

A Plain Language Standard for Accessibility Standards Canada

Iva Cheung (@IvaCheung) • Laura Edlund (@EdlundLaura)
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Disclaimer

- This presentation reflects our personal experiences and opinions
- We don't claim to represent the Plain Language Technical Committee or Accessibility Standards Canada
- We aren't lawyers!

Terminology note

- The *Accessible Canada Act* uses person-first language
 - “persons with disabilities”
 - “people with intellectual disabilities”
- Some people prefer identity-first language
 - “disabled person”
 - “autistic students”
- The Standard draft
 - refers to goals of the *Accessible Canada Act*
 - uses terms in the Act (e.g., “barriers,” “disabilities”)

Outline

- *Accessible Canada Act* & Accessibility Standards Canada
- Standard-development process
- Example content from our draft
- Next steps and future outlook
- Discussion and questions

Why should editors care?

- This is our best opportunity to make plain language a legal requirement for organizations under federal jurisdiction
- The draft will be open for public comment, and we want editors to comment
- Plain language editors could see more work
- The standard will serve as a reference for best practice

Accessible Canada Act

- Passed in 2019
- **Purpose:** “To achieve a Canada without barriers, to benefit all people, especially people with disabilities”
- **Approach:** Develop, report on, and enforce accessibility requirements in priority areas, and monitor implementation

Accessible Canada Act

Objectives:

- Ensure involvement of Canadians with disabilities
- Address systemic accessibility problems
- Define standards for entities under federal jurisdiction to meet and maintain

Accessible Canada Act

Jurisdiction:

- Federal public service
- Crown corporations
- Canadian Forces
- Federally regulated industries (for example, banking, telecommunication, broadcasting, and transportation)

Accessible Canada Act

Priority areas:

- Built environment
- Employment
- Information and communication technologies
- Communications
- Procurement of goods, services, and facilities
- Design and delivery of programs
- Transportation

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Why is plain language important?

- Plain language is an accessibility issue
- Plain language is an equity issue



Nick
@NickColley

...

With my experience of ADHD I can't stress how much plain English is helpful.

Long, twisty, complicated prose feels like falling into quick sand, trying to concentrate on what is being said makes my mind melt.

Reading plain English is like breathing after being underwater.

Accessibility Standards Canada

- Is a departmental corporation created in 2019 under the *Accessible Canada Act*
- Develops and revises accessibility standards, usually with the help of technical committees
- Makes accessibility standards public
- Advances research into accessibility standards

Standards and the law

- When a technical committee publishes a standard, it is voluntary; organizations can choose to adopt it and enforce it
- ASC can recommend an accessibility standard to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion
- Minister can recommend that the Governor in Council adopt a standard, in whole or in part

Standard development process

1. ASC board identifies priority areas for standards
2. ASC staff issues public notice of the intent to develop a standard
3. Staff considers existing standards and the scope of a new standard
4. ASC establishes a technical committee
5. Technical committee develops content

continued

Standard development process (cont'd)

6. The public comments on the draft standard
7. The Technical committee votes to approve standard
8. ASC publishes standard
9. Board recommends standard to the Minister
10. Staff maintains the standard (update every 5 years)

Standard development process in brief

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Plain Language Technical Committee

- 17 volunteers
- Includes representatives from various sectors
- First meeting in October 2020
- Initial timeline: 18–24 months to create a standard ready for public comment

Plain Language Technical Committee

Task groups, round 1:

- Outline
- Guiding principles
- Work plan
- Scope and success

Guiding principles

Use the International Plain Language Federation definition

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- use that information.

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Guiding principles

We wanted to honour the obligations and be guided by the principles and values in the following:

- the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*
- the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*
- the *Accessible Canada Act*
- the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action.

Guiding principles

Ten other proposed guiding principles include these ideas:

- Everyone has the same fundamental right to accurate information that is easy to find, understand, and use.
- Ableism is systemic. We must counter it at individual and organizational levels.
- Identifying barriers requires an intersectional approach that considers power imbalances.
- Plain language communication centres the audience's information needs and dignity.

Scope

- Who will use the standard?
- Who are the audiences for the communications?
- What criteria—Public-facing and planned
- Language neutral, but with these languages in mind:
 - French
 - English
 - ASL, LSQ, Indigenous signed languages

Plain Language Technical Committee

Task groups, round 2:

- Introduction
- Audience
- Content
- Evaluation
- References

Introductory content

- Definition of *plain language* chosen for the Standard
- Some benefits of using plain language
- The scope for the ASC Standard, including
 - who will use the Standard
 - the audiences
 - languages
 - types of communication
- Guiding principles

Audience section

- Identify your audience
- Engage with your audience to learn about them:
 - What are their information needs?
 - What are their preferred language, medium, format, platform?
 - What barriers do they face to getting information?
 - How do they feel about the source of the communication?
 - How do they feel about the topic?

Content section

- Identify the purpose of your communication
- Use terms familiar to the audience whenever possible
- Define terms that may be unfamiliar to the audience
- Use the same term to refer to the same concept
- Break up your content into chunks
- Label those chunks with meaningful headings
- etc.

Evaluation section

- Test your communication with members of your intended audience
- Use tools like contrast checkers and colour filter simulators to ensure accessibility
- Run your content through a screen reader to make sure your communication is screen reader compatible

A plain language standard in plain language?

- Regulatory language is inherently unplain
- From the “Accessible Private Homes” draft standard:

4.3.2 Exterior

a) Up to the main entrance, be it from a sidewalk, driveway, or parking garage, an accessible dwelling unit shall be served by:

- i) an accessible path of travel in accordance with Clause 4.4.1; or
- ii) a ramp conforming to Clause 5.5.

Note: main entrance refers to the “front door” which typically faces a street.

These efforts in context

How does this standard compare with the *Plain Writing Act*?

- US federal law (2010) for federal agencies and jurisdiction
- “... to enhance citizen access to Government information and services ... Government documents issued to the public must be written clearly....”
- “...requires agencies to write documents for the public that are easy to understand and use.”
- Process of staff lead, training, writing, compliance reviews

These efforts in context

How does this standard fit in with the ISO standard 24495-1?

- International effort
 - International Plain Language Federation
 - ISO (International Organization for Standardization)
- ISO 24495 Plain Language, Part 1: Governing Principles and Guidelines
 - applies to many languages
 - focuses on text, written language, and readers
 - to be published Fall 2022 (estimated) and regularly updated
 - will be available for use by purchasers and according to ISO license agreements

Public comment period

- When the draft standard is complete, the public will have 60 days to review and comment
- Follow Accessibility Standards Canada on social media (@AccStandardsCA) or sign up for their newsletter accessible.canada.ca/contact

Long-term outlook

- Encourage other jurisdictions to adopt the standards
- Incorporate standards into plain language education
- Foster research into best practices

Thank you!

Discussion? Questions?

Iva Cheung • Twitter: @IvaCheung • ivacheung.com

Laura Edlund • Twitter: @EdlundLaura • lauraedlund.ca