

Article by Neil James, first published in The Mandarin

## The arguments against plain English

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**Change is hard. And plain English reform seems harder than most. To help us tackle the task, it's worth reviewing the reasons people offer for retaining a traditional style.**

While the [benefits of plain English](#) are now well established, staff can resist even if their agency endorses writing reform. Here are some of the most common arguments and how they stack up.

### But that's the 'technical' term

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Let's start with an assumption many of us absorbed at school and university: that complex wording will always carry more meaning. More meaning for whom? Will your audience understand the nuances you have in mind, and do they actually need them?

Too often, agencies indulge in what linguist Geoffrey Pullum calls [nerdview](#), an insider perspective that gets in the way of clear communication. We hear this every time we travel, as announcers invite us to 'alight' from a train or 'disembark' an aircraft. Why not just 'step off' or 'leave'? A complex term is not always necessary or effective.

### But they'll understand it anyway

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The next argument is usually that people will be able to work out your meaning even if they don't know the technical terms. Sure, most English speakers will realise – at least after a moment's thought – that by 'disembarking' or 'alighting' they will be stepping off their transport. But why make it harder than it has to be?

When the [Victorian Law Reform Commission](#) redrafted the Takeovers Code, they cut the text in half while retaining legal meaning. Not surprisingly, when they tested the revised version, lawyers took one-third to one-half of the time to understand it compared with the original law.

Even experts prefer plain English.

### But it won't sound professional

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Then comes the authority argument that runs: OK, so plain English is effective, but it just doesn't have the 'gravitas' that official writing requires. We need officialese to signal that our communication is important.

Think about it. This effectively says that the more crucial a communication, the more complex we should make it. Surely the opposite should be the case. It is possible to be both professional and plain.

To be fair, most public servants do move past these arguments. But they then express doubt about what their agency will actually agree to.

### But management won't support it

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The roadblock that most staff cite is 'management'. And it is true that some managers can be part of the problem, particularly in the middle ranks. That's understandable if they've been writing a particular way for 10, 15 or 20 years.

But while there is some truth to this argument, it is always surmountable once an Executive understands the [critical success factors](#) of a plain English program. And it's not an argument against plain English itself.

## But it won't protect us

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Then, of course, the lawyers get involved. Lawyers have a virulent dose of nerdview, which means they write for that proverbial judge who might encounter their text in court.

Not long ago, for example, a regulatory agency was wrestling with the wording of its legal notices, which were impossible for anyone but a lawyer to understand. Legal branch refused to rewrite the documents because 'one case in 1,000 might lead to litigation'.

No matter that the [NRMA found](#) years ago that litigation actually falls when people understand their obligations. Every notice had to be written as if it were going to court, which only compromised communication and compliance for every 999 that didn't.

## But it will cost too much

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As with most organisational change, the cost argument is an easy roadblock to put up. But the evidence is now in: [the business case](#) clearly favours plain English over the status quo, with a return rate as high as 9,900%.

Finally, there are the 'diehard' arguments, which are surprisingly persistent despite what they lack in logic.

## But that's just the way we do things

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A [local councillor](#) embodied the first of these when he defended a 'Local Development Framework Core Strategy Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report' that had attracted public opprobrium. 'This is just the way council reports are written,' he explained. 'If you go to France, they speak French. Here in the Council, we speak like this.'

Local government apparently lives in a foreign country.

## But that will dumb down our language

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Then there is the glory of the English language to consider. Surely we don't want to dumb down the language of [Shakespeare, Churchill and the King James Bible](#)? What are we now, *Play School*?

In fact, there is heavyweight literary support for plain English. Poets such as Wordsworth praised the expression of ideas '[in language fitted to their respective importance](#)' rather than indulging in unnecessary complexity. Emulate our great writers by making your text only as complex as the content demands.

## But plain speak will lead to newspeak

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The newspeak argument is a rank fallacy that suggests plain English is the start of a slippery slope to George Orwell's 'newspeak' - a language so controlled it will narrow thought itself.

In fact, Orwell was a great [exponent of plain English](#), lambasting 'pretentious diction', 'meaningless words' and 'verbal false limbs' alike. Plain English promotes his principle 'to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around'.

## But it just doesn't sound right

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When this final argument appears, it is usually a last gasp of resistance. After probing every plain English principle, some will assert that 'it just doesn't sound right'.

This is an essentially an aesthetic claim, that officialese is somehow more pleasant than plain English. Sorry, but is the first of these two sentences really the more 'beautiful'?

Reference is made to your customer service request in relation to construction works currently being undertaken at the above-mentioned address adjacent to your property.

Thank you for your recent letter about construction work on a neighbouring property.

If you have found yourself sympathising with one or more of the arguments above, the chances are your writing can improve. It's time to [take a closer look at plain English](#).

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