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Plain language —

Part 1:
Governing principles and guidelines

Langage simplifié —

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Foreword

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The procedures used to develop this document and those intended for its further maintenance are described in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1. In particular, the different approval criteria needed for the different types of ISO documents should be noted. This document was drafted in accordance with the editorial rules of the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2 (see www.iso.org/directives).

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For an explanation of the voluntary nature of standards, the meaning of ISO specific terms and expressions related to conformity assessment, as well as information about ISO's adherence to the World Trade Organization (WTO) principles in the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), see www.iso.org/iso/foreword.html.

This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 37, *Language and terminology*, WG 11, *Plain Language*.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at www.iso.org/members.html.

Introduction

Plain language is communication that puts readers first. It considers:

— what readers want and need to know,

— readers' level of interest, expertise, and literacy skills, and

— the context in which readers will use the document.

Plain language ensures readers can find what they need, understand it, and use it. Thus, plain language focuses on how successfully readers can use the document rather than on mechanical measures such as readability formulas.

Extensive studies have shown that writing in plain language saves time or money (or both) for readers and organizations. Plain language is more effective and produces better outcomes. In addition, readers prefer plain language. For organizations, plain language is an important way to build trust with the readers. Finally, the process of translating is more efficient for plain language documents than for documents that are difficult to understand.

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Plain language —

Part 1:
Governing principles and guidelines

1 Scope

This International Standard is for anybody who creates or helps create documents. The widest use of plain language is for documents that are intended for the general public, but it is also applicable, for example, to technical writing, legislative drafting, or using controlled languages. This Standard will help authors develop documents that communicate effectively with their intended readers. It applies to most written languages and reflects the most recent research on plain language and the experience of plain language experts.

This Standard provides principles and guidelines for developing plain language documents. The guidelines detail how the principles should be interpreted and applied. The four governing principles are as follows:

— Principle 1: Readers get what they need (relevant)

— Principle 2: Readers can easily find what they need (findable)

— Principle 3: Readers can easily understand what they find (understandable)

— Principle 4: Readers can easily use the information (usable)

These principles rest on the premise that a document will be usable if the information in it is relevant, findable, and understandable (see Figure 1).
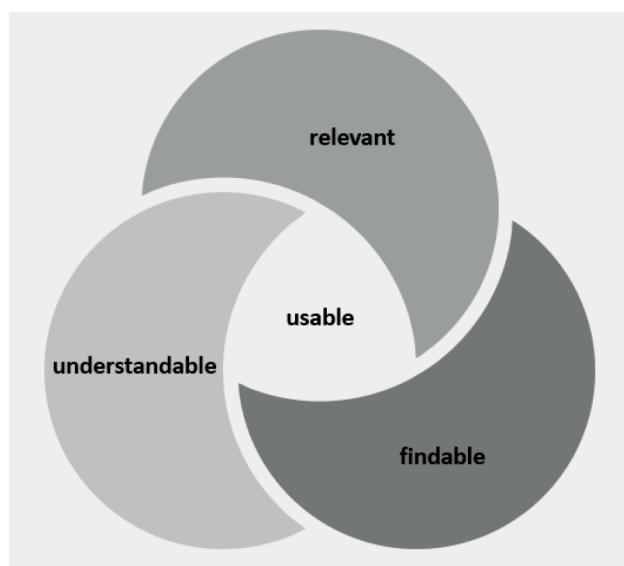

Figure 1 — The relationship of the four principles

From the perspective of authors, following the guidelines under the first three principles will make it likely that readers can use a document. But the only way to ensure that is to evaluate the document continually by applying Principle 4 guidelines. In other words, the Standard does not describe a

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sequential process, because the four principles are interdependent and influence each other. Applying them all together is crucial for developing plain language documents.

Annex A provides a visual overview of the principles and guidelines. Annex B provides a checklist to help authors apply this Standard.

The guidelines that the International Standard provides are recommendations. They do not establish requirements. The Standard applies to most, if not all, written languages, but it provides examples only in English. When localising the Standard, national standards bodies can adapt and expand the Standard to achieve the goals of plain language in their own languages.

Contrary to best practices and its own recommendation, the Standard cannot use the second person ("you") to address readers due to ISO rules.

While this Standard covers the essential elements of plain language, it has some intentional limits:

— It does not cover all types of communication. It applies only to printed or digital information that is primarily in the form of text. However, creators of other types of communications, such as podcasts and videos, may find this Standard useful.

— It does not include existing technical guidance about accessibility and digital documents, although this Standard's guidance can apply to both. For guidance on accessibility, authors of digital documents are urged to consider the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and EN 301 549: Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services.

— Later Parts of this Standard may provide case studies, best practices, and other supporting information.

2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

Where terms and definitions come from the ISO databases, they are referenced.

3.1
plain language
communication in which wording, structure, and design are so clear that intended *readers* (3.2) can easily

— find what they need,

— understand what they find, and

— use that information

[SOURCE: International Plain Language Federation]

3.2
reader
member of the intended audience for the *document* (3.3)

Note 1 to entry: While the word "reader" is historically rooted in the verb "to read", all intended audience members don't necessarily "read" documents. For the purposes of this standard, reader includes everyone who uses the document, whether they view it, hear it, touch it, or a combination. Reader also includes someone who will skim or scan a *document* (3.3), looking only for particular information. Reader also includes someone to whom a *document* (3.3) is read, whether by a person or a device.

Note 2 to entry: There might be several different audiences for the same *document* (3.3). For example, the primary audience of an income tax form is the taxpayer, and the secondary audience is the tax agency. If the needs of different readers conflict, then the needs of the primary audience have priority.

3.3
document
set of printed or digital information, primarily in the form of text

EXAMPLE   Audio description, email, error message, printed document, podcast script, video manuscript, web content.

3.4
author
individual or organization who develops or helps develop *documents* (3.3)

EXAMPLE   Content developers or managers, editors, information architects or designers, information developers or managers, legislative drafters, professional writers, public relations officers, technical writers, translators, UX writers, writing project managers.

3.5
document type
class of *documents* (3.3) having similar characteristics

EXAMPLE   email, webpage, postal letter, instruction manual, newspaper article, form.

[SOURCE: ISO 8879:1986(en), 4.102, modified – the list of examples is modified and separated from the text of the definition]

3.6
image
visual representation of information

EXAMPLE   Chart, diagram, drawing, flowchart, graph, icon, infographic, map, picture, photograph, table.

3.7
information design
visual integration of text, typography, images, and multimedia to help *readers* (3.2) find, understand, and use information

Note 1 to entry: Information design makes the structure and content visual.

3.8
evaluation
assessment of how well *readers* (3.2) find, understand, and use information

4   Governing principles

Principle 1: Readers get what they need (relevant)

Principle 2: Readers can easily find what they need (findable)

Principle 3: Readers can easily understand what they find (understandable)

Principle 4: Readers can easily use the information (usable)