

Plain language and professional writing:

A research overview



Andreas Nord 2018

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Foreword to the first Swedish edition

In Swedish language policy and planning, the use of plain language has been an issue of deep concern since at least the 1960s. As a result of this relatively long history, the concept of plain language is now well established among Swedish public authorities. Much progress has been made since the first initiatives were undertaken to ensure that the language used in texts related to public administration are not unreasonably difficult to understand. The advent of the digital age, however, has completely altered the manner in which we communicate. The language we use socially has also experienced a shift, and has become more personal and casual, even when used in public situations. Today, it is more common for encounters between citizens and public authorities to occur via the Internet than through printed texts, and in many cases the texts published online are written in a relatively accessible fashion. Nonetheless, certain communication problems between citizens and public authorities persist. Both now and in the future, successful plain language implementation therefore requires something of a shift in focus. The perspective must be widened from a narrow perspective of a given text to one in which the entire context that a given text exists in is considered to be relevant. This report is a good example of precisely this kind of expanded perspective, wherein writers' learning and development are seen as key to the quest to establish a comprehensive and comprehensible official administrative language.

Andreas Nord, the author of the report, provides a research perspective on the practices related to plain language. In the field of linguistics, the context in which texts are produced and used has long been an area of interest, and the report is based on current research – not just research on texts and discourse, but research from different disciplines that may be of relevance to plain language initiatives. Thus, the report itself represents a further broadening of the prevailing perspective in which plain language is regarded, comprising a multidisciplinary knowledge base for plain language and plain language research.

Since the turn of the millennium, many have called for further research on the subject of plain language. In Sweden, Andreas Nord has been one of the contributors to these new research efforts. With this report, Nord has provided yet another contribution. Moreover, he also poses a new question: Within the field of plain language, must knowledge be generated through research activities that focus solely on plain language itself, or can we also learn from adjacent fields? In Nord's report, this question is answered in the affirmative.



The present report is the result of Andreas Nord's activities as a guest researcher at the Language Council of Sweden, and has been made possible by funding from the Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore, of which the Language Council of Sweden is a subsidiary unit. The publishing of this report will help to keep the discussion surrounding language planning in public administration alive, and we are pleased to be able to contribute to the dissemination and advancement of knowledge in this area. The report is aimed at everyone interested in plain language – the manner in which it should be used and read is made clear in the introduction at the beginning of the report. Please read it, share it, and continue the discussion!

Stockholm, April, 2017

Catharina Nyström Höög

Research Director at the Language Council of Sweden

Introduction to the English edition

This report constitutes a kind of research overview, originally published in Swedish and intended for a Swedish – and possibly Scandinavian – audience. Its aim has been to summarize some research results and perspectives that are useful for those who implement plain language/clear communication projects in workplaces as course leaders or language planners, and also for researchers and students interested in the subject of plain language. The English version has been slightly revised in order to make it more accessible for an international audience, but it is still mainly a presentation of research selected on the basis of its relevance to a Swedish context. This introduction will give some outlines of the report, including some reading instructions, and it will also introduce a few specific features that constitute the plain language movement in Sweden today – especially those that may seem unfamiliar for readers from other national contexts.

Outline of the report

The report consists of three chapters. They build on each other, but can also be read individually. However, it is advised for all to read the first, introductory chapter (Chapter 1), which briefly lays out the starting points on which the report is based and introduces an example that will be referred to later in the report.

The first of the report's two main chapters (Chapter 2) consists of an overview of the main strands and main results of existing Swedish (and to some extent Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon) research on plain language, broadly defined as research that specifically deals with aspects of plain language or that sheds light on plain language implementation.

The second main chapter (Chapter 3) presents perspectives and results from research on professional writing and the development of writing skills in the workplace. The basic idea is that, in many respects, plain language implementation involves a learning process for writers, and that, for this reason, it may be useful to know how writers learn in professional settings. This chapter draws on both Swedish and international research, but with the aim of focusing on research results relevant to implementing plain language in workplace writing. The implications of this research for plain language implementation are discussed.

The report's intention has not been to provide an exhaustive overview of the current state of research on any field, but hopefully the report provides readers

with a better understanding of the research base available for plain language implementation.

A high degree of institutionalization

In order to understand the conditions for working with plain language in present-day Sweden, a few specific features of the Swedish context need to be outlined.

The first feature is the high degree of institutionalization of the plain language effort.

The effort to implement plain language and clear communication has a long and continuous history in Sweden, a fact of which its advocates tend to be immensely proud, and they never fail to repeat it in international contexts. A prerequisite for this is a broad and solid political support and a high degree of institutionalization. Although plain language may not be a generally well-known and recognized concept in all circles of society – language advisers generally complain about slim resources for its implementation – it certainly comes across as part of a stable and well-established language planning project, with several types of institutional support. It has a profound political support, where politicians today tend to be unreservedly positive (although unengaged), and it has legal support via the Language Act of 2009, where it is stated that the language of public administration should be “cultivated, simple and comprehensible” (Language Act 2009:600, Section 11). (There are, however, no sanctions for those who fail to fulfill this request.) Furthermore, there is a government body, the Language Council of Sweden, which has as one of its main aims to promote the implementation of plain language in public administration, and there is also an ever-increasing corps of university educated “plain language professionals” (language consultants etc.), making a living from implementing plain language in organizations by giving courses, coaching writers, editing texts and improving text templates for central text types.

As will be noted in the report, the detailed political history of Plain Swedish has yet to be written, but it is clear that at least some of its roots can be traced to a grassroots de-bureaucratization effort in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Today, however, the project to implement plain language is probably better described as a top-down – perhaps even somewhat elitist – project. There is certainly still a general discourse about hard-to-understand-bureaucratic texts among ordinary Swedes, but this seems to be reminiscent of days when the traditional gobbledygook officialese had a more prominent position, rather than an actual reflection of how texts from the public administration are perceived today. Today,

linguistic accessibility is not a particular concern of, for example, consumer organizations or other grassroots organizations (with the exception for interest groups for the disabled, lobbying for important information to be made available in different customized formats). If one can talk about a grassroots dimension to plain language in Sweden today, it would be found instead among the employees of different local authorities, where enthusiasts often have been the ones pushing for change by initiating local plain language projects.

Relevance restricted to the sphere of public administration

The focus on public administration is also characteristic for the Swedish plain language movement. When talking about plain language in Swedish contexts, I have sometimes shown a photograph of an advertisement board from the UK. Here, a large insurance agency markets themselves by claiming not to have any hidden surprises in their policies, “just plain English.” In a Swedish context, this type of reference to plain language when made by an insurance agency is unusual, and even to a certain degree hard to comprehend. “Why would they, when they don’t have to?” is the reaction. Plain language (or rather, the more specific Swedish counterpart *klarspråk*) is so tightly linked to the *public* administration that it seems odd to see a *private* agency deliberately referring to it. This is not at all an indication that Swedes always have the highest confidence in their insurance agencies; instead it is a question of *what* they expect from *whom*. Private companies are expected to provide good customer service, including good communication – at least if they want to keep their customers –, but from the public administration it is seen as a democratic *right* to get texts you can understand. This is mirrored in some of the most often reproduced arguments for plain language in Sweden; that comprehensible texts enable democratic insight into public administration and safeguard justice in administrative practices, and that good texts increase public confidence in the public administration (which is seen as an end in itself).

It thus follows that plain language is a concern for public administration, but not for the private sector. Of course, even in Sweden large companies strive to improve their communication – they just prefer to talk about it as good, accessible and customer-friendly communication rather than plain language (*klarspråk*).

Within the public sphere, however, the scope of plain language has been broadened. Traditionally, the priority has been texts aimed at citizens, but lately it has been explicitly stated by the Language Council that texts written for audiences within the public administration should also be written in plain language. Public administration encompasses public authorities at all three main levels of Swedish

government: the state and national government authorities, the regional (county) administrations, and the municipalities.

The fuzziness of the plain language concept

With this said, even in public administration, the concept of plain language (*klarspråk*) is not as clear-cut as one could expect. During recent decades, the expression *klarspråk* has been cemented as the collective label for efforts aiming to improve the way texts are written in the public administration. It is a metaphor, as *klarspråk* literally means ‘clear language’, but it is also a pun on a common saying, *tala klarspråk*, which means ‘speaking frankly’ (i.e. without pussyfooting). It is usually viewed as a direct equivalent to *plain language* (*plain English*) and *clear communication*, and the label *klarspråk* has also been exported to Norway and Finland (where the movement is organized in a similar way). Nevertheless, it is not always clear what it actually refers to, as different interpretations of the ideal of accessible texts have been over-layered and merged.

Two main competing conceptions of plain language seemingly prevail. According to the first, plain language can be described as a stylistic ideal of texts, characterized by a simple syntax, predominance of verbs in active voice, few or no specialized words etc. The recurrent set of guidelines (often referred to as the ‘plain language principles’) is well known from an Anglo-Saxon context, and tends to be construed as a simple recipe for making a good text (see Section 2.4).

This has been challenged, on the other hand, by a second conception, stressing that there can be no uniform recipe for creating a “good” text, as communication is situational, and different purposes and readers have different needs. Instead, plain language is here associated with the concept of *audience design* (*mottagaranpassning*, literally ‘adaptation to the recipient’). In this case, plain language is seen more as the effect of a certain mindset of the writer, designing the text to meet the specific needs of its audience, rather than following a list of certain guidelines. The focus is on functional communication rather than on language per se, and plain language is seen as the language that enables the readers to read in the most effective way.

In practice, however, plain language tends to refer to a bit of both, and, when asked, language advisers tend to see audience design as the main priority, while still regarding the principles as a useful tool for teaching writers and for evaluating texts, although – they often stress – not always relevant in every detail and seldom sufficient.

The unclear nature of the concept seems in no way to be an obstacle for promoting the project, but it may have hampered critical discussion on the field, as it tends to muddy the water for efforts to create an evidence-based practice. The different conceptions have, of course, very different foundations in research.

A developing relationship between practice and research

The relationship between “practice” (language advisers/language planners) and research has historically been somewhat strained. A survey made in 2008 showed that language advisers seldom read research literature, and generally have low expectations for finding research relevant to solving the problems they encounter in their professional life (Nyström Höög 2009). When asked what research they need, language advisers tend to ask for easily applicable results of experimental studies that could be “used,” e.g. in the form of a bullet list of generalized language advice (ideally in a way that can legitimize the advice they were already offering by giving it an evidence-based guise). Needless to say, this type of instrumental demand clashes completely with researchers’ urge to show complexity and nuances, and has fueled a preconception of language advisers among researchers as representing an unreflective and theoretically untenable practice based on outdated or distorted research findings.

However, it seems as if the relationship between practice and research has taken a turn for the better over the last decade, with an increasing mutual interest. One reason for this is probably a quality improvement in integrating research in education programs for language planners. Another is a broadened research base, whereby an interest from the linguistics field on communication in workplace contexts has yielded a range of new and relevant studies. They include studies where the everyday professional practices of professional language advisers have started to be seen – and studied – as the complex and nuanced practice they are. Those studies often have a more or less pronounced ambition to be of relevance for those who work in the field. The feedback to the language advisers is not new sets of advice, but rather an analytical description of their practices in a form that may enable them to critically reflect on their own practices and gain an increased meta-awareness. This research has generally been well received by language advisers, as the recognition factor of its results is high.

This practice-oriented aim has meant that researchers in the field have published primarily in Swedish and in Scandinavian publication channels. Therefore, this report’s introduction of Swedish research results in English may also – at least to



some extent – contribute to making some of the results of this broadened research available to an international audience.

1. Plain language: a question of writers

This chapter introduces some starting points of the report with the help of an illustrative example.

1.1 Plain language, writing and learning

An experienced language adviser once argued that criticizing someone's use of language is akin to criticizing their hygiene; both issues are equally sensitive. This statement is probably a bit of an exaggeration, but it does contain a kernel of truth; our use of language is personal and constitutes a fundamental part of our identity. Through what we say and how we say it, we manifest who we are and, especially in a professional context, what we are capable of.

Naturally, this has consequences. Some people must struggle to master a certain way of using language, and even those who find it easy to express themselves may find it very arduous to abandon the linguistic habits they have developed; such an adjustment can awaken insecurities. This may be true to an even greater extent when it comes to professional writing – the kind of writing that is now demanded of almost everyone as part of their professional practice (Karlsson 2006).

Some people must struggle to master a certain way of using language.

Helping writers to better tackle their assignments is a challenge faced by many of those who work with language planning in the public sphere, especially when it comes to the type of language planning that involves the practice of what is now increasingly referred to as *plain language* (*klarspråk*). This involves the work of making communication – especially written communication – more effective and recipient-oriented, so that it will accord with the requirements set forth in the eleventh paragraph of the Swedish Language Act, which states that the language of public administration should be “cultivated, simple and comprehensible” (Language Act 2009:600, Section 11).

This report will cover various aspects of research that are of relevance to plain language. On the one hand, it provides an overview of research that specifically aims to highlight plain language issues. On the other hand, it also deals with research from other areas that are relevant to the challenges one may encounter in a workplace setting when charged with the task of altering the manner in which employees write. An important starting point for this portion of the report is that

plain language implementation is seen from a writer's perspective as a learning project. It is, of course, possible to regard plain language as something that primarily deals with comprehensible and recipient-oriented *texts*. However, the writing of such documents requires writers to have been given the right conditions to write good texts. Thus, an important component of plain language implementation (assuming that it involves more than just "cleaning up" texts that have already been written) is to give writers the chance to develop their skills and broaden their repertoire, and to provide them with the support they require to achieve this aim (cf. Nord 2015: Chapter 7). Thus, plain language initiatives must deal with learning (and perhaps also with changes in working routines) just as much as with texts. This conviction permeates the latter sections of the report, and justifies the report's focus on aspects that pertain to how plain language implementation is carried out.¹

1.2 The writer Maria

I will begin with an example. It circles around a person I met at a Swedish regional administration unit some years ago. It is a somewhat edited account, partly because the individual in question should remain anonymous (I shall refer to her here as "Maria"), and also because I have surely forgotten many of the details.

When I met Maria, she was a young woman who had just graduated from university. She had been working for a few years as a "temp" in a division of a Swedish regional administration. Her job as an administrative official involved working with nature conservation issues, and was a good fit for her educational background in that field. However, she had received no training whatsoever in how to write professionally in this type of workplace. She sometimes had to draft quite complicated texts involving the resolution of legal issues, the exercise of governmental authority, and informing private individuals and others of the regional administration's decisions.

In many ways, Maria's case is probably typical. She was quite unprepared for the specific writing requirements with which she was suddenly faced when she entered the workplace, and she had to fight to master them. Moreover, she was

¹ In the report, I will cite research that is rooted in different traditions and based on different theoretical assumptions. These theoretical assumptions are not necessarily reconcilable; for example, different researchers have different ideas about what it means to *learn* and to know how to do something. However, in the interest of being able to combine relevant research from different areas, I have chosen not to emphasize these issues, and to instead focus on the results of the various studies.



not one of those people to whom elegant phraseology comes naturally. For Maria, the professional writing involved in her work as an administrator demanded that she labour to master a new way of writing – to understand the objective of the text, to understand what she should (and should not) write, and to understand how the texts should be designed in order to best serve their intended purpose. One of her strategies was to look up texts from previous cases on which to base the new ones she was tasked with writing. The feedback regarding legal inaccuracies (and sometimes even linguistic errors) that she received from the supervisor who usually signed the documents and from the in house counsel who approved them constituted another important source of knowledge. As Maria adapted to the suggestions of these reviewers, her texts often took on a very traditionally bureaucratic tone (especially in the beginning). This was mostly for safety's sake. She knew that if she wrote in this manner, her writing was sure to meet with the approval of her reviewers.

This example demonstrates many of the factors that someone planning a plain language project may need to consider. There can be no doubt that even after a few years on the job, Maria still needed to get better at writing her texts. Yet in order to achieve this aim, she would have to tackle problems on multiple levels; from improving her own personal skills at expressing herself in writing in a simple and comprehensible manner, to altering the attitudes of her superiors – all the while coping with a lack of time (as is so often the case).

Firstly, one challenge we may define, somewhat vaguely, as the “competency” aspect. In this particular case, it refers to Maria's individual ability to navigate the prevailing conditions of her workplace and find the right way to express herself in writing, especially in the context of the formal and legally regulated forms of writing that her work demanded. However, the term can also refer to how successful the workplace as a whole had been in utilizing and developing the competencies of the individual employees. In this case, it is worth noting that Maria had not received any type of writing education in the course of her studies, nor was she offered any training in writing for the workplace – indeed, she was scarcely even given an introduction. Thus, it is safe to assume that in the beginning much of Maria's energies were devoted to simply trying to understand the conditions and requirements of the tasks she was assigned.

Secondly, the culture and attitudes of the workplace community also played a role; Maria could “get by” so long as she expressed herself in a “bureaucratic” manner, and this clearly felt like the safest approach to her writing assignments. Maria herself said that she thought it was a good idea to express herself in an easily understandable manner when writing official texts, and that she of course strove



to write for her target audience, but that she sometimes encountered resistance from her superiors, who did not consider these considerations to be particularly important.

Thirdly, writing is a matter of routine. All too often, Maria's method of producing texts boiled down to "playing it safe"; she would simply reuse existing texts, which were sometimes quite old and outdated. This approach ties in with the general writing practices that often prevail in a workplace environment. For example, in Maria's office there was no routine of administrative officers reading each other's texts, and the reviews carried out by supervisors and in house counsel focused on legal accuracy – not on providing suggestions as to how the linguistic quality of the writing could be improved. Overall, we can conclude that the prevailing work methods and the lack of technical assistance (such as a dearth of good writing templates) were not conducive to allowing administrative officers to develop their potential as writers.

This example is intended to illustrate the fact that there are many different aspects that must be considered in order to help a writer such as Maria learn to write better texts. I will return to the example of Maria – particularly in Chapter 3, in which I will discuss different aspects of what it means to write professionally and address the question of how to support writers in developing their skills.

2. Plain language research

This chapter provides an overview of existing plain language research, and includes examples of investigations and study results. The overview emphasizes research that may be of practical relevance for plain language implementation. The chapter deals primarily with Swedish research, but also includes insights from some international studies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what we need to know more about, and of how some of these gaps can be closed by applying research results and perspectives from other research fields.

2.1 Plain language research: an overview

It is not easy to provide an overview of plain language research. To begin with, one must reflect upon what actually qualifies as research. In an inventory of research relevant to plain language, Schriver & Gordon (2010) draw a distinction between “formal” and “informal” research. The many publications containing tips and advice, as well as descriptions of good examples and testimonials of positive experiences fall into the latter category.

The overview of this report will almost exclusively deal with “formal” research, i.e. the findings of systematic investigations that have been published fairly extensively. “Informal” research can be of great value as an inspiration for further work, but the publications that fall into this category are often very brief – and usually aimed more at inspiring than at problematizing. Therefore, it is often difficult to assess whether they are backed by systematic and substantive analysis, and this makes them difficult to evaluate. However, one exception must be especially mentioned; a Danish anthology edited by Christina Holgård Sørensen (2014), wherein the majority of the chapters combine experience-based perspectives with in-depth, research-based case studies. This work thus represents an important contribution to the practical literature on the subject of plain language work.

Another delimitation problem concerns what “plain language research” actually is. The label “plain language research” is often used in rather sweeping terms. That said, the designation is useful for summarizing research that deals with, or is of direct relevance to, the practical efforts to implement plain language, and that is how I employ the term in this report. At the same time, such a label may give the reader the false impression that “plain language research” constitutes one single

coherent field of study. This could not be further from the truth. Rather, “plain language research” is comprised of research from different research traditions, is based on different theoretical and methodical starting points, and is usually also conducted by different researchers. In truth, the only real common thread is simply that the research has *something* to do with plain language. For example, I will refer to investigations of the history of plain language, of how EU translators comply with plain language requirements in their practical work, and of how individual people actually understand informational texts distributed by public authorities. All of these areas of investigation are relevant to plain language, but their relevance relates to very different aspects.

Thus, an overview of plain language research must necessarily include many diverse perspectives. In the following sections, plain language research will be divided into five categories:²

- Investigations of the history of plain language and the basic ideas on which it is founded
- Investigations of the current state of texts from public authorities
- Investigations of the advice and guidelines that are usually used in plain language implementation, and of the problems they are intended to solve
- Investigations of the practical side of plain language implementation and of workplace contexts in which plain language considerations constitute a central component.
- Investigations of institutional conversations and other types of dialogues carried out as part of public authorities’ communications.

The chapter concludes with a summarizing discussion, in which areas that require further investigation are also pointed out.

This overview will not be in any way exhaustive, but represents a selection – albeit broad – of existing studies. One delimitation is that only published research is referenced. There are now many student essays on the topic of plain language, but these will not be addressed.

² Portions of this chapter consist of an adapted version of a research overview that was included in a previously published research report (Nord 2011a).

Why isn't there more plain language research?

In Sweden, it has often been claimed that there is too little plain language research (Josephson 2009; Nyström Höög 2009; Nyström Höög, Söderlundh & Sörlin 2012). This has changed to some extent in recent years thanks to the addition of a number of new studies, but it remains true that there is still much left to explore.

It is perhaps a little surprising that more research has not been conducted, at least if one considers the long history of plain language in Sweden, and the fact that Sweden has a very long tradition of higher education in the field. The first programme educating language consultants for working with texts in public administration was launched all the way back in 1978 at Stockholm University. The programme still exists, and offers a Bachelor's degree. Similar programmes are given at the universities of Gothenburg, Lund and Umeå, and other programmes and shorter courses exist at other universities. One could have expected that this would create an incentive for researchers to take an interest in plain language, especially since higher education in Sweden by law is expected to be founded on "scholarship" (or on "proven experience") (Swedish Higher Education Act 1992:1424, Chapter 1 Section 2). This is generally interpreted as an expectation of evidence-based education, where research perspectives form an integral part.

The research basis could be expected to be developed within linguistics, since the education programs generally are found in linguistics departments (often Swedish language departments). However, such interest has only been awakened fairly recently. One of the reasons for this is surely that it was only in the early 2000s that linguistics first began to seriously examine "language in practice" – how the use of language actually constitutes a fundamental part of the practice of various activities (Karlsson 2008; Karlsson & Strand 2012). If this trend continues, we can expect more research with relevance to plain language implementation.

2.2 On the history of plain language and the basic ideas on which it is founded

One area of research addresses the actual history of the plain language project and its fundamental beliefs and assumptions. This research aims to provide perspective on what the Swedish plain language project is all about; how it has been justified politically, how it has evolved, and why it is precisely in Sweden (and the Nordic region) that interest in this issue has grown particularly strong.

We only partly know the answers to these questions. The main characteristics of plain language work have been described by Ulf Teleman in overviews of the history of Swedish language planning and linguistic standardization (2003, 2005), in which he singles out a few milestones in the history of Swedish plain language. These include an influential publication on language in reports from political

committees of inquiry in 1950 (Wellander 1950), a regulatory document on the language in laws and other statutes in 1967 (Prime Minister's Office 1967), and the employment of language advisers and developed institutionalization of plain language in Swedish government offices during the course of the 1980s.³ Teleman also ties plain language efforts to tendencies toward democratization and the expansion of the state apparatus, which fueled demands for good communication. Thus, from a historical perspective it appears that what now may seem to be a given – that public authorities should communicate on the citizen's terms – is not so self-evident as it might seem. At the same time, analyses of the political sphere demonstrate that plain language today appears to have become a politically uncontroversial project (Nord 2014), as it is backed by a very solid political consensus.

Other aspects remain to be investigated. Although the general history of plain language in Sweden may be regarded as reasonably well understood, an in-depth political history has yet to be written. How is its emergence related to political trends? Is it possible to relate its growth to the ideological principles that constitute the basis for Swedish public administration?

2.3 Texts from public authorities – what is typical?

As texts in the public sphere are expected to conform to the ideal of plain language, the characterization and evaluation of those texts have quite naturally constituted one area of interest for research in the field: What do texts from the public sphere actually look like? What are the problems? The results of such studies are of direct relevance to the practical implementation of plain language, not least because such research can provide a basis for the recommendations that must be hammered out.

2.3.1 Decision letters – growing more informal over time

Certain types of texts have attracted particular attention from researchers. Most studied are decision letters and mass information documents. This is perhaps not so surprising, because the plain language initiative has traditionally focused especially on texts that are important to individual citizens. The relevance of decision texts is explicitly commented on in the committee report proposing the text of the Swedish Language Act:

³ More details, including biographies, are provided in more personally held accounts (Ehrenberg-Sundin & Sundin 2015; Language Council of Sweden 2007).

It is a self-evident starting point for public activities that the language used must be comprehensible to those affected by the actions that are to be taken or the decisions that are made by the courts, administrative authorities, and other representatives of public sector organizations. This basis, which is usually described as a requirement of plain language, is set forth in Section 11 [of the Language Act].
(Language Act Inquiry 2008:257, translation from Swedish)

The reasons why texts such as decision letters and judgments are perceived to be the most important is not only that they are important to the individual; they also represent the types of texts where the traditional problems posed by the use of a bureaucratic, “officialese” writing style have been most prominent.

A few studies suggest, however, that *officialese* is no longer the largest problem encountered in texts produced by public authorities. In 2001, Catharina Nyström (in a commission for the Swedish Agency for Public Management) carried out a survey study of decision letters and compared them to two other text categories, namely informational documents (brochures) and reports, in an effort to produce a status report on the current state of Swedish official administrative language (Swedish Agency for Public Management 2001). The results indicate that language characteristics associated with traditional *officialese* is no longer the biggest problem to be found in documents produced by Swedish public authorities, although sentence structure problems persist. Rather, the biggest problem concerns what is generally referred to as audience design (2001:8). Indeed, the investigation found that almost all of the texts examined fell short when it came to adapting their message to their intended recipient’s need (2001:109). Shortcomings included irrelevant information selection, unclear headings, and a lack of metatext (which can help to guide readers), as well as an exclusive vocabulary (technical terminology), and flaws in how the reader is addressed. Ten years later, a small-scale follow-up study of decision texts and informational texts was carried out by Nyström Höög (2012). It showed that decision texts had become longer, but in return their language had also become simpler and the use of the informal address with singular *you* (*du* ‘thou’) had been definitively established as the new standard.

This development seems to be part of a larger trend. In Sweden, one general change in language use has been a trend toward informalization (Mårtensson 1988), and it is not so easy to prove whether the jettisoning of *officialese* from official texts is due to a general shift in language style or the effect of the plain language effort. Additional data is provided in a dissertation by Christine Mertzluff (2013). Her study compares the official administrative languages used in

Germany and Sweden, more specifically the language of decision letters and informational documents from the 1950s onward. This comparison is relevant because the plain language effort has had no counterpart in Germany, meaning that the German texts constitute valuable comparative material. Among other things, Mertzlufft examines such aspects as sentence length, different syntactic relations, the use of direct address pronouns, the use of *I/we* within the texts, and salutations. The results are not conclusive; German official texts have also undergone substantial change, and in some respects they appear to be *more* oriented towards the recipient than their Swedish counterparts. For example, they actually use direct address more. Yet at least in some respects, an effect of the Swedish plain language effort can be observed, in particular by the fact that a syntax closer to the spoken language has been established in texts issued by Swedish public authorities.

2.3.2 Informational texts – and the problem with broad target groups

Both Nyström Höög's and Mertzlufft's studies dealt with comparing decision letters to informational documents (and, in Nyström Höög's study, also reports). In the case of mass-produced informational documents (brochures, pamphlets, web texts), there are also a number of other studies that provide a fairly consistent picture of what distinguishes modern informative text produced by public authorities; they generally employ relatively simple language and are characterized by the use of informal direct address with singular *you* (Lassus 2010; Lind Palicki 2010; Tolvanen 2014).

However, these investigations likewise illustrate problems pertaining to audience design; when it comes to mass-produced informational documents, this would seem to be a nearly inevitable issue. A study by Henrik Rahm and Claes Ohlsson of an informational brochure produced by the Malmö elder care service demonstrates this problem (Rahm & Ohlsson 2009; Rahm 2012). The researchers conclude that the language used in the brochure is fairly unproblematic and follows "the fundamental and familiar ideals of plain language" (Rahm & Ohlsson 2009:39, translation from Swedish); but due to flaws in its audience design, it still is not very effective. It tries to address many target groups in multiple matters simultaneously. As a result, it does not successfully convey its message to anyone. This is a typical problem with mass-produced informational documents, which often must be addressed to a very heterogeneous target group.

Lena Lind Palicki points out a related problem in her study of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's brochures on parental insurance from the 1970s onward (2010). Her research indicates (as expected) that direct address with the informal

singular *you* (*du*, ‘thou’) is completely lacking in the earlier brochures, but is consistently used in their modern counterparts. However, upon closer examination, this stylistic decision becomes problematic. Although the brochures are directed at people who have something in common in that they are all new parents, these people also have different circumstances and characteristics; they can be moms or dads, they may be single or live in nuclear families, they may have adopted or given birth to their child, etc., it turns out that the *you* that primarily appears in the modern brochures is too restrictive to accommodate this variety. In summary, the *you* to which the Swedish Social Insurance Agency primarily caters is a married, Swedish, heterosexual, healthy biological mother with a full-time job, a fixed address, and a generally orderly life situation, and who has given birth to a healthy baby. The texts do also include other *yous*, but these are marked by restricting attributes, for example “as a *new dad, you*” (2010:67, translated from Swedish), while other parental roles may be referred to using descriptive titles rather than direct address, for example “an adoptive parent” (2010:91, translated from Swedish). As a result, different categories of parents appear to be more or less normalized than others.

Unexpectedly, the result is that the older brochures, which make no use of pronouns for direct address whatsoever, are better able to cope with this particular problem. They come across as very distant and formal, but, for precisely this reason, they are more egalitarian – they maintain the same degree of distance with all of their potential readers.

2.3.3 Which texts have not been investigated?

There is one thing of which we can be fairly certain; the public sector is large and diverse, and each unit in the public administration most likely constitutes its own little “text universe.” An investigation by Britt-Louise Gunnarsson (1992, 1997) provides a picture of the state of texts and writing in a Swedish municipal administration in the early 1990s. The impression given is one of great diversity in terms of the types and genres of texts produced, and there is no indication that the number of texts has since diminished since Gunnarsson’s study – on the contrary.

Two recent studies exemplify the complexity in function of many texts embedded in institutional practices within the administrative system. They highlight two different but, in their contexts, central genres. Child welfare investigations (Ström 2017) are written by social workers at social welfare offices as a tool in decisions regarding, for example, whether a child should be placed in a foster home. Written records of Swedish tax fraud interviews (Byrman 2016, 2017) are used by

prosecutors to decide whether they will prosecute a suspect or not. Both studies illustrate how genres are designed to answer different – and often conflicting – perceived purposes. In both cases, a conflict between the interests of the institution (and the decision-maker) must be balanced with the interests of individuals (parents, interviewees) as secondary recipients of the text. The two studies are valuable as case studies that clearly demonstrate the intricate demands put on professional writers in many contexts.

Taken together, however, only very small portions of public administration text universes have yet been explored. By and large, most internal genres that one might expect to be of utmost importance (such as protocols and internal inquiries of different kinds) have hardly been investigated at all (but see Section 2.5.2 where some results of a small study of a type of internal inquiries will be summarized). The fact that we do not know more about this subject may prove problematic for those tasked with hammering out valid advice.

The lack of knowledge also extends to texts that are included in various types of dialogues between individuals and public authorities, in the form of correspondence or other dialogic communication (see also Section 2.6.2, in which a few investigations that approach the issue from this perspective are described).

2.4 On advice, guidelines, and the sources of intelligibility problems

The actual recommendations provided in plain language projects are an area that has attracted the attention of researchers from diverse backgrounds, who often approach this issue as a subject ripe for problematization. One common perception among researchers is that plain language projects tend to be centered on a very limited number of “generic” advice guidelines, and they discuss this as problematic.

I will first touch on the advice itself, and will subsequently address the objections of researchers who are skeptical of the research basis of plain language advice – and indeed of the very idea that it is possible to formulate generalizable advice. This is also illustrated by a few surveys of actual readers’ needs, and some nuances are added by studies that show which principles are *actually* applied in plain language projects.

2.4.1 What advice and guidelines are provided?

The “core” of plain language work is often regarded as being composed of a certain amount of prescriptive advice and recommendations. Various versions of these guidelines exist, but the existence of a general “canon” of recommendations has been confirmed in an investigation in which a number of documents containing advice and guidelines were analyzed (Nord 2011a:chapter 4). Examples of these recommendations include using the informal singular *you* (*du* ‘thou’) for address, avoiding verbs in passive voice, writing in short sentences (or sometimes varying sentence length), and providing explanations of technical terms (or avoiding them altogether). However, it is shown that advice extends beyond linguistic choices at the sentence level. Attention is paid to many different linguistic levels and text characteristics:

[T]he guidelines address most of the different levels of communication and language. According to the guidelines, the implementation of “plain language” can range from adding a table of contents, a connective, or an explanation of a necessary technical term, to removing irrelevant portions of a text, substituting a verb in active voice for one in passive, or replacing the prepositional phrase *in terms of* with a shorter option. (Nord 2011a:6, translation from Swedish, original italicization)

At the same time, the results of the study indicate that the underlying reasons given for the recommendations are somewhat contradictory. Some of them were clearly justified on the basis of audience design, i.e. they were intended to adapt the text to the reader’s needs (for example by selecting a type of text structure that fits the reader’s purposes for reading the text). However, other advice was presented as “generic” and always applicable (Nord 2011a:66). This was particularly true of recommendations regarding linguistic choices at the sentence level (i.e. sentence structure, the choice of voice, or vocabulary). These were treated as advice that should always be followed, regardless of the type of text or the readers for whom it was intended.

2.4.2 What support for the recurring advice is to be found in the research?

As was shown, certain tips were presented as generalizable and as being applicable to any situation in documents containing recommendations and guidelines. Researchers have repeatedly criticized this approach.

Åsa Wengelin conducted a form of meta-analysis in which she examined a number of frequently used linguistic plain language tips to evaluate their scientific basis in psycholinguistics (Wengelin 2015). The results demonstrate that the scientific foundation for such recommendations appears to be fairly weak, and that much of the advice may actually prove misleading. With regard to the recommendations she examined, Wengelin finds that “*some sort* of evidence does appear to exist (or has existed) that supports at least some of them” (2015:13, translation from Swedish, original italicization), but also that there are many reasons to problematize the advice. One issue is that key aspects of the recommendations are based on research that is several decades old, and therefore partly outdated. Another objection is that the supporting evidence is derived mainly from studies of the English language, and the transferability between languages is unclear. A third issue is that many investigations are based on grammatical theories that had a major impact during the 1970s, but whose validity has since been called into question. One example relates to verbs in the passive voice. The advice to avoid passive verbs is most likely derived from studies that had their foundations in transformational grammar. According to this theory, passive structures are “transformations” of an underlying active counterpart. This means that in the process of text interpretation, a passive verb must be “translated” back into its active counterpart. If this assumption is correct, this may make passive voice somewhat more time-consuming to interpret. This possibility has been investigated by comparing the amount of time it takes to read similar constructions with active and passive verbs, respectively, but as such sentence pairs also always include numerous other differences, Wengelin argues that it is difficult to know whether the longer reading time is actually the result of the use of the passive voice per se, or if it is caused by other differences in the content of the sentences used in the experiments. It is therefore unclear whether the passive voice itself does in fact make texts more difficult to read – or if the longer reading time that can result from the use of passive verbs may actually be better explained by the omission of information from the text that the passive voice may entail.

Wengelin also points out that the research foundations for many of the recommendations have been distorted or misunderstood in the process of formulating and disseminating them. The advice regarding the use of the passive voice may constitute an example of such corruption. The original justification, that passive constructions result in increased reading time, seems to have been dropped, and has been replaced by arguments that passive voice can result in a less suitable (i.e. too formal) *style*, or make it unclear “who does what” in a text (see Nord 2011a:55–56). Those motivations are, of course, justified in certain contexts, but are not based in systematic studies. In this case, the

recommendations are (to some extent) based on research (at least for those who accept the assumptions of transformational grammar theory regarding how language is stored in the brain), but the arguments do not actually have any research basis.

Another example of the distortion of advice is the recommendation to avoid “top-heavy” sentences. In recommendations, these are described as sentences in which a large number of words precede the finite verb in the main clause of the sentence. Writers are advised to avoid top-heavy sentences on the grounds that they can be hard to read. However, research indicates that the actual word count is not really that relevant. Such advice confuses length and complexity – it is not the *number* of words before the verb in the main clause of the sentence that matters; rather, it is the syntactic complexity of the phrase that precedes the verb. For example, it matters whether the “top-heaviness” is the result of a subordinate clause or merely a long noun phrase, because these are cognitively processed in different ways.

Based on her findings, Wengelin stresses that these recommendations require a thorough review, and warns against relying generally on advice that deals with the surface structure of a text. She emphasizes that while surface aspects may affect how easy it is to read a text, it is the other aspects that are actually most important for interpreting the text. With a reference to Schank & Riesbeck (1981), she summarizes that

apart from analysis of the surface structures, the interpretation of a text requires semantic interpretation, the construction of mental models, cohesion, pragmatics, rhetorical structures and external knowledge. According to this view, coherence is a mental representation that is created in the interaction between the reader’s background knowledge on the one hand and the text’s linguistic surface structure and textual characteristics on the other. Consequently, the writer’s task is to help activate – or create texts with properties that activate or contribute to – the reader’s background knowledge, rather than to merely write in “simple language.” (Wengelin 2015:15, translation from Swedish)

Wengelin is not alone in underlining that the intelligibility of a text relates to much more than its surface structure. At least as far back as the 1980s, similar comments were made by other researchers, who warned against what they perceived to be an overemphasis on the importance of linguistic surface structure factors in assessing the intelligibility of texts (Gunnarsson 1982, 1985; Platzack 1985; Josephson 2006). In particular, it was argued that the importance of

sentence structure tends to be overestimated, and that if a text is difficult to read, this is often actually the result of “a combination of difficult words and abstract content” caused by the fact that the author’s perspective differs from that of the reader (Platzack 1985:97, translation from Swedish). Instead, researchers stress that by its very nature, intelligibility is highly situational and is much more dependent on such factors as the reader’s prior knowledge, interests, and experience with the type of text in question. This argument does not contradict the existing recommendations, but it emphasizes other aspects of texts for which it is more difficult to use rule of thumb advice.

2.4.3 A few studies of actual readers

The assumption that situations and conditions are of crucial importance for readers is supported by the few existing studies of what factors *really* matter to the reader. Smaller investigations of this type are probably often carried out as parts of more ambitious plain language initiatives (cf. Bjerg 2014), but have rarely been reported in publications that are available to outsiders. However, the systematic, published studies that do exist clearly show how difficult it can be to predict what actually plays a role in the reading process.

One such investigation was conducted by Marie Sörlin as part of a political committee of inquiry on how residents of Sweden regard the court system. Sörlin interviewed lawyers to find out how their clients perceived court texts (Sörlin 2008). In reading these texts, the problems that arose primarily involved the fact that readers found it difficult to make out their structure and content – the clients found it strange if the grounds for the court’s decision were not detailed enough, or if all the people who were heard in the course of the trial were not referenced. However, the use of technical legal terminology (which one might have expected to be a problem) did not appear to be an issue. This is probably because the clients have often had the chance to go through the relevant concepts with their lawyers.

Texts that appear to be relatively easy to read can still cause problems, as is demonstrated in yet another survey by Marie Sörlin (2012). A number of people who had been sent a brochure in a mail-out from the Swedish Tax Agency were asked to answer a questionnaire about how they had interpreted the information. The purpose of the information was to get recipients to register their apartment number with the Swedish Tax Agency, because this data had not previously been included in the national population register. It appears that the linguistic surface structure did not pose any problems. However, it was the main message of the brochure that readers misunderstood – a quarter of the respondents thought that

it was optional that they provide their apartment number, and almost all of them had misunderstood the function of the informational graphics and had interpreted them as being an instruction on how they should calculate their apartment number (rather than information about how the apartment number of the property owner had previously been calculated). The brochure also failed to provide answers to follow-up questions that may arise (for example, what would happen if they failed to report the apartment number in accordance with the request).

A very striking example of how texts can mismatch the needs of their intended recipients is provided by Karsten Pedersen (2003b, 2003a), who examined informational documents produced by Ringkjøbing regional administration in Denmark for persons with speech, hearing, or visual disabilities. One of the most important conclusions of the study was that regardless of the linguistic quality of the informational documents, they were simply not necessary for this target group – the recipients had already obtained the information they needed in another manner.

As a whole, these investigations illustrate how difficult it is to develop general advice for writing good texts. They show that it is crucial to good communication that writers understand their readers and their needs, and adapt the communication to its intended purpose and recipient. An over-attachment to predefined lists of recommendations and rules for writing can lead writers to prioritize the wrong things. This opinion is strongly expressed as a basis for the aforementioned Danish anthology edited by Christina Holgård Sørensen (2014). In the book's introductory chapter, the writers assert that the starting point for successful language work in organizations must be a *functional* approach to what makes communication good – not lists of prescriptive, generally applicable recommendations (Becker Jensen, Kjærgaard, Krone & Holgård Sørensen 2014). Instead, the authors stress that good language is comprised of “the particular language code that functions *communicatively* best according to the sender's purpose” (Becker Jensen et al. 2014:24, translation from Danish, original italicization).

It is crucial to good communication that writers understand their readers and their needs.

2.4.4 Linguistic norms in practical work – what is relevant?

What, then, is the approach that characterizes plain language work? Does it involve the application of a certain number of general recommendations and principles? Or does it all boil down to what Becker Jensen et al. (2014) refer to as a “functional” approach, in which context determines which language and text

aspects should be given the most attention? It is difficult to provide a general answer to this question, but the evidence suggests that in spite of the strong positions professed in the recurrent prescriptive recommendations, it is actually the latter approach that pervades much of the practical plain language projects currently being carried out.

An early study from Australia indicates this. Nicky Solomon (1996) analyzed the Australian guidelines on plain language, and then analyzed texts that were reported to have been designed in accordance with these principles.

Texts with different functions require different language use.

The results show that even in these texts (which one would expect to follow the rules “to a T”), the guidelines were only partially applied. Solomon explains this by asserting that it is not possible to fully implement the guidelines’ recommendations – following them religiously would merely result in bad texts. This is because texts with different functions require different language usage.

Similar observations were made in Sweden in a pair of case studies of professional text editing. One of the studies (Nord 2011a) dealt with a case in which two professional language consultants were asked to edit an official text on the basis of guidelines very similar to those presented in section 2.4.1. However, it turns out that the changes the reviewers made to the text were not quite consistent with what had been stated in their guidelines. For example, they often did not replace passive verbs with active ones, although this was recommended. This was probably because it would inappropriately affect the text that they were asked to review. Transforming the passive verb into an active one would require that a new subject be introduced, which in these cases would entail adding irrelevant information into the text – and within the genre of heavy, technical texts such as this one, the use of the passive verb is generally accepted and even expected. For example, the reviewers opted not to replace the passive verb (*was altered*) in the sentence “the number of employees in the various sectors was altered during the last twenty years,” (example translated from Swedish) because in this context it was not necessary to know who has caused the change. In an interview, one of the linguistic reviewers provided the following comments on the subject:

Yes, that’s true, but I would also argue that passive verbs exist for a reason. [...] They’re not just there to mess with us, but because they’re meant to be used, too (laughter) in the right context and to an appropriate extent, of course. (Nord 2011a:160, translation from Swedish)

In a second case study of professional text editing, in which the language consultant was not given any guidelines to follow, their approach became even freer (Nord 2015). The editing process ended up focusing on creating a good text for the intended audience and involving many other aspects of the texts than what the traditional plain language recommendations deal with (such as different approaches to popularizing information by using similes and metaphors). Thus, one can assume that in practice, plain language efforts are based on a far more nuanced approach to language than the simple lists of guidelines that are sometimes referred to, and that an important part of the professional competency of language advisers is to be able to assess which recommendations and principles should be applied, and when.

Furthermore, it is safe to assume that in certain activities, it is necessary to let the plain language concept encompass *more* aspects than the traditional advice addresses. This is demonstrated in Saga Bendegard's doctoral study, which follows the translation processes of legal texts from the EU administration into Swedish (Bendegard 2012, 2014, 2015). The process is restricted by very precise regulations, and the requirement for plain language is just one of the considerations that the translators must take into account. The result is a special, local interpretation of the meaning of "plain language." It is consistent with what one would expect on the basis of recommendation and guideline documents. Similarities include the fact that this interpretation stresses the importance of avoiding archaic words and words that are perceived as typical of officialese, as well as a focus on simple sentence structure. Yet in other respects, the translators interviewed in the study emphasized other aspects as important to making texts functional. In particular, these included idiomaticity of expressions and uniformity between texts. The emphasis on the importance of idiomatic Swedish expressions is most likely connected to the fact that the documents are being translated (rather than merely subjected to editing). The emphasis on uniformity is due to the fact that the texts that are translated are legal texts, in which consistency between the versions in different languages is crucial. Bendegard also notes that terminological questions are afforded greater importance, because terminological consistency between the texts in Swedish and the texts in the different languages of the European Union is essential.

Thus, one conclusion must be that the scope of "plain language" differs depending on the different contexts in which it is applied and allows for the application of various local interpretations in order to accommodate the specific needs of the text culture in question. In a later article, Bendegard (2015) discusses whether this approach is successful, or if the term "plain language" should solely

be used to refer to measures intended to improve the recipient design of texts that cater to individuals:

Thus, there is no consensus on what the concept of plain language should cover, and it would be wise to discuss this issue further. In light of the results yielded by the investigation of the translation units' plain language efforts, there is reason to question whether the broader definition of plain language (which clearly involves adaptation to all possible recipients) actually finds support among writers. On the other hand, it is the most appropriate way to define the term. [...] Of course, there may be many good reasons to further develop the writing of internal texts or texts between public authorities, because these should also work well and be understood by the recipient. However, perhaps this type of work should be distinguished from the work of adapting the texts to the citizens – and maybe the concept of plain language should be reserved for the latter. (Bendegard 2015:11, translation from Swedish)

Bendegard points out that this would make it easier to deliver better, more concrete and general advice and recommendations on which issues should be addressed in texts.

2.5 Plain language in the workplace

Bendegard's study represents a type of investigation that has been rare until recent years – one in which the activity of the texts being produced is studied in context, rather than primarily the texts themselves. Such investigations provide either knowledge about the actual implementation of plain language, or knowledge of practical work in which plain language is a central component. Bendegard's study represents the first option, as it involves examining an activity in which plain language is a factor. However, in recent years investigations have been carried out in which the plain language work itself is the study subject (within the context of the activities in which it occurs). Such investigations could provide a deeper understanding of the conditions involved in plain language projects than those that merely regard the texts as products.

A comparison can be made with modern educational research, in which classroom studies have long been common because the prevailing opinion is that it is only by examining the classroom that one can *really* learn what teaching looks like.

Similar ideas are to be found in the international research on language planning and policy, and the language planning researchers Hornberger & Johnson (2007)

stress that the analysis of language policy documents does not reveal the whole truth about a language policy project:

Historical and intertextual analyses of policy texts can capture the confluence of histories, attitudes, and ideologies that engender a language policy but, alone, cannot account for how the creation is interpreted and implemented in the various contextual layers through which a language policy must pass. (Hornberger & Johnson 2007:511)

They argue that when a language policy decision is made within the political sphere, it usually then trickles down through a number of different levels, and is transformed in the process through interpretation and transformation into various practical measures. For example, it could be argued that the language policy decision contained in the formulation of the Swedish Language Act's eleventh paragraph is not usually directly applied by an individual writer. Instead, the implementation of this decision is effected through e.g. the Language Council's interpretation (Language Council of Sweden 2011). This interpretation may then be incorporated into linguistic guidelines or a writing tutorial by a given public authority before it ever reaches the writer, or it may be disseminated through a writing course, or via the plain language pages of that public authority's intranet.

2.5.1 On how plain language is justified in policy and in practice

There are certainly clear indications that there is a major gap between policy and practice, and this holds true for plain language work. One study on the subject compares how plain language work is justified in policy documents and in contexts wherein plain language must be "marketed" locally (Lind Palicki & Nord 2013; Lind Palicki 2014; Lind Palicki & Nord 2015). It emerges that there is great uniformity among policy documents, which tend to underline the same arguments; plain language leads to democratic insight, safeguards justice in the administrative practices, makes administration more efficient and inspires trust. The justifications for plain language and "plain language products" (both in the promotion of businesses providing language services and as part of training at the municipal administrative level) underscore other motivations, however.

Arguments about democracy and the rule of law (which were central in the political sphere, where everything revolves around hypothetical ideals) fade into the background. In marketing materials, it is instead emphasized that the person who purchases the product will gain a competitive advantage, or will perhaps simply gain the chance to develop his/her writing as a part of his/her personal development (Lind Palicki 2014; Lind Palicki & Nord 2015). When it comes to

plain language training courses, the “democracy argument” is included, but more as an implied background to practical learning activities. Instead, the course leader strives to convince his/her students that writing in a more recipient-designed fashion will be to his/her own advantage. Among other things, the argument is made that clearer texts can get people to do what they’re supposed to – and also that incomprehensible texts may not be considered to be legally binding for the recipient. This finding led researchers to discuss what might be lost if clear language “is reduced to *just* a project intended to help people write a little better on the job” (Lind Palicki & Nord 2015:15, original italicization, translation from Swedish). They argue that questions of democracy and trust must also be raised at the local level.

2.5.2 Why two Danish, and one Swedish, plain language projects yielded limited results

A Danish doctoral study by Anne Kjærgaard (Kjærgaard 2010, 2012) constitutes an important contribution to our knowledge about what might impede the success of language-changing projects. Kjærgaard investigated two plain language projects, one carried out by a court and the other by a municipality. The actual projects and the attitudes of those involved in them were examined by drawing on organization theory, and this approach was combined with analyses of texts written before and after the project, wherein both what can be expected to change (i.e. those language features that have been or can be expected to have been highlighted in the actual project), and other, more unexpected effects on the texts were examined.

However, the results of the study proved disappointing, both projects yielded only limited effects on the actual texts. This failure can be attributed to a failure to garner support and to ambivalent attitudes. For example, the writers at the municipal administration did not share an understanding of the description of the problem on which the project was based, and those at the courthouse were of the opinion that only the judge has the right to decide how his/her texts ought to be written. Furthermore, the projects were affected by impeding circumstances, such as a judge who believes that he/she already writes in accordance with the provided guidelines.

Similar results have also emerged in a smaller study in which texts written before and after the implementation of a plain language project by a regional governmental administration were compared (Nord & Forsberg 2017). The administration aimed at improving texts within a certain genre central to the political administration. These are texts with the purpose of providing part time

politicians in a regional committee with a background inquiry into matters in which they have to make decisions. The project introduced a new template in order to make texts more uniform in structure. The project also included a one-day writing course for all writers with the aim of teaching how to write shorter and less complex texts. The results of the comparison showed that the mandatory use of the new template actually made the structure more uniform, while the texts have not become shorter or in any way different linguistically; they are very dense, nominal and technical, both before and after. It was concluded that the short course, despite high evaluation figures from the participants on appreciation and relevance, was not enough to bring about any change in the writers' well-established writing habits – beyond the changed structure.

2.5.3 Training yields satisfied course participants but has a limited impact

The Dutch writing researcher Daniël Janssen (2001) has likewise demonstrated that it is difficult to change the way people write. He compared the effects of two writing courses that were implemented by the Dutch civil service.

One was a traditional writing course in which a number of writers who had participated in the training were asked to evaluate whether or not they felt they had become better writers, in several respects, as a result of participating in the class. Their bosses were also asked to evaluate the participants based on the same criteria. In addition, a control group of writers who had not attended the training were asked to evaluate themselves. The results indicated that writers who had attended the course felt that they had become better at selecting information and structuring texts, but did not feel they had improved their ability to express themselves or find the right style – nor had they begun to take more pleasure in the writing process or have less problems with “writer’s block.” Their bosses merely found that the writers had become better at structuring texts. Despite these rather limited effects, both the writers and their bosses had a very positive opinion of the course. 90% of those in both groups said they would recommend it.

The second course was structured differently, and was designed as a customized training program for writers, in which they wrote three or four texts and received coaching from a language consultant. In this instance, the course was evaluated using a number of quality rating scales that were applied to texts the writers had written before and after they underwent the training. The results showed that the quality of the writers' texts improved, but also indicated that the change was not dramatic and more limited than could have been expected. Moreover, the reason

for the writers' improvement was not clear – in a course stretching over time, increased practice in writing could in itself be expected to result in improvements.

2.5.4 Two very different examples of text editing

Other types of practical plain language implementation have been examined in two case studies of text editing that were previously mentioned. Both cases related to a specific type of task, namely the editing of official texts with the aim of making them more functional and reader-friendly, but the editing processes were very different in the two cases (Nord 2011a, b, 2013, 2015). The case studies focused on the ways the editing processes were designed, the outcome of this design, the language ideals that are reflected in the linguistic changes made by the language consultants, and also the effects on the texts at hand and on the attitudes of the participants, especially the primary writers.

Both of the case studies examined freelance language consultants who edit official texts in preparation for publication. In the first case (Nord 2011a, b), the editing process was highly standardized; the language consultants were not involved until the end of the text production process, and they were not given the mandate to make any major changes to the texts. The analysis of the text production process and the conditions for the editing reveals how seemingly uncontroversial changes suggested by the language consultants can in fact challenge the writers' perceived norms. It is also demonstrated how a process where there was no contact between the writers and the editors not only provides very limited opportunities to *resolve* conflicts of ideals and expectations, but also does not provide participants with the opportunity to understand and identify potential sources of dissatisfaction and conflict. The analysis also reveals a number of differences between the explicit ideals that the language consultants are supposed to follow, and what they actually choose to change in the texts.

The second case study (Nord 2013, 2015) followed an editing process with a different design. It incorporated opportunities for direct interaction between the writer and the language consultant regarding the text that they are jointly producing. An analysis of a meeting between the writer and the language consultant shows, among other things, how they collaboratively navigate the disparate standards and perspectives related to their respective roles in the editing process. In this case, the language consultant started participating in the text production process in an earlier stage. This led to a more far-reaching impact on the text being produced. The positive effects on the text, as well as the amicable contact with the language consultant, was also a ground for the writer to regard the process as instructive, as she claims it gave her a chance to understand the

reasons behind the various revisions and to understand the arguments of a language expert. Thus, this case study illustrates how plain language planning can be a matter of learning for individual writers.

2.5.5 Text chains: from decision-making to informational texts

Merja Koskela (2009) provides a different image of what may occur during a process of producing informational texts. In her study, she examined how texts are used in a couple of text chains within the Finnish and Swedish tax agencies. The aim was to follow cases throughout the entire production process; from the texts providing the background facts for the decision being made, to the texts in which the decision is expressed, to the informational texts published online. The focus of the study was to observe how the texts are changed in order to function in new contexts and serve new target groups. One of the conclusions derived from the study is that the text revisions were not as extensive as might have been expected. The language in the texts late in the chain does not become unequivocally clearer, and specialized terms often remain unexplained. Koskela suggests that there may be a “human” explanation for this. Even those in charge of rewriting texts may find the original wording of the texts difficult to understand, which makes rewriting risky:

[I]t is easier to copy the decision text’s existing formulations than it is to clarify them. Moreover, a good clarification demands that the person drafting the rewrite actually understands the original idea. In other words, rewording a text always opens it up to new interpretations, for which the authorities may not always want to take responsibility. (Koskela 2009:59, translation from Swedish)

So, if those whose responsibility is it to revise texts to make them easily accessible do not understand them, no changes will be made. The result is the same as if the person rewriting the text is afraid that changing the text will alter its meaning.

Koskela also points out a conflict between the requirement of clarity and the expectations connected to the web medium, where most informational texts are published: “In web text, two aspirations confront one another: the pursuit of clarity and the pursuit of brevity. In this case, brevity (in the form of terms) won out” (Koskela 2009:59, translation from Swedish). Clarifications of the meaning of terms or wordy rewrites are not prioritized.

2.5.6 On templates employed by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency

Koskela's study can be said to show how an organization's division of labour affects the possibilities of creating good texts. An investigation carried out by Hedda Söderlundh (2012) at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency offers very concrete insights into similar factors, but in a different writing situation. By following the administrators as they perform their work, and interviewing both them and professionals from other backgrounds, Söderlundh was able to map many aspects of the writing process and the writing conditions. Among other things, it became evident that the agency's text templates play a major role. Many types of letters that the agency must send out are written – or rather, are generated – using a system into which the administrator enters data that is then automatically transformed into a letter that goes out to the recipient. Often, the administrator never even sees the finished letter. One of the disadvantages is that many administrators do not see themselves as writers, and therefore also do not feel that they are responsible for the quality of the texts they send out. On the other hand, the templates do provide certain clear advantages. For one thing, they ensure that the texts are legally accurate. Moreover, the use of templates means that certain types of plain language reforms can have a very powerful and rapid impact; if a template is improved; it has an instant positive impact on a large number of letters.

2.6 On conversations with public authorities and other types of dialogic communication

Thus far, the research presented in this report has concerned more “monologic” forms of written communication. It has primarily dealt with different types of texts with an informational purpose, such as informational texts and administrative decisions. The challenge to make the written text comprehensible to readers who are not present at the time of their writing has been a common theme for all the varieties of texts we've discussed. However, such texts constitute just one small part of the communication that occurs between individuals and public authorities. A great deal of communication is instead initiated by individuals, thus giving rise to communication chains or dialogues. This type of communication can be oral as well as written.

2.6.1 Oral communication with public authorities – different communication problems than those involved in writing

In the Swedish plain language effort, oral communication has traditionally been overlooked or seen as less important, and guidelines on plain language rarely include advice and recommendations for oral interactions with citizens. Although the written word has historically been at the center of the plain language effort, the current definitions of plain language make it clear that speech – and probably also other types of communication – should also be included. This is evident in the Language Council's clarification of the Swedish Language Act (Language Council of Swedish 2011:29).

Research on oral interaction in official contexts has rarely approached the subject from an explicit plain language perspective, but if the horizon is widened somewhat, there is a rich tradition of research available focusing on institutional conversations. Institutional conversations are usually defined as conversations in which at least one of the participants carries out the conversation as part of his/her professional practice (Drew & Heritage 1992; Sarangi & Roberts 1999; Asmuß & Steensig 2003; Heritage & Clayman 2010; Candlin & Sarangi 2011; Linell 2011). The conversation typically involves an institutional representative of some kind (e.g. a doctor or an administrator) and a layman (e.g. a patient or a client).

This research has taught us a great deal about the general characteristics of institutional conversations. For example, it has been demonstrated that the structure of such conversations has recurrent features, as do patterns of interaction between participants (Linell 2011). Participants usually have clear roles, and the roles are generally associated with different expectations and responsibilities. It is, e.g., the institutional representative who normally takes on the role of the leader of the conversation. Another distinctive feature is that institutional conversations – like much of the written contacts between authorities and individuals – tend to be characterized by a potential conflict between the “professional and institutional perspectives and the clients’ everyday world” (Linell 2011:367). This disparity can lead to different points of view regarding what information is relevant or irrelevant, and also the purpose of the conversation. The focus in studies of institutional conversations is usually not normative, but in some studies questions regarding communication problems and good interactional practice are addressed. They indicate that the problems that can arise are different than those that typically tend to be found in written texts (cf. section 2.4.1). For example, patterns of dominance and turn taking (i.e. how the

institutional representative leads the conversation and includes or excludes the client from the conversation) are crucial in oral communication. A Danish study by Christel Tarber (2003) offers one example. It analyzed two conversations where a caseworker from an employment agency conducted “motivational conversations” with job-seekers, with the aim to develop plans of action for gaining employment. In one of the conversations, the caseworker succeeded in motivating an initially reluctant client to make active decisions by employing meta-communication regarding the conversation itself, and by taking on a neutral role as simply being the person who explains the rules. In doing so, the caseworker transferred the responsibility for making a decision to the client. The second conversation was less successful. In this instance, the caseworker ended up dominating the conversation and ignored the client’s questions, with the effect of reducing the client to a passive receiver of “motivational” suggestions.

A conclusion from research on institutional conversation is that the problems that make oral interaction more or less efficient may be quite different than those that apply to written text. An effect of this is that different advice and recommendations are needed regarding how to carry out oral interactions. Such advice may address issues as conversation management and domination in conversations. For example, a social worker may have a major responsibility to ask questions in such a way that the client feels respected, and the institutional representative who leads the conversation must allow the client to ask questions and contribute their perspectives. The recommendations may also deal with differences in perspective between the everyday and institutional worlds. Of course, this also applies to written texts, but the conditions for implementing the recommendations are very different – in written texts from a public authority to an individual, any and all comprehension problems must be prevented, whereas dialogues offer more opportunities to correct any comprehension problems that may arise.

2.6.2 Written dialogues

Dialogic communication need, however, not be restricted to oral situations. Digital media, in particular, allows direct (written) dialogue to become an important forum for contact between public authorities and citizens (Sörlin & Söderlundh 2014; Nord & Sörlin 2017; Nord 2018). Less research has been conducted on this type of communication. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw the conclusion that dialogical written communication is considerably different than mass information, and that the problems and challenges of good communication

involved in such interactions will therefore differ as well, and may be more similar to those encountered in oral communication.

One example can be drawn from a small-scale study of the questions posed by individuals, and the responses of institutional representatives, on two online forums; the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's Facebook pages on parental insurance, and Huddinge Municipality's own online forum for citizen service (Nord & Sörlin 2017; Nord 2018). In these cases, the language itself does not appear to be a major obstacle for successful interaction; instead a major challenge for the individual articulating a question is to guess which circumstances are actually relevant to the public authority, e.g. whether or not it is relevant for the Swedish Social Insurance Agency to know which type of illness a sick child has.

Hanell (2012) makes a similar observation, and discusses the manners in which one can search for information on public authorities' websites. She notes that in order to find the correct web pages, it is often necessary that one first be able to correctly guess which words or concepts that authority has chosen to use as "tags" for the pages in question.

Digital communication shares characteristics with both oral and written communication, and it clearly merits further investigation. The digitally mediated communication is, furthermore, not one homogeneous phenomenon, as the interaction in digital media is formed by the affordances of the chosen technical solution (Herring & Androutsopoulos 2015). For example, the interaction in chat forums (provided by some public authorities) can be expected to differ considerably from interaction in more asynchronous online forums, such as those illustrated by Nord & Sörlin's study. For this reason, more research on digitally mediated institutional communication is required, not in the least as a foundation for concrete recommendations on what plain language and clear communication in written dialogic communication (or in situations in which individuals must search for websites) should actually entail.

2.7 Conclusions regarding plain language research, and a word on its future

The survey of plain language research in this chapter provides a somewhat fragmented picture of plain language as concept and process. On the one hand, in Sweden plain language has a long history and currently finds strong support. As a result, by all accounts official texts are now written in a manner that takes the needs and conditions of the recipient into greater account. At the same time, to

what extent the concrete efforts to implement plain language actually yields results is unclear. It seems that a lot can go wrong in the process of implementation, and that the obstacles to the success of plain language initiatives are considerable. Few studies fail to uncover problems in such projects, although it does seem safe to say that text editing may have a potential to help individual writers develop their writing skills – provided that the editing process is carried out in a manner that involves a certain amount of writing instruction and coaching.

One potential obstacle for success may be the lack of validity of some of the oft-repeated recommendations. However, a cynic might argue that this doesn't matter much, because there are indications that even professional language advisers do not follow them with any great consistency. When necessary, other, more utilitarian principles are instead given precedence.

Knowledge of certain key varieties of current official communication is good, while other key varieties remain relatively unexplored. This is particularly true of texts within the field of digital communication, and of oral communications with public authorities, but this also applies to many varieties crucial for internal work processes. Perhaps the primary contribution of research on plain language is a critical perspective and problematization of certain assumptions that may otherwise tend to be taken for granted. For example, an investigation such as Lind Palicki's (2010) study of forms of address in the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's brochures problematizes the notion that the sole task of the plain language effort is to ensure that the surface structure of a text is easy to understand. For someone who is merely concerned with the language and surface structure of a text, the Swedish Language Act's statement that the ideal language is "cultivated, simple, and comprehensible" may indeed be considered as guiding the general understanding of what plain language is all about. However, it must be assumed that part of the task of a public authority is to ensure that its texts express egalitarian and democratic ideals and do not discriminate against or exclude certain target groups. On the contrary, they must be respectful and inclusive of everyone they are addressing. Ideally, the reader should not only understand the content of the text; he/she should also feel well treated.

The primary contribution of research is a critical perspective and problematization.

Other examples of concrete contributions from research include Wengelin's problem-oriented review of plain language advice, and Kjærgaard's surveys of why even ambitious plain language initiatives can prove ineffective.



Based on the research that has been reviewed, it is also possible to point out a few areas where more knowledge is needed to support the development of practical language implementation. These include:

- More knowledge regarding the central genres, and of how communication should be designed in order to become understandable and utilitarian
- Better knowledge of how plain language can be implemented in order to actually achieve the goal of getting writers to write better and change the methods of working with texts that plain language projects often entail.

It is notable that the second area (and to some extent even the first) does not necessarily require all that much new research in order to advance our existing knowledge somewhat; rather, existing research from fields outside “plain language research” must be taken into account. The next chapter will illustrate this, as the chapter will focus on useful perspectives and results from research on professional writing and the development of writing skills in the workplace.

3. Professional writing and the development of writing skills

What does it mean to be able to write at work? This chapter describes a number of aspects regarding what it means to be able to write in a professional context, with an emphasis on what skills an individual must master in order to be able to hammer out professional texts. This chapter, therefore, presents research results and models culled from writing research, particularly studies that deal with what it means for individuals to develop writing skills and expertise in writing. Although not all writers need to develop expertise, the demands posed on the path to expertise highlight many of the general requirements and expectations of professional writing. The review of research results is followed by a discussion of how the teaching of writing in the workplace can be organized, which also draws on general observations of workplace learning. All in all, this chapter offers perspectives that can deepen the reader's understanding of how professional writing development can be carried out successfully within a workplace environment.

3.1 Professional writing is hard!

A casual understanding of what it means to be able to write is that one simply uses a pen or digital tool to form letters into meaningful words that are then combined to form texts.

This process is indeed a basic fundamental of writing, but truly being able to write is a much more complex matter. From a workplace perspective, it is far from sufficient to merely be able to write some form of text – in this context, one must be able to produce texts that are relevant and which meet the requirements imposed on them. To produce such texts, the writer must possess knowledge on a variety of levels.

The writing researcher Karen Schriver emphasizes that workplace writing is very complex, because it must meet both the internal requirements, expectations, and needs of the workplace; and the requirements, expectations, and needs of the text's target recipient group, which is often external to the workplace. Of course, this does not apply to all writing. Although an enormous amount of writing is carried out at workplaces everyday – including in professions that are not perceived as involving writing (Karlsson 2006) – much of it is highly routine and intended only for the closest of colleagues. The writing that causes the most



problems – and which is therefore of most interest for plain language efforts – instead falls into a more complex category, one in which there are both recipients external to the organization and interested parties within the organization. These complex recipient relationships make it difficult to determine whether or not a text is actually functioning optimally. Schriver compares these situations with other domains:

Unlike domains in which the criteria for evaluating outstanding performance lie solely in the judgments of other experts, the quality of professional communications is judged partly by peers or domain experts, but primarily by how well the artifact(s) meets the needs of stakeholders (i.e., intended readers, users, citizens, audiences, managers, or clients). (Schriver 2012:279)

The difficulties of sorting out what actually constitutes a good text are encountered in many situations in which someone's writing is subjected to evaluation. If there are multiple interested parties, there is a great risk that they will not have the same understanding of what is "good" – in a typical example, the external recipient of the text, e.g. an ordinary citizen, and the head of the office, who formally signs the text, have different opinions of its quality. If we return to the example of Maria from Chapter 1, we can assume that the private individuals who received her early, very bureaucratic texts were not particularly fond of them (and perhaps did not always understand what was expected of them) – but Maria's supervisor and the lawyers who assessed the texts had found them acceptable.

An important point of this argument is that the task of professional writing is often *more* complex than many other tasks that one is asked to perform at work – and not everyone is aware of this. A rather common attitude is that "anyone who can speak a language can also write well" (Schriver 2012:283) – but this is incorrect.

3.2 Professional writing requires many types of knowledge

Another important conclusion to be drawn from the reasoning above is that it is rarely possible to point out a *single* factor as being crucial to making someone a successful writer. Rather, skilled writers are those who are able to balance expectations and demands that confront them from several directions. One manner in which to attempt to generalize this is to imagine that there are three main areas in which a writer requires skills if he/she is to be able to manage the demands and expectations imposed upon him/her (following Schriver 2012).

Firstly, the professional writer must have relevant *subject matter knowledge*; he/she must have something sensible to say. This is a given, but meeting this criterion can prove to be quite challenging. It can be especially difficult for new writers to meet this requirement. Let us return to the case of Maria; from the very beginning, she found that one of the greatest challenges was to know how she should handle the projects that ended up on her desk. Even writers who possess good subject matter knowledge can encounter problems, though. When writing for less knowledgeable readers, it is not always easy to determine which facts must be conveyed and which ones should be excluded.

This leads us to the second requirement of good writing, which is that we not only need to have something to say, but we also need to be able to package it in a way that will suit the intended recipient. In accordance with Schriver (2012) and the North American research in the field of New Rhetorics, I shall refer to this as *rhetorical knowledge*. However, this requirement essentially concerns the knowledge required to perform what is known in the Swedish rhetorical tradition as *audience design* or *adaptation to the recipient* (*mottagaranpassning*). This is a large and complex area, and I will return to it shortly.

The third requirement is that one must not only have something to say and be able to convey it in a manner that is appropriate to the recipient – one must also be able to do so in a way that is acceptable within the context of one's workplace culture. Karen Schriver refers to the skills required for this last aspect as *cultural knowledge*, and I will shortly return to fleshing out what this encompasses. The designation *cultural knowledge* is, however, rather ambiguous and is likely to bring to mind national culture rather than workplace culture. For this reason, I will refer to it as *knowledge of the norms of the community* rather than *cultural knowledge*. Moreover, the inclusion of the word *community* in this term provides a better indication of what it refers to, namely the fact that it concerns knowledge of certain norms and standards that are shared within a particular community. It is the members of this community who decide what is acceptable and what is not. Furthermore, in research the term *community* has often been used to refer to those groups that “own” a particular genre, i.e. a discourse community (Swales 1990) or community of practice (Wenger 1998).

The trisection of the knowledge required for professional writing is not just an analytical exercise – it can actually be a tool for choosing and designing methods to develop writing skills. A method is probably more efficient if there is a plan for which type(s) of knowledge the method should focus on. For example, the setup of such an initiative may be different if the aim is to help well-integrated employees better understand their recipients, or if the primary focus is to get



newly recruited employees to understand the writing culture and the norms of the workplace community.

Writing research

This chapter primarily addresses research from the writing research field, to which researchers from linguistics, rhetoric, cognitive science, and educational science contribute.

Research on writing has become an important area in recent years, and includes many different perspectives. The perspectives range from psycholinguistic approaches, where the writer's cognitive behavior is studied, often through experimental methods such as keyboard logging and think-aloud protocols, to more social perspectives where the object of study is the role of writing and its conditions in contexts such as schools and workplaces, often through ethnographic methods.

The research referred to in this chapter draws upon different theories and methodical approaches, but is united by a common interest of illuminating aspects of professional and specialized writing. For a more thorough introduction to writing research, Ken Hyland's *Teaching and researching writing* (3rd edition 2016) is recommended.

3.3 Rhetorical knowledge – the tricky job of recipient design

The challenge to develop and practice “rhetorical knowledge” is one of the most difficult challenges for those who are charged with writing complex texts. It not only requires knowledge of the recipients' needs and preferences, but also of how to actually design a text to suit these needs. As we saw in the previous chapter (Section 2.4.3), good knowledge of the recipient, the recipient's objective in reading a given text, and the recipient's prior knowledge are prerequisites for being able to produce good texts.

3.3.1 Converting knowledge of the recipient into the design of a text

As has been illustrated by many studies, understanding the needs and preferences of the intended recipient of a text is both difficult and time consuming. One example is a study following new employees at the Bank of Canada (MacKinnon 1993), where it is shown that a better knowledge of who they are writing for, and the function of the texts, is one of the things newly recruited employees learn during the first year on the job – and this increased knowledge also allows them to

improve their writing (MacKinnon 1993:48). Unsurprisingly, this study showed how finding out more about the recipients and how they would use the text proved to be one of the keys to developing writing skills. Perhaps more surprising was that the writers were not actually even aware of what they knew or did not know in the beginning.

The study began by carrying out interviews with the writers when they were still completely new to their jobs. Interestingly enough, at that point most of these new employees were convinced that they knew enough about their target readers' prior knowledge and the overall purpose of the texts they wrote (mostly various types of financial analyses) (MacKinnon 1993:46). Yet when the same writers were interviewed some 10–12 months later, most of them had changed their opinions on the matter. In a typical response, one employee said: "I definitely wasn't clear [when I started working here] about the readership and how readers used the documents, [...] Sometimes you're wrong" (MacKinnon 1993:46). This statement illustrates the fact that writers don't necessarily *know* that they need to develop their skills, or that they don't know everything they need to know.

This study's primary focus was texts with an audience within the same organization, as the recipients were other employees at the bank (albeit higher up in the hierarchy), and it was therefore relatively easy for new employees to obtain feedback on their writing. A larger problem occurs if the texts are aimed at groups of interested parties who are far away, and whose needs and reactions to the writing can therefore be harder to figure out. This is common in texts that constitute any type of mass information, or in decision-making texts addressed to recipients outside the organization. In such cases, spontaneous feedback is seldom obtained. Special measures must be taken to learn more about the recipient, such as target group analyses or questionnaires, or focus group interviews with representatives of the recipient group (Kjærgaard & Krone 2014).

Such analyses can be quite in-depth, but a common problem is that they fail to provide concrete and detailed knowledge of precisely what in a given text may pose problems to the reader. There are of course alternative methods to acquire knowledge on this subject. One such method was developed by Karen Schriver (1997), and is based on a teaching experiment. It is of interest because it not only illustrates the difficulties involved in really understanding how a reader will comprehend a text, but also provides a model for how this particular ability can be developed. It is advantageous because it allows the writer to become better at predicting problems in texts on several different levels.



Schrivver calls her technique *Protocol-aided Audience Modeling* (PAM), because reading protocols by actual readers plays a major role in the method. The intention of her experiment was to train students, who were studying to become technical communicators, to design better texts for technical manuals. At the beginning of the experiment, a number of readers who represent potential users were given a selection of excerpts from rather poorly written computer manuals. They were asked to read the extracts and implement so-called think-aloud protocols as they read. This means that they verbalized their reactions to the text and what they thought and felt about it, e.g. if they had trouble understanding it. The communication students started with reading one of the unsuccessful manual texts, and then attempted to identify its intelligibility problems on their own. Thereafter, they were provided with the think-aloud protocol for the text, and then examined it again, taking into account the information on recipient experiences provided in the think-aloud protocol. The results of this experiment showed it to be a success. The students who had followed the PAM method had a broader view of what they needed to work on to improve the texts as opposed to students in a control group who worked with comparable tasks but whose only source of knowledge of the recipient was a traditional recipient analysis. The students who worked with a PAM setup had become better able to address whole-text issues, and this even led to the revision of text organization, and they tended to get stuck less in reformulating individual wordings at a microlevel. They had also become aware that it is not only what is included in a text that can cause problems, and had realized that information that is excluded from the text may also be a problem. The students were also able to transfer this developed ability to visualize problems in texts to making revisions of other types of texts, and longer-term effects were also reported:

Several students who participated in the PAM method reported that after going through the training they could not read their drafts without hearing “readers in their heads,” saying, “I’m confused! What do you mean by that?” (Schrivver 1997:491)

Thus, this method has the advantage of providing specific and detailed knowledge of what it is in the texts that the recipient has difficulty understanding, and makes it easier for the writer to learn to think like a reader.

However, it appeared that it took time for the students who were provided with the protocols to learn how to use the information they contained. The experiment consisted of 10 lessons, each of which addressed a particular manual text, and it was only after the first 5 classes that the students began to focus on whole-text



issues. This demonstrates how difficult it can be to actually operationalize a reader's perspective.

3.3.2 Active recipient design: an advanced writing strategy

The experiment with the manuals illustrates how difficult it actually is to adapt a text to its intended recipient, even when one is provided with concrete information on how a reader thinks. One reason for this is the fact that implementing recipient design in the writing of a text actually demands a lot on the writer's cognitive abilities. Writing does not necessarily involve actively designing a text for its recipient; rather, it is a matter of the writing strategy employed. Experienced writers have more strategies in their repertoire.

The writing researchers Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia (1987) have proposed a way of describing writing strategies and writing development that has had a major impact. According to them, the basic first approach a writer learns is *knowledge telling*. Put simply, the writer tells what he/she know about a topic. Considered as a writing strategy, this approach can be compared to the metaphor of "laying everything out on the table". This can result in texts of various kinds, both good and bad, and the strategy continues to be important even for experienced writers. Sometimes it's actually enough to simply lay out what one knows in a text, because it's precisely this sort of text that is called for in that context.

However, in many contexts, this strategy is not sufficient to create an appropriate text, and writers therefore typically develop a second strategy, which Bereiter & Scardamalia call *knowledge transforming*. The "transformation" referred to here concerns the fact that the content of the text is determined in the course of the writing process itself, because as the writer writes, he/she can use the text as a tool for thinking. What the author thinks is transformed through the process of writing. By reading the text as it develops and reflecting on what he/she has written so far, a writer can restructure his/her thoughts and ideas in his/her long-term memory. This allows the writer to develop and reorganize what he/she knows about the subject. This strategy can result in expository or argumentative texts. It is generally believed that people normally begin to master this type of writing by the time they are approximately 12 to 14 years old.

However, it has been argued that *knowledge telling* and *knowledge transformation* do not cover the entire repertoire that professional writers possess. The writing researcher Ronald T. Kellogg (2008) has therefore proposed that yet another strategy, *knowledge-crafting*, should be included in our understanding of what professional writers do. Kellogg clarifies:



The novice writer progresses from a stage of knowledge-telling to a stage of knowledge-transforming characteristic of adult writers. Professional writers advance further to an expert stage of knowledge-crafting in which representation of the author's planned content, the text itself, and the prospective reader's interpretation of the text are routinely manipulated into working memory. (Kellogg 2008:1)

Thus, knowledge-crafting refers to the ability to not only use language to *craft* the content; in order to design the text in a manner that suits the reader's needs, the writer must consider the manner in which the prospective reader will interpret the text, and this is another important part of the writing process. A precondition for this, however, is that the writer has not only developed an awareness of the recipient but also has the capacity to think about the reader at the same time as he/she does everything else involved in the writing of the text.

Kellogg, whose work falls into the field of psycholinguistic research, applies this approach to how the writing process works cognitively when a person produces a text. Put simply, a writer needs to be able to "free up space" in their memory in order to see the text from the reader's perspective, and this can only be accomplished if he/she has automated most of the other elements of the writing process. If the writer has not fully mastered spelling, typing skills, genre knowledge and other basic functions, then memory resources are required to deal with these factors, and not enough working memory will be available to "cope" with thinking from the reader's perspective. By extension, reader awareness is a requirement if a writer is to be able to develop the ability to read and interpret his/her own text based on the prospective reader's perspective. However, reader awareness alone is not enough to succeed in this department.

Therefore, it is important to point out that advanced recipient design is just one part of a repertoire of strategies that only very advanced writers fully develop. Furthermore, one may conclude that because adaptation to the prospective reader's interpretation of the text is cognitively demanding, even experienced writers require the right conditions in order to successfully adapt their texts to their readers.

Perhaps this is one of the keys to understanding the problems experienced by the writer Maria, who we met in the introductory chapter. From the very beginning, Maria probably found many aspects of writing at the regional administration unfamiliar. Although she hardly had any problems with dealing with her computer or spelling, she had to devote a great amount of cognitive attention to deciding *what* she would write and in which genre. Given the effort she had to put into keeping track of things and trying to figure out what the expectations of her

workplace were, it is perhaps not so surprising that she did not always succeed in writing texts from the reader's perspective *on top of everything else*.

Certainly, her youth may also have played a role – it takes time to become such an experienced writer that one can work with *knowledge-crafting*, and it is rare for those under the age of twenty to achieve this level of mastery. This may be because parts of the brain used in writing do not appear to become fully developed before that age (Kellogg 2008:14–15).

However, we cannot be certain that this is the reason – and in Maria's case it was certainly equally relevant that at the outset she had neither sufficient subject matter knowledge nor sufficient knowledge of the norms and expectations of her new workplace community.

3.4 Knowledge of the norms of the community – the specific expectations of the workplace

One might think it a sufficient challenge for a writer to hammer out a text that is well adapted to a sometimes-unclear recipient. For a text to be considered successful, however, it also must qualify according to the prevailing norms and expectations of the workplace community. This is not as minor a matter as it may seem. A very commonly reported experience from different language-changing projects is that local culture and community norms play a crucial role (Lund 2014), and that these can be an impediment to change. In Maria's case, the local writing culture incorporated a slew of limitations regarding what was acceptable (but at the same time, also permitting the unit she worked for to send out texts that other public authorities would have deemed unacceptably bureaucratic). Part of her problem was that she struggled to figure out where the limits lay.

This type of norms is one of the reasons why it is often difficult to transpose writing skills from one context to another (see inset). In other words, to learn how to write in the context of one's workplace is to learn how to participate in the local culture (Smart & Brown 2002:119).

3.4.1 Writing in the context of education and work life

Examples of the relevance of community norms are provided in the many studies (especially those from North America) in which researchers have followed university students as they enter the workplace and become accustomed to professional writing (Winsor 1996; Dias, Freedman, Medway & Paré 1999; Dias & Paré 2000; Artemeva 2005, 2006). Indeed, the transition from student to

Is it possible to become an expert at writing?

The answer to this question is far from obvious. It is true that writing is usually perceived as one among the many areas in which one can achieve expertise (Kellogg 2006; Schriver 2012). However, this does not refer to any kind of *general* expertise on writing, which hardly exists. A comparison with skill at ball sports proposed by David Russell (1995) may illustrate this.

It's hard to become an expert at ball sports in general. It is possible to apply what one knows about one ball sport (football, for example) to learning another one (such as rugby) – but it is most likely that one will only become an expert at one or two of such sports. Similarly, certain basic elements of writing (such as handwriting or keyboard skills, spelling skills, sentence construction, etc.) can be transferred between domains, but one's true expertise, if one develops it, lies probably a single domain, while not necessarily yielding very successful results in other domains.

This is illustrated by numerous examples of experienced journalists who have difficulty learning to write in a “non-journalistic” manner, i.e. when they are called upon to write an academic paper; or when experienced researchers, who have successfully authored hundreds of research articles and research reports, suddenly find it very difficult to express themselves when they must write a piece for a popular science publication. In both examples, experienced writers are confronted with both new genre patterns and a new rhetorical situation involving an audience that can be difficult to understand. In some sense, they must therefore “start from scratch” – and on top of that look out so their “usual” genres do not start seeping in.

The fact that knowledge of writing is domain-specific does not solely apply to writing excellence – expertise – but also to writing skills in general. Being good at writing probably has more to do with specific domains than we often imagine. Consequently, one must be prepared for the possibility that someone who is good at one type of writing will not necessarily be good at writing in another context in which the audience, genre and situation are unfamiliar. Naturally, the ability to spell and form sentences are par for the course, but the building of whole texts often requires the writer to “begin at the beginning.”

Thus, it may not be particularly meaningful to teach generic writing skills (aside from simple things like spelling). It is therefore very doubtful whether the types of writing training usually employed in workplace contexts can be expected to have any significant effect on writers' abilities. If, in the context of a writing course, a person learns to write good texts in the genre he/she is asked to work with (press releases, for example), this does not mean that he/she can be expected to be capable of applying any of these skills to the writing of e.g. an official statement or a decision text.

professional life is an occasion when different writing demands and different preconditions for writing become evident. One common observation is that the demands of workplace writing come as something of a shock to those new to this

task, and that in any case such writing proves to be very different from the writing one does at university (see for example Dias et al. 1999).

The difference between professional writing and what new graduates have already experienced can be attributed to numerous factors. One factor may be that those who created the educational curriculum did not give communicative skills any priority, and therefore did not include such training in their programme. If so, writing in the educational context is restricted to tasks like producing an essay or an exam. This was the case for Maria.

Another factor may be that the professional writing required in many professions is so diverse in its nature that it is difficult to prepare for it in any meaningful way. This means that even if the students have taken some writing courses, many genres and writing assignments they encounter in the workplace are completely new to them.

A third factor – and perhaps the most interesting one – is that there are simply many and considerable differences between the writing situations that one encounters in one's education and in work life. Even in those cases where some of the coursework is intended to have a direct bearing on professional writing, it is very difficult to replicate the writing situations that occur in the workplace in an educational environment. Tasks assigned in the context of one's education will always be "school assignments," and can never be as fully authentic as workplace tasks (Freedman & Adam 1996).

3.4.2 Different ways of learning at work and in educational contexts

The differences between workplace and educational settings also pertain to how one *learns* to write, as this typically is brought about in different ways in an educational context and a workplace situation. In formal learning carried out in school situations, there is often a pronounced focus on instruction (Sahlström, Hummelstedt, Forsman, Pörn & Slotte-Lüttge 2010), and most of it concerns laying the groundwork for the learning path. This differs from how learning is normally framed in everyday life, in which learning is rarely the goal of an activity, but instead something that happens in the course of executing the task at hand. Everyday learning – including the kinds of learning typical of workplace situations – can instead be referred to as *informal* learning or *situated* learning, because it occurs in a particular context. A commonly held belief that originated with Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger is that this kind of learning particularly occurs through participation in activities (Lave & Wenger 1992; Wenger, 1998) in which the learner starts out on the outskirts of an activity and then works his/her way into it



through participation. Beginning as a “legitimate peripheral participant” in an activity (Wenger 1998) is perceived as the “normal” way to learn; one becomes a part of the group that is doing something, and learns by participating in the “doing.” The writer Maria who I introduced in Chapter 1 is an example of this sort of participant; she probably received a short introduction to what she would do, but how she should do it was something she learned by “being thrown into the deep end,” participating and doing.

However, this learning process is not necessarily linear, and the trajectory does not necessarily lead from the periphery to the center of the practice community; different trajectories are possible, because some participants move on to other activities (Wenger 1998; Hållsten 2008). This proved to be true for Maria. She never went on to become a full-fledged bureaucrat; when her temporary contract at the regional administration came to an end, she went on to another workplace that may have fit her better (but which of course entailed learning new genres and participating in new communities).

A study conducted by Aviva Freedman and Christine Adam (1996) effectively illustrates the differences in how one learns to write in a workplace setting versus an educational one. The researchers compared the same students’ writing and writing development in two contexts: first when they were carrying out an extended internship; and secondly when they performed a case study assignment as part of their financial analysis studies. The researchers suggest that although the case study assignments were designed to mimic a workplace context as faithfully as possible, they still provided too clear an outline and offered too much correction. Thus, the case study writing work becomes a task “undertaken primarily for the sake of the learner” (1996:403) – the writing it entailed would not have been done otherwise, and the task was only authentic as an educational assignment. When the writing carried out in the context of the case study assignment is compared to the workplace-based writing and learning that the same students undertook as part of their internships, the differences were clear. In a workplace setting, the goal was always to *do* something through writing, not to learn. Learning occurred in passing and often happened unconsciously. The students did not focus on learning; rather, they directed all their energies towards accomplishing the task of which the learning was part and parcel. For this reason, in an internship, even the way in which one learns is different. Students can no longer expect to be fed ideas; instead, they must seek out knowledge on their own and seize available opportunities for furthering their understanding of the workplace’s operations (something for which they were not always prepared, nor always successful). Consequently, the students experienced their workplace

assignments as being completely authentic. This clearly illustrates the dilemma inherent in the fact that in an educational context, the terms and conditions of an activity are always characterized by the goal of imparting learning, wherein the completion of assignments is always a very central aspect of the work performed.

The study also revealed that learning often was seen as a non-issue in the workplace – as something that had nothing to do with the tasks at hand, and that could even be perceived as unnecessary.

Another demonstrated difference between educational and working life concerns the type of feedback that is provided (Schrivver 2012). In educational situations where learning is the focus, teachers often give feedback that is constructive and encouraging, and it is considered to be acceptable if the student still has much to learn. In the workplace, where the focus is on productivity, “doing one’s best” is not always enough – the text must pass muster and those who fail to meet the requirements may face negative consequences.

All these differences between educational and working life contexts mean that it is difficult to practice writing skills outside their “natural environments.” Even case study exercises that are designed to simulate workplace conditions tend to be authentic as school assignments, but not as examples of the types of professional tasks for which they are intended to prepare students. Of course, this does not mean that assignments mimicking workplace tasks must always be meaningless. On the contrary, there are many examples of how work-orientated writing training can be a key and valuable element of a student’s education. One example is a project created as part of a computer science education program that is designed to mimic situations in which future computer scientists were asked to give feedback to imagined clients (Hoffman, Anderson & Gustafsson 2014). Although the teachers were still the actual recipients and assessors of the texts, students were given an opportunity to practice thinking about adaptation to prospective recipients – and the teachers were provided with a clear framework from which to assess the texts from the intended recipient’s perspective. Although this is still a “school assignment,” the project provides a key to training oneself to adapt to one’s recipient.

Another example of the fact that communication training leads to greater preparedness for taking on new writing assignments is provided in an investigation that follows the professional writing of a number of interns from a university education programme (Smart & Brown 2002). The study shows that while students may have initial problems with understanding genres and writing in the context of their various internships, their training in professional writing has

nonetheless provided them with helpful tools. They have been prepared to think in a recipient-oriented manner and to independently seek out clues about how they are expected to formulate the texts they are commissioned to produce. This means that they can solve problems and dilemmas on their own.

3.5 Improving one's writing skills independently

As indicated above, learning on the job usually occurs informally, unconsciously, and often invisibly. This is also one of the reasons why, even in the case of an experienced writer, learning can often fail to occur.

In research on expertise in different areas, it has been found that it seems to take (at least) ten years to achieve expert status within a given field (Simon & Chase 1973; Hayes 1985; Ericsson, Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer 1993). If one assumes that writing (within demarcated domains) is also something in which one can achieve expertise, then one may also assume that the terms and conditions of gaining this expertise are the same as they are in other areas, and that the same length of time is required to do so. However, although a considerable time investment is certainly a prerequisite for achieving expertise, it is not the only necessity. On the contrary, it is perfectly possible to work year after year without really developing one's skills. This may be quite understandable; it is easy to find a way of working which allows one to "get by," and then to continue along this path, without ever pushing oneself to expand the limits of one's abilities. Routine solutions are comfortable.

Yet, it is by pushing his/her limits that a writer can develop independently. Those who wish to work to develop their own abilities to achieve actual expertise are therefore advised to purposefully strive to work at the edge of one's current competence, focusing all the while on making the leap to the next level (Ericsson et al. 1993; Schriver 2012).

Writing development often requires support from one's surroundings in the form of feedback from a teacher or knowledgeable colleague.

However, such independent learning is difficult, and also requires that a writer have ample latitude in determining how he/she works. In practice, it has been shown that such development often requires support from one's surroundings in the form of feedback from a teacher or knowledgeable colleague: "a mentor's critical eye can help experts-in-training to see their shortcomings and recognize where they need to focus their practice next" (Schriver 2012:289).

This is in line with the finding by modern school research that responding to texts is an important function of learning (Hattie & Timperley 2007), and a similar important function can also be assumed to be found in workplace contexts (Dahl 2007; Nord 2015). This means that activities such as writing coaching – in which a writer receives individual feedback on his/her text, focusing on how he/she can develop as a writer – emerge as valuable working tools. A study of text editing involving ambitious feedback was referred to in the previous chapter (Section 2.5.4), and it validates the assumption that such working methods can prove to be effective.

3.6 Improving one's writing through education – factors for success

The need for external support in order to develop as a writer also means that some kind of (formal) education is usually necessary. The question is then, how should the teaching of writing in workplace settings be organized in order to achieve good results? Relatively little research has been carried out on teaching writing in the workplace, and even less exists that examines the effect of such training efforts. A few of these investigations were referenced in Chapter 2 (Janssen 2001; Kjærgaard 2010, 2012; Nord & Forsberg 2017), and they can be used to point out several obstacles that may occur; that those who need to change the way they write do not believe that they have a problem, they don't give the time necessary to involve themselves in a learning process, etc.

A broader base for identifying good practice is available if one expands one's scope and turns to more general literature regarding the possibilities for achieving results through training in the workplace. Although writing as an activity has its distinctive features, there is no reason to believe that writing development is in any way fundamentally different from other kinds of learning that occur in work life.

A good overview of the factors that are generally considered as encouraging success can be found in a comprehensive report compiled by Steen Høyrup and Per-Erik Ellström (2007). Some of the success factors for workplace learning that are singled out in this report may be particularly relevant for teaching writing, and I will refer to these factors and principles and discuss how they can be applied to writing courses.

3.6.1 Preparation – adaptation to needs and motivation

A fairly obvious precondition – which nonetheless is not always followed – is that an educational program or course should respond to existing needs. Just as it is not possible to create one set of rules for writing that will always be relevant (see Section 2.4.3), there is no single teaching method that will always yield success. Instead, a training initiative must be designed in such a way that it can help remedy specific problems in the specific workplace context. It is therefore important that each step in the training program be well thought out, and that it be adapted to the workplace in question – it should feel “tailor-made.” Employee perspectives, experiences and learning needs should ideally serve as the main bases for how a training initiative is organized. This can be achieved by involving the employees in a dialogue during the planning phase, in which they formulate their training needs and express their opinions on the workplace’s development needs and problems, as well as their views on existing competencies. Needs may also be identified through performance reviews with employees, or assessments of employees’ actual competencies in a specific area.

A training initiative should also be clearly goal-oriented; there should be formulated objectives for what the participants should achieve, so that everyone is aware of the intended outcome. At the same time, it is an advantage if the setup is characterized by flexibility, so that changes can be made in the course of the training process, should the conditions change or should it turn out that they were not properly understood to begin with.

Basing an initiative on the needs of the employees is an important part of the work of gaining support for such an effort, but it is equally important that management support and legitimize the skills development initiative in the workplace. This applies in particular to training that involves challenging the operational status quo in some way. For example, one might imagine that a plain language course intended to challenge and change an organization’s ingrained ways of writing requires that the new patterns it proposes be sanctioned by formal and informal leaders; such support will encourage employees to dare to break free of the community’s established norms and change their ways of writing. (Cf. section 3.4.)

In the interest of motivation it is also desirable that the training take place in the workplace or in an adjacent location, and it is preferable that it be carried out during regular working hours. It is also helpful if the participants in a course consist either of work teams, or of all the employees in a unit/department. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the choice of group composition

should be consistent with the desired outcome of the training. For example, one can assume that a more homogeneous group can be useful if, for example, a group of officials who write official statements within a given unit/department are to agree on a new way of designing their texts. On the other hand, in some cases a variety of experiences in the training group can prove enriching. For example, administrative officers from one unit/department can share their positive experiences with administrative officers from another unit/department. In such a case, it may be relevant to divide people into groups in a variant manner.

3.6.2 Implementation – teaching and application in interaction

There are also a number of considerations to keep in mind when it comes to concrete teaching design.

An important characteristic of everyday learning in the workplace is that it is informal and even invisible, and opportunities for learning occur (for example) when one solves a problem or collaborates with others (cf. Section 3.4.2). The difference between learning in these sorts of contexts and learning in a formal education context (e.g. in school or at university) has been illustrated above by Freedman & Adam (1996). They showed how writing tasks carried out in an educational context constitute clearly delineated pathways to learning, but are only truly authentic as learning assignments, whereas writing in a workplace setting was rarely focused on learning but rather presupposed that the student was induced to pick up clues as they came across them. It was clear that this writing led to learning, but at the same time, such learning occurred invisibly and unconsciously.

Due to the fact that workplace learning is so invisible, it is easy for those who have identified a need for skills development among employees to get stuck on the idea that this clearly means that they should send the employees to a course, from which they will return with newfound knowledge that will help them to do a better job. However, there is a high risk that such courses will not yield any significant results. For example, one can refer to the effects of writing courses that Janssen (2001) and Nord & Forsberg (2017) highlighted. Their research revealed that even very satisfied writing course participants only marginally altered the ways in which they wrote.

Instead, according to Høyrup & Ellström (2007), setups involving both education and application tend to yield the best results. Ideally, formal and informal learning must interact by integrating informal learning into everyday work with planned training activities. This means that teaching is most successful if it is permitted to interact with application in real-life work situations. If skills development is

allowed to occur in tandem with everyday work, this increases the chances that the effects of training will “stick.” A good rule of thumb is thus that training should be structured in such a way that relatively short formal teaching activities alternate with longer, practical activities carried out within the context of regular work.

Teaching activities should also integrate theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge, i.e. work experience. These practical skills often involve partly tacit knowledge – knowledge that is not put into words and often is also unconscious – and are conveyed when a beginner works on a task with someone who already knows what they are doing and thereby learns. This may mean that experiential learning constitutes the best point of departure. According to Høyrup & Ellström (2007), it has proven expedient to allow practice to structure theory, particularly when it comes to employees who are unaccustomed to participating in training courses. By this, Høyrup & Ellström mean that the practice in question – the thing that must be done – must determine *which* theory is chosen, *when* theory is introduced, and *how much* theory is incorporated. The basic idea is that theory should be introduced when the need for it arises in the course of work practice, and when theoretical knowledge appears to be necessary to the ability to solve tasks and meet requirements. A practical example could be the following scenario; a setup that starts in theory would be based on introducing plain language advice and associated grammatical concepts, and based on this explain how these can be practiced, while the opposite approach would entail taking different issues or dilemmas that employees experience with their texts as the starting point, and introducing advice and concepts in order to put these observations into words. In some contexts, the latter approach may be preferable.

In such a case, it can be useful to distinguish between *deductive* and *inductive ways* of working. Both can be used to integrate theory and practice, but their starting points are different. Working *deductively* involves drawing on a given set of theories that are employed as tools for understanding and analyzing practice and practice related problems and dilemmas, whereas *inductive work* involves the formulation and interpretation of experiences in the context of a chosen, relevant theory (e.g. through case method and role play). Thus, one option is to avoid starting in a specific, predetermined content (e.g. some specific concepts), instead basing the approach on authentic problems or dilemmas that the employees/writers have experienced. This type of approach exemplifies how an approach drawing on the general inductive principle that the participants’ own experiences and perspectives is taken as the starting point can be used.



If the training includes practical application, which involves the employees returning to their everyday activities, a part of their assignment could be considering the conditions and problems they observe in the course of their work, and on this basis formulating thoughts about how things might be improved. These thoughts can then be brought back to the teaching activities, where they can be processed and discussed jointly among all the participants. For example, a participant can present a communication dilemma or a problematic text to the class so that everyone can work on it together.

Another factor that has been shown to be beneficial is structuring training in such a way that it encourages dialogue and makes the participants take an active part, rather than be passive knowledge recipients. For example, employees can be asked to explore and experiment, or be given the opportunity to discuss their experiences. More specifically, the required active participation can be achieved through a setup that incorporates “as if” actions into the course situation in the form of exercises and role-play, or by including planned actions that are subsequently carried out in the work situation.

Høyrup & Ellström (2007) also point out that giving employees a “win” early on can also be a success factor, because this can increase their motivation.

In summary, it is safe to say that the most traditional type of course – where an outside expert comes in and holds one or two lectures – is the type of teaching that can be expected to have the *least* impact. The participants are not active, nor are they given any opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they acquire to their practical work activities. The writer Maria was never sent to any course, but had she been sent away to participate in such a program, she would probably have returned feeling inspired – but then continue to write in the same way, especially if the training was a more general course on writing. As has been mentioned previously in this chapter, writing skills are largely domain-specific and can be difficult to transfer to new areas.

Maria would have instead been better served by attending a series of short workshops, where she and her colleagues from the same unit would have been able to start with the texts and writing routines they already had and used these to identify what they felt less satisfied with, perhaps with contributions of authentic readers’ reactions to the texts (as in Karen Schriver’s PAM model that was described in a previous section). In this way, she and her colleagues would have been given the chance to develop their rhetorical skills in dealing with the types of text that were actually representative of their most important writing tasks.



3.7 Conclusions regarding professional writing, and an afterword

The chapter on professional writing, and how writers develop this skill, has demonstrated how difficult professional writing really is – it appears to be *more* complex than many other tasks, and this may explain some of the difficulties encountered in plain language efforts. As writing and writing skills are frequently invisible and unconscious for many people, they are often not afforded the attention they require. It is not unusual for less knowledgeable people to trivialize writing skills, or to say that writing is something that “anyone” can do (or, with a somewhat moralistic undertone, *ought* to be able to do). Yet on the contrary, it is precisely this type of task for which even highly educated people seldom have received any relevant training.

One important conclusion is that writing for work must be made more visible, and must be taken seriously and viewed as the sophisticated and cognitively demanding task it often is – both in plain language efforts and in the workplace overall. In general, the status of writing and awareness of the prerequisites for writing must be increased.

This overview has also demonstrated how many different types of knowledge must interact in order for someone to be able to formulate a good text. One of the reasons for this is that it is so difficult to grasp and unify all the demands of writing – knowledge of the subject matter, of the recipient, and of what is acceptable in the workplace are all necessary prerequisites. This has implications for those who plan plain language initiatives, who need to decide what such an effort should actually remedy. Those planning an educational program involving writing assignments should be aware of the risk that such tasks will not be perceived as authentic writing assignments, as it is difficult to formulate assignments that do not end up feeling like schoolwork. Training in other genres than those one writes in at work can also be seen as meaningless, and there is a great risk that practicing writing in one genre will have no positive effect on authors’ writing in other genres, where the purpose and the audience differs. Instead, it is probably best to allow writers to work on their own, authentic texts and to alternate between training activities and their usual work. Writing development thus becomes a natural part of everyday writing – and the advice and recommendations that writers receive will be inherently relevant to their texts.

These sorts of conclusions demonstrate the value of applying other fields of research to the development of plain language implementation. In this report, the aim has been to incorporate results and perspectives from the field of writing



research that are relevant to plain language efforts. Yet many more aspects than the ones presented here could also have been dealt with. Plain language is a multifaceted project. Only courses with fairly modest teaching goals have been discussed here, but working with plain language can also involve extremely far-reaching projects aimed at changing practices in writing. For example, many aspects of what is often referred to as *service design* are relevant to plain language. As with service design projects, plain language implementation often involves developing new work methods that alter writing and communication procedures in ways that positively affect the methods in which public authorities communicate with individuals.

Mention might also be made of issues pertaining to Swedish in a multilingual context – in relation to communication with people from different language backgrounds as well as in relation to employees whose native language is not Swedish. The fact that this and other issues have not been addressed here does not mean that they are considered to be less important – quite the opposite. These areas are expansive and complex. They must be taken seriously, and each of them merits their own report. Both scientists and active language care workers still have much work ahead of them when it comes to collecting new information and deepening our existing knowledge.

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