

Information Design in effective communications: the Plain Language approach

*Design da Informação em comunicações efetivas:
a abordagem da Linguagem Simples*

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Plain Language,
standard, citizenship

This paper presents and discusses the context of Plain Language and its tight relation with Information Design, as well as the designer's role in this scenario. To achieve this, definitions of these areas are presented, along with the similarities and differences between Information Design and Ergonomics. Next, the path that led to ISO 24495, Plain Language, Part 1, was approved in 2023. From the understanding of the need for an international standard to the importance of conveying information across design process steps, and finally to the translation into Portuguese, a brief glance at this journey is presented. Five parts were proposed, and to fulfill the need of one of them (Part Five: Document design), a pattern library highlighted the role of designers working in this field. Finally, some initiatives in Brazil highlighted and strengthened the designer's role in advancing citizenship.

*Linguagem Simples,
normatização, cidadania*

Este artigo apresenta e discute o contexto da Linguagem Simples e sua estreita relação com o Design da Informação, bem como o papel do designer nesse contexto. Para isso, apresentam-se definições dessas áreas, bem como as semelhanças e diferenças entre Design da Informação e Ergonomia. Em seguida, é abordado o caminho que levou à aprovação da ISO 24495, Linguagem Simples, Parte 1, em 2023. Desde a compreensão da necessidade de um padrão internacional até a importância de transmitir informações ao longo das etapas do processo de design, e finalmente a tradução para o português, é oferecido um breve olhar sobre essa trajetória. Foram propostas cinco partes e, para atender à necessidade de uma delas (Parte Cinco: Design de documentos), uma biblioteca de padrões destacou o papel dos designers que atuam nesse campo. Por fim, algumas iniciativas no Brasil evidenciaram e fortaleceram o papel do designer no avanço da cidadania.

1 Introduction

The discussion in this paper is grounded in the relationship between Information Design and Plain language. How are these concepts interconnected? What critical issues emerge from their intersection? Beyond mere concepts or definitions, it is necessary to highlight the clear convergence of distinct domains of knowledge. While Plain Language

is typically associated with writers, translators, and legal practitioners, Information Design is situated within the broader scope of design as a project-based discipline. To explore and examine these concepts and their interrelations, the article highlights significant aspects and addresses the following central question: what role do information designers play when Plain Language is debated in the context of an international standard – namely, ISO 24.495-1, published in 2023?

In 2020, the first official guidelines on Plain Language in Brazil (Brasil, 2020) were published, and in 2024, the ISO standard was translated into Brazilian Portuguese as a national standard (Associação Brasileira de Normas Técnicas [Brazilian Technical Standards Association, ABNT], 2024). These guidelines, which follow those established by the Plain Language movement in many countries, must be considered in the information design of all forms of communication.

2 Information Design, Information/Visual Ergonomics, Plain Language: presenting an integrated approach

In a publication focused on practice, analysis, evaluation, and research on information design processes, concepts, and definitions, these must be presented to situate the reader and facilitate a better understanding of the relationships among the areas listed above. The intention is to allow the reader to identify the correlations among the issue of information, its suitability for the user/target audience, and the need to consider the language used. To emphasize the discussion, classical authors are presented alongside recent definitions for each field.

2.1 Information Design

As one of the pioneers in the studies about graphic design and the role of a specific design process when the content to be shown was information, Petterson (2002) proposed that:

Information design is a multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, and worldwide consideration with influences from areas such as language, art and aesthetics, information, communication, behaviour and cognition, business and law, as well as media production technologies.

Information Design (ID) as a graphic design subarea, encompasses research into principles for analysing, planning, presenting, and understanding messages – their content, language, and form. Regardless of the medium selected, well-designed information must meet aesthetic, economic, ergonomic, and content requirements (Petterson, 2002).

Some years before Petterson's definition, Horn (1999) explained why information design emerged as a profession and affirmed that this design field draws on a variety of research foundations, including computer

interface design, documentation design, educational psychology, typography, and interface design, among others.

Horn (1999) also proposed as a definition for this field of research and professional practice that:

Information design is defined as the art and science of preparing information so that it can be used by human beings with efficiency and effectiveness. Its primary objectives are

- To develop documents that are comprehensible, rapidly and accurately retrieved, and easily to translate into effective action.
- To design interactions with equipment that are easy, natural and as pleasant as possible. This involves solving many problems in the design of human-computer interface.

2.2 Information/Visual Ergonomics

Design research on information systems is in the scope of Information Design (ID) and Information Ergonomics (IE). Suppose information acquisition seems more pressing in Information Design, based on the planning and production assumptions of the project, in Informational Ergonomics. In that case, the focus is on the survey of perceptual and cognitive characteristics of those who need to read and understand the information presented. Thus, research in Information Ergonomics encompasses not only design but also the language used, including Plain Language, which will be discussed ahead.

We can also mention that, since the 2000s, in the field of Design research in Brazil, the first author to propose a definition of IE was Prof. Dr. Anamaria de Moraes.

As the first Latin American fellow of the International Ergonomics Association, Prof. de Moraes in 2002 stated that informational ergonomics should be understood through the perspective of the communication process. More than recognizing that communication extends beyond the linear triad of sender–channel–receiver, the author argued that the perception of information, its comprehension by the receiver, and its acceptance are crucial to effective communication (i.e., information transmission), as proposed by Moraes (2002).

Within this context, IE lies precisely in the recognition of human abilities and limitations. The role of the ergonomist is to interpret how visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic, and synesthetic information should be considered from the perspective of the human being – the user of information – who receives such signals, decodes signs, and acts upon them.

From an ergonomic point of view, the message is emitted, the human decodes it, and subsequently performs tasks based on it. The knowledge derived from Human Factors/Ergonomics is to be used to observe aspects such as agradability, legibility, readability, comprehensibility, and usability. To analyse these aspects, when the user ‘uses’ the information, both objective and subjective dimensions must be considered, and quantitative and qualitative tools may be employed.

Petterson, who is not an ergonomist, also presented a definition of IE as:

Information ergonomics (IE) comprises research and development of the ergonomic design of man-machine systems. The design of an information system must be based on studies of the information user's aims, knowledge, experience, and way of working. Tasks that require heavy information processing occur at computer terminals, complex information panels, and signal systems (e.g., for monitoring industrial processes and various advanced applications) (Petterson, 2002).

The International Ergonomics Association (2025) uses the term Visual Ergonomics (VE) to encompass a broader range of information analysis in human activity contexts. It states visual ergonomics as:

Visual Ergonomics is the multidisciplinary science concerned with understanding human visual processes and the interactions between humans and other elements of a system. Visual ergonomics applies theories, knowledge and methods to the design and assessment of systems, optimizing human well-being and overall system performance.

Some domains of interest of VE are: visually demanding work tasks and leisure activities, environmental conditions, workstation design, visual comfort, and Visual displays and information design, among others.

As the Human Factors/Ergonomics approach enables a more thorough investigation of users' characteristics, abilities, and capacities, aiming to improve information projects. It's here that we can interconnect these research fields.

2.3 Plain Language

After presenting how ID and IE are connected, we can now include Plain Language in this discussion. ID considers image design, the particularities of visual content, Image formats and their context, visual literacy, and text design. Moreover, it is here that the connection with Plain Language is. Language models, information literacy, Text structures, and the credibility of information have also been a concern for information designers (Petterson, 2002). The way the information is written is also important in an information design process.

As defined by the International Plain Language Federation (IPLF, 2025), "A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information."

As a writing technique, Plain Language aims for universal access. However, it cannot be mixed with the Easy language proposals. The goal is to elaborate easy-to-read texts for different levels of literacy. Over time, stakeholders interested in written information to be more comfortable reading – citizens, consumers, civil servants, teachers, journalists, and even

lawyers – have consolidated several guidelines based on empirical evidence. The guidelines are primarily informed by practice with little support from linguists and scientific research (Fischer, Mont'Alvão, & Rodrigues, 2020).

2.4 Interconnected ideas

If Information Design considers that information ‘used by human beings with efficiency and effectiveness’ (Horn, 1999), it’s possible to identify comprehensibility, legibility, and usability concepts (considering efficacy, efficiency, and satisfaction), which form the basis of Information Ergonomics. Furthermore, according to IPLF (2025), readers can easily find what they need, understand it, and use that information. We are still talking about efficiency, effectiveness, and comprehensibility. All these aspects are addressed in ISO 24.495-1 (International Organization for Standardization [ISO], 2023) and will be discussed in the next topic.

As a proposal for the connection among these areas, we present Figure 1, below.

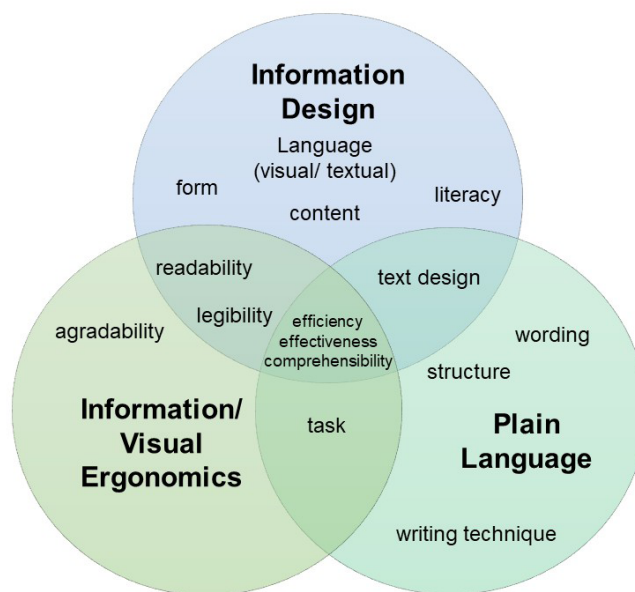


Figure 1 Intersections among Information Design, Information/ Visual Ergonomics, and Plain Language. Source: The author, 2025.

3 Plain Language and its applications with graphic elements

Plain Language is understood as a writing technique; it becomes essential to distinguish what constitutes pure Plain Language from what represents its broader application. As mentioned, legal documents have been widely discussed, and many opportunities have emerged to use plain, clear text and to incorporate images, diagrams, and graphic models. All these approaches share the same goal: enabling readers/users to understand better

the information presented, while considering context, literacy levels, and user profiles.

This text does not aim to analyse the use of Plain Language and its possibilities of including graphic elements exhaustively. However, it is important to highlight some expressions that are frequently mistaken for Plain Language or Information Design, even though they actually involve multidisciplinary work carried out by professionals from these fields:

- **Legal Design.** Application of design thinking in the legal field to enhance clarity and impact in legal documents, processes, and services (Kim & Chung, 2023; Brunshwig, 2021; Perry-Kessaris, 2019);
- **Visual Law.** Intentional use of visual elements – such as icons, graphs, flowcharts, infographics, and videos – to simplify complex legal information (Brunshwig, 2021; Parola & Poto, 2024).
- **Easy Language.** Use of Plain Language principles to serve individuals with reading and/or learning difficulties or other characteristics that affect their ability to read written text (Maaß, 2020; González-Sordé & Matamala, 2024).
- **Visual/graphic facilitation.** Also known as graphic facilitation, it is a technique that transforms complex conversations and ideas into visual representations – such as drawings, diagrams, icons, and keywords – usually produced in **real time** (Sandholdt, et al., 2022; Hautopp & Ørngreen, 2024; Wright, Butt, Miller, Jacobs, & Ferron, 2023).

To advance this discussion, it is crucial to clarify what Plain Language is and is not. As a writing technique, Plain Language emphasizes producing well-structured texts that use simple words and are tailored to the intended audience. Within this framework, the use of graphic elements to support comprehension is welcome, but these expressions cannot be used as substitutes for Plain Language itself.

Understanding these distinctions is also essential for the next topic: a brief discussion about ISO 24.495 1 and its intersection with Information Design. As an international standard intended for translation into multiple languages, it leaves no room for confusion between Plain Language and other related – but distinct – approaches.

4 Relating the ISO 24.495-1 (2023) and ABNT NBR ISO 24.495-1 (2024) with Information design

4.1 Mobilizing the practitioners in Plain Language worldwide: is a standard necessary?

How can a practice be converted into a standard? It's difficult to explain that all the standards had the same development, but in the case of Plain Language, a brief timeline can be presented here. It was summarized from ISO standard steps (ISO, 2023), IPLF (2024), and Plain Language Association International (PLAIN, 2025), available data on their websites, and posted at LinkedIn Profile

(Balmford, 2025). And since the idea was to compile information from different sources, some topics may vary slightly from one source to another.

No names are mentioned here. On the websites and reference documents used, you can find information about each tireless professional involved in this process. If it were not for these people – their effort, commitment, and dedication to the cause of Plain Language, recognizing its importance for society and citizenship in various parts of the world – none of this would have been possible. The idea of this section is to allow the reader (primarily in the Design area) to understand the paths of the ISO 24.495 proposal and how it relates to the design field, specifically the information design area.

Discussions began at the plenary session of the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) conference in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in 2007, when representatives of PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language questioned the need for standards. It's difficult to say that none of the standards were considered before this, but at this point, a motion was established for an international working group, since a standard could also develop the plain language field. At the same time, a standard could benefit the practice and profession, as well as the public's understanding of this area.

At this point, it was clear that, if plain language were a field with professionals worldwide and could be organized to improve their recognition, these three organizations needed to work together. The next year, 2008, this group was formally named the Plain Language Working Group and held its first meeting in Mexico City, Mexico. It's important to note that this working group was the seed of the IPLF; the group changed its name only in 2011. A panel on standards at the Mexico Clarity conference highlighted the need to first establish a standard definition for plain language. A first draft proposed as 'Options paper' highlighted the ongoing need for an organization to enable the three organizations to work on these projects together explored the following topics: a definition for PL, a national or international standards, training and certification processes for practitioners and professionals, establish PL in research, advocating plain language field locally and internationally as The Clarity Journal number 64 (James, 2010). This document was discussed during the 2009 PLAIN Conference in Sydney and the 2020 Clarity Conference in Lisbon.

As a result, in 2011, the Plain Language Working Group meeting, during the PLAIN conference in Stockholm, Sweden, renamed the group the International Plain Language Federation (IPLF). During this event and the following years, it was debated at the 2012 Clarity Conference in Washington, D.C., and refined at the 2013 PLAIN conference in Vancouver. Every conference and its sessions were opportunities to move discussions about the draft forward, as a permanent and extensive consultation with the PL community. In 2014, at the Clarity Conference in Antwerp, Belgium, the International Plain Language Federation formally adopted an international definition of PL, after consolidating the previous discussions and finalizing it through an email discussion group of leading practitioners. By 2015, each of the three organizations had formally endorsed this proposed definition.

So, the next step was the challenge to create an international PL standard. The Federation established a Standards Committee. The first discussions were to contact Standards Australia to explore the possibility of an international, multilingual ISO plain language standard. As a result, the standards issue was published in *The Clarity Journal*, number 79 (Clement, 2018), as an option for sharing the ideas developed for an international plain language standard with PL communities.

An important point to highlight here was that, in this issue, a discussion was included on why a standard should incorporate design principles. The paper by Prof. Karel van der Waarde (2018, pp. 28–32) was explicit about the role of information design since an international standard was under proposal:

Developing a plain language communication integrates writing and design, as a standard need to provide a step-by-step description of this process. Although experts have identified hundreds of descriptions of design processes (...), those processes tend to share a pattern of at least six main activities. (...) This pattern can be applied in all languages; it is based on the activities of people in a specific situation and context. (p. 30)

Here, a straight connection with IE that focuses on how information and tasks are related, and also on the ID process, considering users and the context of information use. The six main activities mentioned in this paper by van der Waarde (2018) consist of steps used in design processes: observation and problem setting; benchmarking; developing (writing and designing); testing and redesigning; implementing; and monitoring, as shown by Figure 2. The author also mentions that a standard that emphasizes design in plain language considers these six activities and supports writing, design, and testing processes (p. 31).

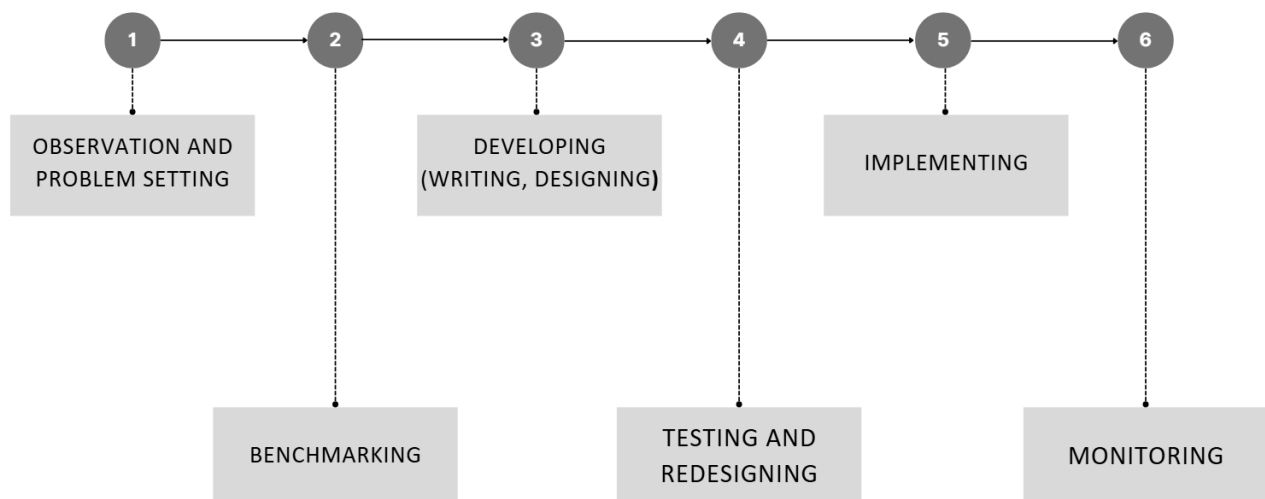


Figure 2 Six main activities in the design process, by van der Waarde (2018).

Source: The author, 2025, from van der Waarde (2018).

The formal proposal of a standard to Standards Australia in 2019 followed ISO procedures: it was assigned to a Technical Committee, received approval, and, meanwhile, the three involved organizations were constantly updating the PL community through their conferences and journals.

It can be mentioned that in 2021, PLAIN published an issue of its e-journal (volume 3, n. 2, 2021) focused on discussing the standard, with papers from professionals from distinct parts of the world. It provided a broad overview of the IPLF, including its work on the standard, and highlighted the importance of a standard for languages and countries. It also explored the possibilities of a plain language certification and education programs based on the standard. It also included an international definition of plain language, which was proposed in the standard.

The involvement of representatives from the organizations in the IPLF, following the progress of the standard within ISO, was essential to its approval. Between 2021 and 2023, when the standard was finally approved, the participation of representatives and members of these organizations was fundamental.

4.2 The ISO Standard under discussion and its parts

Even before Part 1 was published, the IPLF initiated the development of additional parts, aligned with the purpose defined and discussed in the first draft proposed as 'Options paper', as mentioned before. All ISO 24495 parts rely on Part 1: Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines. Several representatives are working on them, whose contents are summarized and listed below, at their current status:¹

¹ Status until this paper was finished, December, 2025.

- *ISO 24495-2:2025 – Plain language. Part 2: Legal communication.* Published in August 2025.

This document addresses legal communication and builds on the foundation, explaining how to apply principles from ISO 24495-1 in legal contexts. It provides examples only in English, and although this document primarily applies to written communication, it can also apply to oral communication in some contexts, such as client discussions and explanations in court proceedings. On PLAIN e-Journal, an article (Clement, 2025) updated the community, presenting a discussion about why a specific standard is needed for plain legal documents; how it is expected that this part will benefit lawyers, plain language practitioners, and consumers; who is involved in developing Part 2, and clarify that anyone interested in this topic is welcome to participate.

- *ISO 24495-3 – Plain language, Part 3: Science writing,* is in its Final Draft. This part of the standard focuses on science writing for the general public, meaning it is intended for anyone who creates or contributes to scientific documents for diverse audiences. It provides guidance and techniques to help authors ensure that readers can understand and use the information. It applies only to printed or digital materials that are mainly text and

does not replace existing technical guidance on accessibility or digital documents, although its recommendations can support both.

- *ISO 24495-4 – Plain language. Part 4: Requirements for implementing the plain language principles in organizations.* The Committee Draft is available, since this part is under development.
Part 4 of the standard explains what organizations must do under each section of Part 1 in order to be certified. As with Part 1, the goal is for the standard to be usable across most written languages and sectors. When localizing the standard, national standards bodies may adapt and expand it as needed to support effective plain language certification. It was published in the *PLAIN e-Journal*, in an article in which the project co-leaders of ISO 24495-4 (Reksten & Slabbert, 2025) explain why a requirements standard for organizations is needed. They outline what organizations must do, the challenges involved, how to create a standard suitable for all organizations, how the standard can empower them, the scope of the certification process, and the role of generative artificial intelligence, which is rapidly becoming a major factor in organizational content development.
- *ISO 24495-5 – Plain language. Part 5: Document design.* Approved word item available, since this part is under development.
This is the part where PL and information design are clearly connected, since it focuses on expanding the recommendations proposed in part 1 on how information design can support clear communication in documents and on its fundamental role in complex ones.

A work was initiated by the International Institute for Information Design (IIID), and in June 2025, a Document design pattern library was proposed to support ISO 24495. This document, available online (IIID & IPLF, 2025) presents the first three principles of ISO 24495, Part 1:

- a) Principle 1: Readers get what they need (relevant)
- b) Principle 2: Readers can easily find what they need (findable)
- c) Principle 3: Readers can easily understand what they find (understandable)

Principle 4 – Readers can easily use the information (usable) – as presented in ISO 24495, Part 1 proposes how to evaluate usability, from the perspective of user experience. This principle is not included in this document, and the authors point out that another publication will be published to present evaluation techniques for document design.

The design pattern library is accompanied by examples and notes about its use, considering each subtopic of ISO 24495, Part 1 (IIID & IPLF, 2025). What is interesting to highlight here is that the authors mention that in these principles, users' needs are:

answered by the way words are arranged on a page or screen, as well as by what they say. ISO 24495 presents a view of readers as active and strategic,

so information design is essential to help them move quickly to relevant information and see its structure. (p. 3)

The PLAIN e-Journal, volume 7, n. 1, 2025, presents examples of these plain language communications when text and information design are considered.

4.3 The ABNT NBR ISO 24.495-1, Brazilian Standard

In Brazil, the efforts were no different. As soon as ISO was approved, a working group was created to translate it into Brazilian Portuguese, since only with a standard approved by the Brazilian National Association of Standards, ABNT, could it be used as an argument for practitioners.

In June 2023, a working group was formed, and initial contact with ABNT was established. The level of commitment was so remarkable that, from this initial contact to the publication of the standard, only 13 months elapsed before the Brazilian Plain Language Standard was released in July 2024, available as ABNT NBR ISO 24.495-1 (2024). But even when the ISO or ABNT NBR ISO 24.495-1 wasn't available, the idea of PL as a citizenship movement was established in Brazil.

5 Plain Language and citizenship in Brazil

Even before ISO and ABNT NBR ISO 24.495-1 were available, the relationship between plain language and citizenship was already being built in Brazil. It is worth highlighting some actions listed below. It is clear that these were not the only ones, but they were selected for their multi- and interdisciplinary reach. These actions guided, encouraged, and gave visibility to many others. From them, teams were formed, discussions were proposed, initiatives were developed, and, eventually, implemented.

5.1 Brazilian National Council of Justice (CNJ) Plain Language Seal

The Brazilian National Council of Justice (CNJ) is a public institution that aims to improve the work of the Brazilian Judiciary, primarily through administrative and procedural control and transparency.

Officially launched by the CNJ in December 2023, the National Pact of the Judiciary for Plain Language (CNJ, 2025) is an institutional commitment to make legal language clearer, more accessible, and understandable to all citizens, without compromising the necessary technical rigor. This pact involves:

- Eliminating excessively formal terms and unnecessary legal jargon
- Explaining how judicial decisions impact citizens' lives
- Using summarized versions of opinions and rulings, written in direct language

- Including accessibility resources, such as Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) and audio description

The CNJ created the Plain Language Seal, awarded annually on October 13 (International Plain Language Day). Forty-seven Brazilian judicial bodies that stood out in implementing Plain Language were honoured in 2025, and forty-eight judicial bodies received the Plain Language Seal in 2024. The certification, granted twice to date, encourages courts to adopt plain language practices and recognizes the efforts of judicial institutions to use direct, understandable language in their communications, especially in judicial decisions.

5.2 Plain Language Marathon for Citizenship

Plain Language Marathon for Citizenship is an initiative of the LabHacker, Laboratory of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies (LabHacker, 2025). It is the first innovation lab within a Parliament in the Americas. It is dedicated to transparency and social participation projects within the Chamber of Deputies, aiming to connect Parliament with citizens. LabHacker organized two marathons in 2024 and 2025, both supported by international organizations, Clarity and PLAIN, as a regional event promoting plain language in Brazil.

In these editions, activities were set in two days. The first day included discussions about the plain language application in Brazilian governmental communications, strengthening the institutions' interactions and bringing attention to successful experiences. They also included awards for the best experiences, chosen through popular online voting. The second, workshops are promoted by experts in this area, bringing together those taking their first steps in studying plain language and public communication with those who already have experience in training and capacity building. It marked the trajectory of plain language in Brazil by bringing the Brazilian government, civil society, and international organizations that work with plain language closer together.

6 Final remarks

Besides the long way described here to achieve approval as an international standard, research in Information Design and its contribution to Plain Language is still limited. Plain Language and Ease Language have been constantly mixed, and to move on, it is necessary to understand their differences, roles, and possibilities. It is a kind of confusion about terms of Universal Design, Inclusive Design, and Participatory Design, which are well-established fields of research now, but were confusing in the 80s, when we could find many publications.

Evaluation is not discussed here, but designers are trained under the idea that every project must be evaluated and tested with real users in real

conditions to become eligible for approval. User experience, the way in which users deal with the information, can be investigated using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, which consider several approaches and techniques, to reach the best version for a project, aligned with the design process.

In the same way, the discussion about linguistics and ISO or ABNT NBR ISO 24.495-1 is not covered here. The idea of plain communication can be understood in a way that the language, in the way that it is, must be used in documents to be understood by the population. The same happens with the 'legalese'. Be clear that citizens do not mischaracterize the patterns and legal procedures, but when sharing information with citizens, they feel confident making their decisions, with a better understanding and relationship with their lawyers and the judicial environment. Plain language can enhance citizens' perceptions of justice when they understand how decisions can impact their lives.

The major point is that designers (graphic, information, or interaction) are qualified to develop these artefacts (physical or digital) whose primary purpose is to convey information, based on their knowledge of text and illustration. The use of typography, headings, colours, and graphic elements (as frames, arrows, diagrams, flowcharts, among others) cannot be banalized. Each item, as presented by ABNT NBR ISO 24.495-1 has a reason to be included in a document design process, to fulfil the principles already listed in this paper.

Finally, we must ask if we do have design professionals who are informed and prepared to work in this field. Are they aware of their responsibility, or still working according their clients to enhance the appearance of a document? Consider the design process and plain language possibilities is not only informative, but formative. Designers must understand their role in contributing to society: allow that citizens can access easy the information they need, to take their decisions, be empowered and to exercise your citizenship, engage in civic participation.

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