



Plain Language
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International

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ISO plain language standard

Read all the news about the 5 plain language standards with the International Organization for Standardization and more in this issue.



ISO

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promoting plain language around the world.

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President's Foreword

eJOURNAL



As President of PLAIN, it is truly inspiring to witness how the ISO 24495 Plain Language Standard is making a difference around the world. For countries and organizations that have been working with plain language for years, the standard provides renewed strength and validation. For those just beginning their journey, it offers a powerful and practical starting point.

Sometimes I catch myself thinking: *if only this standard had existed earlier*. Coming from a background in communication science, what I value most about the ISO standard is its unwavering focus on the reader. It aligns beautifully with the theory of reflective communication strategy, which emphasizes continuous alignment with the reader through research and feedback. After all, in communication, we are the professionals — but the true experts are our readers. And when professionals and experts collaborate, real plain language emerges — language that fosters mutual understanding.

“Communication professionals must think systematically about communication in line with reflective dialogue.”

***Betteke van Ruler, Emeritus Professor of Communication Science,
University of Amsterdam***

This issue of the *PLAIN eJournal* offers a rich look at the ISO standard's development and implementation. From foundational principles to legal, scientific, and organizational applications, and even document design and certification — this issue showcases the global momentum behind plain language.

Enjoy the read and let's keep building a world where plain language is the norm.

Lodewijk van Noort
President of PLAIN

The Plain Language Association International publishes the *PLAIN eJournal* twice a year for PLAIN members.

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Voorwoord van de voorzitter

Prefazione del Presidente



Als voorzitter van PLAIN is het geweldig om te zien hoe de ISO 24495-standaard wereldwijd zijn werk doet. Voor organisaties en landen die al jaren met duidelijke taal bezig zijn, biedt de standaard extra kracht en erkenning. Voor beginners is het een stevig en praktisch startpunt.

Soms denk ik: *was deze standaard er maar eerder geweest*. Vanuit mijn achtergrond in de communicatiewetenschap is voor mij de grootste meerwaarde van de ISO-standaard dat de ontvanger echt centraal staat. Helemaal in lijn met de theorie van reflectieve communicatiestrategie, waarin je voortdurend afstemt met je lezer via onderzoek en feedback. Want laten we niet vergeten: wij zijn de communicatieprofessionals, maar de echte experts zijn onze lezers. En waar professionals en experts samenwerken, ontstaat echte heldere taal — taal die wederzijds begrip mogelijk maakt.

“Communicatieprofessionals moeten systematisch over communicatie nadenken conform de reflectieve discussie.”

Betteke van Ruler, emeritus hoogleraar Communicatiewetenschap, Universiteit van Amsterdam

In deze editie van het *PLAIN eJournal* lees je alles over de ontwikkeling en toepassing van de standaard. Van de basisprincipes tot juridische, wetenschappelijke en organisatorische toepassingen, documentontwerp en certificering — deze editie laat zien hoe breed en krachtig de beweging is.

Veel leesplezier en laten we samen blijven bouwen aan een wereld waarin duidelijkheid vanzelfsprekend is.

Lodewijk van Noort
Voorzitter van PLAIN

Come presidente di PLAIN, è meraviglioso vedere come lo standard ISO 24495 sul linguaggio chiaro stia facendo la differenza nel mondo. Per i paesi e le organizzazioni che lavorano da anni con il linguaggio chiaro, lo standard offre nuova forza e riconoscimento. Per chi è all'inizio, rappresenta un punto di partenza solido e concreto.

A volte penso: *magari questo standard fosse esistito prima*. Con la mia formazione in scienze della comunicazione, ciò che apprezzo di più dello standard ISO è il suo focus costante sull'utente. È perfettamente in linea con la teoria della strategia di comunicazione riflessiva, che promuove un continuo allineamento con il lettore attraverso ricerca e feedback. In fondo, noi siamo i professionisti della comunicazione, ma i veri esperti sono i nostri lettori. E quando professionisti ed esperti collaborano, nasce il vero linguaggio chiaro — un linguaggio che crea comprensione reciproca.

“I professionisti della comunicazione devono riflettere sistematicamente sulla comunicazione in linea con il dialogo riflessivo.”

Betteke van Ruler, professoressa emerita di Scienze della Comunicazione, Università di Amsterdam

Questo numero del nostro *PLAIN eJournal* esplora lo sviluppo e l'implementazione dello standard ISO. Dai principi fondamentali alle applicazioni legali, scientifiche e organizzative, fino al design dei documenti e alla certificazione — questa edizione mostra la forza globale del linguaggio chiaro.

Buona lettura e continuiamo a costruire insieme un mondo dove la chiarezza è la norma.

Lodewijk van Noort
Presidente di PLAIN

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Virginia St-Denis Managing Editor



So much has happened in the global plain language community since the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) published [*ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines*](#). The (Plain Language Association International) *PLAIN eJournal* has published some quick

updates since then — mainly in the form of closing articles from the president of the International Plain Language Federation.

The time is right for a more in-depth update. So this issue focuses on all aspects of the ISO plain language standard. Our contributors for this issue have a lot of exciting news for you, so I'll try not to give anything away while I introduce each article.

We start this issue with a look at what has been happening with *Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines* since its release in 2023. Gael Spivak, Chair of the Federation's Localization and Implementation Committee, shares updates on adoptions, localizations, translations, communications, presentations, and more in her article "Implementing the ISO plain language standard."

If you have implemented Part 1, consider writing a case study. It can help build credibility, gain support for your next project, and promote your services or team, as Cinzia Theobald and Nadja Green write in their article, "Showcasing the value of plain language: a step-by-step guide."

In "Four plain language principles in action: Insights from a Canadian project," Chantale Audet and Amélie Bourret share a case study for their ClearMark Award-winning work. Find out how they transformed the research-intensive *Canada's Guidelines on Alcohol and Health* into a plain language public summary. But there is so much more happening beyond Part 1. Clarity President Julie Clement has exciting news about *ISO 24495-2 Plain language Part 2: Legal communication* in her article, "ISO 24495-2: A Global Standard for Plain Legal Documents."

ISO 24495-3 Plain language Part 3: Science writing is also under development. It is in the enquiry phase with ISO members and still needs approval before publication. We'll share more details in a future issue once it is further along in the approval process.

Organizations that want to be certified in plain language would need to follow *ISO 24495-4 Plain language Part 4: Requirements for implementing* the plain language principles in organizations. In their article, "An ISO requirement standard for organizations," Torunn Reksten and Sarah Slabbert share why certification is needed and describe their team's process.

If you enjoyed our spring issue of the *PLAIN eJournal* on plain language design (Vol. 7, No. 1), you will want to read Rob Waller's article, "ISO 24495-5: Toward a plain language standard for document design." He discusses his committee's process for *ISO 24495-5 Plain language Part 5: Document design*, including the development of a document pattern library as a related resource.

While technically not part of the ISO 24495 plain language standard, *ISO 24896 Notation for business reporting* is closely related and being developed by the same ISO working group. If you want to apply plain language principles to business documents, including tables and charts, you will want to read "Business reporting made easy" by Angelika Vaasa and Diego Bera.

We conclude this issue with a focus on the Federation's Certification Committee, with a report from Sarah Slabbert called "Shaping the future of plain language certification." And Milva Finnegan, Lynn Dare, and Dees Stalling discuss certification of individual practitioners in "Global survey shows strong interest in individual certification in plain language."

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- encourage others to join PLAIN, so they can also read the journal.

Please do not:

- circulate digital copies
- post images of articles that are not written by you.

Joanna Richardson Chair, International Plain Language Federation



As the current Chair of the International Plain Language Federation, I am delighted to introduce this issue of the *PLAIN eJournal*, which is dedicated to ISO 24495 Plain language standards. The Federation is a collaborative initiative led by its three founding organizations, the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN), the

Center for Plain Language, and Clarity.

As you may know, every issue of the *PLAIN eJournal* includes an article updating readers on the standard and the Federation's activities. However, PLAIN decided to devote this entire issue to this important topic. It allows the international plain language community to explore it in greater depth and consider the many aspects being developed by the Federation and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Technical Committee 37's Working Group 11 (WG 11).

This issue offers us all a chance to learn more about the different areas of work under the Federation's guidance, such as certification — particularly for individuals — implementation and localization, case studies, and systems. It also covers the groundbreaking parts of the standard in progress.

Among these are Part 2: Legal communication. Other parts under development include Part 3: Science writing, Part 4: Organizational requirements, Part 5: Document design, and Business notations, which has its own ISO number.

Working with the ISO is a detailed and often lengthy process that requires patience and perseverance from everyone involved. The progress we have made over such a short time is even more remarkable considering that we are a relatively small and entirely volunteer-based community. This should be recognized and celebrated.

In June, some members of the Federation met in person in Japan with WG 11 to discuss the ongoing development of the standard's various parts.

Another important topic raised was artificial intelligence (AI) and its role in content creation. These productive discussions confirmed that this is the right moment for the plain language community to come together and make the most of the opportunities offered by the standard, its future parts, and advances in generative AI.

This is an exciting time for global plain language communication. As this issue shows, there is so much happening and real progress is being made. I hope you enjoy reading about it and feel inspired by the breadth and depth of work underway. And please join me in applauding the outstanding contributions of the Federation's many volunteers.

Joanna Richardson has over 20 years' experience teaching plain English to lawyers at Argentina's largest law firm. She now works freelance training Spanish-speaking professionals to communicate clearly. The current chair of the International Plain Language Federation, she served on PLAIN's board for 7 years and as president twice.

Implementing the ISO plain language standard

Gael Spivak Chair, Localization and Implementation Committee



In the two years since International Organization for Standardization (ISO) published *ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language, Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines*, people have been working on promoting it and making it as widely available as possible.

In 2021, the International Plain Language Federation

created the Localization and Implementation Committee. The committee supports people who are working on various tasks related to the ISO plain language standard: translating it, localizing it, adopting it at the country level, and implementing it.

With members from 25 countries, the committee meets every 2 months to talk about progress in each country, share ideas, and provide encouragement.

The meetings and the committee work are done in English. As committee chair, I want to express my deep admiration for all the committee members who provide high-quality work and interact in meetings in a language that is not their first language.

Examples of work across countries

Here are some examples of the work committee members are doing in their countries and areas of expertise, or that they're following to stay up to date on.

- In March 2025, the Brazilian Senate approved a [groundbreaking bill \(PL 6.256/2019\)](#) that mandates the use of plain language across all public bodies in the country. This marks a major step forward in institutionalizing plain language in public communication throughout Brazil.
- In Canada, the federal government's Digital Transformation Office announced it would no longer use readability formulas and grade levels as a measure for plain language. The office also updated the [plain language section](#) of the [Canada.ca Content Style Guide](#) to align the ISO standard. They wrote a [blog post](#) detailing that work.
- Various members submitted their concerns to the New Zealand government about its bill to repeal the *Plain Language Act*. The Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) and the Federation also made submissions.

- A committee member in Nigeria is working with the Standards Organisation of Nigeria to adopt the ISO standard.
- Norway launched Norwegian versions of the standard. This was the first time that Standards Norway translated a standard into both official Norwegian languages.

Support for translation and localization

National standards bodies around the world are translating, localizing, and adopting the plain language standard. Since the standard was published, 14 countries have translated it, and 21 have adopted it or are selling it. The committee is keeping [a list of these countries](#).

The committee also has specific items on its work plan to support people as they translate and localize the standard.

Glossary

One of these items is creating a multilingual glossary that has key terms used in the standard. Our goal with the glossary is to ensure consistency in word usage in the translation of subsequent parts of the standard. The committee's working group will release the first version of the glossary soon. This will feature the original English terms and their equivalents in French, Spanish, and Italian. It will be a resource available to everyone, and it will be open to additions for other languages.

Localization brief

We're also writing a localization brief for translation teams localizing the standard or anyone who would like more detailed information about the standard. The brief will also help translators with their work.

Definitions

We also manage how the Federation's definition of plain language is translated into languages other than English. We review existing translations and support new ones as they are being created. We're working with plain language experts around the world to make sure that all translations of the definition are accurate and relevant, and that they make sense in their local context.

Communications work

The committee consistently does communications work for the standard. We've been working on key messages, press releases, and social media kits for Part 2: Legal communication and Part 3: Science writing of the standard.

We also respond to topics as they come up. For example, you've probably all heard the common misconception that plain language is about using simple words. Our committee decided

to [analyze the standard](#) to see how much of it is directly about word choices. We looked at it in two ways: through ideas and through words.

- The standard has roughly 485 ideas. These cover a variety of language issues (such as the content's structure, findability, understandability, and usability) but only 7% of the guidance focuses on word choice.
- The standard has roughly 4,800 words, but only 7% of the guidance focuses on word choice.

The percentage was the same whether looking at ideas or words.

Presentations and interviews

Members of the committee are often invited to talk to groups about plain language. Here are some examples.

- Adelyse Lopes (Brazil) created a [presentation](#) about her research on awareness, access, and use of the standard in Brazil.
- Gael Spivak and Greg Ioannou (Canada) were interviewed by Ragini Werner (an author, editor, and translator in the Netherlands) for [a post on her blog](#).
- Michela Zanon (Italy) spoke at the [DiParola Festival](#) about her experience as a technical communicator using plain language strategies.
- Machiko Asai (Japan) held free seminars for public relations representatives of 5,000 listed companies and reached out to Japanese government and local government officials.
- Víctor González Ruiz (Spain) gave a webinar about plain language in judicial proceedings as part of the European Judicial Training Network's judicial training program (<https://ejtn.eu/>). He highlighted the relevance of the standard for implementing plain language in court settings.
- Karen Schriver (United States) met with leaders of ACM's SIGDOC (Association of Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group on the Design of Communication) to talk about the standard and why it might be useful for their students.

Case studies and testimonials

The Federation has resources on how you can use the ISO plain language standard and how people can implement it in different sectors.

- We're collecting case studies to show how organizations have used the ISO standard as part of a plain language project. These case studies can show you how to implement plain language in your workplace.
- We have a guidance document to help you create these case studies. It has instructions and examples for small and large projects. Refer to Cinzia Theobald and Nadja Green's article, "Showcasing the value of plain language: A step-by-step guide to creating your own case study," later in this issue of the *PLAIN eJournal*.

We are collecting short testimonials from people about how they're using the standard.

Join us in leading this change

Part 1 of the standard has now been available for 2 years. People around the world are using this standard and telling people about it. You can be a part of that.

- Keep talking about the standard on social media, in communications, and at work.
- Consider creating a [case study](#).
- Email the committee any testimonials you have about using the standard. We'll put it on the Federation website and use it in social media posts, which is great for your online visibility.

Gael Spivak is a writer, editor, and communications advisor for the Government of Canada. She works at a science-based regulatory agency where she does plain language editing and coaches her colleagues on plain language techniques for their communications products. She is a former president of the Editors' Association of Canada and co-moderates several international communities of practice for editors. She chairs the International Plain Language Federation's Localization and Implementation Committee.

Showcasing the value of plain language:

A step-by-step guide to creating your own case study



Cinzia Theobald
Plain Language Strategic Advisor



Nadja Green
Managing partner at The Plain Language Institute

Whether you're a plain language practitioner, team leader, or internal champion trying to build momentum, creating a strong case study can be one of your most effective tools. It shows — not just tells — the value of using the *ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines*. It also helps you build credibility, gain support for your next project, and promote your services or team.

Case studies do not just benefit the people who create them. They also help the International Plain Language Federation share and promote the benefits of using the ISO plain language standard in a consistent and effective way.

The Federation created a step-by-step guide to help you turn your work into a compelling, real-world example. The guide walks you through each phase of identifying, implementing, and sharing a project that applies the standard — whether it's a small internal rewrite or a large-scale public communication campaign.

In this article, we give you a quick overview of the Federation's step-by-step guide and a snapshot of 3 case studies that show the standard in action.

Why create a case study

There's something powerful about showing how a plain language project solved a real problem, especially when it's backed by data and user feedback.

A case study can help you:

- show how easy it is to apply the 4 plain language principles to any type of project;
- demonstrate the impact of the ISO plain language standard in your context;

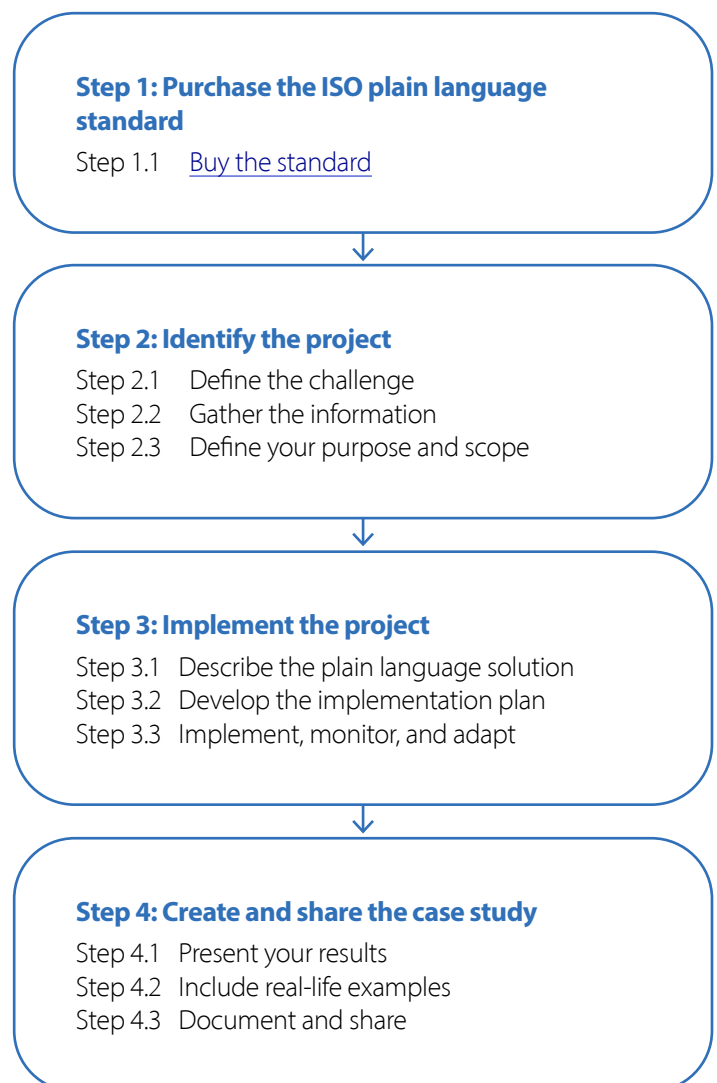
- build a stronger business case for future projects;
- add credibility to your resume, curriculum vitae, or portfolio; and
- inspire others to adopt plain language in their own work.

You do not need to wait for the so-called perfect project to get started. In fact, the guide encourages starting small, especially if this is your first time applying the standard.

Here's how it works

The figure shows the 4 steps to creating a case study. You can [download the full guide](#) from the Federation's website.

Figure 1: Steps to creating a case study



A bit about our published case studies

Here are summaries of a few case studies. You can visit the [Federation's website](#) to see how the ISO plain language standard and its principles were used to achieve meaningful results.

Case study 1: Making the Australian Tax Office's website work for everyone

In January 2024, the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) changed digital platforms, giving its website a new look and feel. While this upgrade brought many improvements, the team recognized that change can be challenging, especially for users with lower digital literacy.

Given that ato.gov.au is a central part of the Australian tax system, with millions of web visitors each year, the ATO focused on helping users adapt to the changes. They created [practical, easy-to-follow tips for using the new website](#), which was written in plain language and designed to support all users.

They chose not to include behind-the-scenes technical updates or internal processes, which were featured in earlier drafts. Instead, they kept to what users needed most: clear guidance on navigating the new platform. Content was tested to ensure it met accessibility standards and that it was relevant and usable for everyone.

[Read the case study](#)

Case study 2: Understanding Primary Aldosteronism

Enliven created 3 plain language brochures about primary aldosteronism, which is when the adrenal glands produce too much of the hormone aldosterone. Because aldosteronism can lead to hypertension (high blood pressure), the brochures raised awareness of the condition and encourage people with high blood pressure to get tested.

Community testers confirmed that the brochures helped them clearly understand the condition and the different types of primary aldosteronism. They felt confident about the kinds of tests they might need, why those tests are done, how they work, and what the results would tell their doctor. Testers also showed a strong understanding of the different treatment options and how these are matched to specific types of the condition.

The feedback from testers was overwhelmingly positive. Participants described the brochures as simple, easy to understand, and straight to the point. Several noted that they did not need to reread the information to grasp it and appreciated the clarity of the layout. Others highlighted how practical the format was. Users could skim and quickly find what they needed. One tester summed it up well. "They're easy to understand and will be useful when needed."

[Read the case study](#)

Case study 3: Canada's guidance on alcohol and health

Autrement dit won 3 ClearMark Awards in 2023 for their work on the [Drinking less is better infographic](#): infographic category winner, French language winner, and Grand ClearMark Award winner.

Chantale Audet and Amélie Bourret have more information in their article, "Four plain language principles in action: Insights from a Canadian project."

[Read the case study](#)

Your work matters — let people see it!

If you have used plain language to solve a real problem, your story can help others make the case. It can support change-makers, persuade decision-makers, and inspire newcomers. The Federation's guide is there to help you tell that story with confidence and clarity.

So, pick a project, big or small, and start documenting your journey. Your future self (and your readers) will thank you.

Cinzia Theobald has worked in health literacy, plain language and multicultural community engagement for over a decade. With a Master of Laws (LLM, Medical Law) and a background in implementing health related projects that spans 28 years, Cinzia sees the value of plain language every day. She co-chairs a Standards Australia working group that focuses on implementing the ISO plain language standard in Australia, sits on various International Plain Language Federation and ISO committees, and is currently on the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) Board. Cinzia is the Plain Language Strategic Advisor at enliven, a Christine Mowat International Plain Language Award recipient.

Nadja Green is an accomplished plain language content developer, researcher, and strategist with a passion for promoting plain language as a strategic priority. Nadja provides plain language services, consulting, and training to professionals and organizations. As a representative of South Africa, Nadja helped to develop the first ISO standard for plain language. Nadja serves on the Localization and Certification Committee of the International Plain Language Federation and is a member of the PLAIN Board.

Four plain language principles in action: Insights from a Canadian project



Chantale Audet and Amélie Bourret
Associates and plain language consultants at
Autrement dit

Communicating on alcohol use in plain language

Alcohol use can be a hot topic. Most people do not like being told that drinking alcohol can be harmful and that it is best to drink less.

Nevertheless, there is scientific data to support such a statement. In fact, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), a non-governmental organization, reviewed the latest scientific research to update Canada's guidelines on alcohol and health.

The results of their scientific work needed to be communicated in a clear and accessible way to all people living in Canada. For drinkers, these results were not good news.

Case study of a perfect project for plain language

The CCSA asked our consulting firm, Autrement dit, to develop an infographic that clearly communicates the new guidelines, making them relevant to people living in Canada and easy to read, understand, and use.

The infographic had to be visually compelling and had to fit on one page.

The target audience was all adults living in Canada. The infographic also had to be produced in both English and French, the 2 official languages of Canada.

The challenge was to communicate complex scientific information about the risks of alcohol use for various health problems, such as cancer and heart disease.

Four plain language principles in action

Although the ISO plain language standard had not yet been published at the time, we had participated in the consultation process while it was still in development, so we were familiar with its main principles. It was clear that we would have to apply these principles for this project.

Principle 1: Readers get what they need

When almost the entire population of a country is the target audience of a document, ensuring they get what they need can be a monumental task. The general public is never a homogeneous group.

To get to know who composed the general public, we used social mapping to identify different groups of people the infographic should or could reach. Social mapping is a useful technique that creates a visual that highlights the various groups of people who have a vested interest in an issue.

This exercise also enabled us to understand the context in which the new information would be received and the environment in which the target audience evolved. In fact, this context is a complex ecosystem including many subgroups with diverging interests regarding alcohol use.

The social mapping revealed that there were several subgroups that had to be considered. Most of them were aware of the previous guidelines, which allowed for more alcoholic drinks per week. The main subgroups identified were the following:

- adults living in Canada, drinkers or not
- health professionals
- alcohol producers, bar owners, and other industry groups
- news media
- scientific experts
- addiction specialists.

Social mapping showed that there were different interests at stake, going from the health and well-being of the population to economic interests.

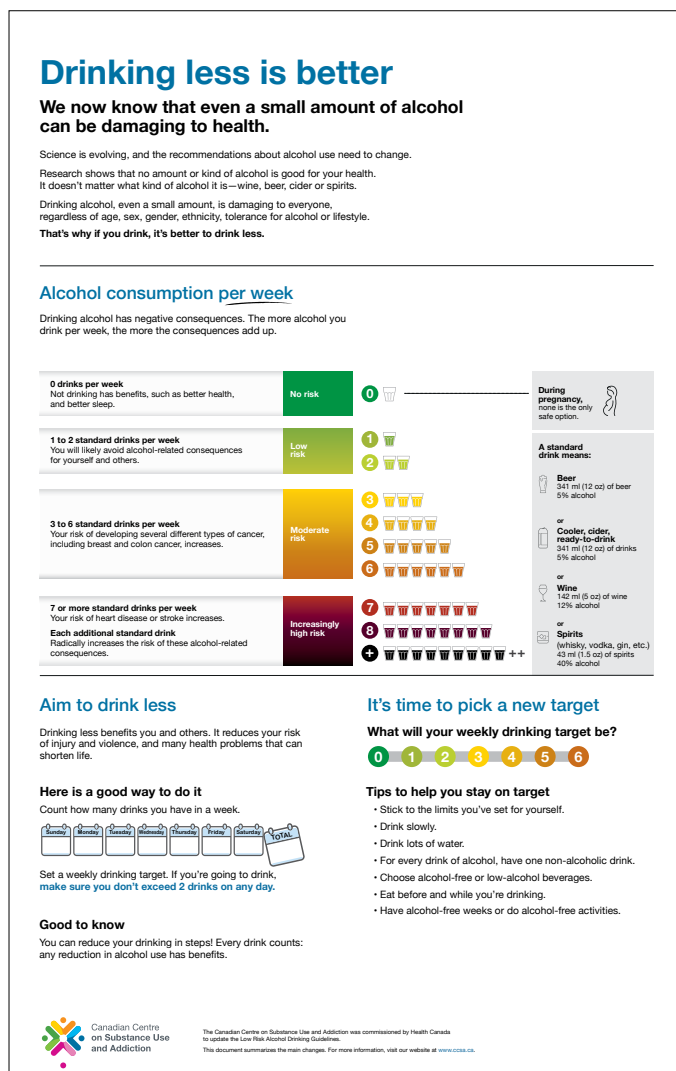
Principle 2: Readers can easily find what they need

Structuring information on a one-pager can be a tricky exercise. Consulting members of the target audience at different stages of development helped us understand the context in which the new information was received. First, many myths and outdated information had to be deconstructed.

A good structure is essential to support readers and encourage them to read to the end. To capture readers' attention, the key messages were placed at the beginning: "Drinking less is better" and "We now know that even a small amount of alcohol can be damaging to health."

Short titles divided the 3 main parts of the information. The first part addressed old knowledge and beliefs to lay the groundwork for new information. The second part displayed a risk continuum, showing the consequences of drinking alcohol in relation to the number of drinks consumed. The last part explained the benefits of drinking less and provided tips for doing so.

Figure 1: Final version of the infographic



Principle 3: Readers can easily understand what they find

We know that people's scientific literacy is generally low. Many have limited knowledge of how scientific research works, which can make them suspicious of changing health information. We addressed this issue right from the start in the infographic.

At the top of the infographic, it says: "Science is evolving, and the recommendations about alcohol use need to change."

This simple sentence clearly states that the infographic presents new scientific information. Our various consultations during the conception of the infographic showed that this statement had achieved its goal of addressing suspicion.

Because health and risk communication can involve complex notions and terms, we made sure to use simple words and write short sentences. One important challenge was achieving the right tone to present the information in a neutral, non-moralistic, and non-stigmatizing manner.

Another important tool for communicating the risk continuum was a graphic showing how risk increases with the number of drinks. Using colors from green to dark red helped illustrate how risk increases.

Principle 4: Readers can easily use the information

Our process was iterative. Throughout the development process, we held multiple rounds of consultations with various members of the target audience.

In total, there were 4 formal and many informal consultations between drafts. These consultations resulted in several versions of the text, the graphic, and the illustrations.

Consulting was very insightful and enabled a great deal of fine-tuning. For instance, achieving a neutral, informative tone required some editorial adjustments. Small words such as "only" or "just" can greatly affect the tone. Only consulting members of the target audience could ensure that the desired tone was eventually attained.

Conclusion

Applying the 4 principles in a plain language process is crucial to bridging new information to existing knowledge.

In fact, when communicating a sensitive issue to a large audience, all the steps leading up to and surrounding the production of a document are as important as the writing itself.

Using social mapping in such situations is extremely useful and easy to apply. As well, consultation, evaluation, and testing are essential at different stages of the project.

Lastly, producing drafts early in the process and presenting them to members of the target audience can also help gain a fine understanding of their needs. It also helps keep them in mind throughout the plain language process. Our ultimate goal was to produce information that people would not only read but also understand, accept, and hopefully use to better their health.

Chantale Audet and **Amélie Bourret** are medical anthropologists and have over 15 years of experience in public health. They co-founded Autrement dit, a Quebec-based plain language consultancy firm. Many Autrement dit's projects relate to the environment, social issues, health care and public health, and aim to promote health literacy. Autrement dit has won multiple ClearMark Awards for its plain language work. The project presented in this article won 3 ClearMark Awards, including being the first French submission to win the Grand ClearMark.

Les 4 principes du langage clair et simple en action: les dessous d'un projet canadien



Chantale Audet et Amélie Bourret
Associées et consultantes en langage clair et simple
chez Autrement dit

Communiquer en langage clair et simple sur la consommation d'alcool

La consommation d'alcool peut être un sujet sensible. La plupart des gens n'aiment pas se faire dire que boire de l'alcool peut être néfaste pour leur santé ni qu'il est préférable de boire moins.

Pourtant, il existe des données scientifiques pour appuyer ces affirmations. Le Centre canadien sur les dépendances et l'usage de substances (CCDUS), une organisation non gouvernementale, a examiné les plus récentes études pour mettre à jour les recommandations sur la consommation d'alcool au Canada.

Les résultats de ce travail scientifique devaient être présentés de façon claire et accessible à l'ensemble de la population canadienne. Pour les personnes qui consomment de l'alcool, ces résultats n'étaient pas une bonne nouvelle.

Étude de cas d'un projet idéal pour le langage clair et simple

Le CCDUS a fait appel à notre entreprise de services-conseils, Autrement dit, pour créer une infographie qui présente clairement les nouvelles recommandations en matière de consommation d'alcool. L'objectif était de les rendre pertinentes pour la population canadienne ainsi que faciles à lire, à comprendre et à utiliser.

Cette infographie devait être visuellement attrayante et tenir en une seule page.

Le public cible était composé de l'ensemble des adultes vivant au Canada. L'infographie devait être produite en anglais et en français, soit les 2 langues officielles du Canada.

Le défi consistait à présenter des données scientifiques complexes sur les risques que présente la consommation d'alcool pour la santé, tels que le cancer et les maladies cardiovasculaires.

Les 4 principes du langage clair et simple en action

Bien que la norme ISO sur le langage clair et simple n'avait pas encore été publiée à ce moment, nous avons participé au processus de consultation pendant son élaboration. Nous connaissions donc ses principes fondamentaux, et il était évident pour nous que nous devions les appliquer à ce projet.

Principe 1: Le public cible obtient ce dont il a besoin

Lorsque la quasi-totalité de la population d'un pays est le public cible d'un document, s'assurer qu'il obtient ce dont il a besoin peut s'avérer une tâche colossale. En fait, le grand public ne forme jamais un groupe homogène.

Pour connaître la composition de ce vaste public cible, nous avons eu recours à la cartographie sociale afin d'identifier les personnes que l'infographie devrait ou pourrait atteindre. Cette technique est particulièrement utile pour mettre en évidence les différentes catégories de personnes touchées par une question donnée.

Cet exercice nous a également permis de comprendre le contexte dans lequel les nouvelles informations seraient reçues et l'environnement dans lequel le public cible évoluait. En fait, ce contexte est un écosystème complexe composé de nombreux sous-groupes aux intérêts divergents en matière de consommation d'alcool.

La cartographie sociale a révélé que plusieurs sous-groupes devaient être pris en compte. La plupart d'entre eux connaissaient les anciennes recommandations qui faisaient mention d'une consommation d'alcool hebdomadaire plus élevée. Les principaux sous-groupes identifiés étaient:

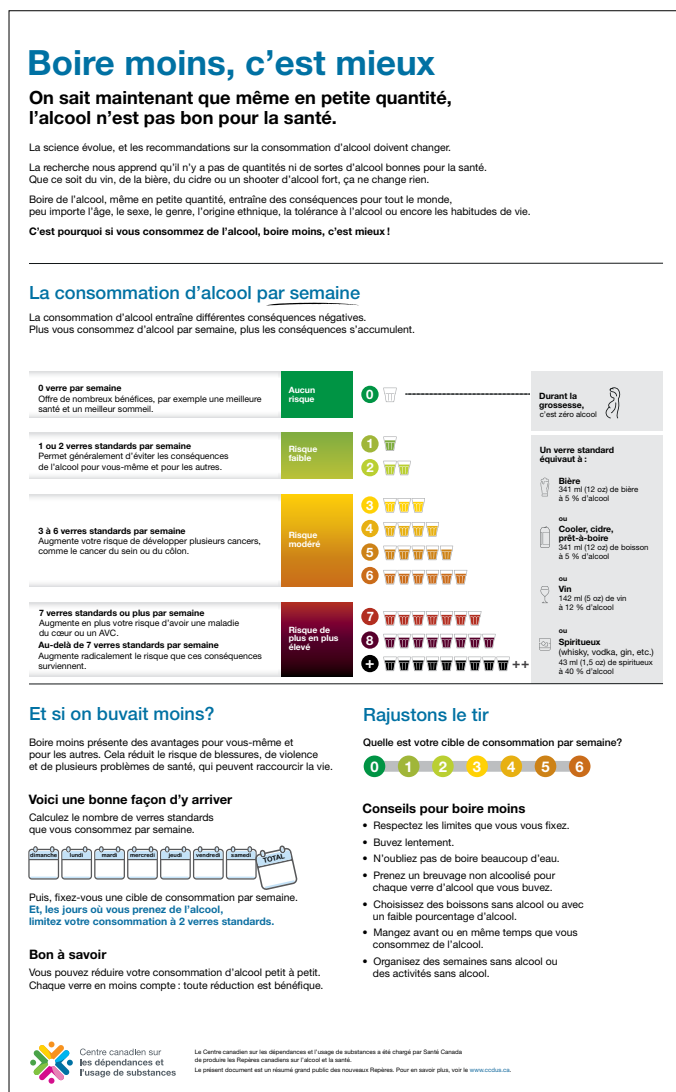
- les adultes vivant au Canada, qu'ils consomment de l'alcool ou non
- les professionnelles et professionnels de la santé
- les productrices et producteurs d'alcool, propriétaires de bar, et autres groupes œuvrant dans l'industrie de l'alcool
- les médias
- la communauté scientifique
- les spécialistes des dépendances.

La cartographie sociale a aussi montré que différents intérêts étaient en jeu, allant de la santé et du bien-être de la population aux intérêts économiques.

Principe 2: Le public cible peut facilement trouver ce dont il a besoin

Structurer l'information en une seule page peut s'avérer complexe. Consulter des membres du public cible à différentes étapes de l'élaboration de l'infographie a permis de comprendre

Figure 1: Version finale de l'infographie



Principe 3: Le public cible peut facilement comprendre ce qu'il trouve

Nous savons que la littératie scientifique de la population est généralement faible. De nombreuses personnes ont une connaissance limitée du fonctionnement de la recherche scientifique, ce qui peut les rendre méfiantes face aux changements d'informations dans le domaine de la santé. Nous avons traité de cette question dès le début de l'infographie.

Au haut de l'infographie, on peut lire : « La science évolue, et les recommandations sur la consommation d'alcool doivent changer ».

Cette phrase simple indique clairement que l'infographie présente de nouvelles informations scientifiques. Les différentes consultations que nous avons réalisées lors de l'élaboration de l'infographie ont montré que cette phrase avait atteint son objectif de réduire la méfiance.

Comme la communication sur la santé et le risque peut nécessiter l'usage de notions et de termes complexes, nous avons veillé à utiliser des mots simples et à rédiger des phrases courtes. L'un des principaux défis restait de trouver le ton juste pour présenter les informations d'une manière neutre, non moralisatrice, ni stigmatisante.

Afin d'illustrer la notion de continuum du risque clairement, nous avons créé un graphique qui présente comment le risque augmente selon le nombre de verres consommés. L'utilisation de couleurs allant du vert au rouge foncé a permis de rendre l'augmentation de ce risque plus visuelle.

Principe 4: Le public cible peut facilement utiliser l'information

Notre processus a été itératif. Tout au long de l'élaboration de l'infographie, nous avons organisé plusieurs vagues de consultations avec différents membres du public cible.

Au total, nous avons mené 4 consultations formelles et de nombreuses consultations informelles entre les différentes versions préliminaires. Ces consultations nous ont amenées à produire plusieurs versions du texte, du graphique et des illustrations.

Consulter des membres du public cible s'est avéré très instructif et a permis d'apporter de nombreuses améliorations. Par exemple, pour arriver à adopter un ton neutre et informatif, il a fallu procéder à quelques ajustements. De simples mots comme « seulement » ou « juste » semblaient avoir une grande influence sur le ton. Seule la consultation de membres du public cible a pu nous garantir que le ton souhaité soit finalement adopté.

le contexte dans lequel la nouvelle information serait reçue. Nous avons ainsi compris qu'il s'avérerait d'abord nécessaire de déconstruire plusieurs mythes et informations qui n'étaient plus à jour.

Bien structurer l'information est essentiel pour accompagner les personnes dans leur lecture et les encourager à lire jusqu'au bout. Pour capter l'attention, les messages clés ont été placés dès le début de l'infographie : « Boire moins, c'est mieux » et « On sait maintenant que, même en petite quantité, l'alcool n'est pas bon pour la santé ».

Nous avons aussi rédigé des titres courts et divisé l'information en 3 grandes parties. La première partie de l'infographie aborde donc les connaissances et croyances que le public cible peut avoir afin de préparer le terrain pour de nouvelles connaissances. La seconde partie présente un continuum de risque, qui montre les conséquences de la consommation d'alcool en fonction du nombre de verres consommés. La dernière partie explique les bénéfices de boire moins et propose des conseils pour y parvenir.

Conclusion

Appliquer ces 4 principes du processus de rédaction en langage clair et simple est essentiel pour faire le pont entre de nouvelles informations et des connaissances déjà bien ancrées.

En fait, lorsqu'un travail consiste à communiquer de l'information sensible à un large public, toutes les étapes menant à la production d'un document et entourant son élaboration sont aussi importantes que la rédaction elle-même. Recourir à la cartographie sociale dans de telles situations est très utile et facile à mettre en œuvre. De même, la consultation, l'évaluation et les tests sont essentiels à différentes étapes d'un projet.

Enfin, produire des ébauches dès le début du processus de création et les présenter aux membres du public cible peut aider à bien comprendre leurs besoins. Cela permet également de garder leurs besoins à l'esprit tout au long du processus de rédaction en langage clair et simple. Notre objectif ultime était de produire des informations qui ne soient pas seulement lues, mais aussi comprises et acceptées. Et nous espérons qu'elles seront aussi utilisées par les personnes pour améliorer leur santé.

Chantale Audet et **Amélie Bourret** sont anthropologues de la santé et ont plus de 15 ans d'expérience dans le domaine de la santé publique. Elles ont cofondé Autrement dit, une entreprise de services-conseils en langage clair basée au Québec. De nombreux projets d'Autrement dit portent sur l'environnement, les enjeux sociaux, les soins de santé et la santé publique, et visent à promouvoir la littératie en santé. Autrement dit a remporté plusieurs ClearMark pour son travail en langage clair et simple. Le projet présenté dans cet article a reçu 3 ClearMark, dont le Grand ClearMark, une première pour un projet français.

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PLAIN

Plain Language
Association
International

ISO 24495-2: A global standard for plain legal documents

Julie Clement, JD
President, Clarity Inc



After the 2023 landmark release of *ISO 24495-1 Plain Language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines*, work has been completed on a second part to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standard. The [*ISO 24495-2 Plain Language – Part 2: Legal communication*](#) which was published in August. It is the

first international standard focused specifically on plain legal documents.

The guidelines in this new standard speak to one of the most stubborn myths about legal documents: that plain language sacrifices precision. For lawyers, legal drafters, and plain language consultants, ISO 24495-2 is both an opportunity and a powerful new tool.

Why is a specific standard needed for plain legal documents?

Legal language is notoriously hard to understand, even for lawyers. But drafting clear legal documents is not just a courtesy. It's also an ethical obligation and a practical necessity. People who do not understand their rights and obligations cannot exercise those rights or fulfill those obligations.

Too often, legal professionals write primarily for other lawyers, despite knowing their work will affect clients, customers, and others who lack legal training. The result is misunderstandings, disputes, losing trust, and barriers to justice.

Lawyers have traditionally worried that applying plain language principles risks losing important nuances, eliminating precision, or increasing liability. Yet decades of experience in the plain language field show that legal documents can be both precise and understandable. In fact, achieving both can actually reduce risk and save money.

What does the standard cover?

Part 1 set out 4 principles for plain language: relevant, findable, understandable, and usable. Part 2 applies these principles directly to legal writing, with:

- detailed guidance on identifying and assessing the multiple audiences for a specific document;
- structuring contracts, forms, and other legal documents for clarity and accessibility;
- communicating complex legal concepts in an understandable way; and
- using mandatory legal terminology in a way that makes it clear to all readers.

In other words, Part 2 does not ignore laws or professional obligations. Instead, it provides consensus-based, practical guidance on producing legally sound documents that people can understand and use.

Who is developing Part 2?

ISO 24495-2 has been developed by ISO Technical Committee 37, Working Group 11 (TC 37 WG 11) — the same international team that produced Part 1.

This working group includes more than 100 international experts appointed by their national standards bodies, as well as experts from liaison organizations, including Clarity, the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN), the Center for Plain Language, the International Institute for Information Design, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and World Commerce & Contracting Association.

WG 11 reviewed, modified and approved every draft of Part 2. But much of the hands-on work was done by the drafting committee: Convenor Angelika Vaasa, Project Manager Julie Clement, and members Christopher Balmford, Clément Camion, Karen Jacques, Doug Lawrence, Torunn Reksten, Gael Spivak, and Rob Waller. Along with the other WG11 members, this committee discussed and responded to hundreds of comments at each stage, ensuring a truly global and interdisciplinary approach.

How will Part 2 benefit lawyers, plain language practitioners, and consumers?

Lawyers in industries that already use ISO standards understand the weight that those standards carry. ISO standards represent [global best practices](#) backed by rigorous expert review. So for legal professionals, ISO 24495-2 will be recognized as much more than a style guide. It is an internationally endorsed, consensus-driven standard to support the practice of law and help legal professionals meet their obligations.

Lawyers and other legal professionals who follow the Part 2 guidelines will reduce client confusion and time spent explaining legal documents. Plain language legal documents also minimize misunderstandings that lead to disputes or litigation, improve satisfaction in competitive legal markets, and reduce administrative overhead. Perhaps more importantly, clear legal documents help to ensure access to justice.

Part 1 gave plain language practitioners a powerful advocacy tool. Part 2 speaks directly to the unique complexities — and resistance — found in legal communication. This standard will provide weighty support to persuade skeptical legal teams that clarity does not sacrifice precision. Moreover, Part 2 could help foster better collaboration with legal professionals.

Ultimately, ISO 24495-2 is about serving people who must read and rely on legal documents. Clear legal documents mean clients and customers will better understand what they're agreeing to, citizens will face fewer barriers to exercising their rights, and courts and regulators will see fewer disputes based on misunderstandings.

Clear legal documents promote transparency, trust, and fairness — values that are at the heart of legal ethics and good business practices.

How can you get involved?

ISO uses a consensus model that welcomes expert input. You can participate in this process in numerous ways. First, contact your national standards body to find out if they participate in TC 37. If so, you may be able to join TC 37 and WG 11 through that standards body.

If that's not an option for you, then watch for invitations to comment through one of the liaison organizations. For example, PLAIN members are already involved with Part 2 of the plain language standard and will be asked to comment further.

You can buy a copy of ISO 24495-2:2025 Plain language Part 2: Legal communication from your national standards body or from the [ISO store](#).

Julie Clement, JD, is the Deputy Clerk at the Michigan Supreme Court and a distinguished professor emerita at the Thomas Cooley Law School. Julie has dedicated her career to making legal documents more accessible to the public. She is the president of Clarity Inc. and served as editor-in-chief of *The Clarity Journal* for 14 years. Julie is the project manager for ISO 24495-2 and is on the boards of the Center for Plain Language and the International Plain Language Federation. As a plain language practitioner, she works with public institutions, courts, and legal professionals on writing, editing, and designing clear documents.

An ISO requirement standard for organizations



Torunn Reksten and Sarah Slabbert Project co-leaders of ISO 24495-4

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is developing a standard that will enable organizations to be certified for using plain language systematically in their operations. The ISO expects to publish the *ISO 24495-4 Part 4: Implementing the plain language principles in organizations* in 2026.

ISO 24495-4 will set out requirements for any organization — large or small, public or private — to implement plain language principles and consistently produce plain language communication. It will define the systems and processes organizations must have in place to show they are applying the *ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines*. It also ensures they are consistently working to build a culture of plain language.

Even if an organization does not aim for ISO certification, the organization can use the standard as a guide to implement plain language practices.

Why a requirement standard for organizations

In 2022, the International Plain Language Federation conducted a survey to assess the demand for certifying organizations for plain language. Nearly 120 organizations participated in the survey — 35 plain language consultancies and 82 organizations interested in plain language. The results showed a keen interest (68%) in certification.

The same survey found that among organizations interested in plain language:

- only 19% had a documented process to produce plain language communications
- only 12% measured their plain language performance (process or outcomes)
- only 5% had a budget for plain language and
- 76% had one or more of these plain language resources (trained writers, a plain language style guide, templates, checklists, glossaries, software).

These findings align with research (Green, 2019), which found that organizations struggled to implement plain language sustainably and systematically. Often, plain language projects are one-off or dependent on a plain language champion.

In addition, plain language practitioners and organizations from countries with plain language legislation, like the United States and South Africa, have reported weak compliance enforcement (Green, 2019; Cornelius 2016; Blasie, 2023). This points to a lack of relevant, clear, and practical requirements.

The ISO does not certify organizations. However, it develops requirement standards that could form the basis of certification. The various ISO-accredited certification bodies run the certification process.

What organizations must do

The initial task group working on drafting requirements for organizations developed a conceptual framework for implementing plain language in an organization. The framework distinguishes between 2 types of organizational processes:

1. the processes needed to develop plain language content and
2. the structures and processes needed to drive and sustain successful implementation. These were called enabling requirements.

The enabling requirements are based on criteria and requirements from 3 sources: 2 business excellence models ([EFQM \[European Foundation for Quality Management\] Model](#); [Baldrige Excellence Framework](#)), [ISO 9001:2015 Quality management systems — Requirements](#), and [the compliance criteria for Outcome 3 of Treating Customers Fairly](#). In addition, task group members added requirements from their own experience as plain language practitioners.

The committee defined content as all types of communications organizations share internally with employees and externally with customers, suppliers, partners, and the public (Miller & Barbour, 2015). Content includes printed documents, websites, presentations, emails, videos, and social media posts.

ISO's process to develop a standard

An ISO standard is developed according to a consensus principle, which states that the working group should agree on content and wording. A standard must go through 6 stages of review, comments, validation, and voting before ISO can accept it for publication. It usually takes about 3 years from proposal to publication.

This lengthy and rigorous process strengthens the standard. Many voices representing different countries, cultures, languages, types of organizations, and levels of plain language maturity are heard. This helps ensure that the standard has legitimacy and can be adopted worldwide.

ISO's Technical Committee 37 (language and terminology) Working Group 11 on plain language (WG 11) has about 160 international experts developing the draft for Part 4. The Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) is an official liaison organization to WG 11, and all PLAIN members were invited to give their input on the first draft.

Most of the actual writing is done by a drafting committee (DC) formed by WG 11. In addition to the project leaders, the DC for Part 4 includes Annetta Cheek (USA), Burcu Karaman (Turkey), Chantale Audet (Canada), Cinzia Theobald (Australia), Doug Lawrence (UK), Hajime Yamada (Japan), and Nuria Gómez Belar (Argentina). Having such a diverse committee is of great value as it provides different perspectives on the issues at hand and the discussions on revising the draft in response to comments and other feedback.

In June, WG 11 approved the draft. It has now entered the committee stage where national standardization bodies will comment.

Challenges

A standard suitable for all organizations

Requirements must be practical for all organizations. They must clearly state what organizations must do to produce the evidence that the certifying body will be looking for. And they must be realistic to achieve and to audit for all types of organizations, small and large.

A standard that empowers organizations

The set of processes and structures that the standard requires must empower the organization to consistently and sustainably produce plain language communications.

The scope of the process

Organizations can produce an endless amount of content. What is the most logical scope restriction? New content? External-facing content? Strategic content? In the end, the DC selected content with the greatest impact, but organizations must have a plan to extend the scope over time.

An organization might not be ready to meet all the requirements across all departments but may want to get certified for what it has already achieved. This falls outside the scope of this standard, but the eventual certification system can include certification levels; for example, certification for the whole organization, a division, or even a project.

The role of generative artificial intelligence

Generative artificial intelligence is fast becoming a major player in organizations' processes to develop content. Discussion is still open about whether and what the standard should require for the use of artificial intelligence in content development.

An inclusive standard

The ISO has numerous internal consultation processes for standards development. However, it is essential to consult organizations outside the ISO about whether the draft is clear and feasible.

Before the first draft was submitted to the ISO, the Federation published a consultation paper that explored various requirements and a survey, which informed the requirements.

During the next stage, organizations will again be consulted. If your national standards body has appointed you to WG 11, we encourage you to participate in this process.

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Torunn Reksten is a plain language expert at the Language Council of Norway, PLAIN Vice President, and Federation board member. She represents Standards Norway in ISO's 24495 series, serving on the drafting committees for Parts 1 and 2 (legal communication) before now co-leading the work on Part 4.

Sarah Slabbert is a South African entrepreneur and founder of BHI32 and [The Plain Language Institute](#). She is active in the international plain language community as a Federation board member and Chair of its Certification Committee. She co-leads the work on Part 4.

ISO 24495-5: Toward a plain language standard for document design

Rob Waller

Board member, International Institute for Information Design



Although many people think of plain language as being about common words, short sentences, and the active voice, it is actually about readers — what they do with documents and what they need to help them. This is what makes *ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines* such

a powerful standard. It focuses on helping readers see the relevance of content and navigate it efficiently — as much as understanding it.

Once you see plain language in this way, it becomes obvious that document design is a central part of any message. Readers want to find relevant information at a glance and by skimming — so structural information needs to be visible through the document's design.

Document design in Part 1

Part 1 includes guidance on using design to help people find the information they need, contributed by representatives of the International Institute for Information Design. However, following its publication, it became clear that there was more to say about the topic.

For the last 2 years, a team has been drafting an additional part to the standard on document design. This was presented at a recent meeting of the ISO's plain language working group (WG 11) of the language and terminology technical committee (TC 37). They accepted it for development with the aim of eventually recognizing it as Part 5 of the ISO 24495 Plain Language Standard.

There are several stages of commenting before we can share the draft, but eventually members of the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) will have an opportunity to review it.

Our process

We established a small team of experts who have many years of experience of writing, design, and testing documents.

Annetta Cheek's deep knowledge of the plain language community and the ISO system was invaluable in steering our

progress. Not claiming to be a design expert, she was able to alert us to the needs of plain language writers, our primary audience.

Robert Linsky has many years of experience in document design, with a particular focus on transactional documents, such as bills, financial statements, and other customer communications. He is a long-standing member and former board member of PLAIN.

Karen Schriver's book *Dynamics in Document Design* is an authoritative classic that brings together the history of the field, best practice, case studies, and research evidence. She has published widely on the theory and practice of information design.

Chani Slabbert is a designer with a background in information design and business. She has a special interest in using design thinking to improve organizational processes. She is developing a resource on how to brief designers, which was published in the last issue of the *PLAIN eJournal*.

Karel van der Waarde is a leading expert on health communications and medicines information, with deep experience of document design, testing, teaching, and campaigning for clearer information for patients. He also had an article in the last issue of the *PLAIN eJournal*, which focused on design.

My own career history is at the end of this article.

A pattern library approach

A problem the writing team faced at the start was: How do we talk about plain language design? Too often design is presented as something that is done to a draft once the writer has finished, to make it look nicer. We wanted to show writers how they can take responsibility for design at the start of the writing process.

When we (people in general, really) talk about language, we have names for the different ways in which words combine to make meaning — clause or sentence, for example. We can refer to rules about grammar and guidance about style and rhetorical structures. But we do not have a parallel metalanguage for document design.

Design patterns are a response to this problem. They are a way to describe design ideas in terms of the writer's intent and their effect on readers — not just what they look like. Originating in architecture, design patterns are widely used in the design of interfaces, apps, and websites.

A design pattern consists of 2 main parts: a problem (or challenge) and a typical solution, together with examples and notes about their use. These problem-solution patterns can be organized as sets, known as pattern libraries.

Figure 1: A typical design pattern from the Document Design Pattern Library

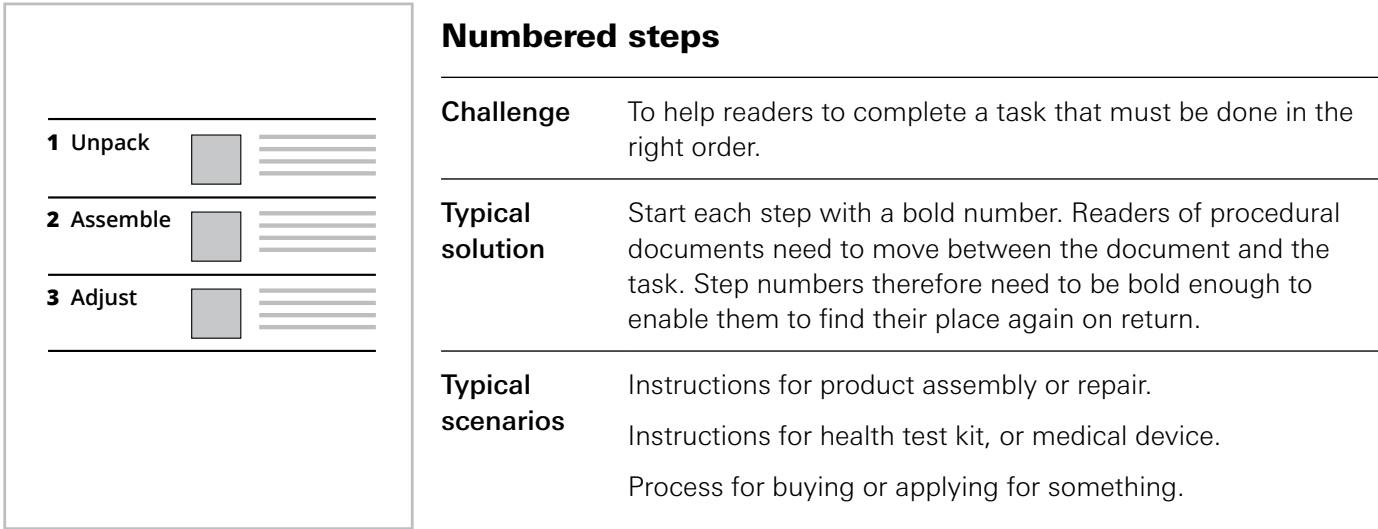


Figure 1 shows a typical design pattern. Because we define the challenge the solution addresses, it naturally leads us to think about how best to implement it. So, in the case of numbered steps, we point out that the reader may need to leave the document and return to it — so the numbers need to be bold enough to support that.

Many of the patterns are well known and obvious. Take headings, for example. We may think these need no explanation. But by discussing headings as design patterns, we are forced to think carefully about what problem is being solved by a heading. This helps us understand what makes an effective heading.

The pattern library

As we started to draft Part 5, we quickly found that the pattern definitions were taking up a lot of space. So, we decided to publish the pattern library as a separate document, referred to in the standard.

It is organized in 3 main sections, reflecting the structure of ISO 24495-1.

- 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 covers usability, which in ISO 24495-1 is interpreted as testing to check that the first 3 principles have been followed. So, instead of design guidelines, we propose testing methods. These will be supported by a further external document, which is still in draft form.

The pattern library includes a deeper explanation of how patterns can be used both to design documents and to

critique them. And because they clarify the purpose of each pattern, they also suggest relevant goals for document testing. The first draft of the document design pattern library is now available on the International [Plain Language Federation website](#). We encourage you to download and to comment on it.

Rob Waller is visiting professor at the University of Leeds School of Design. He is an information designer with wide experience of practice, research, writing, and teaching. He helped to create an institutional framework for the development of information design, founding the *Information Design Journal* in 1979, and organizing the Information Design Conference series in the 1980s–2000s. He is a past president of the International Institute for Information Design and holds BA and PhD degrees from the University of Reading, UK.

Business reporting made easy



Angelika Vaasa
Manager, translation services of the European Parliament



Diego Berea
Managing partner, Ozona Consulting

ISO Technical Committee 37 Working Group 11 on Plain Language (ISO TC 37 WG 11) has a simple but powerful mission: to create standards that help make documents clear, accessible and usable for everyone.

The same International Organization for Standardization (ISO) working group is developing the upcoming ISO 24896 on notation for business reporting. This new standard fits well into this mission because the aim is to make business reports clearer and easier to interpret.

What is notation?

While the term notation might sound technical, it simply refers to a consistent way of formatting, labeling, and organizing information. The purpose is to establish a common visual language that allows for immediate recognition of patterns and structures. One everyday example of notation is public transit maps. The colors, lines, icons, and symbols form a visual language that allows people to quickly understand the transit network. For business reports, it means designing charts and tables with rules that support recognition and comparison of data.

Why is standardization needed?

For notation to be efficient, it needs to be applied consistently. Standardization ensures that consistency. An ISO standard for consistent notation for business reporting will encourage organizations to adopt the globally agreed way of notating their business reports.

That is why the International Business Communication Standards Association (IBCS) approached ISO TC 37 with a proposal to develop a standard on the notation of business reporting. IBCS had already been working on this topic with the aim of achieving a more harmonized approach to business reporting.

Who is working on the standard?

Two experts lead the development of this standard: Diego Berea and Jürgen Faisst. Diego represents the Portuguese national standards body, and Jürgen represents the German body.

Diego attended an IBCS analyst training session delivered by Jürgen. After the course, he proposed the idea of converting the IBCS semantic notation into an ISO standard to give it a wider reach and to establish it as a global standard.

Two plain language experts, Annetta Cheek and Roslyn Abela, are part of the editorial team and ensure the standard follows plain language principles.

The editorial team also includes Matthias Giger, a business analytics expert, and Sabine Mahr, a specialist in technical communication. Their complementary perspectives further enhance the quality and usability of the standard.

Collaborations

During the development of the standard, a wonderful synergy emerged. Business reporting experts are learning more about plain language and are incorporating it into the standard. Plain language experts are discovering new aspects of presenting visuals and related information in business reports.

The collaboration on this standard has contributed to spreading the word about plain language in the business communications community. Each contact and joint activity helps make plain language more prominent and widely accepted.

In addition to following the plain language principles that the standard be relevant, findable, and understandable, the project leads also tested the notation system outlined in the standard with the users of the business reports. The preliminary results showed that the visuals designed according to the requirements of the draft standard 24896 had a potential to make business communication more efficient because they helped users make faster decisions and fewer mistakes in understanding the visuals.

What does the standard cover?

The standard focuses on data visuals in business reports and the text that gives meaning to the visuals. It covers:

- charts;
- tables;
- descriptive text elements, such as labels and legends;
- explanatory text elements, such as key messages and annotations;
- perspectives from which the data is analyzed (also known as business dimensions);
- interpretation of the data, such as increase or decrease over time; and
- marking to highlight different trends.

The standard contains requirements and recommendations. The requirements are mandatory if an organization chooses to comply with this ISO standard. There are two types of requirements:

- those establishing common notation across all organizations and
- those allowing organizations to use their own notation on the condition that they apply it consistently.

Standards that contain requirements can be used for certification. This allows organizations to show their commitment to clear and consistent business reporting by obtaining certification by a certifying organization.

The recommendations are guidelines that support the overall objective of consistent business reporting and should be followed whenever possible and relevant.

The standard also provides many examples of charts and tables that comply with the requirements.

Who can benefit from this standard?

People and organizations that prepare business reports and want to make them more understandable and consistent will benefit from ISO 24896. At the organizational level, sharing a visual language raises the overall quality of communication, strengthens identity, and supports an accessible data culture. For writers, it provides a reference framework that simplifies presentation decisions and prevents arbitrary choices.

Organizations' and writers' work with the standard will ultimately benefit their clients, who need to understand business reports to make decisions. For readers, it enables faster pattern recognition, more reliable data interpretation, and less adaptation effort.

When will the standard be published?

The standard is still under development and must pass the final approval stages. Publication is expected toward the beginning of 2026. After publication, people will be able to buy the standard from ISO or their national standards bodies.

We thank all the experts of ISO TC 37 WG 11 for their dedication and support in making ISO 24896 a reality!

Angelika Vaasa is a manager at the translation services of the European Parliament where she is responsible for developing and maintaining the translation quality policy. She is also the convenor of ISO TC 37 WG11 on plain language and actively involved in the development of plain language and translation standards. Angelika is a former translator, interpreter, and trainer with degrees in linguistics, interpretation, teacher training, and European legal studies.

Diego Berea is a managing partner at Ozona Consulting. He is also a member of the editorial team for ISO IEC 20000 within ISO IEC JTC 1 SC 40 (IT Service Management) and for ISO 24896 in ISO TC 37 (Language and Terminology). He is a specialist in service management, performance measurement, and indicator visualization. He is also an author of several books and articles on these topics.

PLAIN'S REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

The Regional Development committee helps PLAIN become more diverse and international by building geography- and language-based networks for plain language. We have an ambassador program and a growing number of regional LinkedIn groups to help us achieve this goal.

Ambassador program

What is it all about?

PLAIN's ambassadors promote plain language and the work of PLAIN in their regions and languages. They do this by publishing newsletters, writing articles, posting on social media, organizing plain language events, and serving as local contacts for people interested in joining PLAIN.

Ambassadors also bring a regional perspective to international discussions, helping to strengthen the global plain language community.

Meet PLAIN's ambassadors



Tereza Costa
Brazil



Belén Galera
Colombia



Guido Moncayo-Vives
Ecuador



Stéphanie Guillaume
France



Vijayalaxmi Hegde
India



Tamar Tal-Amatzia
Israel



Lorenzo Carpanè
Italy



Claudia Hernández Flores
Mexico



Martín Cuesta
Peru



Antoinique van Staden
South Africa



Antonio Martín Fernández
Spain



Frances Gordon
United Kingdom



Fiorella Parodi
Uruguay

Interested in becoming an ambassador?

We're actively looking for ambassadors in Canada, the USA, Australia, Portugal, Chile, Argentina, Germany, Austria, or Switzerland. Are you interested? We'd love to hear from you!

Contact us at ambassador@plainlanguagenetwork.org

Learn more on [PLAIN's website](#)

Regional groups on LinkedIn

To support local engagement and connect plain language practitioners around the world, PLAIN has established five regional LinkedIn groups. These groups allow members to share resources, promote events, ask questions, and discuss plain language in their own languages and contexts.

Language-based groups

Portuguese: [PLAIN em português – Linguagem Simples](#)

Spanish: [PLAIN en español – Lenguaje claro](#)

German: [PLAIN auf Deutsch – Einfache Sprache](#)

Country-specific groups

[PLAIN in India – Plain Language](#)

[PLAIN in South Africa – Plain Language](#)



PLAIN

**Plain Language
Association
International**

We welcome new members and contributors to these groups. If you'd like to start a LinkedIn group for your language or region, get in touch with us at ambassador@plainlanguagenetwork.org.

Shaping the future of plain language certification

Sarah Slabbert

Chair of the International Plain Language Federation's Certification Committee



Can organizations or websites be certified for plain language? Can plain language consultancies and plain language professionals be certified? Around the world, people are asking these questions with growing urgency.

In 2021, the International Plain Language Federation

established a Certification Committee to help its board make informed decisions on plain language certification.

This article outlines the committee's work so far and what still needs to be done.

Why certification?

In 2022 and 2023, the Federation conducted surveys and focus groups to explore interest in plain language certification. The response was clear: there is strong demand for certification of individuals, organizations, and documents.

The publication of *ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines* was a milestone for plain language. However, because it is a guidance standard, it is not certifiable. The Certification Committee is working to develop viable pathways for certification, based on the ISO standard and other internationally recognized quality frameworks.

Four focus areas

Our work covers 4 core areas of certification:

- Organizations: Developing requirements for certifying how organizations embed plain language into their operations.
- Individuals: Creating a certification framework for plain language practitioners.
- Documents: A tool for assessing documents objectively against ISO 24495-1.
- Systems: Investigating issues and questions that relate to certification systems.

Across all areas, the subcommittees used research, consultation, and real-world testing to guide their work. The Certification Committee's reports to the Federation's board twice a year. At

the end of each year, the board also reviews and approves the committee's workplan for the following year.

In December 2023, the board endorsed the committee's recommendations to do the following:

- proceed with certification of organizations with an interest in plain language through the ISO system
- develop certification for individuals and plain language consultancies (that is, organizations with plain language as their core business) within a non-ISO certification framework
- continue refining a document assessment tool based on ISO 24495-1.

Certifying organizations

The Organizations Subcommittee began its work by mapping plain language principles to existing business excellence models (such as Baldrige and European Foundation for Quality Management) and ISO 9001:2015 Quality management systems — Requirements.

They then surveyed 117 organizations, 35 plain language consultancies, and 82 organizations interested in plain language.

The results showed strong interest: 77% of consultancies and 64% of other organizations were in favor of getting certified for producing plain language content. However, many said they lacked the resources to implement the standard without support.

To address this, a broader task group was established to draft a requirement standard for organizations with 2 key outputs:

1. A consultation paper that explored requirements for organizations with a feedback survey.
2. A draft requirement standard, submitted to ISO in July 2024 as a proposed Part 4 of the ISO 24495 plain language standard. For more details, refer to the article "An ISO requirement standard for organizations" in this issue of the *PLAIN eJournal*.

The subcommittee is formulating specific requirements for plain language consultancies and collaborating with the Systems Subcommittee to identify an appropriate certification body and system outside the ISO.

Certifying individuals

What would a certification program for plain language practitioners look like? For details on the committee's work and survey results can be found in "Global survey shows strong interest in individual certification in plain language" also in this issue of the *PLAIN eJournal*.

Certifying documents

The Documents Subcommittee is examining certifying documents against the guidance of ISO 24495-1. Their approach addresses 3 dimensions:

1. Assessment

The subcommittee has developed a comprehensive document assessment tool based on Part 1 of the standard, with clear instructions and a scoring system. The goal is a tool that delivers objective, defensible, repeatable, and measurable results.

2. Feasibility

Subcommittee members are exploring how to make document assessment and certification practical. Key questions include:

- What qualifications should document assessors have?
- How can we safeguard the tool from misuse?
- What form should the certification award take to ensure credibility?

3. Viability

The next step will be to investigate market demand and use cases for document assessment and certification across various contexts, while also working to ensure a process that is cost-effective and attractive to both public and private sector organizations.

Building systems for certification

Certification is not just about what to assess, it's also about how. The Systems Subcommittee has looked at the structures and processes needed to manage certification.

Their issues paper explores:

- key elements of a certification process
- the advantages and disadvantages of certification
- the pros and cons of ISO versus non-ISO systems
- international versus local certification models
- compliance, credibility, and success factors.

They also identify potential partners to serve as certification bodies, particularly for individuals and plain language consultancies.

Looking ahead

The Certification Committee's work is still evolving, but the foundations are in place. In each area — organizations, individuals, documents, and systems — we aim to build practical, credible options for certification.

Want to learn more?

The Plain Language Association International will host a webinar later this fall to share progress and invite feedback from the plain language community. Details will be announced on PLAIN's website.

Certification is more than a credential. It's a tool for advancing plain language practices worldwide. We believe certification can help grow the plain language profession. It can also help organizations create communications that truly connect with people, because the information is relevant to them, and easy to find, understand, and use.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to Deborah Bosley, Milva Finnegan, Neil James, and Bede Sunter, who are the chairs of the subcommittees. This article is based on their reports to the Certification Committee.

Sarah Slabbert is a South African entrepreneur and founder of BHI32 and [The Plain Language Institute](#). She is active in the international plain language community as a Federation board member and Chair of its Certification Committee. She co-leads the work on Part 4.

Global survey shows strong interest in individual certification in plain language

Milva Finnegan, Lynn Dare, and Dees Stalling IPLF Individual Certification Subcommittee Members

About two-thirds of plain language practitioners who completed a survey said they would be very interested in individual plain language certification, with another quarter being somewhat interested.

The Individual Certification Subcommittee of the International Plain Language Federation completed a global survey to assess interest in developing a certification for plain language practitioners. They received 357 survey responses from professionals in 42 countries, indicating strong global engagement and underscoring the need for a formalized, international certification process.

Most respondents were members of one of the Federation's member organizations: Plain Language Association International, the Center for Plain Language, and Clarity. This response signals that the field is ready to take existing training and best practices to the next level of professionalism and global recognition of plain language practitioners: standardized certification.

The Federation set up the committee to advance the field through professional standards, formal training, and international recognition. It builds on the [ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines](#), a foundational standard that sets out clear principles for plain language communication.

Certification research and the path forward

ISO 24495 Plain Language: A vision for the future of plain language

The journey to certification is part of a broader effort to elevate the plain language profession. For over a decade, the Federation has been working toward 3 common goals:

1. a shared definition of plain language (endorsed in 2014)
2. international standards (published in 2023)
3. mechanisms for certification and training.

This international standard sets out governing principles and guidelines for plain language. It offers an empirically grounded and practical framework, which can help organizations and practitioners improve clarity and accessibility.

In a 2024 webinar, Federation Chair Dr. Neil James emphasized the ISO standard's central role in future initiatives, including:

- certification programs for individuals and organizations,
- a comprehensive resource bank,

- best practice guidelines for training, and
- continued advocacy to promote plain language internationally.

Certification research and strategy development

Since 2022, the Federation's Certification Committee has explored several pathways for formal certification. It established 4 subcommittees, each tasked with researching a specific area of certification: individual, organization, training provider, and documents.

In early 2024, following a presentation of comparative research and survey results, the Federation board approved the Individual Certification Subcommittee to develop a certification framework for plain language practitioners.

The subcommittee's work has been informed by research into certification models used in related professions, as well as feedback from the global plain language community. The survey results validated the importance of and demand for individual certification.

Survey insights: A global perspective

More than 90% of respondents said they were either "very interested" or "somewhat interested" in individual certification.

More than 80% had completed some type of formal plain language training, with LinkedIn and plain language organizations being the most common training providers.

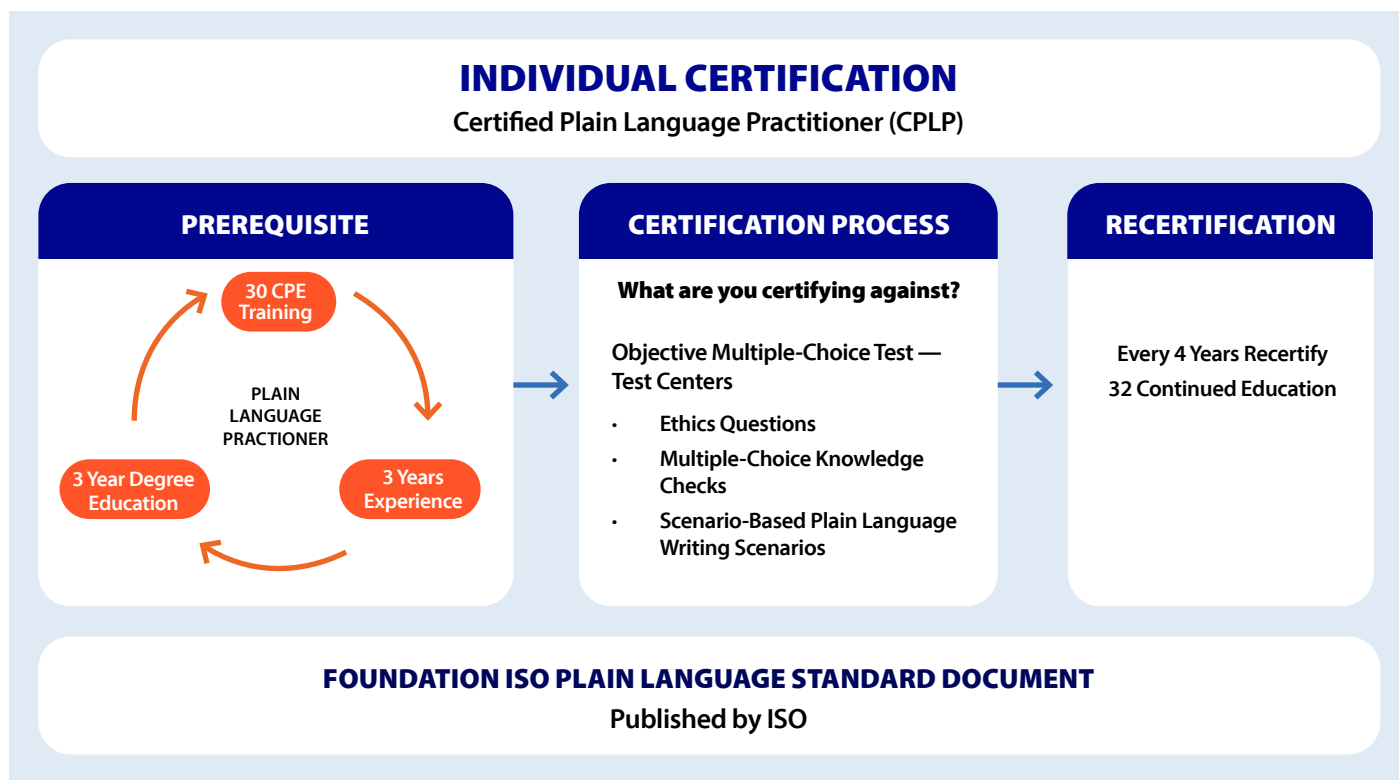
Respondents represented diverse professional roles, including:

- Over 50% being plain language writers or editors,
- 24% being educators, and
- 22% being technical writers.

Additionally, 84% indicated that they work primarily in English, though participation came from 42 countries — highlighting the global relevance of this initiative.

The strong interest and wide professional reach suggest that the field is prepared to take the next step toward certification grounded in international best practices.

Figure 1. Draft certification framework for a plain language practitioner



Note. A long description of this figure is available as an [appendix](#).

Next steps: Building the individual certification framework

The subcommittee is now focused on creating a certification model aligned with the ISO plain language standard and responsive to the needs of practitioners around the world. The framework includes:

- entry requirements, such as training and work experience
- assessment methods, such as exam, portfolio, or practical demonstration
- recertification procedures to ensure ongoing competence and engagement
- using input from plain language community members, we have outlined a framework for the prerequisites, test approach, and recertification criteria. Figure 2 is a summary of the subcommittee's outlined framework.

The next phase of work involves mapping available training resources and defining a knowledge base for certification. This step is critical for establishing consistent standards while allowing flexibility to reflect different cultural, linguistic, and professional contexts.

The certification will be designed to accommodate a range of practitioner backgrounds and to support continuous development in the field.

To contribute to the development process or follow updates, readers are encouraged to visit the [Federation website](#) and participate in upcoming surveys and consultations.

Conclusion

There is strong and growing momentum behind the effort to create a global certification for plain language professionals. A formal credential would reinforce the value of plain language, help employers and clients identify qualified practitioners, and support the credibility and consistency of work in the field.

The International Plain Language Foundation Individual Certification Subcommittee is committed to designing a rigorous yet inclusive certification model that reflects international standards and professional values. Community engagement is essential as this work moves forward. We invite all plain language professionals to stay involved as we continue building a program that promotes clear communication and strengthens the profession globally.

Appendix: Long description for Figure 1

Heading text reads: Individual certification: Certified plain language practitioner (CPLP). Below it are 3 boxes.

The first box has the subheading Prerequisite. A box in the middle has the words Plain language practitioner. Around it are 3 curved arrows pointing to boxes with the words 3-year degree education, 30 CPEs training, and 3-years experience.

The second box has the subheading Certification process. The text reads What are you certifying against? Objective, multiple-choice test, test centers, Ethics questions, multiple-choice knowledge checks, and scenario-based plain language writing scenarios.

The third box has the subheading Recertification. Text reads every 4 years recertify, and 32 continued education hours.

At the bottom of the figure are the words Foundation — ISO plain language standard document published by ISO.

[Return to Figure 1.](#)



Milva Finnegan, PhD, has worked over 25 years in the commercial and contract management profession. Her career started at the Boeing Company and today she runs Karhu LLC, a contracts consulting company. She serves

as the chair for the Federation's Individual Certification Subcommittee. She has a passion for legal design and plain language in contracting to assure everyone understands their obligations. Milva earned her PhD from the University of Vaasa in Finland in business law, where her research focused on user-centered design as the key to contract simplification.



Lynn Dare, PhD, CE, is an evaluation consultant and a Credentialed Evaluator with the Canadian Evaluation Society with over 15 years of experience in program evaluation. She volunteers with the Federation on its Individual Certification Subcommittee. She holds a

PhD in education studies (applied educational psychology) and has a strong interest in social research, especially in education. She supports the use of plain English in evaluation and research and earned a plain language certificate from Simon Fraser University in 2020.



Dees Stallings, PhD, is a former chief of the U.S. Army's Communicative Skills Office and former Director of the University of Maryland Global Campus Effective Writing Program. A Graduate School, USA faculty member, he is also Managing Director of [Deerpath Decisive](#)

[Communications](#), a veteran-owned training and publishing business. He is also a member of the [Center for Plain Language](#).



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Evolving our plain language institutions

Neil James

Author and plain language advocate



As this issue of the *PLAIN eJournal* shows, we have reached an exciting point in plain language standards and certification. Less exciting (but equally important) are the institutional arrangements needed to support these developments. This article looks at how we have already evolved and what

we could consider for the future.

Our current institutions

In 2008, three plain language organizations (the Plain Language Association International [PLAIN], Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language) decided to form a working group to strengthen our profession where it makes sense for them to work together. This became the International Plain Language Federation. The now widely accepted [definition of plain language](#) that it published in 2014 was a good example of its collective action.

In 2018, these organizations decided to pursue plain language standards by partnering with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). We recognized that ISO has the infrastructure and experience to complement our plain language expertise.

This has worked well, with PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center appointed as Liaison Organizations to ISO's Technical Committee 37 (TC 37) on language and terminology. This means members of these 3 groups can comment on draft ISO standards. We then [promote the standards](#) jointly through the Federation's website and social media resources.

A strategic standards ecosystem

The advantage of partnering with ISO is that it provides authority and expertise that the world takes seriously. The disadvantages include the potential loss of control over our intellectual property and the fact that ISO receives the revenue from sales. It is also harder to consult widely outside of ISO once a standard is progressing through its 6 drafting stages.

As a result, we are approaching standards strategically and supplementing the ISO standards with [supporting documents](#) on the Federation's website. Examples include a [bibliography](#), a [guide for health communication](#) and a [pattern library](#) for document design. The Federation is also developing guidelines for plain language training.

This means that both ISO and the Federation's member organizations are playing the role of standard setters. We can decide together which standards we want to publish through ISO and which ones we want to make more freely available.

Elements of a certification system

Certification is a formal assessment that determines whether a product, service, process, or individual meets a standard. Our emerging plain language standards are inevitably raising the prospect of certification against them. But who might administer plain language certification?

First, it is essential to understand how certification systems work. As the table shows, certification usually operates at 4 levels.

To add to this complexity, not all systems have both certification and accreditation, and the 2 terms are used variably in different countries.

Certifying organizations and individuals

So how might a plain language certification system work? This will depend on what we are certifying.

Since 2023, the Federation has discussed using the ISO system to certify most organizations but work outside ISO to certify individuals and plain language consultancies.

For most organizations, producing plain language communications will require appropriate policies and processes. ISO standards such as its 9000 series are very suitable for these kinds of management systems. [ISO 24495-4 Plain language Part 4: Requirements for implementing the plain language principles in organizations](#) will set out mandatory requirements that organizations would need to follow to certify their plain language approach. ISO already has a network of national certification and accreditation bodies in place that can then certify them against that standard.

But the ISO system may not work as well for plain language organizations, such as consultancies. ISO certification bodies do not have the expertise to assess the services that plain language organizations deliver. And our consultancies are often small and may find the costs of ISO certification prohibitive.

Similarly, individual practitioners — whether they work alone or within an organization — would require a separate system

Table 1: Certification systems usually operate at 4 levels

Bodies	Actions	Outcomes
1. Standards bodies	Develop	Standards
2. Organizations or individuals	Produce (using standards)	Products, services, and processes
3. Certification bodies	Assess against standards • Organizations • Individuals • Products and services • Processes	Certification
4. Accreditation bodies	Assess certification bodies	Accreditation

to assess the education, professional development, and experience that a plain language practitioner needs to be certified. And ISO's system does not certify individuals, except as lead auditors for an organization.

So who should do certification in these areas?

Next steps to consider

This brings us to our current point. I recommend we start seriously considering what non-ISO institutions might administer plain language certification.

Of course, we might decide not to pursue certification for individuals and offer only ISO certification for plain language consultancies. But as discussed elsewhere in this issue, Federation surveys show strong interest in certification. This suggests that if plain language practitioners do not take on the task, non-plain language organizations may step in. And commercial certifying organizations may not have the right expertise in plain language. On the other hand, they may have platforms and systems to administer certification that mean we avoid the cost of developing them ourselves.

Another option would be for one of our existing plain language organizations to add certification to its activities, whether that is the Federation, one of its members, or even a for-profit plain language consultancy. Alternatively, we might form a new organization to specialize in plain language certification as an independent entity. This could avoid potential conflicts of interest and maximize integrity of the system.

My own view is that a partnership arrangement, such as between a certification specialist and a plain language organization, could strike the best balance of expertise, control, and plain language outcomes. Our partnership with ISO has worked well in developing standards, so a similar model may be ideal for plain language certification.

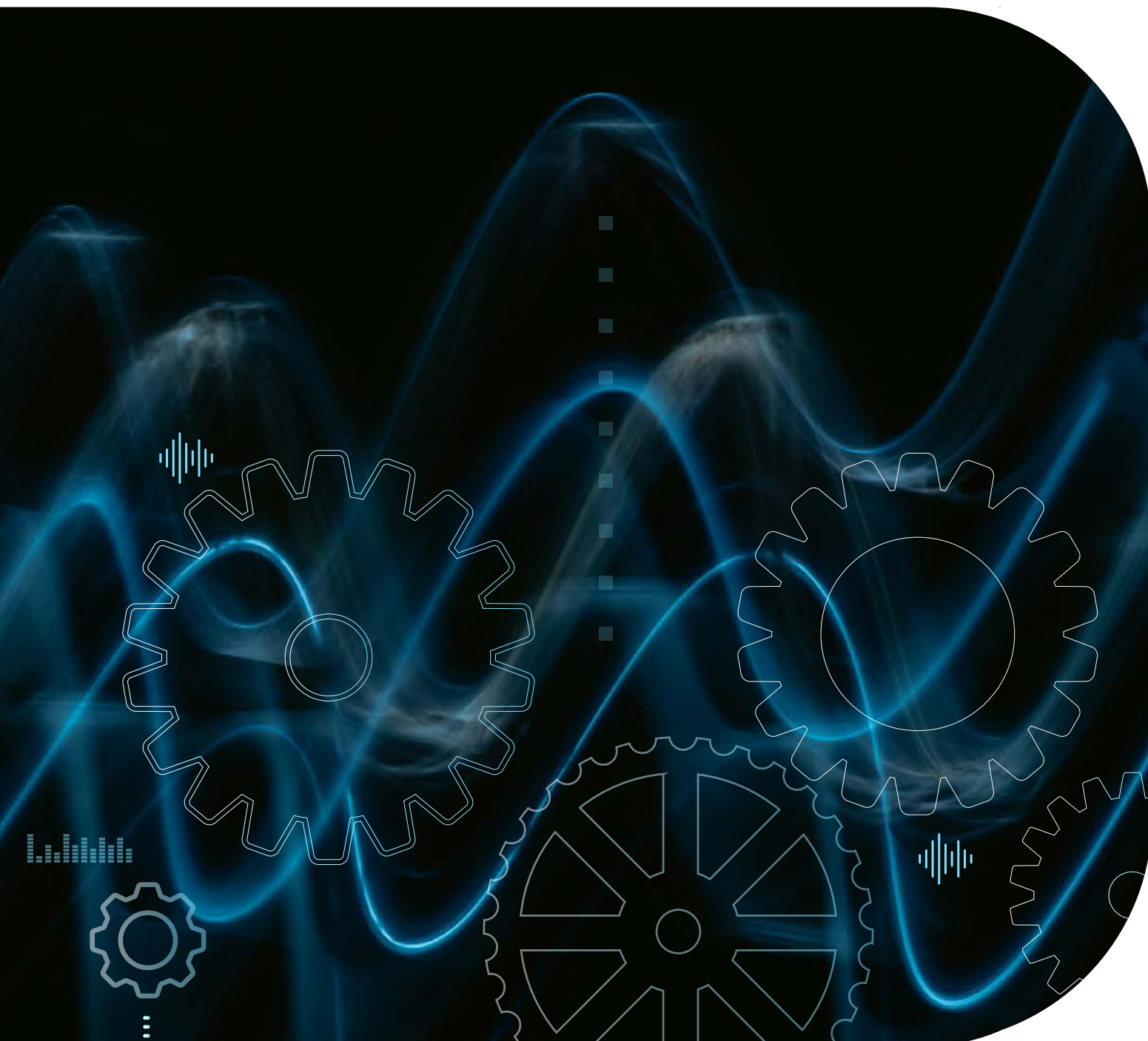
In 2025, I think we are at an important crossroads for certification, just as we were in 2018 for standards. Nothing is yet decided, but the inevitable interest in certification means we should start considering how to further evolve our plain language institutions.

Neil James initially worked in government and the media, then moved into freelance writing and editing before specializing in plain English.

He co-founded Plain English Foundation in Australia in 2003 and served as its Executive Director before retiring in 2022.

Neil has a doctorate in English from the University of Sydney. He has published 2 books — *Modern Manglish* and *Writing at Work* — and more than 100 articles and essays on literature and language.

Neil remains active in plain language internationally through the International Plain Language Federation and Working Group 11 on plain language as part of ISO's Technical Committee 37 on language and terminology.



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