

The Proof Angel Guide to

The Evidence for Plain English

Plain English is not just another buzz phrase. Several researchers have investigated the benefits. Here are some of their findings.

1. Plain English saves time and money

- Royal Mail redesigned their mail redirection form because of the high number of errors people made when completing the form. The reduced cost of dealing with complaints saved them £500,000 in the next nine months.
- British Telecom redesigned their phone bills to make them clearer. The number of customer complaints and queries fell by 25%. People paid more promptly, improving cash flow and saving collection costs.
- The Canadian government revised a form about trees. The rate of errors filling in the form fell from 40% to 20%, and the compliance rate rose from 40% to 95%.
- GE estimated it saved between \$22,000 & \$375,000 per year for each business customer who used their revised software manuals.
- Los Angeles County redrafted their documents and simplified phone messages. They saved \$50,000 annually & consumer calls fell 30%.
- The Arizona Department of Revenue simplified their standard letters. The following year, the unclaimed property section received about 18,000 fewer phone calls, so was able to process about 30,000 more claims.



The Proof Angel is the trading name of Sarah Perkins, freelance editor and proofreader.

www.the-proof-angel.co.uk © Sarah Perkins 2013

- The Veterans Benefits Administration estimates that they saved \$40,000 from rewriting just one letter into clear language. The number of calls relating to this letter dropped from 66% to 27%.
- The Cleveland Clinic revised their billing statements & found 80% more patients paid promptly.
- The IRS improved a form. Before the change only 10% of people could fill it in without errors. The improvements raised the rate to 55%.
- The Washington State Department of Labour and Industries had a standard letter to people who wanted to see public records. They revised the letter so that:
 - They used “you” to make it more personal.
 - They showed the process & options in a list.
 - They added a fact sheet with answers to frequent questions

Before the revision, 10% of their calls were questions about procedures. This dropped to 1%.

- The Federal Communications Commission tested 2 versions of the regulations for pleasure-boat radio requirements. They asked users questions on the regulations & timed how long it took them to answer. Both experienced & inexperienced users could answer questions on the plain English version faster.

	Old regulation	Plain English version
Experienced	2.43 mins	1.5 mins
Inexperienced	3.51 mins	1.73 mins

2. Plain English is not “dumbed down”

- An academic researcher looked at the reactions of a group of students to essays writing in different styles. It was found that people judge the writers of more complex texts as less intelligent.

- A more commercial survey found that:
 - 74% of the sample thought people who use jargon do not understand it themselves.
 - Only 21% of people are happy to deal with someone who uses a lot of jargon.
 - When asked the meaning of 10 common business phrases, 70% of the sample knew less than a third of them.

3. Plain English is not needed for technical material

Some people think that complicated terms avoid confusion. Professor Christopher Trudeau has found that this is not the case. In his sample:

- • 17% of the people had a law degree.
- • 29% had a first degree (BA or BSc).
- • 22% had a second degree (MA etc.).
- • Only 32% had no degree.

This means that the people in the sample were better educated than the general population.

- A predictably high 99.7% said it was important or very important to understand what their lawyer said, but 71% admitted they had struggled to do so at some point.
- When asked, "If you don't understand a term in a legal letter, do you look it up?"
 - 32% said always.) This shows that only 59% were
 - 27% said often.) reasonably likely to look up something if
 -) they didn't understand.
 - 13% said rarely.) This shows that 17% rarely or never
 - • 4% said never.) looked up things they didn't understand.

That means about 1 in 8 of this well educated sample wouldn't know what a term meant, even though they think it is important to understand what they are being told.

- When asked what they feel if complicated or Latin words are used:
 - 40% were annoyed by them.
 - 19% were bothered a little.
 - only 0.5% were impressed.
- A sizable proportion (38%) admitted that at some point in their career they had stopped reading a legal document out of frustration.
- Part of the survey tested several versions of a complicated legal passage.
 - 88% preferred the plain version.
 - The more complicated the issue, the higher the preference.
 - As education increased the preference for plain version increased.
 - 78% preferred the version with a simple explanation of the legal term as they arose.
 - Diagrams to supplement the words scored well.

4. Sources

- Plain English saves time and money:
 - Kimble, Joseph, “Writing for dollars, writing to please”
<http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/Writing1.pdf>
- Plain English is not “dumbed down”:
 - Daniel M Oppenheimer: Consequences of erudite vernacular utilized irrespective of necessity: problems with using long words needlessly.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/acp.1178/abstract;jsessionid=D8FA261739BC115D2CCF0CA2D44D4136.f02t03>
 - Powwow Now: What people think of business jargon
<http://www.powwownow.co.uk/blog/lol/people-business-jargon/>

- Plain English is not essential for technical subject matter:
 - Survey in 2011 by Professor Christopher Trudeau, Thomas M Cooley Law School

<http://prezi.com/7jzg6j0qawfd/plain-talk-2013-swimming-with-the-sharks-convincing-lawyers-and-key-decisionmakers-to-use-plain-language/>