

Is ‘plain language’ easier to understand? A study of the understanding of two versions of a letter from skat

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In Denmark, as well as in other countries, public authorities have for decades tried to make letters to the general public easier to understand by the recipients. There is, however, a lack of empirical evidence to support that this work is in fact successful. This paper presents a quantitative, experimental investigation of how well actual readers understand two different versions of the same letter from the Danish Tax Authority (SKAT) – an original version that was felt by language employees at SKAT to be difficult to understand and a version rewritten to be easier to understand. It is investigated whether the rewritten version is in fact easier to understand than the original one and how factors such as the respondents’ education, age, sex and reading proficiency influence the understanding of the texts. The analysis shows that the rewritten version on average is easier to understand than the original one and that education, reading proficiency, first language and age have a bearing on the understanding. Poor readers have a considerably better understanding of the rewritten version than of the original one, whereas no real difference between the understanding of the rewritten and the original version can be seen for the best readers. The paper concludes with a discussion of the elements in the rewritten version that seemingly make it easier to understand than the original one.