

Simplification: what is gained and what is lost

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What do we mean when we say we want to simplify a document? What's left out? What do we gain? Is it dumbing down, and if it is, is that such a bad thing?

This paper challenges some assumptions - for example, that simplification necessarily results in documents that are shorter or visually simpler. Or that short or visually simple documents are always as clear as they look. We then look at five ways of simplifying documents: Reduction, Amplification, Stratification, Reframing and Personalisation. These strategies are described, with observations about the potential benefits and pitfalls of each.



1 Introduction

Simplification means different things to different people – there are quite number of simplification initiatives in government, for example, which were set up to simplify processes and regulations rather than communications (although hopefully the one will lead to the other). Here I am writing about the simplification of documents, or at least of the user’s experience of them.

Information design, the activity of designing clearer formats and writing clearer words, has sometimes been marketed as ‘simplification’, particularly in the USA. Simplification is an attractive concept, and more quickly understood than ‘information design’, because it calls to mind not only an action (simplifying) but also a desirable outcome (simplicity).

For advocates of the term, simplification represents an important goal of the information designer: to make every reader’s job easier, and particularly to make information accessible to people with functional literacy problems. However well educated we are, most of us sometimes struggle to understand information about finance, tax, health, and technical products. Politicians, journalists, consumer advocates and regulators make frequent calls for information to be simpler¹.

On the other hand, sceptics point out that simplicity can be a superficial quality of information: a document or web page can look simple, while actually being hard to understand. This may be because simplification has resulted in degradation – too much information has been omitted, and the essential message is lost, or readers’ questions have not been anticipated and answered. Worse still, the reader may have felt patronised or infantilised by a ‘dumbed-down’ text.

Or, the simplicity may be only at the surface level, because the designer has valued a simple layout more than one that uses graphic techniques to articulate the information structure – in effect, the hard work of comprehension has been handed back to the reader. It is not just designers who deal only with the surface level – editors sometimes apply the principles of plain English (for example, common words, short sentences) without looking more deeply at the content, or at the document’s role in a wider dialogue with the reader.

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¹ Evidence of public interest in clear communications in the UK can be seen in a range of government or regulatory reports over the last several years. For example, National Audit Office (2003), Better Regulation Executive (2006), House of Commons (2007), Financial Services Authority (2007).

Moreover, the usual opposite of simplicity – complexity – is not in itself a bad thing. Complex systems are rich, powerful, and capable, while simple ones may be useless outside of the limited context for which they were designed. For example, a map of my town is more complex and more confusing than the set of specific directions I give you to help you walk from the railway station to my house. But if you make a wrong turning, my simple directions quickly become useless. In many, perhaps even most, cases, the process of simplification does not reduce the underlying complexity and richness of content, but improves the user’s ability to navigate it – it produces a simpler experience, or a simpler understanding.

This paper focuses on simplifying documents (which may be paper or electronic) that seem too complex or difficult for their users. It does not examine the concept of simplicity itself, nor the process of creating communications that are simple from the start.

I will first identify some confusions that exist around the issue of simplifying documents – for example, that simplification necessarily results in shorter documents, or that documents that look short or visually simple are correspondingly easy to use. Then I will explore some simplification strategies and their effects – reviewing what has been lost, and what has been gained.

2 What does simplification mean?

Simplified = dumbed down?

This is a common accusation leveled at people who try to simplify things. Sometimes ‘dumbing down’ is just a pejorative term for ‘simplifying’, which implies that the accuser thinks some stigma attaches to a desire for clearer information. Certainly there might be stigma if two versions are produced, and given out selectively, but I am not aware of that happening.

Could it be said, on the other hand, that if people are made to feel stupid, ‘dumbing down’ is a fair accusation? Possibly, but many documents are aimed at the whole population, which includes people who struggle with literacy. So most of us should expect to encounter documents that explain things at a more basic level than we think we need.

Simplified = changed?

Widdowson (1979: 167) makes a distinction between ‘simplified versions’ and ‘simple accounts’. The former are translations of existing documents, while the latter are documents that are originally planned, written and designed to be easy to understand. Most documents intended for children are simple accounts: both content and form are created from the outset with that audience in mind.

It is an important distinction, because it reflects a different dynamic of production. Simplified versions can seem relatively easy to produce, because they are modifications of existing documents. However, if badly done, simplification results in only superficial improvement, or can even make things worse. In many cases, the best solution is not to simplify the existing document, but to reconstruct it as one might a house that is in such poor condition that the best course of action is to take it apart and start again from first principles – in other words, to develop what Widdowson calls ‘simple accounts’ that may bear little relation to the original. Because it is radical, document reconstruction carries the risk that it will disrupt existing administrative processes, and within system-driven organisations it can be hard to achieve. Simplification is often a much bigger task than organisations predict or budget for, and a number of publicly-declared programmes to clarify communications have been announced only to be quietly forgotten within a year or two.

Moreover, Bhatia (1983) points out that in some cases even simplified versions are inappropriate. His particular concern is legal text, and his challenge is to make the law student’s task of understanding legal texts easier, without altering the texts themselves. He argues that the original texts cannot be changed without essential damage to their meaning and function, and he also wants to train law students in how to read such texts. So rather than simplify the texts, he instead uses what he calls ‘easification’ devices to make them easier to read while preserving them word for word. In my schema (Table 1 on page 9) I refer to these as ‘learning helps’.

Short = simple, or short = cryptic?

It is sometimes assumed that simplified documents, that provide easy reading experiences, will also be shorter documents. For example, when politicians from time to time become interested in making government communications clearer, it is often the length of the communications that they highlight first.

As a result of this kind of criticism, the minister in charge of one major UK government department decreed that no form should be more than 12 pages long – a feat that required their forms writers and designers to combine questions (which often makes them less clear²), to separate supporting notes into supplementary booklets, to provide less space for answers, and to use less white space to separate key sections of the form. The error rates in forms from this department can be startlingly high – in one case, 80% of forms returned had errors that made them unprocessable. In an exercise to improve this form a huge reduction of errors was achieved by doing the opposite: disambiguating questions, integrating notes, and starting new sections on new pages. Errors went down from around 80% to around 25%, but the new form was double the length at 24 pages.

Bhatia provides a demonstration of the lengthening effect of simplification. He distinguishes between the simplification of content (which involves expanding the text to explain the meaning of legal concepts) and the simplification of form (which involves making more explicit cohesive links between propositions, and which expands the text to include exemplifications). He shows how, in the legal context, either kind of simplification inevitably leads to considerable expansion. In his demonstration, both of his simplifications are more than double the length of the original.

Text A

A tort is any wrongful act or omission that injures another's person, property, or reputation. The party whose person, property, or reputation is damaged has a remedy in the form of a right to sue and recover damages from the wrongdoer. A contract duty is voluntarily assumed, but a tort duty is one imposed by law.

Text B

A tort is a legal term which can be regarded as a violation of a kind of 'social contract' which we all enter into, in exchange for the amenities of a common social life in a civilized society. This 'social contract' establishes standards of conduct which we all must meet whether we like it or not. If we fail to meet these standards, we will be committing a tort and thus may be in peril of paying compensation for injuries that we might thus cause to others. The injuries should not be taken literally to mean physical injuries alone. Any person who suffers an injury to his person, property, or reputation has a right to claim compensation in terms of money from the one who happens to be the cause of it. This kind of social contract is not the same as an agreement or a promise. An agreement or a promise is entered into by two persons out of their free will, but a 'social contract' is enforced by law even against our wishes.

Figure 1: Bhatia (1983) demonstrates that Text B, the easier to understand, is about three times as long as the original, Text A.

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2 One reason that combining questions tends to make them less clear, is because an 'or' conjunction often results. 'Or' can be inclusive ('are you unemployed or unable to work because of your health?') or exclusive ('are you male or female?').

According to Bhatia, many legal texts are intentionally compact: he refers to the ‘normal legal practice of including maximum information into a single sentence, making it compound as well as complex’ (page 44). In effect, it is a carefully engineered construct, in a form that is economical and precise, but inevitably cryptic for those who do not share the right prior knowledge. So, any attempt to simplify a legal document (such as the terms and conditions that accompany insurance policies) by reducing its length is bound to damage its functionality.

Legal texts are a special case, but the question frequently arises: if simplification means shortening a document, what is being omitted, and what effect will that have on the user? Is the new document degraded in some way and of less value? This introduction to *The Reader’s Digest Bible*, by former Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan, reflects this concern:

‘The last thing that the editors of Reader’s Digest or the scholars who produced the original condensed edition of the RSV wanted to do was to replace the full biblical text, What they did want to do – and I shared this desire with them – was to put in the hands of the general reader a book which was less daunting in size than the whole Bible, was shorn of repetitions and such things as long genealogies, and which, just because of this, was more likely to convey the essence of what the Bible is really about. The result was not meant to be an “easy” version which eliminated the difficult passages. It was intended rather as a direct, honest, uncomplicated route straight to the spiritual heart of the greatest book mankind possesses. (Coggan 1990, page 11-12).

The Bible is an interesting case study in simplification, since as a sacred text it should not be tampered with. In contrast to the Reader’s Digest version, which omits content, most editions that are intended to be easy to read use one or more of three strategies. Firstly, they translate or paraphrase the content into an easier form of English (for example, the *Basic English Bible*, which uses a heavily restricted vocabulary, or the *Contemporary English Version*, which excludes theological terms, and is written to score well in readability tests, or *The Message*, which is heavily paraphrased into a conversational modern idiom): in Widdowson’s terms these are simplified versions. Secondly, they surround the text with helps and access devices which are not in the original text: chapter and verse divisions, headings, summaries, footnotes, side notes, glossaries, maps and diagrams: in Bhatia’s terms, these are easified versions. Thirdly, and more rarely, some use layout as genre markers: single columns for poetry, instead of the usual double; smaller type, and three columns, for the relatively technical content of genealogies and books of the law.

Coggan sounds somewhat conflicted in his introduction: clearly, the editors *did* want to produce ‘an “easy” version’. That is what the Reader’s Digest is in business to do, and that is why they eliminated the genealogies and other things. But his unease over the word ‘easy’ exemplifies the subject expert’s dilemma: to many of them, to simplify is to degrade the text, or to short-change the reader.

The government department mentioned earlier has a further problem: every time they are asked to clarify a particular aspect of a regulation, or to explain how it applies to a particular category of people, the document gets longer – and ironically appears less clear to the very people who have urged them to clarify the point. In one document, a simple question that asks for your bank account information (so they can pay you money) is supported by three full A4 pages of notes – they explain what a bank account is, the different kinds, the benefits of a bank account, and how to open one. The information is written in clear English, but it is possibly an example of what Olson (1985) calls an ‘explicit text’ (and elsewhere he calls it an ‘autonomous text’): that is, unable to be sure of any prior knowledge among its readers about something as basic as a bank account, it provides such an explicit and lengthy explanation as to exclude the very readers it is trying to help.

Simplification, trust and risk

I once asked a conference audience of around 200 people how many of them routinely read the terms of business (another everyday example of an explicit text) you are required to accept when installing software. One person raised his hand.

A survey for the UK Department of Trade and Industry reflects the same attitude among financial services customers:

“People can’t be bothered to devote the time they feel would be necessary to read the whole agreement and try to understand it. In some cases they feel some sense of protection in the fact that their bank would be fairly unlikely to treat them too badly.” MORI (2000)

Other comments from the same report evidenced trust in the government and in regulators. For example, in the UK, ‘stakeholder pensions’ are a basic pension scheme offered by private sector institutions within a government-initiated framework; some citizens think the connection with government represents a guarantee but it does not.

Not reading any of the information provided is a form of strategic reading, in which the strategy is to trust in common sense or to take a chance on the consequences of not reading the information.

This approach obviously carries an element of risk, and many of us will have been caught out at some time by small print that covers, for example, terminating a mobile phone contract, claiming on our insurance, or the precise dimensions of carry-on bags for air travel. Of course, even if we had read the small print, we may not have understood it, we may not have correctly assessed the risk, and we may not have retained it in memory.

The risk is not just for the customer, but also for the organisation they are dealing with. After all, reputable organisations do not want to end up in fights with their customers, in which they may be accused of mis-selling or intentionally misleading. Many adopt a risk-based approach – highlighting those terms of business that are likely to cause misunderstandings if not understood – although this is more likely to be based on customer service experience rather than a formal risk assessment.

Examples of this selective highlighting include printing key terms in bold, repeating them in a separate section, and pointing to them in covering letters or marketing documents. For example, I was recently asked to sign a document where the declaration said ‘I have read the terms and conditions, especially section 10 which describes...’.

What are we simplifying?

I have identified an apparent contradiction between the idea that clear documents are simple on the surface (that is, short), and the idea that clarity is sometimes only achieved by elaborating or amplifying the original message. This contradiction can be resolved by asking the question ‘what is being simplified?’.

It may be **the document itself**: if this is the assumption, then the simplified version will tend to be shorter and to look less complex (that is, it will be less graphically complex, and visually more orderly, and will probably contain fewer elements) than the original. This certainly gives the user a better first impression, and it may lead to more people engaging with the document, but it can also lead to damaging consequences when information needs are not catered for, or when content has been made ambiguous by radical editing.

It may be that **the process or content** that the document describes needs simplification. This is the sense in which the term is often used in the government context. For example, the European Commission (2006) has identified 143 separate simplification initiatives – they address regulations, not documents. It is often the case

that content needs to be simplified, and perhaps this is an ideal, but we cannot rely on this to be always achievable. Moreover, simplification may be in conflict with other valid goals, such as fairness – legislation is often made more complex through efforts to cater for special cases, or as a result of political compromise (a side effect of democracy).

Finally, **the reader's experience** can be simplified – that is to say, made easier, faster, smoother, and more confident. In my view this is the first principle by which any others must be tested. But, Bhatia points out, this is as likely to mean amplifying (that is, lengthening) the document as it is to mean reducing it.

3 Simplification strategies

We can identify a number of strategies that are typically used, often in combination, when existing information has to be made clearer (Table 1).

Optimisation	Transformation				
	Reduction <i>It gets shorter</i>	Amplification <i>Clearer but longer</i>	Stratification <i>Broken up</i>	Reframing <i>Rebuilt from scratch</i>	Personalisation <i>Focus on relevance</i>
Plain language editing Clear typographic design Access structure	Omission Distillation Abstraction	Learning helps Glossing Visualisation	Layering Drill down Routeing	Deconstruct/ reconstruct	Customisation Helplines and advisors

Table 1: Some common simplification strategies

The first thing to note is that Table 1 distinguishes *transformation* strategies from *optimisation* strategies, which take existing text and improve it with few or no changes in the structure or content.

Optimisation strategies are hygiene factors: simple basic issues that should be resolved whenever words are written down and arranged on paper or screen. As a minimum intervention in a difficult document, the verbal content should be edited to improve readability – for example, using more common words, shorter sentences, and simpler sentence constructions. Good typographic design should ensure legibility, and articulate the content structure using space, colour and graphic emphasis. And sufficient aids to navigation should be provided in the form of access structures: informative titles, headings, and links.

Because ‘content’ is not threatened, this is the easiest form of improvement to manage in an organisational context. The changes can be impressive, if sometimes superficial. Traditionally, plain English advocates have focused on this level of improvement, although in more recent years the best of them have moved beyond an earlier preoccupation with short sentences to question more fundamental issues of audience, content and structure.

Transformation strategies go further, and usually require more effort, more negotiation, and more investment. The classification in Table 1 is not absolute – in practice, they may be combined, and some of them might sit in more than one of my boxes.

4 Reduction

Reduction strategies are self-explanatory – they simplify the reader’s task by presenting less information.

4.1 Omission: Difficult or less important parts are simply omitted.

Omission in particular does not need explanation – it is perhaps the easiest simplification strategy of all, so long as what is left behind is adequate for its purpose.

In bureaucratic organisations, documents often accumulate content over a period of years in response to changes in products and policies, or sometimes because of well-meaning thoroughness. Because document owners are hard to trace, superfluous content can remain long after it has ceased to be relevant.

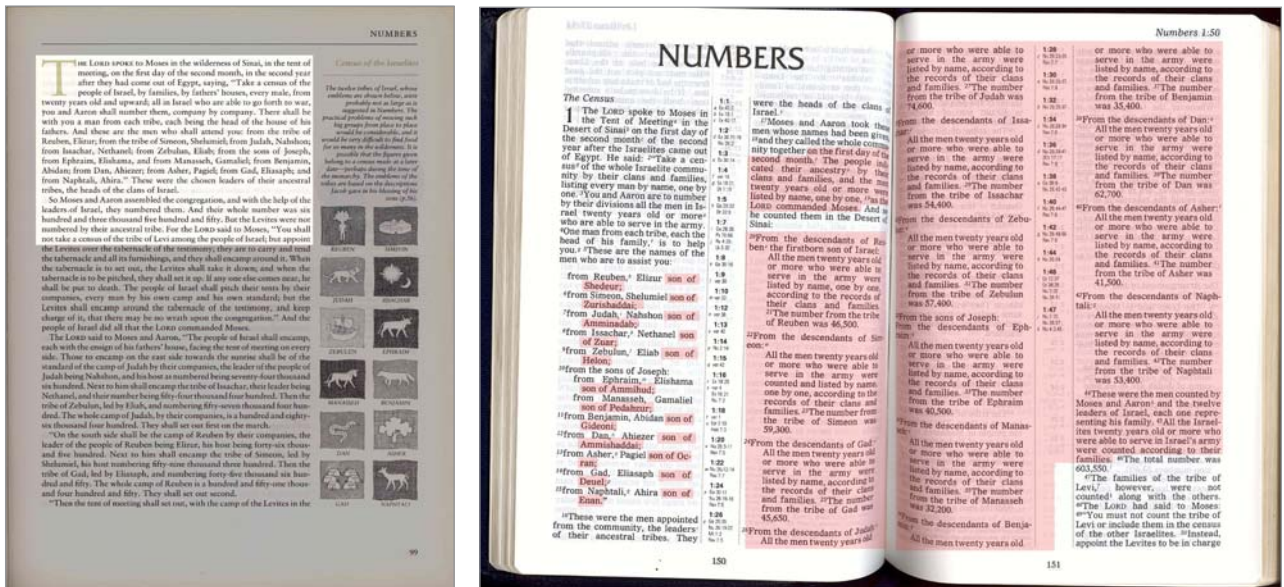


Figure 2: This may seem a strange choice of example, but it is hard to find before/after examples that are easily visible. The part left white on this page of The Reader's Digest Bible (left) is the equivalent to the whole double-page spread on the right. The parts highlighted in pink have been omitted. In practice, omission is usually combined with other transformations in most everyday documents.

What is gained?	What is lost?
Done well, omission rids a document of unnecessary matter, reducing distractions and making the reader's task easier.	So long as the omitted material has been risk-assessed, nothing important is lost. If in doubt, then stratification can be used instead.

4.2 **Distillation:** Information is rewritten, to contain only its essence, or gist.

Distillation is perhaps what the term ‘simplification’ first brings to mind, because the result is visibly shorter and easier to read than the original. Distillation produces the kernel or essence of a message, and it is typically used to give busy people a quick briefing on an important issue. Distillations are often components of other simplification strategies – for example, layering.

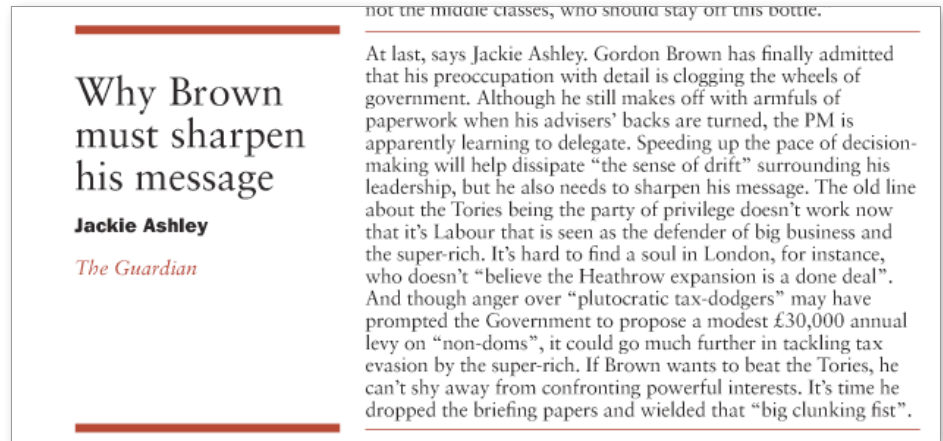


Figure 3.: this single paragraph (above) from *The Week* claims to distill the whole of the newspaper article on the left. Accepting it requires a high degree of trust that nothing important is left out.

What is gained?	What is lost?
<p>Distillation gains the reader's attention, and can create a more predictable top-level understanding than if they have to create their own overview. Because readers do not have to use a selective reading strategy, you have a more reliable knowledge of what they have read.</p>	<p>Distillation necessarily loses a large amount of detailed content that might prove important. It is not a wise approach used on its own for important topics. .</p>

4.3 **Abstraction:** A subset of essential information is repackaged in an easily accessible form.

Technology products typically come with complex user guides, which go unread by customers who are impatient to get going. Many manufacturers now provide a Quick Start guide to help them, and the trend is to provide the full guide in electronic form only. This is not the same as distillation, as the repackaged information does not claim to represent the whole of the original version. One section is simply pulled out and used for a particular purpose for which it is relevant.



Figure 4: this phone user guide contains a selection of pages taken from the main guide, accessible online – no changes to the content have been made.

What is gained?	What is lost?
Abstraction of information required for defined purposes saves the reader the effort of searching, and ensures that key information is seen at the time it is needed. The existence of the full document, albeit in less accessible form than is the case in layering, gives the information provider a degree of cover against legal challenge.	Nothing is lost, so long as the reader can access the full set of information.

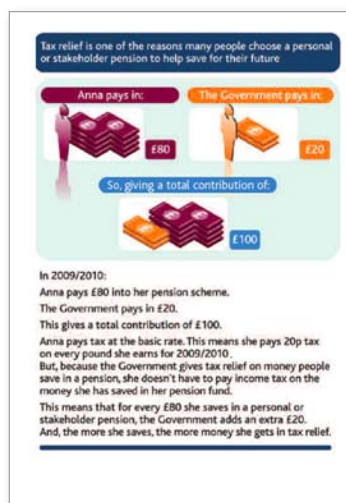
5 Amplification

Amplification strategies add things that help readers to understand the document – such as extra notes, alternative versions (including diagrams) and a range of instructional design techniques that acknowledge that readers may need to learn new concepts.

5.1 **Learning helps:** *Instructional techniques are used, recognising that reading the document is a learning task for some readers.*

Any communication created by experts for non-experts must recognise that reading about complicated products (for example, a mobile phone tariff, a pension plan, or a mortgage) is a learning experience: unfamiliar concepts may need to be explained, and technical processes, risk factors or legislation described. More significantly, there may be a need to establish the conditions for making valid inferences from the document – establishing appropriate mental schemata, for example. It is rare to find instructional design explicitly acknowledged in simplification, but document designers frequently draw on techniques developed by educational researchers and textbook writers – I have referred to them simply as ‘learning helps’ (since instructional design itself is a broader field). They include, for example, advance organisers (the term refers to a schema-creating preview or summary), stated objectives, case studies and self-assessment tests or checklists.

Figure 5: Frequently asked questions and case studies are examples of common learning helps



Your questions answered

<p>Question</p> <p>What happens to my partner if I die?</p> <p>Answer</p> <p>If the scheme is in both your names, the arrangements will continue.</p> <p>If the property and scheme were in your sole name, the property would have to be sold and your partner would have to find somewhere else to live (unless, for example, they could repay the lifetime mortgage in full).</p>	<p>Question</p> <p>Is there a minimum amount I have to take?</p> <p>Answer</p> <p>There may be a minimum amount you have to take. This could be, say, £15,000 or £25,000. It will depend on the scheme and provider. But you may not have to take it all at once. Drawdown loans can be taken in smaller amounts over time.</p>	<p>Question</p> <p>Would an equity release scheme reduce the amount of inheritance tax due on my estate after my death?</p> <p>Answer</p> <p>An equity release scheme will reduce the value of the estate you leave when you die so this may reduce any inheritance tax. But if you are thinking of using an equity release scheme as part of your planning for inheritance tax, it's best to seek professional advice.</p>	<p>Question</p> <p>Who would be responsible for maintenance costs in the home?</p> <p>Answer</p> <p>You will be responsible for keeping the home in good repair. If you don't maintain the home, the scheme provider could arrange the necessary repairs and you would have to pay for them.</p>
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What is gained?	What is lost?
Instructional design techniques, it is claimed, help people build a deeper understanding of the topic, enabling them to apply its content more reliably to their own situation. They may also help memory of the document's content.	Some instructional design techniques assume, perhaps unrealistically, that readers will read in a linear, cooperative way at key points in the narrative. And because they lengthen the document by adding new features, learning helps might put off readers who would potentially benefit.

5.2 **Glossing:** Explanatory notes are provided alongside the text, to define terms, explain exceptions or answer anticipated questions.

Glosses are a very old technique for making a document easier through amplification, while retaining the integrity of the original. They typically take the form of sidenotes, footnotes or popup boxes, and are particularly useful for repairing problems that are discovered after a document is approved (in response to feedback or errors), or where it cannot be changed for a legislative reason.

5 20% directors

5.1 Please let us know if there are any 20% directors you have not already told us about.

Reference number	Name

• A 20% director is a member who, at any time after 16 March 1997 and within 10 years of retirement or leaving pensionable employment has been a director and owned or controlled 20% or more of the company's shares.

Figure 6: This AXA form uses a technical term that could not be avoided – so it is explained in a marginal note, or gloss.

What is gained?	What is lost?
Notes help readers interpret difficult text, and give them a sense of a support.	Notes may discourage readers from looking deeper into the content, which could be misleading.

5.3 **Visualisation:** A graphic representation is provided to give the reader an overview of the document's structure, or the structure of the process or system it describes.

Simplified documents often use diagrams to explain difficult concepts, or decision structures. Diagrams can also be used to explain the structure of the document itself, or the process it describes – for example, flowcharts are used at the top of pages (either paper or web) to show progress through the process. Page layout can also be treated diagrammatically – multi-column grids can be used to express conceptual relations or rhetorical structures.

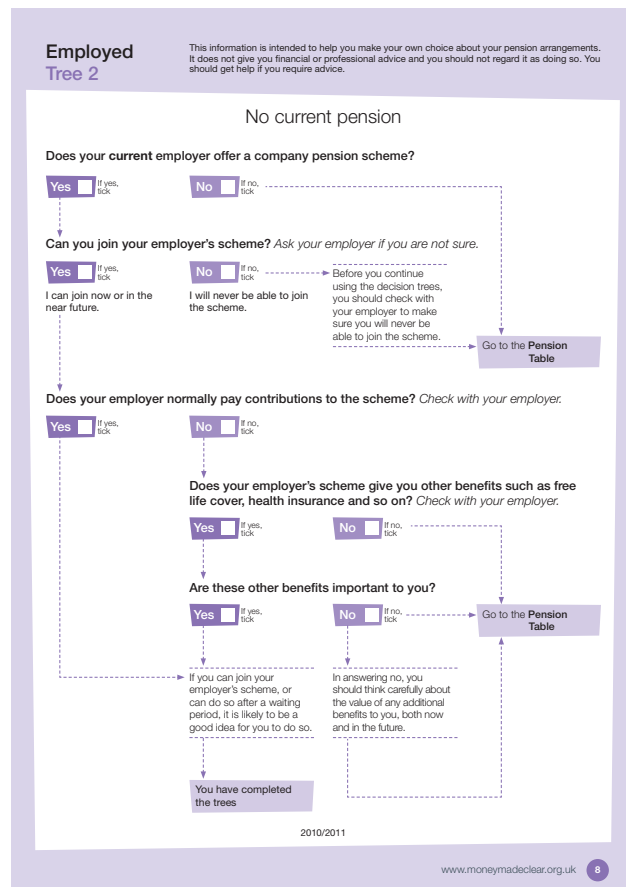


Figure 7: This page explains pension options diagrammatically. It is from the Financial Services Authority's Money Made Clear leaflet on pensions.

What is gained?	What is lost?
Diagrams help readers see systematic structures in text content, or to orient themselves within a document or process.	Diagrams can be imprecise, and may be read in unpredictable ways. There is no (or only an imprecise) equivalent to the grammatical, spelling and punctuation rules that can be applied to verbal text.

6 Stratification

Stratification techniques distinguish between different layers or types of content, which may be foregrounded or backgrounded depending on their function or status. The layers may be readable as a set, or they may be accessed by drilling down from higher levels (a process sometimes called progressive revelation), or they may be reached by following a route defined by filter questions or instructions. Or they may remain parked in the small print and never accessed.

Figure 8: This mortgage brochure uses a layered structure. You can read across the top at the main heading and introduction, or you can skim the informative headings, or read the smaller text below the headings

The image shows two pages from a mortgage brochure. The left page is titled "OFFSET MORTGAGES GUIDE" and "How does it work?". It contains a main heading, a paragraph, and two sub-sections: "Taking the benefit later – 'term reduction'" and "Taking the benefit now – 'payment reduction'". The right page is titled "4/5" and "Why choose a Woolwich Offset Mortgage?". It contains a main heading, a paragraph, and five sub-sections: "You can choose from many eligible accounts, and view and manage them online", "You can also reduce your tax bill", "You keep any historical cash ISA allowances", "We calculate interest daily – so your money works harder", and "Unlimited overpayments available". Both pages have a footer with contact information: "Let's talk it through | in branch | 0845 677 9993* | barclays.co.uk".

6.1 **Layering:** Parallel explanations are provided, at different levels of detail or difficulty.

Any document in which the product is described in a range of parallel ways, using different formats and voices, is using a layered structure – layering is therefore signalled through typographic design and navigation features. In a typical financial services sales brochure, for example, layers might include a headline with bullet-pointed benefits on the cover, a summary, a technical description of the product, and the legal terms and conditions. They cover different aspects of the same content, but they are presented in a

stratified way, anticipating different occasions of use, and different styles of reading. They may refer to each other explicitly, or through inference or repetition.

In some respects, layering is similar to strategies previously described. Content may be omitted from the main narrative, but not literally omitted – just treated as a background layer. Or extra top-level layers, such as notes or summaries, may be developed as distillations or amplifications. Where information is removed to a background layer, it is sometimes described as ‘black boxing’: complex information (technical descriptions, terms of business, lists of eligibility criteria) is moved out of the main narrative into separate sections, panels, appendices, footnotes, or (in electronic documents) popup boxes. The remaining argument is then made clearer, with the reader taking the black-boxed information on trust until it is needed.

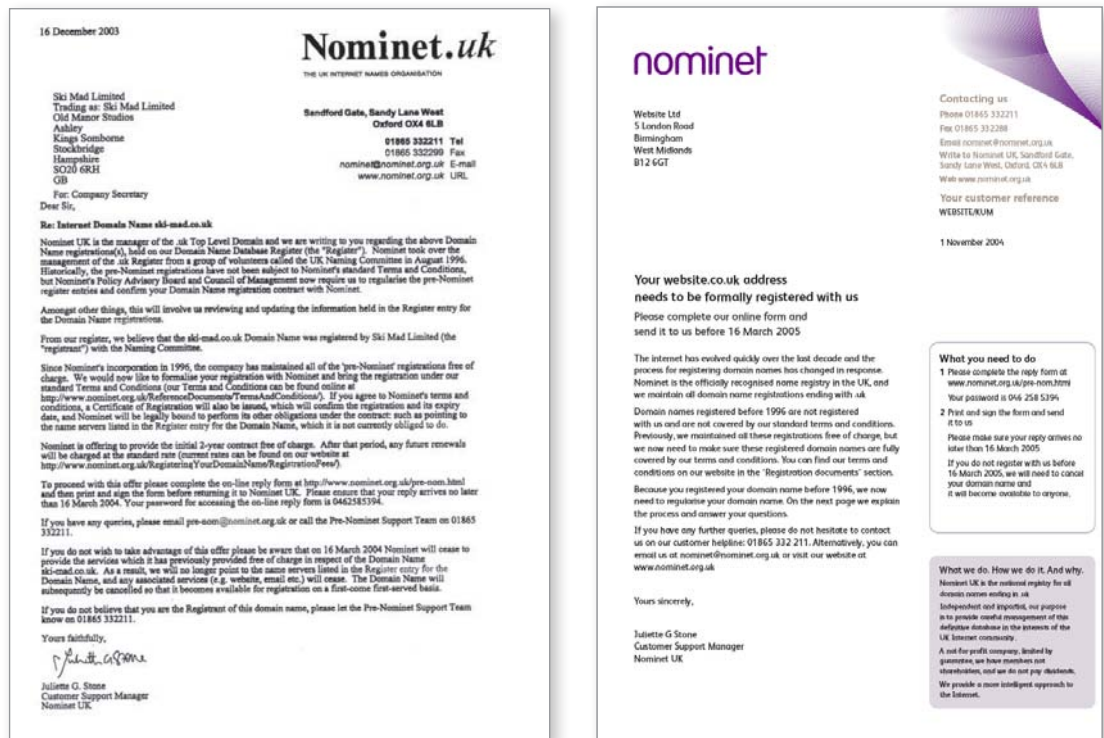


Figure 9. Nominet are the body who control UK internet domains. They frequently have to write to people who don't know they are – every letter used to start with an explanation of their role, which was repetitive and delayed getting to the main point, The new letters provide a preprinted explanation in a panel – a background layer, in effect, that is optional reading. And it pulls out key actions to be read at a glance. (Project by Enterprise IG for Nominet UK).

What is gained?	What is lost?
Layering, achieved through well-judged graphic design and navigation, can encourage and enable strategic reading.	Little is lost, so long as navigation is adequate, but in some instances there can be confusing repetition of content at different layers.

6.2 Drill down: Top-level summaries link to progressively revealed detail.

Drill-down is a form of layering in which higher levels are directly descriptive of, or are linked to, lower ones which appear on separate pages. It is a very common web design strategy, in which each page level contains hyperlinks to a level below, but it is also used in paper documents.

The figure shows three pages of a phone bill from Jersey Telecom, illustrating a drill-down structure.
Page 1 of 8: The main bill, titled 'Your monthly bill' for 30 September 2003. It shows a total payable of £13,743.52. It includes sections for one-off charges, service and usage charges, and a total payable. A large business marketing message is at the bottom.
Page 4 of 8: A detailed breakdown of 'Service and usage charges'. It lists various services like 'Direct Inward Dialling', 'Outgoing Telephone Service', and 'SMS Service' with their respective charges. A total service and usage charge of £504.11 is shown.
Page 1 of 7: An 'Itemisation' page showing a detailed list of calls. Each row includes the date, time, number called, duration, and charges. It provides a granular view of the usage charges listed on the previous page.
 Arrows indicate the drill-down path: from the 'Service and usage charges' section on Page 1 to the detailed breakdown on Page 4, and from a specific line item on Page 4 to the itemised list on Page 7.

Figure 10: this phone bill uses a drill down structure. Information is summarised at different levels, and users can go deeper for detailed information.

What is gained?	What is lost?
Like layering, drill-down structures enable strategic reading. They give the reader greater control over the degree of detail they access.	Little is lost, so long as navigation is adequate, and routes back to the main narrative are obvious.

6.3 **Routing:** Forms frequently use filter questions that send people through the document by different routes, depending on the response.

Decision trees, ordinary-language algorithms and the equivalent online tools do the same thing but on a smaller scale, and are normally intended to walk customers through a decision process. And it is good practice on all information documents to make it clear at the outset who they are intended for (and even who they are not for).

24 If you are aged 16 or over → Go to 25
If you are aged 15 or under → Go to 43

25 Which of these qualifications do you have?

- Tick **every** box that applies if you have **any** of the qualifications listed
- If your UK qualification is not listed, tick the box that contains its nearest equivalent
- If you have qualifications gained outside the UK, tick the 'Foreign qualifications' box and the nearest UK equivalents (if known)

1 - 4 O levels/CSEs/GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma

NVQ Level 1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic Skills

Figure 11: from the 2011 UK Census form

What is gained?	What is lost?
Readers get only relevant information, designed for their use.	Readers may miss information about other options, or may stray into other sections by mistake.

7 Reframing

Many documents are so irredeemably bad that there is no option but to scrap them and start again. They are like old buildings which have been altered so much over the years that there is no obvious logic to their layout, there are numerous features with no apparent purpose, and various wires and pipes that no one understands – they could be vital, or completely redundant. There is no option but to tear it down and start again from first principles.

Figure 12: This is a design exercise (not an actual project) to demonstrate how a confusing penalty charge notice might be reconceived around a conversational approach – what is this? what happened? what to I do now?

7.1 Deconstruct/reconstruct: You often need to pull a document apart, examine the pieces, and start again.

Deconstruction is not the same as destruction – it’s a positive step that helps you to understand the purpose and worth of each part, and to create a design brief for a reconstructed document.

Reading BOROUGH COUNCIL
PENALTY CHARGE NOTICE
 Bus Lane Contraventions (Penalty Charges, Adjudication and Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2005
 Date of Detection: 24/11/2008

TO: Mr Andrew Sample
 12 Acacia Avenue
 Reading
 RG3 6XY

Vehicle Registration Number: ~~RG80506710~~
 Penalty Charge Notice: RG80506710
 Date of this Notice: 03 Dec 2008

DO NOT IGNORE THIS NOTICE

Reading Borough Council believes that a Penalty Charge is payable with respect to the above vehicle, for the following alleged contravention:
Being in a Bus Lane (as defined in S.144(5) Transport Act 2000).
 The vehicle was seen in (Place) STATION APPROACH (WEST TO EAST) at 11:19:22 on 24/11/2008. The alleged contravention was noted at the time by Camera Operator RG175 who was observing real time pictures from the roadside camera at the time stated above. This alleged contravention is supported by video evidence.

You must either pay the Penalty Charge Notice or make representations to the Council by 07/01/2009. Pay the Penalty Charge of £60 by 07/01/2009. IF PAYMENT OF THE PENALTY CHARGE IS RECEIVED BY THE COUNCIL WITHIN 14 DAYS OF THE SERVICE OF THIS NOTICE A REDUCED AMOUNT OF £30 IS PAYABLE.

Or, if you believe you have valid reasons, you can make representations against paying the Penalty Charge. The Grounds on which you can make representations are set out overleaf. Any representations made outside this 28 day period may be disregarded by the Council.

IF YOU DO NEITHER OF THESE THINGS WITHIN 28 DAYS FROM THE DATE OF SERVICE OF THIS NOTICE, THE COUNCIL WILL SERVE A CHARGE CERTIFICATE INCREASING THE PENALTY BY 50% TO £90. AT THAT STAGE IT WOULD BE TOO LATE TO MAKE REPRESENTATIONS.

Reading BOROUGH COUNCIL
PAYMENT SLIP

PENALTY CHARGE NOTICE NUMBER: RG80506710
 DATE OF NOTICE: 03 Dec 2008
 VEHICLE REGISTRATION NUMBER: ~~RG80506710~~

Please debit my MasterCard/Visa/Switch/Debit Card (Delete as appropriate)
 Card Number: _____
 Amount £: _____
 Issue Date: _____ Expiry Date: _____
 Issue Number: _____ Name of Cardholder: _____
 Cardholders Address: _____ Postcode: _____
 Signature of Cardholder: _____

RETURN ADDRESS
 TO: Reading Borough Council BL
 PO Box 4649
 Worthing
 BN11 9FB

If payment is made by post please detach this slip, complete the details above and return it with your payment to the address shown.
 If you require a receipt please tick the box. A stamped SA£ must be enclosed.

Reading BOROUGH COUNCIL
Penalty Charge Notice

This is an important notice. Do not ignore it. You must either pay a penalty or appeal within 28 days.

This Penalty Charge Notice is issued under the Bus Lane Contraventions (Penalty Charges, Adjudication & Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2005

Mr Andrew Sample
 12 Acacia Avenue
 Reading
 RG3 6XY

Notice date: 12 Nov 2009
 Reference: RG1234567

Your car was photographed in a bus lane

Date of offence: 12 Nov 2009
 Time: 12:33
 Vehicle: AB233HTY
 Place: Station Approach
 Evidence: Video (operator RG175)

The penalty

£30 if you pay by 17 Dec 2008	£60 if you pay by 07 Jan 2009	£90 if you pay later.
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How to appeal

If you wish to appeal, you must contact us by **07 Jan 2009**. To appeal, tick one of the possible reasons on the back of this form, or write to us to explain why you think you should not pay the penalty. Our address is Reading BC, PO Box 4649, Worthing BN11 9FB.

You will not have to pay the penalty while we consider your appeal. If we refuse the appeal we will give you a new date by which you will need to pay the penalty.

How to pay

By phone
 Call 0945 3108743 with your credit or debit card details.

In person
 You can pay by cash, cheque or card at the Civic Offices, Mon-Fri 9.30-5.30, Sat 9.30-1.00.

Online
<https://secure.reading.gov.uk/parking/>

Notice date: 12 Nov 2009
 Reference: RG1234567

Reading Borough Council
 PO Box 4649
 Worthing
 BN11 9FB

By post
 Send this slip with a cheque paid to Reading Borough Council or enter your card details here.

Name on card: _____
 Card number: _____
 Start date: _____ Expiry date: _____
 Issue number: _____
 Address: _____
 Signature of cardholder: _____

What is gained?	What is lost?
You get a radically changed document that is up-to-date, addresses known problems, and challenges old inefficiencies.	If the project is done well, nothing important is lost, although users have to relearn how to use the document. .

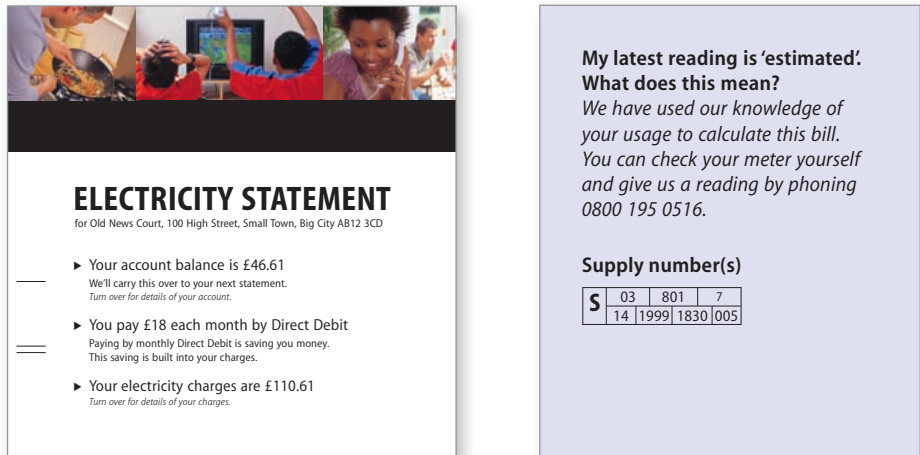
8 Personalisation

Personalisation includes tailored documents or web pages, programmed to combine data from various sources (fixed text, variable messages, personal information) into customised documents for individual customers. And it includes personal contact with humans via helplines, offices or professional advisers. Phoning is a simplification strategy used by most of us from time to time, and it is important to recognise that it may be the only way to communicate about exceptional cases, or with people who find using documents difficult.

8.1 **Customisation:** Information is generated from a bank of separate message versions, using personal data about customers.

Personalisation is most used for documents about finance, tax and benefits, bills, and health information. They are generated from templates, in which prewritten messages are selected using logical rules, driven by individual data. Because every part of the document is potentially relevant to the customer, they do not have to be so strategic in their reading, and problems associated with the understanding of conditionals are eliminated. The messages themselves can potentially be modified according to the customer segment – some organisations operate under a number of brand names in order to attract different types of customers, who can be addressed in an appropriate tone of voice.

Figure 13. Excerpts from an energy bill which is entirely personalised, with headlines and marginal notes that reflect the customer's situation (project by Enterprise IG, for TXU Energi).



ELECTRICITY STATEMENT
for Old News Court, 100 High Street, Small Town, Big City AB12 3CD

- ▶ Your account balance is £46.61
*We'll carry this over to your next statement.
Turn over for details of your account.*
- ▶ You pay £18 each month by Direct Debit
*Paying by monthly Direct Debit is saving you money.
This saving is built into your charges.*
- ▶ Your electricity charges are £110.61
Turn over for details of your charges.

**My latest reading is 'estimated'.
What does this mean?**
*We have used our knowledge of
your usage to calculate this bill.
You can check your meter yourself
and give us a reading by phoning
0800 195 0516.*

Supply number(s)

S	03	801	7
	14	1999	1830 005

What is gained?

Readers get only relevant information, designed for their use.

What is lost?

Readers may miss information about other options, not chosen by the system for their personalised document. They have less control over the information they access.

8.2 **Helplines and advisors:** Information is interpreted by human beings, at call centres, at branches, or in the home.

Documents that try to cater for every need can end up catering only for customers who are persistent and able enough to deal with the resulting complexity. All good interfaces have to be forgiving of error: helplines do this for complex documents. It is also important to remember that many documents are not designed to be self-sufficient. Instead, their purpose may be to support a conversation with a human advisor, or to support the memory of a conversation.

Figure 14: this design concept for a renewal statement for road rescue services from the AAA is personalised so the individual is offered the most popular options for someone like them – and a ‘call us’ option for everything else, to stop the document getting too complicated (project by Enterprise IG for AAA Michigan).

What is gained?	What is lost?
Problems can be quickly diagnosed, and explanations given at different levels of detail in response to immediate feedback.	Although the organisation may record the conversation, the customer’s memory of it soon fades.

9 Conclusion

There is an appetite for simplification among document users, and among those who regulate or seek to influence information providers in sectors such as financial services, utilities, health, and government. Although it is tempting to see it just as a matter of common sense, there are good reasons to look more deeply at the issue. As everyone who has tried it knows, every word, phrase, clause or paragraph you try to delete has a champion somewhere in the organisation, who is prepared to go into battle for it. The would-be simplifier needs to be armed with good arguments and a wide repertoire of options – for example, you don't have to delete if you can layer.

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The purpose of this paper has been limited – to identify a range of simplification strategies that go beyond plain language. By identifying these strategies, we can look more deeply at them – at how they are graphically and linguistically signalled, at how they relate to the specific reading skills that are embodied in definitions of functional literacy, and at how they can be evaluated.

If there is a single conclusion to be drawn, it is that simplification can be quite a complex business – there are bold choices to be made, risks to be taken, and difficult technical processes to control.

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