

Home (<https://www.themandarin.com.au/>) Features  
(<https://www.themandarin.com.au/features/>)

# A 9900% rate of return? The value of plain English to government

By Dr Neil James (/author/njames) · 06/04/2016



There's an **enormous economic return** in making government communication — internally and externally — easier to read. And while documents drive government it can help agencies make better decisions.

Imagine a public sector reform that generated one dollar for every cent invested. That's a 9900% rate of return!

Fanciful as this sounds, that's what the Department of Revenue in Washington State found when it **rewrote just one of its tax letters in plain English**. Its goal was to raise \$1.2 million from businesses who commonly failed to pay a particular sales tax. As a result of the new letter, compliance rates actually leapt by 200%, raising an extra \$2 million in revenue.

Examples like this led the entire state to develop a "Plain Talk" program that trained 7500 people, revised six major websites and rewrote 2000 standard forms and letters. While not every measure produced results as spectacular as that tax letter, there were no negative returns.



(/partners/plainenglishfoundation)

In Australia, most public sector managers would acknowledge the documents they deal with could also improve. **Too many of our government communications are unclear, inefficient and hard to read.** But fewer managers would understand the full costs of unclear communication, or the benefits that plain English will bring.

## Improved productivity

First of all, **plain English improves productivity.**

The Plain English Foundation has helped more than 100 public sector organisations in Australia to improve their communications. We have found that **converting documents such as briefing notes or internal submissions into plain English reduces them on average by 25% to 40% without compromising their content.**

More importantly, **plain English generally halves the time staff spend writing and the time managers spend reading (and rewriting) texts.**

## Lower costs

Not long ago, the United States Navy put a dollar value on this impact by measuring how long its officers needed to read internal memos. It found that memos written in plain English took up to a quarter less time to read than those in traditional language (the study did not include rewriting time). Based on the hourly rate for naval officers, this was worth as much as \$73 million in staff time. If all personnel were included, the value was around \$350 million a year.

Consider the staff costs in your own organisation. What proportion of the working day would a mid-level manager spend reading and reviewing text? And what proportion would more junior staff spend reading and writing emails, letters, submissions and reports?

**A reasonable estimate is that direct writing and reading time is around one-third of staff time in many agencies.** For a \$90,000 position, this costs \$30,000 a year. Reduce that time by 25% to 50% with plain English, and the time saved is worth \$7,500 to \$15,000 each year. Multiply by the number of employees and the figures quickly add up.

## Operational savings

Of course, these savings don't always translate directly to the balance sheet because you are still paying your employees. But it means they are producing more for the same investment in time. And in a high-volume environment, agencies can often convert this to operational savings.

In Sweden, for example, the Higher Education Agency revised around 200 pieces of online content it used to process 800,000 applications a year. **Increased clarity meant fewer phone calls and less follow-up.** Operating costs for its call centre fell by 20% within two years, and it reallocated 1.7 million kroner of the centre's 8 million kroner budget.

## Enhanced reputation

**No less real is the impact plain English can have on the reputation of an agency.** Not surprisingly, nearly every study shows **the public prefers plain English** and will view an organisation that uses it more favourably as a result. If you were making a complaint, which one of these responses would be more credible?

Before:

“I acknowledge your patience whilst I undertake an investigation of the concerns that you have raised regarding your experience with this service. The circumstances of your complaint will be examined, and details of the outcome will be forwarded to you within a timeframe of two weeks.”

After:

“Thank you for your patience while I investigate your complaint about this service. We are further assessing the circumstances you outline and will let you know the outcome within two weeks.”

Is the first version closer to your agency’s style? If so, you should consider a plain English program.

## Better decisions

But of all the benefits of plain English, perhaps the least understood is **how it affects the decision-making process.**

Documents still drive government. Virtually every decision is assessed, conveyed, reviewed and recorded in some form of text. **When those texts are poorly written, it is not just time that is wasted and readers who are annoyed — decisions themselves are compromised.**

When **managers and executives complain about the poor quality of the documents they read,** they commonly highlight the analysis supporting recommendations they are asked to approve. Poor logic is more easily papered over by complex language, and managers end up having to comb through a text for the key points. **Inevitably this leads to some less effective decisions.** As a director in one agency put it: “Plain English forced us all to think much more clearly.”

This is perhaps the premier value of plain English. It doesn’t just improve government communication — **plain English improves government.**

Share on

**f** (<https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/>)

**t** ([https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=A 9900% rate of return? The value of plain English to government&url=https://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/&via=TheMandarinAU](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=A%209900%25%20rate%20of%20return%20?%20The%20value%20of%20plain%20English%20to%20government&url=https://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/&via=TheMandarinAU))

**in** ([https://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=https://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/&title=A 9900% rate of return? The value of plain English to government](https://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=https://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/&title=A%209900%25%20rate%20of%20return%20?%20The%20value%20of%20plain%20English%20to%20government))

**wa** ([whatsapp://send?text=A 9900% rate of return? The value of plain English to government%0D%0Ahttps://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/](https://whatsapp://send?text=A%209900%25%20rate%20of%20return%20?%20The%20value%20of%20plain%20English%20to%20government%0D%0Ahttps://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/))

**G+** (<https://plus.google.com/share?url=https://www.themandarin.com.au/62630-value-plain-english/>) 

---

Author Bio



(/author/njames)

**Dr Neil James (/author/njames) **  
**(<https://twitter.com/plainenglishhaus>) **  
**(<http://www.facebook.com/plainenglishfoundation>)**

Dr Neil James is executive director of Plain English Foundation (<https://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/>), which has trained more than 16,000 public sector staff in plain English and redeveloped thousands of documents and templates. Neil regularly promotes plain English and ethical communication in the media and at @drplainenglish (<http://www.twitter.com/drplainenglish>). (© Plain English Foundation 2016. You must attribute us if you quote from this work.)

## Related Posts

(<https://www.themandarin.com.au/2203-public-administrator-kerry-sanderson-named-next-governor>)

**Public administrator Kerry Sanderson named WA's next governor**  
**(<https://www.themandarin.com.au/2203-public-administrator-kerry-sanderson-named-next-governor>)**

(<https://www.themandarin.com.au/57722-parkinson-confirmed-top-federal-mandarin>)

**New chief mandarin Parkinson warns of complacency**  
**(<https://www.themandarin.com.au/57722-parkinson-confirmed-top-federal-mandarin>)**

(<https://www.themandarin.com.au/79148-ballooning-emails-unproductive-meetings-going>)

**Ballooning emails and unproductive meetings: where is it all going?**  
**(<https://www.themandarin.com.au/79148-ballooning-emails-unproductive-meetings-going>)**