

Frequent questions

1 What is plain English or plain language?

Martin Cutts: There are several definitions, as a page on Wikipedia shows: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plain_language. But as plain English is hard to define, I'd rather describe it, for example:

'The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the intended meaning at first reading.'

This places the reader at centre stage and means we're always trying to do the difficult job of putting ourselves in the reader's shoes. But it also means the reader has to make an effort and meet the writer half way. Writers can sometimes clarify to the point of obscurity – by using simple words they may become verbose; and by over-explaining they may state the obvious so readers get bored and switch off. Our job as editors is to balance all the relevant factors in a text and ensure it's highly readable for as many people as possible – without disadvantaging fluent and savvy readers.

Here's the definition recently adopted by the International Plain Language Federation, a worldwide body of plain-language professionals:

'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.'

2 Must we accept your editing suggestions on a document or website if we want it accredited with the Clear English Standard?

MC: No, you're free to accept and reject them as you please. But if you're seeking accreditation, we'll consider how far you've adopted our suggestions. Your document or website must meet the accreditation criteria shown on this site.

3 Why use Plain Language Commission instead of your competitors?

MC: People who've tried our competitors often breathe a big sigh of relief when they come to us. They find our editing suggestions easier to understand, better written, less petty and more realistic. They also find our comments more helpful and genial – we're not dogmatic (on most things). They also find us quicker and cheaper than our rivals, and they think the Clear English Standard is well designed and looks good on their documents. And they always know who's working for them because they can see names, faces and qualifications on this site.

4 What's the most convincing argument for using plain language?

MC: Just that if you do it well, it really works – it cuts through the verbiage, clarifies the author's meaning, and helps people read what you've got to say. It works especially well in legal documents. As the Oxford Guide to Plain English (OUP, 2020) says, the most telling point of all is that no company that has issued a plain-English insurance policy, pension contract or bank guarantee has ever reverted to a traditional, legalistic style of wording.

5 Our material can be sensitive before its publication date. How do you ensure confidentiality?

MC: We treat the business of all customers as confidential in any case, but we're happy to sign a confidentiality agreement or non-disclosure agreement if you wish. We've done this for law firms, banks and many others. Naturally, confidentiality applies to draft documents and material sent to us in advance of training courses.

6 How long do editing jobs take?

MC: The usual turn-round is 3–4 working days for initial editing suggestions. Big documents (10,000+ words) may take longer. The final pre-accreditation check may take up to two days. If there's a particular deadline, please tell us and we'll try our best to meet it. If we know we won't be able to meet a deadline, we'll tell you at the start.

7 Can you edit a document into plainer English but still ensure it conforms to our own house style?

MC: Send us your style rules and we'll try our best to follow them. Organizations that have style rules usually care about clear writing too, so there aren't usually big differences between us.

8 Can you develop a style guide for us?

MC: Yes, we've worked with many organizations to produce a style guide. And if we're editing several documents for a customer, we'll often provide a free list of basic style points to ensure a reasonable level of consistency on such things as punctuating bullet-point lists. We offer our own free-to-download style guide on this site, under 'Publications'.

9 How will we know how much progress individuals make because of your courses?

MC: For many courses, participants can send examples of their written work in advance or after the course, or both. The presenter will provide comments and suggestions. It's then for line managers to keep an eye on their progress, though we're happy to give one-to-one follow-up by email or face to face, as the customer prefers. We can also provide refresher courses. A different and rarely used approach is to measure progress by giving people a writing-skills test before they attend a course and then repeat it a few weeks afterwards.