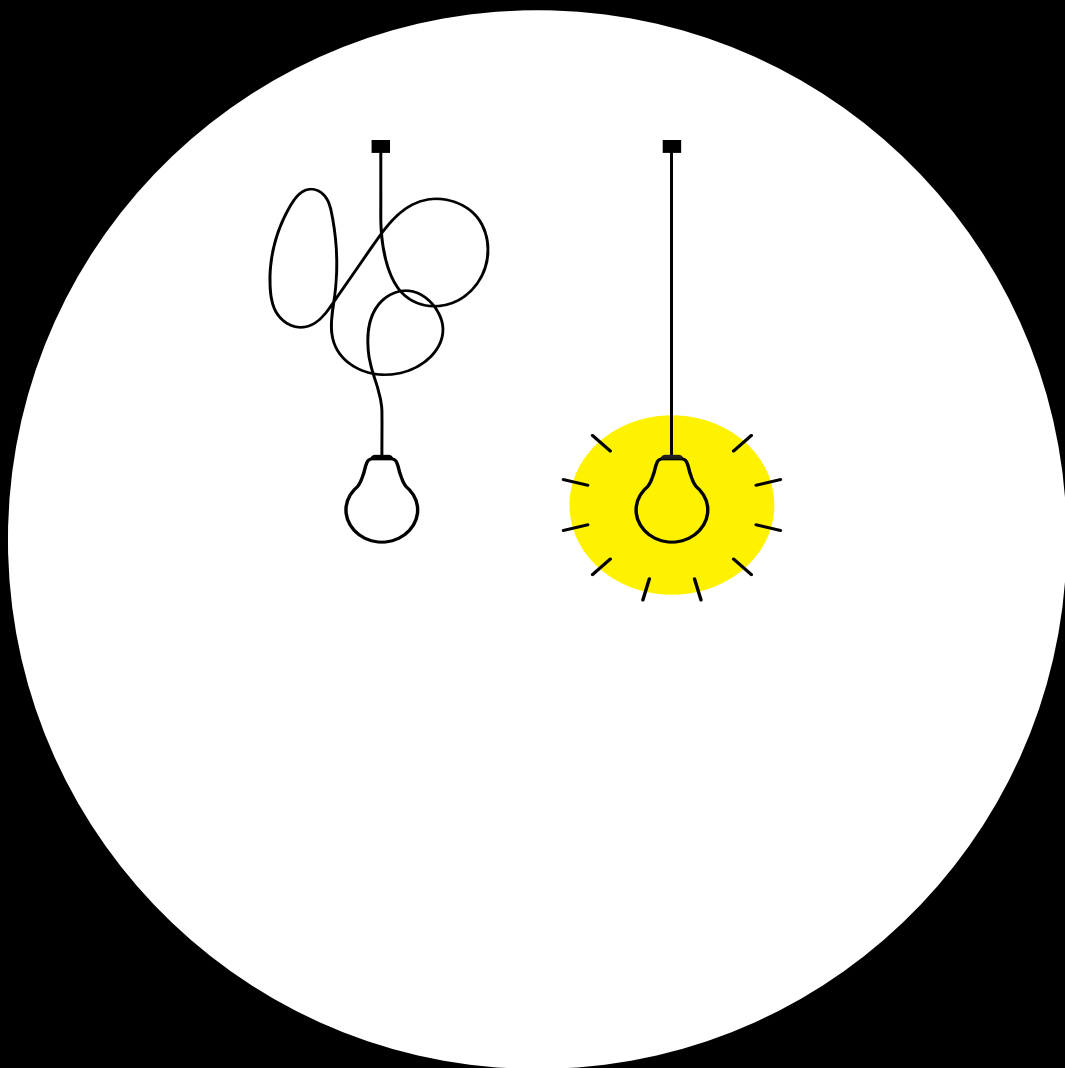


Easy English versus Plain English

A guide to creating accessible content

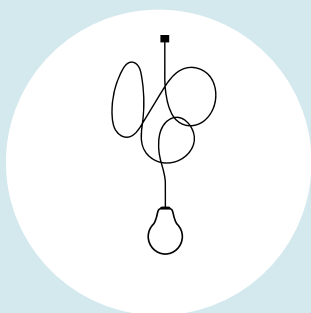
Centre for
Inclusive
Design



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What's the difference?

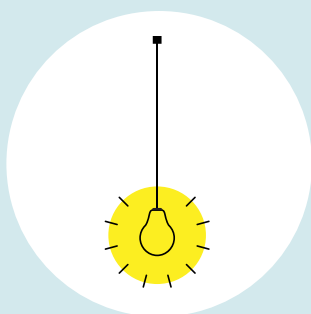


You may have heard of a number of terms to describe Easy English and Plain English, such as easy-to-read, Easy Read, Everyday English. So, what do these words mean – and why are they relevant to you and your work?

We will use Easy English and Plain English for the purposes of this guide as they are the two most commonly names used.

This guide explains what Easy English and Plain English are and how they differ. It also provides guidance on how and when to use Easy English and Plain English. Anyone who writes or designs content can use it to make information simple and clear.

Before we go into more detail, here is a short explanation of what they are how they are different.



Easy English is a writing style that helps people who find it hard to read and understand English. It is simpler and has a lower reading level than Plain English. Easy English is also called easy-to-read or Easy Read. You'll recognise this style as it uses short sentences with an image or picture.

Plain English is a direct style of writing for people who can read at a reasonable level. It helps people who want to read and understand information quickly. Plain English is sometimes known as plain language or Everyday English. Plain English looks and sounds like standard forms of writing.

See the 'Quick reference guides' on page 12 for a detailed summary.

Why you need Easy English and Plain English

Writing in Easy English or Plain English makes information more accessible for everyone. There is a real need to present content in a simple and clear way, so more Australians can meet their everyday needs.

Information that is easy to read and understand is beneficial for people:

1. Consuming information

(audiences and consumers)

People will feel more confident and trust in the product or service if the information is easy to use.

2. Providing information

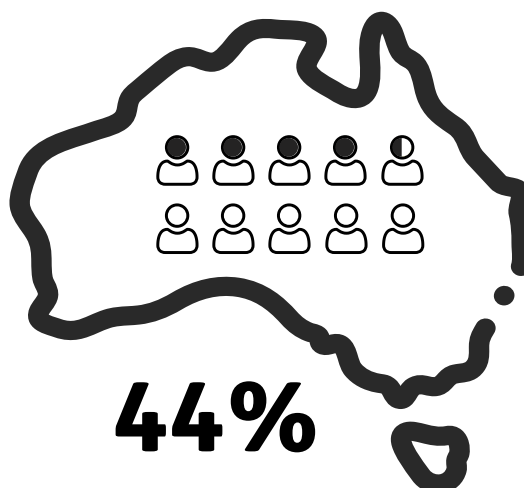
(companies and organisations)

Clear information will help meet user needs and reduce frustration. Delivering a seamless experience will increase the uptake of a product or service.

Did you know?

Studies found 44% of Australians between the age of 15 to 74 are functionally illiterate.¹

A functionally illiterate person cannot read or write above a basic level to manage their daily living needs or employment tasks.



Easy English

Other names:

Easy Read, Easy Write, Easy Info, Easy Access, easy-to-read, aphasia friendly.

What is it?

Easy English is an accessible and alternative form of communication. It has a distinct format that is simple to read.

Who is it for?

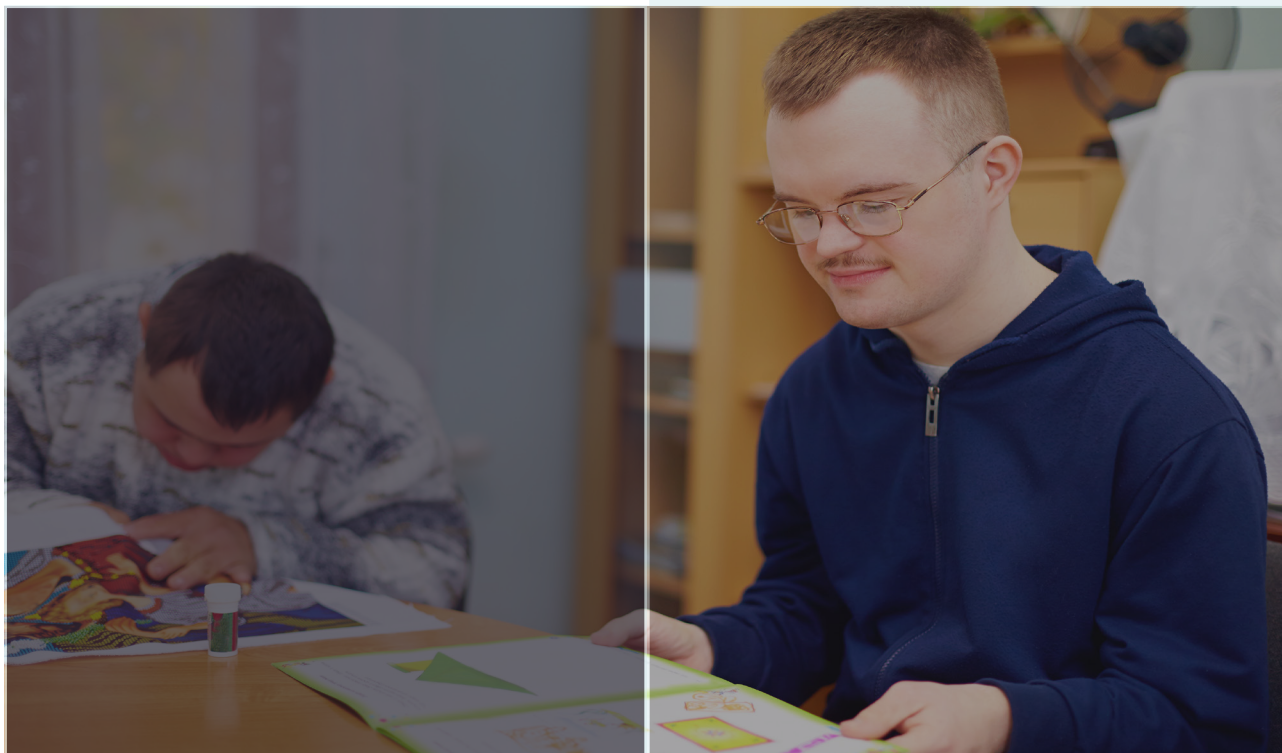
For people who have difficulties reading and understanding English. It helps people with:

- Low literacy
- Intellectual disabilities
- English as a second language.

Features of Easy English

- Short sentences
- Simple, everyday words
- Key information
- Explains hard words
- Dot points
- Clear sections and headings
- Images to support each point
- Lots of white space
- Large text size

For a detailed checklist of features, see page 14.



Plain English

Other names:

Plain language, plain writing, layman terms, layperson terms.

What is it?

Plain English is a direct style of writing which is easy and quick to understand. Its goal is to make sure the audience can understand the information the first time they read or hear it. The reader or listener should be able to take informed action based on this information.

Who is it for?

For people with reasonable literacy skills, around Year 7 to 9 level (12 to 14 years of age). It is used to reach a general audience.

Features of Plain English

- Short sentences
- Short paragraphs
- Simple, everyday words, avoiding jargon
- Clear sections of text
- Headings which are easy to understand
- Adequate white space

For a detailed checklist of features, see page 14.



Design for one, extend to many

The benefits of Easy English are not limited to the people mentioned above. It extends to people who are time-poor and want information quickly. In fact, any one of us who is struggling with cognitive load or who are more visual could benefit from Easy English.

Plain English is suitable for when more detail is required and for people who prefer to read more.

It keeps things simple and is good for large amounts of information.

Why not use both?

Depending on the target audience, the Easy English style or Plain English style might be used. Sometimes a mixture of both Easy English and Plain English styles is most suitable. Adopting some features of Easy English can help Plain English content be easier to read.

For example, large amounts of text increases cognitive load. The reader may lose focus and disengage. Pictures will help people stay interested and understand information faster. They can also illustrate key messages and reduce the word count. This is helpful for people who are time-poor and want to know something quickly.

An Easy English document should be less than 20 pages and only cover the key points. There is less room for detailed content. Whereas using the Plain English style with more pictures will allow more room for details. Mixing the styles will help the content to be more detailed while remaining simple.

Why test?

Easy English and Plain English are not direct translations of one another. They are different versions of information with specific audiences in mind. The informational needs of each audience group are unique. So content is structured and prioritised accordingly.

This is why testing is critical to the success of your content. It is the most important step in checking if your content is effective and meets the needs of the audience.

The Inclusive Design approach recommends involving the target audience throughout content creation. Testers from your audience can check if your content is clear and usable. Clearly communicated information is more inclusive and useful to your wider audience also.



Why test continued...

Flesch-Kincaid readability test

The Flesch-Kincaid readability test is a useful tool that tells you how easy your content is to read. It gives a rating based on school year (grade) levels. For example, someone in Year 8 at school or 13 years old should be able to read and understand this guide easily.

You can use it to check how easy the content is to read for your target audience. Of course, you could publish the content after this baseline check, and it may be fine. Yet, you will not truly know if it is useful to a real person.

Test with users

Testing content with edge users is ideal. Edge users are people who experience difficulties reading and understanding English because they:

- have a physical or intellectual disability
- have low literacy
- are elderly and may have a change in cognitive ability
- are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage
- speak English as a second language.

Together, you should find out what works well and not so well. Success is measured by how easily users can navigate, read and understand the information to meet their needs.

An example of why you need to test with users

Let's pretend you are a content designer. You are working on an Easy English booklet for people with intellectual disabilities. The booklet instructs people how to make a doctor's appointment. You followed all the Easy English writing rules and your team tested it and agreed it's super easy to read. The Flesch-Kincaid gave a readability level of Year 4 and even your boss is happy for you to publish it.

So you publish it. The next week is chaos. Your phones go off the hook and your team is flooded with questions. How could this be?

It turns out that the pictures used were confusing. Instead of helping people, it confused them, so they called to find out what to do.

Only a tester chosen from the target audience will be able to give unbiased feedback.

During testing, it may surprise you when testers have trouble identifying certain images. Even worse, they may have no idea what the words you wrote mean. It's better you find this out before publishing. If you fix and retest these parts until it is clear, more people will be able to understand your content.

Most importantly, your target audience will thank you for a better and less confusing experience.



Quick reference guides

Summary of Easy English versus Plain English

	Easy English	Plain English
Other names	Easy Read, Easy Write, Easy Info, Easy Access, easy-to-read, aphasia friendly	Plain language, plain writing, layman terms, layperson terms
What is it?	Easy English is an accessible and alternative form of communication. It has a distinct format that is simple to read.	Plain English is a direct style of writing which is easy and quick to understand. Its goal is to make sure the audience can understand the information the first time they read or hear it.
Who is it for?	For people who have difficulties reading and understanding English. It helps people with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• low literacy• intellectual disabilities• English as a second language.	For everyone. It assumes reasonable literacy skills, around the Year 7 to 9 level.
Who else does it work for?	It is also helpful for people who: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• experience a high cognitive load such as a CEO.• want quick and summarised information.	It should be your baseline style for all information based material, as it's direct and to the point.

When is it used?	To explain key messages and points to people who have difficulty reading English.	For communicating information which normally uses jargon and complex terms. Such as government or business information.
Why is it used?	To help people with difficulties reading and understand English. It is a way for them to read and understand information easily.	To help everyone read and understand information quickly and easily.
Key features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short sentences • Simple, everyday words • Key information • Explains hard words • Dot points • Clear sections and headings • Images to support each point • Lots of white space • Large text size 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short sentences • Short paragraphs • Simple, everyday words, avoiding jargon • Clear sections of text • Headings which are easy to understand • Adequate white space
How to check readability	Testing the features above with users is the best way to check if content is easy to read and understand. The Flesch-Kincaid readability checker can provide a baseline.	Use the Flesch-Kincaid readability checker. (Microsoft Word has one)

Checklist of features

Features	Easy English	Plain English
Short sentences	Yes. As short as possible, 15 words maximum. One concept per sentence.	Yes. 15 to 20 words per sentence.
Clear sections of information	Yes	Yes
Common, simple language which avoids jargon	Yes Explains hard words	Yes
Dot points	Yes	Yes
Active voice	Yes	Yes
Minimal punctuation	Yes	Yes
Font size (minimum)	14 pt	12 pt
Acronyms and abbreviations	Avoid if possible and define if it must be used.	Acceptable to include if defined or is for 'everyday' use.
Clear headings	Yes	Yes
Lots of white space	Yes	Yes
Left aligned text	Yes	Yes
Images/icons	To the left of text to reflect and support the main points. Must be clear and universally understood. Photos are preferred.	Good to include.
Reading level	As low as possible.	Year 7 to 8 (12 to 14 years old)
Number of pages	As short as possible. No more than 20 pages.	Not defined, but shorter the better.

**If you have
any questions
or feedback,
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