



## **Everyday words.**

### **What does it mean for accessible written documents?**

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#### **Abstract**

*Accessible written information* is being developed in many countries. There are many different labels being used in different parts of the world. There are no specific definitions or measurable parameters in the various guidelines. For example, *use everyday words*. Much of the current research addresses the readers understanding of the information. (Fajardo, I, Ávila, V, Ferrer, A, Tavares, G, Gómez, M, Hernández, A (2014)). We do not know whether this research is relevant to the context of *Easy English*.

Five Easy English documents were analysed, identifying there were a small number of words in all document. These repeated words made up a quarter of all words (26%). There were also a substantial number of words (72%) in the documents of one syllable only.

This data provides a starting point for further research regarding potential measurable parameters for accessible written information. Until these parameters are identified we cannot determine if the current research is applicable to all accessible written information.

#### **Introduction**

*Accessible written information* is being developed in many countries now. In Australia there are labels Easy English or Easy Read. In the UK it is Easy Read, Easy to Read or Communication for All. New Zealand has Easy Read. European and Scandinavian countries often use their language plus Easy to Read, eg: German Easy to Read. The USA have Easy

Read. Those working with people following a stroke use the term Aphasia Friendly. The research in this area is very limited, yet consumers continue to say they need and value more accessible written information.

Government and organisations recognise the need for and include the need for accessible written documents in their policy statements. Although the labels used all come under the broad term accessible written information, these documents can often appear quite different on viewing them. There are many variables to consider in creating more accessible documents. The basic elements are language, images, format and consumer engagement. However, each of these elements have a wide variety of checkpoints, eg: for the element of language, checkpoints 'use everyday words' and 'short sentences'. To date none of these elements have been researched in the context of accessible written information, yet guidelines across all countries have these specific checkpoints.

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability* (2006) is useful to bring to the attention of people who write for the public. Article 9, *Accessibility*, and Article 21, *Freedom of Expression, Opinion and access to information* both recognise the importance of access to information the person needs, in the way the person understands, in the way they can use it meaningfully, in the same timeframe as the rest of the community. Therefore, all organisations that provide information to the public need to be aware of the needs of their audience and be able to provide documents for people with differing needs.

The recognition of the rights of people to access written information was behind the development of *The Easy English Writing Style Guide* (2005, 2007) (Personal citation) in Australia. Other countries, including UK and Scandinavia have developed guidelines for writers to follow also. These guidelines to help write documents for people with low or limited literacy skills developed in Australia, Europe and Scandinavia all have similar checkpoints covering all the elements of language, format, images and consumer engagement.

The early research about these more accessible documents most often cited 'this was better than what we got before,' 'keep working to improve it,' and most critically 'involve us' in its development. (Rodgers, J, Namaganda, S. (2005); Thurman, S, Jones, J, Tarleton, B. (2005)).

In more recent years researchers in a number of countries have been investigating the functional outcomes of documents for people with low or limited literacy. (Fajardo et al

(2014); Hurtado, B, Jones, L & Burniston, F. (2014); Poncelas, A, Murphy, G. 2007; Rose, T, Worrall L, McKenna, K., 2003; Sutherland, R, Isherwood, T. (2006)).

The research investigating the functional comprehension outcomes of more accessible documents are from a diverse range of professional groups including Pharmacology (Houts, P, Doak,C, Doak, L, Loscalzo, M.(2006)), Medical Practitioners (Kuijken, N, Naaldenberg, J, Nijhuis-van der Sanden, M, van Schrojenstein-Lantman de Valk, H. (2016)), Health Promotion (Edwards, M, Wood, F, Davies, M, &Edwards, A. (2012)) as well as for and by specific disability groups such as Down Syndrome (de Knegt, N.C., et al, (2016)).

A visual inspection of UK developed documents labeled 'Easy Read', eg: Change People – 'Hepatitis,' 'What is Safeguarding,' and Australian developed documents labeled 'Easy English', eg: Legal Aid NSW – 'Police Powers,' Integrated Family Violence Partnership: 'Intervention Orders – Men Think Safe, Act Safe' might suggest there may be differing literacy loads for the reader. The conclusions being drawn from the currently available research may or may not be relevant to all the differently labeled documents within the broad term *accessible written information*, in particular Easy English. Moffitt, R. (2015). also identified that when asking a 'typical' reader to read and use the information in an Easy Read document, the 'typical' reader still had difficulty comprehending the Easy Read document.

There are a wide range of individual checkpoints which make up any of the guidelines to writing more accessible documents irrespective of who or where they have been developed, and what label they have been given, i.e. Easy English, Easy Read, Aphasia Friendly etc. In the element of language, checkpoints include: use everyday words, short sentences, active tense, one idea per sentence. For the element of formatting, checkpoints include: size of font, type of font, line spacing and paragraph spacing to name a few. Additionally, there are checkpoints regarding selection of images to support the text including the number and range of images selected, their iconicity, complexity, familiarity to the general public or specific audiences, size of images, position in the text, and whether to use images from one or more image libraries. The fourth element in the development of more accessible documents consists of obtaining feedback from people who represent the intended audience. Each of the guidelines provide checkpoints on topics such as when to conduct consumer reviews, the type of participants and how to obtain feedback.

To date there is no published research that specifically investigates the impact on document comprehension and reader usability in any of the basic checkpoints in the guidelines. There are checkpoints that can be measured. Then it may be possible to compare across similarly labelled documents, eg :a number of Easy English documents, between differently labelled

documents eg: Easy English compared with Easy Read documents, and also compare with the original version of a document eg: Easy English or Easy Read compared to the Plain Language or complex language version of the document. Some measurable checkpoints include frequency of words used, range of words used, evidence of any core vocabulary of words, word length and syllable structure. This analysis may or may not assist in identifying and measuring the checkpoint of *use everyday words*.

Guidelines and current research recommend writers need to 'use everyday words' or 'avoid difficult words'. There is currently no definition of what is an everyday word or a difficult word. However, experience in completing Easy English consumer reviews suggest words appear to be everyday words when:

- The word is used in the consumers typical day;
- It is a short and often a single syllable word;
- The consumer can say that word with ease. (Personal Citation).

However, these measures are not an analysis of functional outcomes. Rather they may provide some insight into what are possible measurable checkpoints, that are repeatable across many different topics of an Easy English document, and be able to compare them with other accessible written documents.

There are a number of other possible reasons for similarities and differences in the published versions of accessible documents. These include background of the writer, the writer's awareness of the knowledge of a wide range of people with lower or limited literacy and place in the project of involvement of consumers, i.e. from the outset (and these tend to be more skilled consumer readers) or once content has been simplified (consumer testing a draft).

Internationally, style guides (Change, 2016, Scope, 2008) provide broad statements about the criteria or guidelines. The guidelines can be interpreted by different writers in quite different ways. A writer's everyday word, eg: 'cinema' may not be a consumer's everyday word. Another alternative is 'movies.' Consumer testing of language such as this may identify the word, 'pictures' as an everyday word to that audience. In the current guidelines written by organisations writing for these audiences, no specific measurable outcomes have yet been developed, eg: percent of single syllable words in a document, total number of different words in a document, and then whether that makes any difference to the reader.

The Royal College of Speech Language Therapists (RCSLT) in the UK have published an *Inclusive Communication Position Paper* (2016). It states "...the future for inclusive

communication is exciting.... and RCSLT should be among the leaders in defining inclusive communication and outlining best practice”. The National Health Service (NHS) in England has developed the Accessible Information Standard (2016). It states information “..... is able to be read or received and understood by the individual or group for which it is intended.

Speech Pathology Australia has also identified Accessible Information as an aspiration in its current Strategic Plan. (Speech Pathology Australia, 2017). The Victorian Government in Australia has developed *Accessible Communication Guidelines* (2014). It states “You should always consider accessibility when planning your communication. Your communication should be easy to understand and available in alternative formats so it reaches the widest possible audience, including those with a disability”. It also includes a description of Easy English.

For Speech Pathologists and people who write for the public, but also the people who are the intended readers it can be difficult to know which, if any of these accessible documents are meeting a basic standard or if the writer is following and interpreting guidelines in the way they were intended. This paper begins a conversation about some of the checkpoints in the guidelines. These measurable checkpoints may or may not be useful in building towards an International Standard of specific measurable guidelines, however could be a valuable tool for all writers in our journey forward. This is a starting point for a national and international discussion on the many and multi-faceted elements in Easy English, Easy Read and other accessible documents.

## **Research Design**

There are many concurrently used elements to an Easy English or more accessible document. This analysis specifically considered the words used in the documents only. The words in a number of Easy English documents were analysed across a range of different measurable areas. Word choice is a significant part in developing more accessible documents. It is one element that can be consistently measured, irrespective of the document topic and length. It is also able to be repeated across documents, both in this analysis and in any future analysis of both similar and different accessible documents.

A retrospective analysis was completed on Australian Easy English documents.

All documents used in this analysis were available at that time in the public domain, and were created by the author. All documents from 2014 – 2016 were included in the initial list of

available documents. Brochures and single or double page flyers were excluded from the list of available documents. Some documents were one of a number in a series. See Police Powers (Legal Aid NSW, 2016). In these instances, only one randomly selected document of that series, was included using the selection process of [www.random.org](http://www.random.org). All organisations whose documents were used in the in-depth analysis authorised the use of their documents in this analysis.

Other inclusion criteria were:

- Images and words were part of the development of the document;
- Document was labelled Easy English.

The following analysis was undertaken:

- Total number of words per document;
- Number of different words used per document;
- Number of different words used as a percentage of the total number of words;
- Identification of a Core Vocabulary;
- Number of syllables per word;
- Number of words of 1,2,3,4,5 or 6 syllables;
- Number of syllables as a percentage of the total words.

Total and different word count analysis was completed through manual counting of raw data, and conversion to percentages to also enable comparison across documents. Words were identified as being a different word for any variation of a word. For example:

- 'have' and 'has' were identified as 2 different words;
- 'drink' and 'drinks' were identified as 2 different words.

Core Vocabulary and number of these in documents was determined by a manual count of all occurrences of each word in documents.

Each word was assigned a syllable count from 1 to 6. These were then aggregated across all the documents, to determine a percentage of usage of the various syllables of words.

## Results

Initially there were 22 documents.

The most number of documents available (12) were those with less than 500 words, so this group of documents was selected for the more in-depth analysis. Using the exclusion criteria, as above, and selecting only 1 document when there was a series of documents on the same topic, the analysis was left with 5 documents.

### Number of words to total words

The analysis identified that there were a small number of different words used in each Easy English document (Table 1), ranging from 89 words - 163 words, with a mean of 137 words. The median was 140 words.

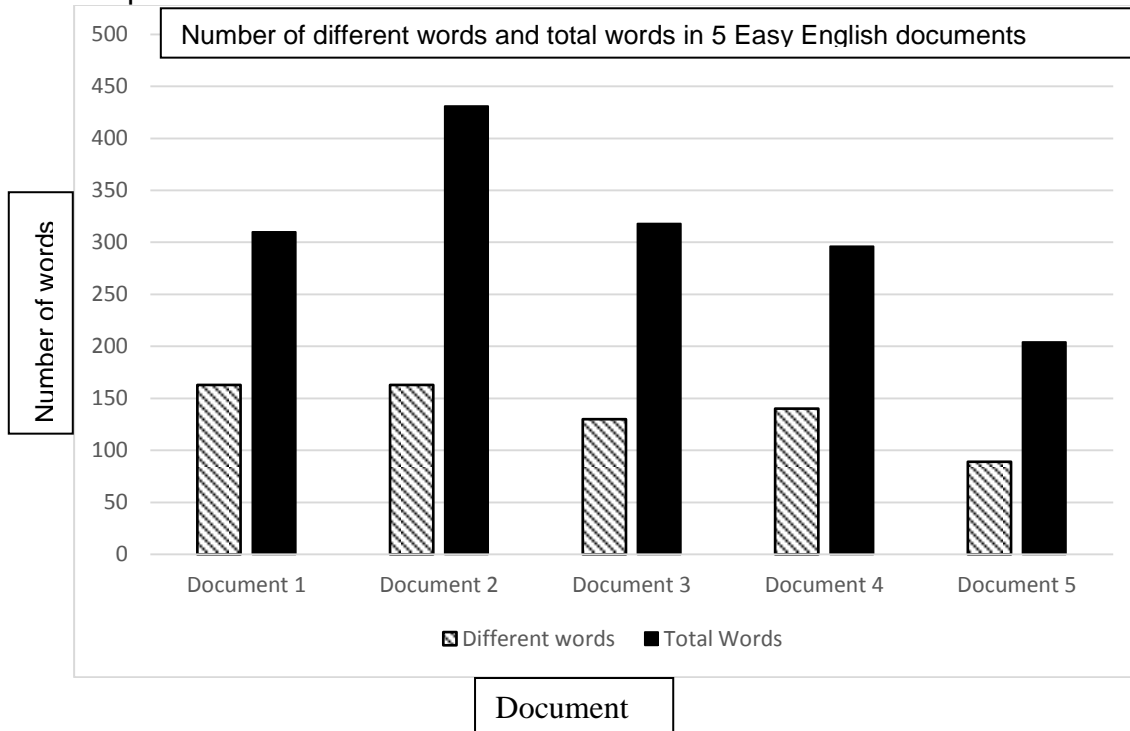
The total number of words used ranged from 204 words – 431 words, with a mean of 312 words per document. The median was 310 words.

The percentage of different words to total words used ranged from 37.8% - 52.6%, with a mean of 44.4%. The median was 40.9%.

Document no.	Number of <b>different</b> words in document	Number of <b>total</b> words in document	Percentage
1	163	310	52.6%
2	163	431	37.8%
3	130	318	40.9%
4	140	296	47.3%
5	89	204	43.6%

Table 1. Number of different words and total words in Easy English documents.

Graph 1



### Core Vocabulary

The 5 Easy English documents were analysed with respect to vocabulary used.

As noted earlier, any derivative of a vocabulary item was classified as a different vocabulary item, eg: walk and walks; have and has.

There were 1,558 vocabulary in the 5 documents. There were 402 different vocabulary in the 5 documents.

Some vocabulary occurred in all documents. There were 21 of these vocabulary items. There were multiple occurrences of them, being 447 of the vocabulary to read. These 21 vocabulary items made up 26% of all reading in these 5 Easy English documents.

Additionally, another 19 vocabulary items occurred in 80% (4/5) of these Easy English documents. With multiple occurrences, this was another 258 vocabulary for the reader, being 17% of the total vocabulary.

Consequently, a potential core vocabulary of words starts to emerge, which is in 80%-100% of all documents. These words made up 43% of the total vocabulary the reader had to read, understand and use meaningfully in these Easy English documents.

See Table 2 for the list of vocabulary that occurred in 100% and 80% of Easy English documents.



<b>Vocabulary In 100% of documents (5/5)</b>	<b>No. of repetitions</b>	<b>Vocabulary In 80% of documents (4/5)</b>	<b>No. of Repetitions</b>
A	31	About	20
And	22	At	5
Are	25	In	17
Be	20	It	11
Can	15	Look	7
Do	20	May	8
Email	6	Not	14
For	11	Of	14
Get	9	Or	11
Have	20	Other	8
Is	12	People	8
Need	7	Phone	6
On	12	Some	8
The	47	There	11
This	12	Us	7
To	54	Want	13
Use	11	We	46
Website	11	Will	31
What	17	With	13
You	49		
Your	36		
<b>21/402</b>	<b>447/1558</b>	<b>19/402</b>	<b>258/1558</b>

Table 2. Vocabulary occurring in 100% and 80% of Easy English documents

**Syllabic Construction of Vocabulary**

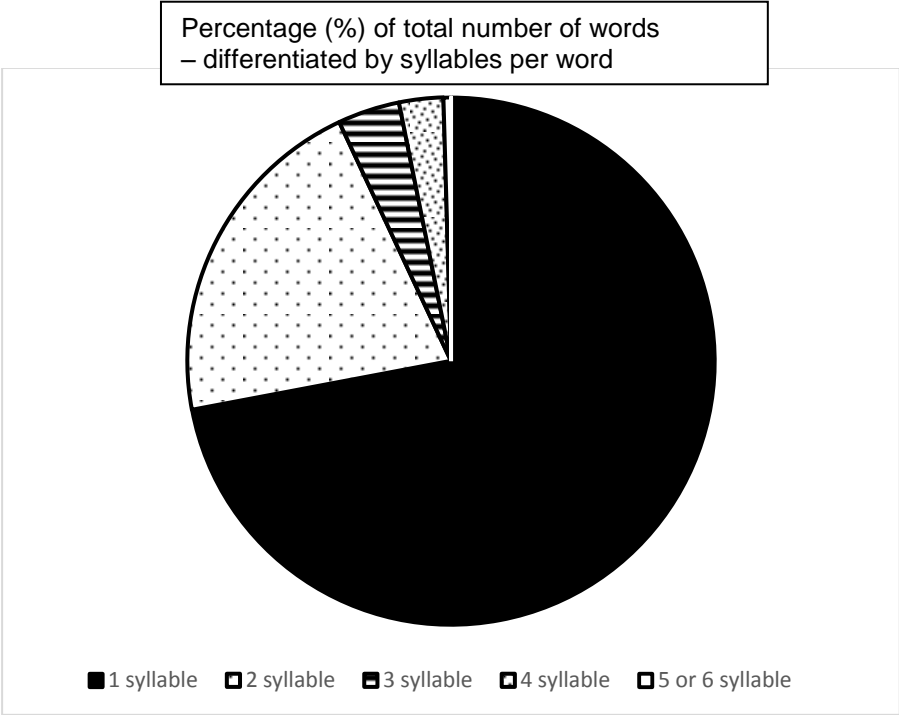
All vocabulary were manually assigned 1- 6 syllables. Experience with consumer reviews of Easy English documents has indicated time and again the length of word, which often means a multisyllabic word may have some effect on the consumers ability to read, understand and know what that word, sentence or content means for them. (Personal citation)

Table 4 and Graph 2 illustrates the number of different words, based on their syllable length, and as a percentage of the total words. One and two syllable words made up 93% of all words used in these documents.

%	Number of words	% of total words
1 syllable words	1126 words	72%
2 syllable words	323 words	21%
3 syllable words	58 words	3.8%
4 syllable words	43 words	2.7%
5 syllable words	7 words	0.4%
6 syllable words	1 word	0.06%

Table 4 – Percentage of total number of words – differentiated by syllables per word.

Graph 2



Additionally, the words that occurred in all documents (100%) and four out of the five documents (80%) were all either a one or two syllable word. These made up 705 words of the 1558 words, representing 45 % of all words the person needed to read.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Currently there are no available comparative measures to compare and contrast between 'Easy English, Easy to Read, Easy Read, Clear for All, Plain Language' or complex language documents. Consequently, it is not yet known whether the current research, particularly from the UK and Europe, analysing comprehension and meaningful use of 'Easy Read' documents is also relevant to the Australian 'Easy English' context. The data in this paper provides a starting point for analysis to compare with other accessible written documents with the different labels, suggesting to the reader they are a simpler form of written communication.

However, it is not known at this stage, whether the measurable parts discussed in this analysis do or do not make a difference to the consumers reading, understanding and functional use of an accessible document.

It does however highlight how many words, and the complexity of those words that a person may need to be able to read, understand and use meaningfully to effectively read an 'Easy English' document. It also poses the question whether understanding of an accessible document correlates with a person's spoken or expressive vocabulary.

The number of words used, prevalence of a small group of words that occur in each document, and the syllabic construction of these words are just a few of many language parameters that may be measurable. In this instance, they may be able to be compared to other Australian Easy English documents, and also other international accessible written information. The checkpoints in this analysis are concrete and measurable which may assist writers of Easy English to begin to operationalise the meaning of the term 'everyday words.'

This investigation identified a limited vocabulary across all documents, and a potential core of words in these Easy English documents. Other outcomes from this initial investigation indicated a:

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- low number of total words used;
  - low number of different words used, and these as a percentage of total words;

- syllable structure range was low, with most words (72%) being a single syllable, and another 23% being two syllable words.

This data is an initial analysis of the vocabulary used in a small sample of Australian Easy English documents. A larger sample of Easy English documents may expand or reduce the evidence of a core vocabulary. This analysis also identified a small range of different words per document, and also across the documents reviewed. This may or may not be replicated across a wider range of Australian Easy English documents. Analysis of a greater sample of Australian Easy English documents will also identify if measurable outcomes such as total words and percent of one and two syllable words are also readily identifiable as being a high percentage of use.

It also leaves open the question of many other areas that need to be measured to assist writers in developing best practice Easy English documents. These include criteria such as mean length of sentence, types of language used, i.e. percent of nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, etc, grammatical markers, regular and irregular verb use.

Following this there are a number of other areas that need to be considered for Easy English documents including what can be measured and repeated across multiple documents and multiple topics in the

- layout of the content;
- format and font choice and size;
- various images have for the reader;
- use of consumer reviews, and when they take place.

And then

- what difference do these parameters have for the readability and usability of the material for the consumer.

Once consistent, measurable outcomes are derived from the Australian Easy English documents, then a comparison with documents labeled Easy Read is possible. Further comparison could also be undertaken comparing the Easy English versions with the original documents and any Plain Language versions with regard to their vocabulary, sentence structure, layout and style. Additionally, it may be useful to compare any Australian Easy English documents with first Reading Lists which are used in Australian schools for early literacy.

In the final analysis, we want to know if these measurable parts are useful to then determine whether a document is functional and usable for the intended audience.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author of this paper wrote the 5 documents analysed in this research.

The analysis occurred at least 12 months after these documents had been published.

All organisations who had their Easy English document included and analysed for this paper provided permission for this to occur.