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Plain language —

Part 1:
Governing principles and guidelines

Langage clair et simple —

Partie 1: Principes directeurs et lignes directrices

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

A list of all parts in the ISO 24495 series can be found on the ISO website.

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;

— 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.

This document 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. See Reference [3] for research on plain language.

Plain language is not to be confused with easy language. Plain language can be used for a general audience, while easy language is used for people who have difficulties with reading comprehension. These difficulties can be caused by health conditions, not being fluent in the given language or other reasons.

Plain language —

Part 1:
Governing principles and guidelines

1   Scope

This document establishes governing principles and guidelines for developing plain language documents. The guidelines detail how the principles are interpreted and applied.

This document 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. However, it is also applicable, for example, to technical writing, legislative drafting or using controlled languages.

This document applies to most, if not all, written languages, but it provides examples only in English.

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

— It does not cover all types of communication. It applies only to printed or digital information that is primarily in the form of text.

   NOTE 1   However, creators of other types of communications, such as podcasts and videos, can find this document useful.

— It does not include existing technical guidance about accessibility and digital documents, although the guidance can apply to both.

   NOTE 2   For guidance on accessibility, authors of digital documents can consider the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines[4] and EN 301 549.[2]

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.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

— ISO Online browsing platform: available at https://www.iso.org/obp

— IEC Electropedia: available at https://www.electropedia.org/

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]]

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

Note 1 to entry: While the word "reader" is historically rooted in the verb "to read", all intended audience members do not necessarily "read" documents. For the purposes of this document, the term "reader" includes the following:

— Everyone who uses a document, whether they view it, hear it, touch it or a combination.

— Someone who will skim or scan a document, looking only for particular information.

— Someone to whom a document is read, whether by a person or a device.

Note 2 to entry: There can be several different audiences for the same document. 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, contract, form, podcast script, video manuscript, webpage.

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 (user experience) 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, 4.102, modified — The list of examples has been 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* (3.6) 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

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).
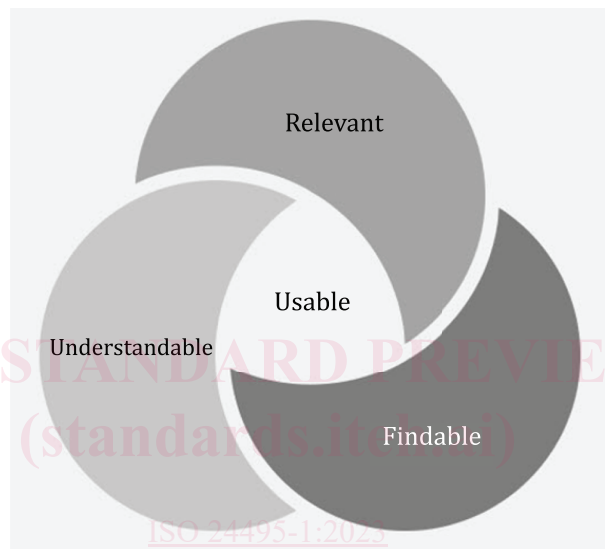

Figure 1 — Relationship of the four principles

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 the guidelines of Principle 4. As a result, this document does not describe a 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 document.

5 Guidelines

5.1 Guidelines for Principle 1: Readers get what they need (relevant)

5.1.1 Overview

This principle focuses on what authors should do before they start drafting. Understanding the readers of a document and their needs is essential to creating a document in plain language. Authors should select the document type and content that fits their readers' needs, purpose and context.

5.1.2 Identify the readers

Authors should identify who their readers are and consider the readers' characteristics, including their literacy and language skills, cultural backgrounds and subject-matter knowledge.

Characteristics also include readers' accessibility needs and preferences, as well as the languages that they understand. Authors should provide the document in a language that their readers know. That can mean complying with official language requirements and translating the document into other languages.

To identify the readers and their characteristics, authors can use the following methods:

a) Review knowledge gained from previous communications with readers.

b) Interview readers.

c) Conduct reader surveys.

d) Review research and relevant literature on readers.

5.1.3 Identify the readers' purpose

Authors should identify why readers will read the document. For example, readers can be doing any of the following:

a) following instructions to complete a task;

b) deciding to do or not to do something;

c) trying to understand a topic;

d) finding out what the author wants them to do;

e) learning about an area of interest;

f) gaining the required knowledge for a specific purpose, such as getting a driver's licence.

5.1.4 Identify the context in which readers will read the document

Authors should consider the following:

a) where readers will read the document;

b) what technology they will use to read it;

c) how much time they will have;

d) how long will they stay focused;

e) how interested they will be in the document;

f) what their emotional state will be when they read it.

The answers to these questions can be affected by the document type (see 5.1.5).

5.1.5 Select the document type or types

Authors should select the document type or types that fit their readers' characteristics (see 5.1.2), purpose (see 5.1.3) and context (see 5.1.4). If it better serves the readers' purpose, authors can also decide to use an alternative to a document, such as a video.

5.1.6 Select content that readers need

Authors should always keep readers' needs in mind when selecting content, even when the authors' own needs dictate that certain information be included.

Authors should do the following:

a)   Put readers' needs first.

b)   Identify questions that readers need answered (see 5.1.2 and 5.1.3).

c)   Select content that fits the readers' characteristics (see 5.1.2), purpose (see 5.1.3) and context (see 5.1.4), as well as the document type (see 5.1.5).

d)   Leave out content that readers do not need (see 5.2.5 for guidance on required supplementary information).

e)   Consider the authors' purposes and needs.

f)   Select content ethically:

    1)   Select accurate content.

    2)   Do not include false or misleading content.

    3)   Do not hide or leave out content that readers need to know.

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

5.2.1   Overview

Readers should be able to quickly determine what the document is about and whether it serves their purpose. Good structure and design help readers to easily find the information they need. Headings are one of many techniques to help readers predict what comes next and are especially helpful in documents longer than a few paragraphs.

5.2.2   Structure the document for readers

Authors should group related information together and order it in a way that makes sense for their readers. When deciding on order, authors should consider these guidelines:

a)   Place the most important message where readers can easily find it, commonly at the beginning.

b)   Introduce new information by building on information readers already know.

c)   For instructions or processes, present information in chronological order.

d)   Place information that most readers need before information that only some readers need.

e)   If failing to follow a process can lead to damage or harm, place warnings about what not to do before instructions about what to do.

5.2.3   Use information design techniques that enable readers to find information

Inclusive information design techniques make it easy for readers to find what they need. Authors should use the following techniques:

a)   Visually show the following relations between elements:

    1)   Make important elements more prominent (prominence), by using a larger font, bold type or other methods.

    2)   Place elements that belong together close to each other (proximity).

    3)   Make elements with the same function look similar (similarity).

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