

# Plain English Translation



## What is a plain English translation?

There is lots of information that gets given to people in a written format. But written information is only useful if people can read and understand it.

One approach to improving written information is called writing in plain English. The Plain English Campaign (UK) stated that plain English is, "a message, written with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice, that is clear and concise".

The readers that I often have in my mind are people with a mild or moderate intellectual disability and their families or support workers. I translate original documents into a language that is targeted to these people.

In writing with these people in mind, I usually target the language to a grade 6 reading level. I try to keep to one idea per sentence. I explain any necessary jargon. I examine the structure of a document so it is in the best reading order.

I have experience in translating complex and basic information. I have translated website content, research papers, annual reports, and newsletters.

I enjoy doing plain English translations. They help me to understand concepts; you cannot translate complex information until you really understand the information – there's no hiding behind jargon in plain English!

### Translating the tax bonus example

<p><b>Tax bonus Overview</b></p> <p>If you earned less than \$100,000 in the 2007-08 financial year and paid tax you could be eligible to receive a bonus payment of up to \$900. Payments start from early April 2009 and are tax free.</p>	<p><b>Tax bonus</b></p> <p>The Australian Government has decided to give some people extra money this year. They are giving money to people who:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Did an Australian tax return for 2007-2008, and</li><li>2) Earned less than \$100,000.</li></ol> <p>In April, 2009, the government will start to give people the money.</p>
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*Handwritten annotations:*

- A red arrow points from "Tax bonus Overview" to "Tax bonus".
- A red circle highlights "Tax bonus Overview".
- A red circle highlights "If you earned less than \$100,000".
- A red circle highlights "you could be eligible to receive a bonus payment of up to \$900".
- A red circle highlights "Payments start from early April 2009".
- A red circle highlights "and are tax free".
- A red arrow points from "you could be eligible to receive a bonus payment of up to \$900" to the list of criteria.
- A red arrow points from "and are tax free" to "and are tax free".
- A red arrow points from "In April, 2009, the government will start to give people the money." to "In April, 2009, the government will start to give people the money."

*Annotations:*

- "What is the topic" with an arrow pointing to "Tax bonus".
- "One idea in each sentence" with an arrow pointing to the list of criteria.

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## What's involved in a plain English translation?

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Plain English translation by me involves the following:

- Email or call me to discuss what you want done
- I will view the document and provide a quote for the number of hours that might be required
- I will read the document a number of times to get a good understanding
- I may ask you to clarify jargon or implicit information within the document so that she can understand it better
- I will create a draft for you to review
- You provide your feedback on the draft
- I respond to the feedback
- I provide you with the final document
- You decide what happens next with the document.

The final document is your property. You remain the primary author, but may wish to acknowledge my support in the plain English translation. I will not release any of the information inside the document to anybody else while I am writing or afterwards, unless a final copy is provided to me with permission to release.

Here are some things that I might ask you when doing a translation:

- Who are your readers?
- Do you know what their reading skills are like?
- What is the key information that you want your readers to get? What is the ultimate 'take home message'?
- What do you want them to do with the information?
- Do you want to use images or figures to illustrate ideas?
- Do you have an idea of how big you want the document?

I provide only the text. I can provide some advice on formatting, but I do not do layout and publication.

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## Payment for plain English translations

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I currently charge \$100/ hr for writing plain English translations. The number of hours required depends on the length and complexity of the information.

Here are a few examples:

- Refinement (mentoring to a person who is developing their plain English writing skills) of a 2 page newsletter = 1 hour
- Information sheets for families on child protection = 4 hours per sheet (key terms had to be clarified and process needed to be straightforward)
- An annual report = 10 hours
- Editing of an existing complaints document = 2 hours
- A translation of a research article = 4hours.

Please note, well written original documents are always easier and quicker to translate than poorly written documents. Well written documents already have a clear idea that is being expressed and are careful in their use of jargon and implicit information.

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## Dr Sheridan Forster

BAppSc, GradDipEd, PhD, CPSP

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Sheridan is a Certified Practising Speech Pathologist. In 2011, she completed doctoral studies, looking at interactions between adults with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities and their support staff.

She has worked in the government and non-government sector in Australia and the UK. Sheridan currently combines research and practice, being aware and contributing to best practice in the communication support of adults with disabilities.

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**Sheridan Forster**  
attentive engagement

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