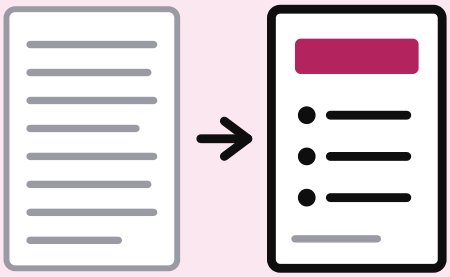
Concept

Plain language

A way of writing in which the wording, structure, and design are so clear that readers find what they need, understand it, and can use it the first time.



In Spanish

Lenguaje claro

Origin

A movement with several antecedents and no single author; in the US, the Plain Writing Act (2010); the ISO 24495-1 standard (2023)

What problem it addresses

Letters, forms, and contracts are often written in the institution's language, and the people who receive them don't know what they have to do. Design takes a testable criterion from plain language: a text works if the person acts correctly after reading it.

An example

An illustrative example, similar to the study below: a notice asking someone to claim money that belongs to them.

In bureaucratic language



Long paragraphs, passive sentences, and the key action hidden at the end, among legal references. **Many don't respond.**

In plain language



At the top, what you need to do and by when; then the steps in a list, and the details at the end. **Many more respond.**

The information is the same: the order, the words, and the form change, and with them what people do.

Why it happens

1

Reading takes effort, and every technical word or long sentence adds to it.

2

If the action isn't visible, the person doesn't know what to do or by when.

3

With a clear text, they act correctly the first time, without having to ask.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Start with what the person has to do, use their words, and test the text: ask someone to tell you what they would do after reading it.

Avoid

Confusing clear with childish or incomplete: a clear text can include legal terms, as long as it explains them.

Don't fall for it

Don't rely only on readability formulas: they measure sentences and words, not whether someone finds and understands what they're looking for.

41% → 76%

Before

After

What the research says

People who responded to a Washington State notice about unclaimed property, before and after it was rewritten in plain language, within one year (Kimble, 2012).

●●● **Solid evidence.** Kimble brings together 50 studies pointing the same way, although many are case studies rather than experiments. In a study with 1,462 judges and lawyers in four US states, between 80% and 86% preferred the plain version of legal paragraphs (Kimble, 2006).

Connections

Used in

- Accessible design
- Civic design
- Information design
- Legal design
- UX writing

Related to

- Privacy nutrition label
- Legibility and readability
- Contract visualization

Authors and works

2010	**US Congress**	The Plain Writing Act requires federal agencies to write the letters, forms, notices, and instructions they issue to the public clearly.
2006, 2012	**Joseph Kimble**	Gathered the evidence that plain language saves money and that people understand it better and prefer it.
2023	**International Organization for Standardization**	Defined plain language in the ISO 24495-1 standard and set its four principles: relevant, findable, understandable, and usable.

Sources

Original sources

- International Organization for Standardization (2023). Plain language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines (ISO 24495-1:2023). View source (https://www.iso.org/standard/78907.html)
- Plain Writing Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-274, 124 Stat. 2861 (2010). View source (https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/html/PLAW-111publ274.htm)

Academic reviews

- Kimble, J. (2012). Writing for dollars, writing to please: The case for plain language in business, government, and law. Carolina Academic Press. View source (https://cap-press.com/isbn/9781611631913)

Secondary sources

- International Plain Language Federation (n.d.). The ISO plain language standard, Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines. View source (https://www.iplfederation.org/the-iso-plain-language-standard-part1)
- Kimble, J. (2006). The straight skinny on better judicial opinions. Michigan Bar Journal (marzo), 42–43. View source (https://www.michbar.org/file/barjournal/article/documents/pdf4article986.pdf)

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