

Chapter 4

What is plain language?

What it is

It is customary in anglophone countries to describe the alternative to legalese as *plain English*. *Plain language* is less parochial, reflecting the worldwide appeal of the movement and in Britain the existence of minority languages. But when referring only to English the terms are interchangeable. So, what is it?

Robert Eagleson (1990) kept fairly close to the popular meaning by describing plain English as:

[T]he opposite of gobbledegook and of confusing and incomprehensible language. Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of ... language.

Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure their audience understands the message easily. This means that writers of plain English must vary the way they write their documents according to the composition of their audience. For instance, a document can contain a number of technical words and still be plain. The following extract from a scientific paper is plain to its particular audience:

'An interesting description of the filamentous gills of lepidopterous larvae is given by Welsh (1922), who finds that each gill filament contains a tracheal branch from the main lateral trunk of the tracheal system, and that the inner surface of the gill is covered by innumerable tracheoles lying parallel with one another. Nearly five hundred gill filaments may be present on a single individual of *Nymphula obscuralis* ...'

But confusion has arisen because many of its proponents have stuffed other criteria of good writing into their definition of *plain language*, stipulating good document organisation, legible typography, and attractive layout. Others have added criteria which have nothing to do with language at all: conceptual simplicity and honesty. These extra recommendations are commendable in themselves but it is unnecessary and counter-productive to include them in the definition.

WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?

People unaware of the stuffed definitions of plain language naturally misunderstand what those proponents are offering, and this has contributed to the serious but often unjust criticism that plain writers oversimplify, and so distort, legal concepts. We reply to that criticism in Chapter 5. Here we will try to untangle the confusion.

The great irony is that by taking the definition away from the popular understanding of the term, the plain language experts break their own rule against using unexplained jargon: their phrase *plain language* is not plain language.

But that is not the only difficulty. Even if this problem is resolved, ambiguity would still arise from the multiple common meanings of the word *plain*. Among the meanings listed in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973 revision) are those:

- Describing objective characteristics:
 - flat, level, even
 - free from obstructions or interruptions
 - unembellished, not ornate
 - of simple composition; not elaborate
- Describing their effect on people:
 - open, clear; evident, obvious
 - manifest
 - simple, readily understood
 - not complicated; simple
- With positive connotations:
 - free from evasion or subterfuge, straightforward, direct
 - unaffected
- With negative connotations:
 - ill-favoured, ugly
- With connotations dependent on the reader:
 - ordinary, simple, unsophisticated; such as characterises ordinary people
 - not distinguished by rank or position
 - homely
 - simple in dress or habits; frugal.

And, of course, all these concepts have fuzzy boundaries. So it's no wonder that the plain language movement has been accused of over-simplifying.

The International Plain Language Working Group has proposed this as a definition (Cheek, 2010):

PART B: WHAT IS GOOD WRITING?

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

This goes part of the way towards resolving the difficulties, but:

- The 'if' should be 'if and only if', to exclude the possibility that this is only one type of plain language. (Compare this definition with *A dog is a mammal with four legs and a tail.*)
- It does not make clear whether *easily* is intended to govern *understand* and *use* as well as *find*. (It probably does but an academic definition, as this is supposed to be, should be rigorous.)

And more importantly:

- It suggests that if the intended readers have no use for the information the language is not plain.

What it isn't

A language

It does not help to speak of plain language as if it were a language or dialect in its own right, akin to what is wrongly called pidgin, and perhaps as an artificial language like Esperanto. It is not a language with a particular vocabulary and grammar. It is a relationship between the way a language is used and its audience. Saying that a document is plain doesn't identify any objective characteristics of the document (unlike *This table is made of wood*). Category errors like this reveal muddled thought. And false assumptions lead to false conclusions. (Adler, May–Jun 2011.)

The use of short words

It follows, as Dr Eagleson pointed out above, that plain language should not be identified with the use of short words. An example of unplain 'plain English' appeared some years ago in a standard form of bank deed, which defined *you* as *we/us* and *we/us* as *you*. It was difficult to understand; *lender* and *borrower* would have been much plainer. Using *you* has its place, for example in a leaflet addressed to consumers explaining their rights. But when two or more parties sign an agreement, which one is *you*? We give more examples of imprecise 'plain' words in Part C.

Honest language

It has been suggested that if information is misleading it cannot be plain and that accuracy and frankness are therefore essential components of plain