An ISO requirement standard for organizations

Torunn Reksten and Sarah Slabbert
Project co-leaders of ISO 24495-4

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is developing a standard that will enable organizations to be certified for using plain language systematically in their operations. The ISO expects to publish the *ISO 24495-4 Part 4: Implementing the plain language principles in organizations* in 2026.

ISO 24495-4 will set out requirements for any organization — large or small, public or private — to implement plain language principles and consistently produce plain language communication. It will define the systems and processes organizations must have in place to show they are applying the *ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines* It also ensures they are consistently working to build a culture of plain language.

Even if an organization does not aim for ISO certification, the organization can use the standard as a guide to implement plain language practices.

Why a requirement standard for organizations

In 2022, the International Plain Language Federation conducted a survey to assess the demand for certifying organizations for plain language. Nearly 120 organizations participated in the survey — 35 plain language consultancies and 82 organizations interested in plain language. The results showed a keen interest (68%) in certification.

The same survey found that among organizations interested in plain language:

- only 19% had a documented process to produce plain language communications
- only 12% measured their plain language performance (process or outcomes)
- only 5% had a budget for plain language and
- 76% had one or more of these plain language resources (trained writers, a plain language style guide, templates, checklists, glossaries, software).

These findings align with research (Green, 2019), which found that organizations struggled to implement plain language sustainably and systematically. Often, plain language projects are one-off or dependent on a plain language champion.

In addition, plain language practitioners and organizations from countries with plain language legislation, like the United States and South Africa, have reported weak compliance enforcement (Green, 2019; Cornelius 2016; Blasie, 2023). This points to a lack of relevant, clear, and practical requirements.

The ISO does not certify organizations. However, it develops requirement standards that could form the basis of certification. The various ISO-accredited certification bodies run the certification process.

What organizations must do

The initial task group working on drafting requirements for organizations developed a conceptual framework for implementing plain language in an organization. The framework distinguishes between 2 types of organizational processes:

1. the processes needed to develop plain language content and
2. the structures and processes needed to drive and sustain successful implementation. These were called enabling requirements.

The enabling requirements are based on criteria and requirements from 3 sources: 2 business excellence models (EFQM [European Foundation for Quality Management] Model; Baldrige Excellence Framework), ISO 9001:2015 Quality management systems — Requirements, and the compliance criteria for Outcome 3 of Treating Customers Fairly. In addition, task group members added requirements from their own experience as plain language practitioners.

The committee defined content as all types of communications organizations share internally with employees and externally with customers, suppliers, partners, and the public (Miller & Barbour, 2015). Content includes printed documents, websites, presentations, emails, videos, and social media posts.

ISO's process to develop a standard

An ISO standard is developed according to a consensus principle, which states that the working group should agree on content and wording. A standard must go through 6 stages of review, comments, validation, and voting before ISO can accept it for publication. It usually takes about 3 years from proposal to publication.

This lengthy and rigorous process strengthens the standard. Many voices representing different countries, cultures, languages, types of organizations, and levels of plain language maturity are heard. This helps ensure that the standard has legitimacy and can be adopted worldwide.

ISO's Technical Committee 37 (language and terminology) Working Group 11 on plain language (WG 11) has about 160 international experts developing the draft for Part 4. The Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) is an official liaison organization to WG 11, and all PLAIN members were invited to give their input on the first draft.

Most of the actual writing is done by a drafting committee (DC) formed by WG 11. In addition to the project leaders, the DC for Part 4 includes Annetta Cheek (USA), Burcu Karaman (Turkey), Chantale Audet (Canada), Cinzia Theobald (Australia), Doug Lawrence (UK), Hajime Yamada (Japan), and Nuria Gómez Belar (Argentina). Having such a diverse committee is of great value as it provides different perspectives on the issues at hand and the discussions on revising the draft in response to comments and other feedback.

In June, WG 11 approved the draft. It has now entered the committee stage where national standardization bodies will comment.

Challenges

A standard suitable for all organizations

Requirements must be practical for all organizations. They must clearly state what organizations must do to produce the evidence that the certifying body will be looking for. And they must be realistic to achieve and to audit for all types of organizations, small and large.

A standard that empowers organizations

The set of processes and structures that the standard requires must empower the organization to consistently and sustainably produce plain language communications.

The scope of the process

Organizations can produce an endless amount of content. What is the most logical scope restriction? New content? External-facing content? Strategic content? In the end, the DC selected content with the greatest impact, but organizations must have a plan to extend the scope over time.

An organization might not be ready to meet all the requirements across all departments but may want to get certified for what it has already achieved. This falls outside the scope of this standard, but the eventual certification system can include certification levels; for example, certification for the whole organization, a division, or even a project.

The role of generative artificial intelligence

Generative artificial intelligence is fast becoming a major player in organizations' processes to develop content. Discussion is still open about whether and what the standard should require for the use of artificial intelligence in content development.

An inclusive standard

The ISO has numerous internal consultation processes for standards development. However, it is essential to consult organizations outside the ISO about whether the draft is clear and feasible.

Before the first draft was submitted to the ISO, the Federation published a consultation paper that explored various requirements and a survey, which informed the requirements.

During the next stage, organizations will again be consulted. If your national standards body has appointed you to WG 11, we encourage you to participate in this process.

References

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Torunn Reksten is a plain language expert at the Language Council of Norway, PLAIN Vice President, and Federation board member. She represents Standards Norway in ISO's 24495 series, serving on the drafting committees for Parts 1 and 2 (legal communication) before now co-leading the work on Part 4.

Sarah Slabbert is a South African entrepreneur and founder of BHI32 and The Plain Language Institute. She is active in the international plain language community as a Federation board member and Chair of its Certification Committee. She co-leads the work on Part 4.