

# The Proof Angel Guide to

## Why you should use Plain English

### Plain English saves time and money

- Things that are easier to read are quicker to understand. This is important when everyone is busy these days.
- When people understand more easily, they comply more easily, ask fewer questions, and complain less.
- Streamlined procedures and paperwork lead to savings.
- Clearer documents improve understanding and satisfaction for both customers and staff.

### Plain English creates a positive image

- Clear wording aids transparency. People don't think you are hiding behind the language.
- If the instructions are hard to follow it creates a frustrating experience, which is bad for the product's reputation.
- Plain and simple is elegant.

### Plain English is not “dumbed down”

- Reading habits are changing. Many people only scan for information, particularly on line. Concise well set out writing assists that process.
  - Both formal and informal research suggests that people are not impressed with complicated writing. They do not associate complexity with intelligence.



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

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- One study found that preference for plain English versions increased with the level of the reader's education.
- For most writers their job isn't to make people think, it's to make them take action. The harder the reader has to work, the lower the chance of getting them to do what you want.
- If your subject matter is complicated and technical, it is more important that people should understand you easily.

### **Plain English widens your audience**

- If your target audience is average,
  - around 10% will be dyslexic, and
  - their average reading age will be around 12.

Plain English makes it easier for these people to understand your message. How many of your audience do you think will complain that your literature is too easy to read?

### **Thoughts from professional communicators**

"You are not writing to impress the scientist you have just interviewed, nor the professor who got you through your degree, nor the editor who foolishly turned you down, or the rather dishy person you just met at a party and told you were a writer. You are writing to impress someone hanging from a strap in the tube between Parson's Green and Putney, who will stop reading in a fifth of a second, given a chance."

Tim Radford  
Former Guardian editor for science, letters, and arts

"The first requirement of *The Economist* is that it should be readily understandable. Clarity of writing usually follows clarity of thought. So think what you want to say, then say it as simply as possible."

Introduction to *The Economist* style guide

### **Famous fans of simplicity**

"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

Leonardo da Vinci

“You can always recognise truth by its beauty and simplicity.”

Theoretical physicist Richard Feynman

“A vocabulary of truth and simplicity will be of service throughout your life.”

Winston Churchill

“Simple can be harder than complex. You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple, but it’s worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.”

Steve Jobs

“Reports drawn up on the lines I propose may first seem rough as compared with the flat surface of ‘officialese’ jargon. But the saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking.”

Winston Churchill

“If you can’t explain it to a six year old, you don’t understand it yourself.”

Einstein

“Persistently obscure writers will usually be found to be defective human beings.”

Philosopher Brand Blanshard

## **Evidence**

A separate guide is available summarising the evidence behind this reasoning.