

# IS COMPLEXITY A CON? The false dilemma between plain language and literature

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Let me be clear at the outset: I am a lover of literature with a day job. I spend my days making texts such as letters, reports and websites easier to read, but at night I prefer to tuck into a more literary tome.

Not long ago, my night turned into day when the judges of the Man Booker Prize announced the 2011 shortlist would feature 'readable' books. Chair Dame Stella Rimington explained that the judges wanted 'people to buy these books and read them, not buy them and admire them'.<sup>1</sup> Record sales figures suggest they succeeded.

The literati moved immediately to restore the celestial order. Jeanette Winterson thundered in the *Guardian*:

There are plenty of entertaining reads that are part of the enjoyment of life. That doesn't make them literature...

Novels that last are language-based novels—the language is not simply a means of telling a story, it is the whole creation of the story...

The problem is that a powerful language can be daunting.<sup>2</sup>

The episode highlighted for me an implicit assumption that connects both times of my day: that there is a directly proportional relationship between complexity and value. Winterson implies that the more complex the language of a text, the more value it has as literature—even if it is 'daunting' rather than 'readable'. I fight the same assumption every day when lawyers, bureaucrats or engineers argue that making their writing more readable is 'dumbing it down'.

But is there such a strong correlation between complexity and value?

If you were running a small business, you might question the value of wading through 28 pages of this:

The Consultant will ensure that the Specified Personnel undertake work in respect of the Services in accordance with the terms of this Agreement and will not be hindered or prevented in any way in the performance of their duties in carrying out the Services including but not limited to being removed from the performance of the Services or being requested to perform services which in any way interfere with the due performance of the Services by the Specified Personnel.<sup>3</sup>



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That's an extract from a text small businesses had to agree to before working for a government organisation. I had it checked by a professor of law, and all it means is:

The consultant will ensure that the specified personnel deliver the services.

Yet like Winterson, the lawyers who wrote the original harboured a deeply ingrained assumption that the complex version was the more valuable.

That same assumption has an understandable presence in our education system. As teachers, we want students to master increasingly complex language, and there is certainly value in strengthening our students' skills. But is there a line beyond which value doesn't automatically rise as complexity increases? Do we teach our students where to draw that line on behalf of their readers so that their texts will succeed? Too often, we passively accept that complex language must mean complex thinking, and we don't sufficiently critique academic texts like this:

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Whether you discuss this open/closed in terms of the semiotic coding of the self and other, some kind of introjected and extrojected cultural imago, or the cross-projection of Lacanian veils on a cultural plane—each of which generates different kinds of problematics and solutions—it nevertheless remains a cross-cultural rule of thumb that “out” is not “in” because “in” is the inverse of “out”.<sup>4</sup>

Just like the consultant text, the meaning here is evasive, but probably boils down to:

When you migrate from one country to another country, you will always feel on the outside of the culture of the new country because people construct a sense of themselves in contrast to others.

Again, is the first more valuable than the second because of the complexity of the language? Does it communicate content of greater worth?

As a lover of literature, I am anxious about asking these questions. Yet it is hard to escape the conclusion that too many writers rely on an assumed relationship between complexity and value to get away with utter tosh:

Grammar is the art of reckoning that it is by themselves that they are one and two. To please this in displeasing they are gracious in rebounding to their mastery of employing it again in difference comfort alone theirs made having been taught to look like their just as room. A grammar makes it very much fifty to one which is the same as fifty-fifty do you not think so. They were wider widening widen in remainder in coupled that it is best who makes a door handle matter. If it is a matter. Like like a pencil.<sup>5</sup>

That’s from Gertrude Stein’s ironically titled *How to Write*: ‘Just as room.’ ‘Who makes a door handle matter.’ ‘Like like a pencil.’ Tosh.

To help me manage my anxiety about the value of complexity, I thought I might share it. And who better to share it with than the nation’s English teachers?

### Complexity in public language

Let’s start out on the safest ground: complexity in our public language. I’m talking here about the texts that bombard us in our everyday life: letters from banks, forms from government agencies, policies from insurance companies, even the signage they put up in public toilets. Here’s a warning sign, for example, that turns hot water into something much more complex:

WARNING  
This fixture may deliver

hot water which will scald.<sup>6</sup>

When it could just say:

DANGER  
Hot water

Do we judge the first as more valuable because it is more complex, or do we prefer the second because it will communicate more effectively?

The plain language movement over the last 30 years has been rewriting these kinds of texts for the social benefits they bring (like fewer scald injuries). If we were to distil the common principles of that effort, following is a fairly useful dozen:<sup>7</sup>

### Principles of plain English

- A reader-centred approach
- A clear core message
- The right level of detail
- A fit-for-purpose structure
- Coherence and flow
- Clear document design
- A light but professional tone
- A readable style
- An active voice
- An efficient style
- An error-free text
- Evidence-based testing

Half of these principles are about the big picture, relating to content, structure and design. The other half relate to expression at a sentence level. They are connected by a rhetorical focus on the reader’s needs. While there isn’t space here to discuss all 12 principles, let’s start with just one big picture and one little picture principle to show how *reducing* complexity actually *improves* value in our public language.

One of the most common plain language reforms is to the structure of texts. Graduates commonly arrive in the workplace with a narrow appreciation of genre, believing that the narrative and exposition models of academic texts will transfer well to the working world. They don’t.

A narrative text, for example, organises content by the research process itself, starting with an issue or problem, setting down the background and methods of enquiry, outlining the research findings, before drawing some conclusions and (finally) recommendations. Many technical reports use an information hierarchy like this set of headings:

Introduction

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- Background
- Methodology
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

This can be appropriate in an academic context, particularly where a reader needs to evaluate the methods more than the conclusions. But in the workplace, the most important points are the recommended actions and the analysis that supports them, not the journey it took to get there. As long ago as 1961, a study by James Souther found that only 15% of readers in these contexts actually bother with the main body of a report, and only 50% reach the conclusions if they are buried in the back end.<sup>8</sup>

Think about your own reading experience. Have you ever started reading a report or a letter, only to find yourself skimming the text to locate the core message? If you found it at the end, you probably then had to read the whole text anew. We structure texts in this way far too often, contrary to the information needs of our readers. Even in public bathrooms like this sign:

### Flick Washroom Services

This system is maintained by using the latest in sanitising treatment methods. This affirms that you, the user, can at all times have the peace of mind that a high standard of hygiene is being met. To help us better maintain this facility for your use and that of others.

*Please flush after use.*<sup>9</sup>

Look around you in the next few weeks and monitor just how much of the information you read on websites or in workplace documents (or in bathrooms) is structured in the same way. Wouldn't a structure that gets to the point more quickly have more value?

The alternative is usually to structure content using a telescoping model. This sequences information in descending order of importance to the reader—rather like a telescope expanding from its viewing lens to its magnifying lens:

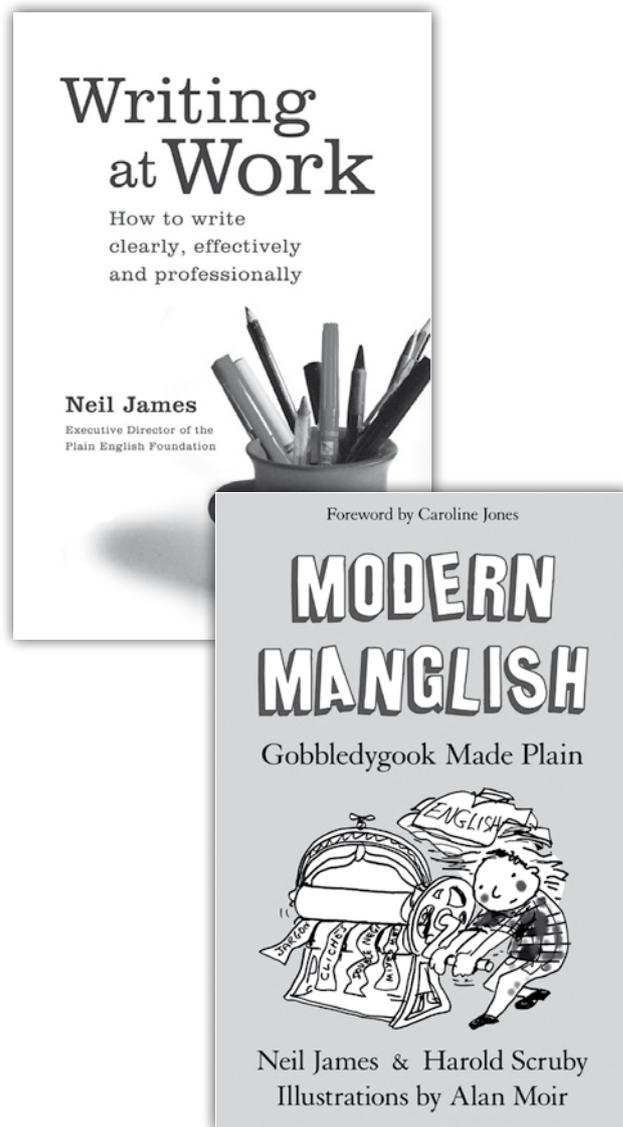
### Telescoping structure model<sup>10</sup>

Executive summary	
Conclusions Recommendations	
Background Methods Findings	

The telescoping model foregrounds the most important information and allows the readers to choose the level of detail that will meet their needs. The Plain English Foundation has introduced this reform in the templates of dozens of organisations (including most recently the NSW Department of Education). The benefits we have measured include:

- reducing drafting time by half
- reducing editing time by one-third to one-half
- improving readability and reader satisfaction
- strengthening decision-making.

Similar benefits accrue at the sentence level, in simplifying the word choice, sentence length and syntax. Text, in fact, loses value as it becomes more complex because it worsens readability, clarity and efficiency. The Plain English Foundation's tone scale illustrates this shift.<sup>11</sup>



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### Plain English Foundation Tone Scale

Tone	Text
1. Informal	Got your note and liked it.
2. Chatty	Thanks for the note. I've read it with interest.
3. Formal yet friendly	Thank you for your letter and the comments you make in it.
4. Official	I have received your letter and noted the matters you raise.
5. Officialese	Receipt is acknowledged of your recent communication, whose contents have been noted.
6. Legalistic	Acknowledgement is hereby made of your communication (hereinafter 'the letter') by the undersigned who has apprehended its matter.
7. 19th century	Your esteemed favour to hand of the fourth ultimo; contents of same have been duly noted.
8. Biblical	I receiveth unto me thy epistle, and its wisdom escapeth me not.

For workplace writing, the Foundation advocates a style between 3 and 4 on the tone scale. This strikes a balance between an overly simple style and one that is unnecessarily complex. Consider the following versions of a text about curing the hiccups:<sup>12</sup>

<b>Version 1 (original)</b>	Initially, gagging and tongue pulling manoeuvres were attempted with no change in Symptomatology. Digital rectal massage was then attempted using a slow circumferential motion. The frequency of hiccups immediately began to slow, with a termination of all hiccups within 30 seconds.
<b>Version 2</b>	Gagging and tongue pulling did not change the symptoms. But when a finger massaged the anus in a slow circular movement, the hiccups became less frequent and stopped within 30 seconds.
<b>Version 3</b>	We found you can cure the hiccups by sticking your finger up your bum and giving it a twirl.

While version 3 would be too informal and dumb-down the content, does version 2 really lose anything compared to the original? If not, then we have broken the proportionate correlation between complexity and value.

Making this adjustment in our public language represents a return to one of the oldest concepts in communications: propriety of style. According to Aristotle:

The virtue of style is to be clear ... and to be neither mean nor above the prestige of the subject, but appropriate.<sup>13</sup>

Here at last (again) is a concept that can replace our assumptions about complexity. A text should only be as complex as the subject and purpose demands. It's a lesson we have forgotten to our detriment.

There is growing evidence that achieving propriety of style generates social and economic value. Let's take just one study by the United States Department of Veteran's Affairs. Each year the department sends out letters to veterans who might be eligible for a benefit. For one benefit, it sent out 750 letters one year, and promptly received 1,128 phone calls from confused readers. The text was too complex and it wasted everyone's time and money. Given there was a fixed deadline for applications, it probably also meant some veterans didn't receive what they were entitled to. The following year, the text was rewritten in plain language with a clearer structure, design and expression. When 710 letters went out, there were only 192 calls. Multiply that by thousands of letters. The department saved millions.<sup>14</sup>

These kinds of studies have prompted governments to legislate for propriety over complexity in our public

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language. In 2010, President Obama signed the *Plain Writing Act*:

To enhance citizen access to Government information and services by establishing plain language as the standard style for Government documents issued to the public.<sup>15</sup>

Similar laws are already in place in countries as diverse as Sweden and South Africa. The 2009 Swedish Language Act mandates, for example, that the 'language of the public sector is to be cultivated, simple and comprehensible.' The South African laws focus on consumer protection. The push is on for similar laws in New Zealand, and already there are plain language provisions in as many as 40 Australian statutes.<sup>16</sup>

So the trend is seriously challenging the nexus between complexity and value in public language. English teachers will increasingly need to understand plain language principles because employers will want graduates to bring them to the workplace. That alone suggests we need to refine our implicit assumptions about complexity.

### Complexity in literary language

Of course, it's one thing to dispute the correlation between complexity and value in our everyday language, but what does this have to do with literature? Do we exempt the 'powerful yet daunting' language that Jeanette Winterson claims defines literature?

Not all writers share Winterson's view. Here is the Australian (literary) novelist Amanda Lohrey speaking at the Sydney Writers' Festival:

This misconception of the literary—that it can't be plain English, that literary writers have a verbal facility like a set of fireworks, that can toss adjectives or esoteric words into the air at random and link them up in a fascinating way which suggests that the writer is ineffably more clever and sensitive and deep than the reader—this has taken hold and has constructed what I call the school of 'fine writing', the equivalent of that ghastly cultivated Australian accent.'

Lohrey cites a story told by American writer Mary McCarthy about a creative writing class when a student asked McCarthy to read one of the student's stories. McCarthy agreed, but the student backpedaled. 'I won't give it to you now,' she said, 'I've written the narrative, but I've got to take it away and insert all the symbols and images in it.' When McCarthy asked why that was essential, the student replied: 'Because only then will it be 'literary'.<sup>17</sup>

The assumption is that to have value as literature, a story must be rendered more complex. Yet some of our greatest writers opposed this notion outright.

The Romantic poets were particularly comfortable with Aristotle's notion of propriety. Coleridge as a critic praised Cowper as the first English poet who 'combined natural thoughts with natural diction,' unlike much English poetry, in which:

we find the most fantastic out-of-the-way thoughts, but in the most pure and genuine mother English; [or] the most obvious thoughts, in the language of the most fantastic and arbitrary.<sup>18</sup>

Wordsworth, in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, agreed:

There will be found in these volumes little of what is called poetic diction; I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it. ...

I hope that it will be found that there is in these Poems little falsehood of description, and that my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance.<sup>19</sup>

Do literary writers live up to this ideal? Far more than any of us might suspect. Let's take the plain language measure of 'readability' and see how our literary writers fare against benchmarks usually applied only to workplace writing.

In the plain language world, readability has a far more technical meaning than that used by the Booker Prize judges. It is grounded in more than 1,000 studies over 80 years, which mapped the comprehension of readers working with real texts. The studies identified two elements that correlated more than others with reading difficulty: average word length and average sentence length.<sup>20</sup>

The correlation is so stable, in fact, that we can grade text using readability 'formulas'. We can estimate the number of years of education that a reader will generally need to understand a text at one reading. This helps to match texts to their intended audiences in contexts as diverse as newspapers, social services, educational publishing and the military.

Readability advocates in the United States generally recommend writing on average at grade 8 because this aligns with the literacy of the American population. The Plain English Foundation in Australia suggests up to grade 12 when writing for a post-secondary-educated reader and 8 to 10 for those with some degree of secondary education.

Our newspapers also roughly align with these numbers.

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A paper like the *Sydney Morning Herald* averages around grade 12 on a readability measure, while the *Telegraph* is closer to grade 8. There is little point if you are a newspaper in writing at a level of style that your readers will struggle to understand, so there is strong commercial motivation to strike the right balance.

In contexts without these commercial pressures, the results are more sobering, and they explain why many of us complain about the documents we receive from government agencies, banks, insurers or lawyers. Plain English Foundation analysis of over 5,000 documents written in more than 30 organisations revealed an average of grade 16 readability, meaning that someone would need doctoral levels of reading skill to understand all they needed at one pass. Most of us would have to re-read at least some of the text.<sup>21</sup>

But where do our writers score? The Foundation decided to find out by measuring the readability of a range of literary texts, and the results were surprising:<sup>22</sup>

### Readability in literary texts

Genre	Author	Readability grade
English canon	Shakespeare (sonnets)	9
	Jane Austen	9
	Charles Dickens	9
Crime / thriller	Raymond Chandler	6
	John Grisham	6
	P D James	8
Science fiction / fantasy	Ursula Le Guin	7
	J R R Tolkein	7
	Anne McCaffrey	7
Australian literature	Tim Winton	6

The greatness of our literature is perhaps less in its 'powerful and daunting' language than in how writers use language to sophisticated effect. It doesn't by definition have to be 'difficult'. Even the classics use a measurable base of short words and sentences that aligns with plain English principles.

Similar results emerge if we take another of the plain

English principles: minimal use of the passive voice. In contrast to academic contexts, where the passive voice is often encouraged, plain language discourages passive syntax because it reduces clarity. Who, for example, is doing the actions in the following sentence?

It is expected that the introduction of new program funding arrangements will go some way to ensure the shortfall is addressed. The situation will be closely monitored.

In government and corporate documents, commonly more than 40 per cent of all sentences are written in the passive voice, leading to misreading, misunderstanding and miscommunication. While it would not be realistic to ban the passive voice, the Plain English Foundation recommends a maximum of 15 to 20 per cent in workplace documents.

The Foundation's research shows that, just as with readability, our writers fall easily within the plain English benchmark:<sup>23</sup>

### Passive voice in literary texts

Genre	Author	% Passive voice
English canon	Shakespeare	5 (sonnets)
	Jane Austen	14
	Charles Dickens	15
Crime/ thriller	Raymond Chandler	6
	John Grisham	15
	P D James	13
Science fiction/ fantasy	Ursula Le Guin	15
	J R R Tolkein	15
	Anne McCaffrey	5
Australian literature	Tim Winton	7

### The false dilemma

Of course, this brief survey is hardly sufficient to settle all the questions I have raised. And I am still anxious about asking them. But we can at least make some preliminary conclusions.

Let's start by disposing with the idea that there is a continuing and directly proportional relationship between complexity and value. As English teachers and

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lovers of the language, it is time that we question this automatic assumption whenever it emerges and replace it with Aristotle's notion of propriety.

We can do so with confidence because there is mounting evidence that unnecessary complexity fails. It fails in particular in the language of public exchange because it diminishes readability, clarity and efficiency. This in turn impairs the practical outcomes of those texts.

But propriety should equally be part of the critical scrutiny of academic and literary texts. Rather than blithely accepting that complex language automatically reflects well on an author, let's ask whether the content merits that complexity, or whether it is, as Wordsworth put it, 'expressed in language fitted to [its] respective importance'.

This doesn't mean that workplace and literary texts will converge into a uniform style. There will always be differences in context, purpose, structure, and language. But we can evaluate each text by how effectively it achieves its purpose through its structure and language and appreciate each through its own genre and context.

In doing so, our critical evaluation of literary texts can draw from the plain language research of the last 80 years, and bring new perspectives using criteria such as propriety, readability and passive voice. Doing so will identify much more common ground than our inherited assumptions would have us believe.

By all means, let's continue to teach our students how to master complex language in a wide range of genres and styles. But let's also emphasise that simple can be sophisticated and complexity can be a con.

### Endnotes

- 1 Alison Flood, 'Booker Prize shortlist breaks sales records.' *Guardian*, 26 September 2011, [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/sep/26/booker-prize-shortlist-breaks-sales-records](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/sep/26/booker-prize-shortlist-breaks-sales-records). See also [www.themanbookerprize.com/feature/dame-stella-rimington-s-speech-man-booker-prize-2011](http://www.themanbookerprize.com/feature/dame-stella-rimington-s-speech-man-booker-prize-2011).
- 2 Jeanette Winterson, 'Ignore the Booker brouhaha. Readability is no test for literature.' *Guardian*, 18 October 2011, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/18/booker-prize-readability-test-literature](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/18/booker-prize-readability-test-literature)
- 3 This is from a standard agreement issued by the Crown Solicitor's Office for NSW agencies to use when engaging a consultant.
- 4 From an essay in Maryanne Dever (Ed.) *Australia and Asia: Cultural Transactions*. London: Curzon Press, 1997.
- 5 Gertrude Stein, *How to Write*, Dover, 1975. You can find an equivalent passage by opening the book at random.
- 6 Photographed in a public bathroom in Sydney's Goodsell Building.
- 7 Plain English Foundation: [www.plainenglishfoundation.com](http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com). For a more detailed account of these principles, see Neil James, *Writing at work: how to write clearly, effectively and professionally*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2007.
- 8 James W. Souther, described by Richard W. Dodge in 'What to report', *Westinghouse Engineer*, no 4-5, 1961, pp. 108-11.
- 9 Sign transcribed from a bathroom in Dumas House, Havelock Street, Perth.
- 10 Neil James, *Writing at Work*, pp. 50-64.
- 11 Neil James, *Writing at Work*, pp. 154-168.
- 12 Francis Fesmire of the University Hospital Florida, writing in the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, for which he won an Ig Nobel prize. [www.independent.co.uk/news/science/why-woodpeckers-dont-get-headaches-and-other-ig-nobel-prize-winners-418902.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/why-woodpeckers-dont-get-headaches-and-other-ig-nobel-prize-winners-418902.html)
- 13 Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, Translated by H C Lawson-Tancred, London, Penguin, 1991, p. 218
- 14 Joseph Kimble, *Writing for Dollars Writing to Please*, Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 2012, pp.108-111. Kimble summarises 50 similar case studies.
- 15 [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/pdf/PLAW-111publ274.pdf](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/pdf/PLAW-111publ274.pdf).
- 16 For the Swedish Language Act, see <https://internt.slu.se/Documents/internwebben/info/språk/Language-Act-summary.pdf>. A useful summary of the South African laws is at [www.plainlanguageinstitute.co.za/context.php](http://www.plainlanguageinstitute.co.za/context.php). For the New Zealand situation, see [www.plainenglish.org.nz/law.php](http://www.plainenglish.org.nz/law.php). Ben Piper presented some early research on plain language provisions in Australia at the Clarity conference in Washington in May 2012.
- 17 Amanda Lohrey, speaking at panel 'Diseased English: can it be cured' at the 2004 Sydney Writers' Festival. Transcript courtesy Plain English Foundation.
- 18 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, London, J M Dent and Sons, 1984, pp. 12 and 13
- 19 Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (Eds.), London, Methuen, 1986, p. 251.
- 20 For a general introduction to readability, see William Du Bay, *Smart Language: Readers, readability and the grading of text*, South Carolina, Book Surge Publishing, 2007. Pioneers in developing readability measures include Rudolph Flesch, Jeanne Chall, Edward Fry, George Klare and Robert Gunning.
- 21 Plain English Foundation writing audits conducted between 2003 and 2012.
- 22 Peta Spear, 'Is plain English relevant to literature? Far more than you might think.' Paper presented at the sixth Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) conference, Amsterdam, October 2007. Courtesy of Plain English Foundation.
- 23 Peta Spear, 'Is plain English relevant to literature?'