

Legal and linguistic simplification for vulnerable people: an interdisciplinary training experience with law students

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Accessible communication and clear language are key tools for social inclusion. Public institutions and social organizations are increasingly prioritising these aspects, with a growing number of seminars and lifelong learning courses being organized for professionals in public administration, students and university staff, future translators, language experts, and the broader public. This paper reports on a practical workshop at the University of Geneva, led by researchers from the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting and addressed to Master's students from the Law Clinic of the Faculty of Law on the Rights of Vulnerable Persons. The workshop focused on enhancing the linguistic accessibility of a brochure – currently being developed by the students – on the rights of drug users in Geneva. While the Law Clinic's publications already entail simplified legal content, they could further be enhanced by incorporating strategies drawn from plain language or even easy language methodologies. The workshop combined theoretical input with practical exercises to explore these techniques. In a broader context of evolving professional roles

Felici, A., Portioli, E., Canavese, P.: Legal and linguistic simplification for vulnerable people: an interdisciplinary training experience with law students. Slovenščina 2.0, 13(2): 102–126.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original Scientific Article

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4312/slo2.0.2025.2.102-126>

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and shifting educational frameworks, this paper argues that adopting an interdisciplinary approach is essential. Preparing students to work beyond the boundaries of their core discipline equips them to meet the evolving professional demands with greater agility.

Keywords: plain language, easy language, legal simplification, training, vulnerable people

1 Introduction: simplifying legal language

Institutional and bureaucratic discourse is frequently marked by syntactic density, specialized terminology, and opaque stylistic conventions, all of which significantly hinder comprehensibility for non-expert audiences (Tiersma, 1999). This issue is particularly evident within governmental agencies, insurance providers, legal firms and healthcare bodies, often criticized for their ineffective public communication. The resultant lack of clarity undermines individuals' ability to make informed decisions about their legal rights, finances, and health, while simultaneously burdening institutions that must provide follow-up explanations to mitigate the confusion generated by their own texts. It is within this context – and most notably in the legal domain – that the plain language movement has gained prominence in the second half of the 20th century (Adler, 2012; Garner, 2001; Kimble, 1992; Macdonald, 2004). Initially emerging in English-speaking countries where a few legislatures began to enact laws requiring documents to be written in clear language (Adler, 2012, p. 69; Dorney, 1988, p. 49; Schriver, 2017, p. 349), the initiative soon evolved into a coherent movement¹ that rapidly extended its influence across legal and bureaucratic systems worldwide.

The publication of the ISO norm on Plain Language (ISO 24495-1:2023) marks a further step in the promotion of accessible public and institutional communication. Part 1 of the standard “Governing Principles and Guidelines” provides a unified framework for clear, efficient and user-centred communication across industries and countries, regardless of the language. More recently, in August 2025, “Part 2:

1 With Clarity, the Center for Plain language, and Plain Language Association (PLAIN), as well as the International Plain Language Federation that was established in 2007.

Legal Writing and Drafting” (ISO 24495-2:2025) was also published, further extending the principles of plain language to the legal domain. A third part on “Science Writing” is currently under development and will address sector-specific writing and document design. Besides the aim of standardization in assessing and improving institutional communication, the norm underlines the growing international commitment to transparent, accessible, and effective communication, notably in certain domains of specialization.

Legal discourse is exceptionally concerned with the issue of clarity – not only due to its traditionally opaque and technical nature, but also because law is, fundamentally, constructed through language. Far from serving merely as a medium of communication, language is a constitutive tool that shapes legal meaning, defines and enacts pragmatically rights and obligations, and ultimately structures legal reasoning and decision-making. Moreover, through legislation, legal language permeates everyday life and every domain, influencing how citizens understand rights, duties, and social norms (Mattila, 2013). In principle, even the most technical legal texts are addressed to the general audience, who are expected to be aware of the law, because ignorance of the law excuses no one. Consequently, institutions bear the responsibility of ensuring that legal language is directly or indirectly accessible and comprehensible to all members of society (Nussbaumer, 2004, p. 293–294). The ability to comprehend information transcends individual interests, simultaneously reinforcing democratic legitimacy and enhancing everyday life, whether the context is legislation, medical advice, or financial documentation.

In this context, Adler (2012, p. 72) situates the plain language movement within a broader democratic framework, arguing that clear legal communication is not merely a matter of style but a fundamental right that enables meaningful engagement with the legal system and the government. His perspective highlights a dual interest in legal accessibility: while it supports individual autonomy, it also serves the State, which cannot function effectively if its laws and regulations are not understood. This view aligns with the normative principle that legal texts in democratic societies must be accessible not only to legal professionals, but also to society at large.

The advantages of employing plain language are also evident from an economic and social perspective. Public agencies, governmental bodies, and even the private sector have much to gain from communication that is clear and readily understood by diverse audiences. When institutions communicate in plain language, they reduce the frequency of supplementary inquiries, thereby saving valuable time and resources (Kimble, 1996–97, p. 7). This efficiency not only enhances the quality of service provided to the public but also contributes to an elevated level of trust and accountability. The economic benefits are evident in cost reductions and improved operational efficiency, while the social gains extend to greater civic participation and empowerment (Kimble, 1996–1997, p. 7; Schriver, 2017, p. 348, 361).

On the other hand, the relationship between plain language and legal communication is not without tension. The complexity of legal reasoning, the need for precision, and the interpretive nature of law mean that oversimplification can risk distorting legal meaning. In this context, Assy maintains that legal complexity is not just a linguistic issue and warns against “de-legalisation” (2012, p. 390), or sacrificing legal precision in favour of clarity. He argues that legal precision often necessitates details, e.g. definition, cross-references, procedures and layering exceptions that plain wording cannot handle without ambiguity (2012, p. 396). The same specialized legal concepts carry doctrinal weight and cannot be fully grasped by replacing terms with plain-language synonyms (2012, p. 402). This element is also addressed by Flückiger and Grodecki (2017, p. 34), who stress the importance of the legal framework when interpreting a legal norm. They draw a distinction between “legislative clarity” – which guarantees that a rule can be applied to a concrete case with maximal precision – and “linguistic clarity” – which concerns the most straightforward formulation of the rule. Crucially, the authors argue that linguistic clarity on its own does not suffice to secure normative clarity, thereby casting doubt on the aspiration to produce so-called popular law (2017, p. 53). Likewise, Zódi argues that legal complexity is more than a matter of style, because it stems from the systemic and interpretative character of law (2019, p. 259).

A more purpose-driven approach is advocated instead by Xanthaki, who regards legal clarity, precision and unambiguity at the same

level, as essential drafting tools subordinated to effectiveness (2008, p. 11; 2018, p. 129). In her view, plain language is not an end itself but rather a means to achieve clarity – its application being audience-relative, since what is considered “plain” for legal professionals may not be for laypersons. In this way, she shifts the focus toward “easification”, and thus adjusting the text for each specific target audience (Xanthaki, 2018, p. 131) as an attempt to address the asymmetry between experts and laypeople.

Nonetheless, it must also be acknowledged that the diversity of legal and administrative genres reflects a wide spectrum of communicative purposes and levels of technicality, ranging from highly formal, legally binding documents to more informative materials intended for the non-specialist public (Felici and Griebel, 2019, p. 168). Such diversity challenges a static or across-the-board understanding of plain language, demanding instead a dynamic, context-sensitive and holistic approach that responds to the specific requirements of each communicative event (Balogh, 2023, p. 16). This also echoes the ISO 24495-1’s interdependent principles (relevant, usable, understandable, findable) that influence each other (2023, p. 3). The final goal is to align language use with the multifaceted nature of the legal and institutional domain, because while legal discourse must maintain fidelity to its technical function, it must also be intelligible to those subjects to its authority.

Building on this recognition, both private and governmental institutions are placing increasing emphasis on clear communication. Training in plain language is expanding rapidly, and authorities and other agencies are increasingly developing accessible materials in-house or training their own staff in clear writing practices, with the dual aim of enhancing communication and reducing costs.²

2 For the United States, see the already-cited work by Schriver (2017). For the United Kingdom, the website GOV.UK hosts guidance and training for civil servants, including *Writing skills* (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/writing-skills>; <https://www.communications.gov.uk/external-resources/writing-skills-civil-service-learning/>; <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/style-guide/a-to-z>). EU institutions are likewise active, offering staff conferences and workshops on clear language like *Clear Writing for Europe and How to write clearly*. In Canada, the government also organizes training for public servants emphasizing clarity (https://catalogue.cspc-efpc.gc.ca/product?catalog=TRN106&cm_locale=en). Finally, for a Europe-wide overview, see Lindholm and U. Vanhatalo (eds.), *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe* (2021), which includes for each country the historical background of plain and easy language, as well as paragraphs on stakeholders, training and research.

In response to these developments, our paper reports on an interdisciplinary training experience with law students at the University of Geneva. After introducing the challenges and the delicate balance of law and clear language in Section 1, an overview of the current training in plain and legal language follows (Section 2). In this context, plain language is used to denote clear communication, as described in the ISO standard and advocated by the plain language movement. The project participants and the goal of our study are presented in Section 3, before delving into our workshop and related activities (Section 4). The concluding section (Section 5) reflects on the value of interdisciplinary, systematic training in enhancing students' communicative competence and drafting skills, while highlighting the role of text analysis as a key pedagogical tool.

2 Training in accessible legal language

With institutions embracing the cause of plain language, the movement has exerted a growing influence on the legal profession itself, as reflected in a proliferation of courses and training programmes offered both within academic institutions and across governmental bodies worldwide. In the United States, the formalization of plain legal language, most notably through President Obama's Plain Writing Act³ in 2010, requires all the federal agencies to provide training in plain legal language. Consequently, agencies like the US General Services Administration and the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) also offer workshops and lectures to help implement the Act's requirements.⁴

Parallel initiatives exist internationally in other countries and governments. In Canada, the federal Directive on the Management of Communications mandates plain language across all public communications⁵ and offers several learning resources. In Europe, both national administrations and EU institutions have actively supported clear

3 <https://www.pclob.gov/Legal/PlainWriting>

4 <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/plain-language>; <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

5 <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/system/government-communications/communications-community-office/communications-101-boot-camp-canadian-public-servants/plain-language-accessibility-inclusive-communications.html>

writing to enhance transparency and democratic engagement. The non-governmental organization Clarity⁶ was founded in the UK in the early 1980s and is currently the largest plain language organization, partnering with institutions and legal professionals in the organization of workshops and other events on plain language. The European Commission's Clear Writing for Europe initiative⁷ conducts annual events and workshops for Commission staff and representatives of Member States to support democracy and language accessibility. Similarly, the Directorate for Citizens' Language of the EU Parliament's Directorate-General for Translation organizes yearly initiatives such as the Citizens' Language Days to raise awareness of the importance of clear writing.⁸

Notably, universities and law schools have played a pivotal role in developing courses and programmes that emphasize the importance of clear legal drafting, thereby aligning their curricula with regulatory best practices. It is worth mentioning the International Law Institute in Washington DC⁹ and the Tulane Law School's International Legislative Drafting Institute that have integrated plain-language modules into their programmes since the end of the 1980s (Marcello, 2013, p. 46). In the UK, the University College London, and the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (IALS) are leading institutions providing academic training on legislative and policy drafting.¹⁰ In Switzerland, both the Centre for Legislative Studies of the University of Zurich and the University of Geneva run seminars and advanced training in legal drafting for employees of the Swiss Confederation,¹¹ trying to respond to the need for legal professionals to communicate complex information in a way that is understandable to diverse audiences. Academic involvement also extends beyond the field of law, drawing on interdisciplinary expertise from areas such as linguistics, translation, education, and the social sciences.

6 <https://www.clarity-international.net/about.html>

7 https://commission.europa.eu/about/departments-and-executive-agencies/translation/clear-writing-europe_en?utm_source=chatgpt.com

8 https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/photoset/dg-trad-citizens-language-days-2024-conference_EP-176128A

9 <https://www.ili.org/training/workshop-on-legislative-drafting/> (accessed on 15.06.2025).

10 <https://ials.sas.ac.uk/study-and-training/study-us/short-courses-summer-schools/legislative-drafting-course>

11 Murtner Gesetzgebungsseminare, <https://www.unifr.ch/federalism/en/capacitybuilding/mggs.html>

Since the second half of 20th century, various European governmental authorities – often in collaboration with academic institutions – have implemented lifelong learning programmes and in-house training to help public sector professionals develop the skills needed to simplify legal texts. In recent decades, Italy has, for example, witnessed fruitful cooperation between universities and other governmental and regional authorities. Among these, the pioneering efforts of the linguist Tullio De Mauro in simplifying public communication, known as “*Chiaro!*” (2003) and supported by the University of Padua, were instrumental in increasing transparency among regional and municipal authorities (Cortelazzo, 2021), as was the cooperation between the University of Pisa with the Italian Revenue Agency aimed at rewriting tax documents and web contents. Similarly, in France, the *Direction interministérielle de la transformation publique* (DITP) launched initiatives in partnership with the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and other institutions to host webinars and produce guides helping public bodies rewrite content in plain French under the ISO 24495 standards.¹² In Switzerland, the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Geneva ran a cooperative project with the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) to find new ways to provide accessible institutional information (Felici et al., 2023). In Germany, academic cooperation is closely tied to the development of easy language (*Leichte Sprache*), largely due to a specific legal framework mandating that all federal websites provide content in this simplified version (Maaß et al., 2021, p. 195). For the sake of clarity, easy language is a modified and reduced form of standard language, aimed at people with cognitive impairments, learning disabilities or low literacy skills (Bredel and Maaß, 2016, pp. 24–29; Lindholm and Vanhatalo, 2021, p. 11). Within this broader societal commitment to accessibility and inclusion, the University of Hildesheim has played a leading role by collaborating with governmental institutions, developing guidelines, conducting research, and training professionals in the field. Easy Language has also found application in nearby Switzerland, where several higher education institutions – most notably

¹² https://www.modernisation.gouv.fr/campus-de-la-transformation-publique/catalogue-de-ressources/outil/langage-clair-et-services?utm_source=chatgpt.com

the University of Fribourg, the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, the University of Zurich – have cooperated with Cantons in training staff, producing informative publications, and implementing easy language in their academic programmes (Diacquenod and Santi, 2018, p. 31; Parpan-Blaser et al., 2021, p. 585). In this context, the Swiss Federal Department of Home Affairs has created a Competence Centre for Easy Language¹³ to translate official content into easy-to-read format and develop best practices. University training in easy language has also been introduced in Slovenia at the University of Maribor (Knapp and Haramija, 2021, p. 471) and in several Spanish universities (University of Jaen, Alicante, Madrid, Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona) with research projects focused on technology and reception from the end-users (Muñoz and Matamala, 2021, p. 510).

These partnerships and the involvement of academic actors reflect a shared recognition of the democratic necessity of accessible public language and underline the critical role of academic institutions in reforming public communication, while fostering a more democratic relationship between the State and citizens.

3 The University of Geneva’s law clinic on the rights of vulnerable persons

This study is based on a practical experiment carried out in collaboration with the Law Clinic on the Rights of Vulnerable Persons at the University of Geneva’s Faculty of Law, which is very active in implementing legal and language simplification strategies.¹⁴

Clinical legal education dates back to the mid-20th century within the US higher education system (Le Fort Mastrotta and Carron, 2016, p. 2). The first legal clinics were established to combine theoretical teaching with practical experience, providing students and future legal practitioners with direct exposure to real-world cases. The goal of such clinics is to identify practical needs and challenging legal situations, enabling students to learn through a *learning by doing* approach

13 <https://www.ebgb.admin.ch/de/kompetenzzentrum-leichte-sprache-cls>

14 This section draws on the paper of Le Fort and Carron (2016), who have provided an in-depth description and analysis of the work of Geneva’s Law Clinic on the Rights of Vulnerable Persons.

and to develop a deeper understanding of the legal profession (Le Fort Mastrotta and Carron, 2016, p. 3).

The Law Clinic on the Rights of Vulnerable Persons of the Faculty of Law of the University of Geneva was established in 2013. The aim of the clinic is twofold: to provide practical training to master's students in law through a year-long course, and to foster cooperation with the Municipality of Geneva by making legal information more accessible to a very specific vulnerable audience. Since 2013, it has brought together over 160 master's students (Montavon et al., 2023, p. 8).

The notion of “vulnerability” needs, at this stage, some clarification. In legal and social scholarly works, “vulnerability” is described as both a universal and a particular condition: all humans experience it, yet some individuals are considered more vulnerable than others due to social, historical, or institutional factors (Peroni and Timmer, 2013, p. 1064; Timmer et al., 2021, p. 192). In human rights law, Timmer et al. (2021, p. 195) describe “vulnerability” as a “chameleon concept”: it can express the need for expanding rights, while carrying the risk of stereotyping or paternalism if used uncritically. In the context of Geneva's Law Clinic on the Rights of Vulnerable Persons, the notion of “vulnerability” enables those whose rights are at risk of being neglected, and who may lack the resources or knowledge to seek redress, to be placed at the centre of the discourse. Thus, the concept of “vulnerability” is not intended to reflect negatively on these individuals or label them as victims, but rather to acknowledge their precarious position within the legal system (Le Fort Mastrotta and Carron, 2016, p. 4).

Each year, the Geneva Law Clinic identifies a specific group of people affected by a particular vulnerability.¹⁵ These groups – all based in Geneva – have so far included Roma people in precarious situations, women without legal status, people in detention, LGBT people, unaccompanied migrants, people with disabilities, sex workers, and drug users. The selection is made on the basis of different criteria: each group should include individuals whose rights are not respected

15 To avoid “trapping” individuals within a “vulnerable group” category, Timmer et al. (2021, p. 196) suggest identifying and addressing the distinct vulnerabilities that affect each individual, in a unique way.

locally in Geneva, individuals requiring clarification of their legal situation, and individuals lacking knowledge of their rights, for whom providing accessible information could improve their situation. Finally, humanitarian experts working with the chosen group must also express a desire to obtain legal clarification. This process is conducted in dialogue with local associations, humanitarian organizations and experts who signal areas of unmet need (Le Fort Mastrota and Carron, 2016, pp. 4–5).

The issues to be addressed each year are jointly defined. Students, clinic staff, and external partners review the concerns raised by local organizations and by members of the target population. Interactions with these groups often begin with consultations facilitated by associations working with them. Frequently asked questions are then compiled from these exchanges (see Le Fort Mastrota and Carron, 2016, p. 4–5).

The Law Clinic’s goal is to publish an informative “frequently asked questions” brochure once a year or every two years. To achieve this, at the beginning of every academic year students attending the Law Clinic’s course are organized into small working groups and tasked with drafting detailed legal advice on some of the previously identified issues. Their work is then reviewed by the teaching and academic staff and by external experts. In a second stage, students focus on simplifying and improving the accessibility of their texts to produce “de-legalized” informative content.¹⁶

The final brochures are always in a “frequently asked questions” format, and include relevant legal references. This format was deemed to be the most practical and accessible by both the public and the working group.

In the absence of established, practical guidelines for effective legal language simplification, the Law Clinic has developed its own criteria to structure its drafting process and its simplification methodology. The following points summarize these criteria, which are meant to serve as a working checklist:

16 “[...] les étudiant-e-s procèdent à la vulgarisation de leurs recherches afin d’aboutir à un texte synthétisant, simplifiant et déjuridicisant leurs conclusions” (Le Fort Mastrota/Carron, 2016, p.5).

1. Which target audience(s) is to be aimed at?
2. What message or information is to be conveyed?
3. Which media should be used?
4. What language and level of simplification should be used?
5. The final text must be proofread by the target audience.
6. The final format must be standardized based on previous brochures.¹⁷

Within this process, which addresses mostly the *legal* dimensions of simplification, there remains scope to integrate more systematic *linguistic* simplification strategies to achieve both normative precision and linguistic clarity.

4 An *ad hoc* workshop on plain and easy language

In the 2024–2025 academic year, the University of Geneva’s Law Clinic on the Rights of Vulnerable Persons developed the first part of a brochure on the rights of drug users as part of its master’s course (see Section 3). Since this course is offered by the Faculty of Law without the involvement of language experts, the lecturers invited the three authors of this paper – who are all based at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting and have research expertise in accessible legal and institutional multilingual communication – to lead a workshop. The workshop was titled “Langage clair et accessibilité linguistique” (Plain and easy language and linguistic accessibility) and took place on 18 February 2025. Its goal was to encourage critical reflection on the potential of linguistic simplification and offer practical guidance on enhancing the accessibility of legal content; 16 participants attended, including three members of the academic staff of the Faculty of Law of the University of Geneva and 13 master’s students.

To make the most of the short training session, it was essential to root the activities as firmly as possible in practice. To this end, we asked the participants to share simplified texts they had drafted earlier, taken from a brochure currently being developed on the rights of

¹⁷ Our thanks go to the organizers of the Law Clinic, Camille Montavon, Quentin Markarian, Vista Eskandari and Professor Maya Hertig Randall for our frequent exchanges and for sharing information about the simplification strategies implemented during the Law Clinic courses.

drug users in Geneva. The entire document comprised 8,626 words, and each group had focused on a thematic section of the brochure – drug possession and use/arrest; police checks; sanctions and violence; public space and dogs – organized in a “frequently asked questions” format.

During the workshop, we proposed a theoretical part as well as hands-on exercises and a series of activities mostly based on this brochure, but also on other Law Clinic’s brochures and texts written by students themselves. The workshop revolved around text material students were already familiar with and was designed to replicate similar working dynamics. This allowed us to benefit from their expertise on a specific topic and make the most of the limited time available. The goal was to introduce and put into practice the use of plain and easy language while working on the brochure currently under preparation.

This section first presents a glimpse of the finding from our preliminary analysis and subsequently delves into how these initial observations helped to shape our workshop. In particular, we present our training strategies, the outcomes of the proposed activities and offer some concluding remarks on the challenges and opportunities of interdisciplinary collaborations with legal and language experts in designing accessible legal information for vulnerable populations.

4.1 Text analysis as a starting point

Using authentic texts produced by the participants as a starting point enabled us to identify both strengths and weaknesses in their drafting and tailor the workshop content to the students’ actual needs. Prior to the workshop, the authors of this paper conducted a linguistic analysis of the samples submitted by the Law Clinic students. This analysis was based on the ISO 24495-1:2023 standard on plain language (ISO 2023, see also Section 1), which served in our training as a concrete tool to operationalize the concept of “linguistic clarity”.

Overall, the original texts already demonstrated a high level of clarity, particularly in terms of vocabulary and syntax, as illustrated by Example (1):

(1) *À quelles conditions la police peut-elle prendre mes empreintes ou mon ADN ?*

La police peut prélever mon ADN si elle a des raisons concrètes de soupçonner que j'ai commis ou je commettrai un **crime** ou un **délit**. Elle ne peut pas le faire s'il s'agit d'une **infraction** de peu de gravité, comme la consommation, l'achat ou la production de drogue destinées à mon usage personnel. Le prélèvement par frottis buccal peut être effectué par la police elle-même, mais celui de cheveux ou de sang doit être réalisé par un ex médecin ou un ex auxiliaire. Pour que mon ADN soit analysé après le prélèvement, il faudra un ordre du Ministère public ou d'un tribunal. Si je ne suis plus soupçonné, l'échantillon de mon ADN doit être détruit et son analyse doit être effacée.

This text does not contain complex terminology or legal jargon, and allows the reader to gain a mental representation of its content (ISO 2023, guideline 5.3.2-c). While a layperson may not fully grasp the distinctions between the legal terms “crime”, “délit”, and “infraction” (highlighted in bold),¹⁸ the general semantic field of “illegal act” remains accessible. Sentences are relatively short and typically consist of a main clause accompanied by a subordinate clause, making them easy to process.

In other cases, though less frequently, we identified lexical and syntactic complexities, as in Example (2):

(2) *Si la police m'arrête ai-je le droit à un ou des appels téléphoniques ? Qui la police est-elle obligée d'informer ?*

Le droit à la défense inclut la possibilité de consulter un avocat, malgré le fait que, dans le cadre d'une **arrestation provisoire**, la personne arrêtée n'ait pas le droit de passer directement un appel téléphonique pour contacter un défenseur. C'est la police qui, sur demande, contacte l'avocat·e choisi·e. En revanche, pour les personnes appréhendées, bien qu'il n'y ait pas de reconnaissance explicite du droit à un·e avocat·e dans le CPP, leur privation de liberté, même temporaire, est encadrée par des garanties procédurales similaires. La personne privée de liberté a le droit de faire informer ses proches. Cependant,

18 In English, they correspond roughly to minor offense, misdemeanour and indictable offense, but caution is required because legal systems vary significantly.

ce n'est pas la personne arrêtée elle-même qui informe ses proches, mais la police qui a l'obligation de le faire, sauf opposition expresse ou interdiction pour des raisons liées à l'enquête. La notification doit se faire immédiatement, dans les limites du possible, en respectant la confidentialité des raisons de l'arrestation. Les proches reçoivent uniquement les informations essentielles tel que le fait que la personne ait été arrêtée ou appréhendée. La police informe l'employeur ou la représentation consulaire uniquement à la demande explicite de la personne arrêtée. La police a l'obligation, ou la possibilité de notifier les services sociaux compétents, lorsque la personne privée de liberté a des personnes à charge ou présente des troubles liés à des addictions.

This passage assumes the reader understands distinctions between terms such as “arrestation provisoire” and “apprehension”, which may not be the case.¹⁹ Terms like *garanties procédurales similaires* may also lack transparency or concreteness for a lay audience. Similarly, the abbreviation *CPP (code de procédure pénale)* might not be familiar. Although its meaning could be inferred, it would be advisable to make it explicit (ISO 2023, guideline 5.3.2-d and e), if it is necessary to provide this piece of information.

From a syntactic perspective, several underlined segments could be streamlined. The first contains numerous parenthetical elements, which obscure the main message (ISO 2023, guideline 5.3.3-a-3). The second segment features a highly nominalized phrase that, although typical of legal writing (Tiersma 1999, p. 74), would be more effectively rendered in a verbal style to align with plain language principles. Lastly, the final sentence outlines in an ambiguous manner the conditions under which police *must* or *may* notify (*a l'obligation, ou la possibilité de notifier*) social services (ISO 2023, guideline 5.3.3-a-2). Such syntactical complexities can slow down or even hinder the comprehension process, especially when they co-occur with other lexical complexities.

A more recurring issue across the analysed texts, however, was the way information is structured. On a macro level, Example (2) would benefit from structural and formatting improvements such as

19 In English, they correspond roughly to provisional arrest and apprehension.

bullet points, subheadings, or bolded keywords (ISO 2023, guidelines 5.2.2-5.2.4). For instance, listing separately the rules applying to notification of lawyers, family members, employers, consular representatives, and social services would make the paragraph more readable and facilitate selective reading.

The positive aspects that emerged from our preliminary analysis were acknowledged at the beginning of the activity, while we built on the weaknesses during the training and designed specific activities to address them.

4.2 Workshop programme

Our invited workshop lasted two teaching units (45 minutes each) for a total of 90 minutes and a break of 15 minutes in between. In the first teaching unit, we provided students with some historical insights and basic theoretical concepts of plain language and easy language. The main objective of this first unit was to familiarize students with some basic linguistic and stylistic rules for writing in plain and easy language. We also presented some comparative examples of these two different simplification methods.²⁰ During the second teaching unit, we proposed two different practical activities using material already developed on the rights of drug users, as well as the Law Clinic's brochure on the rights of unaccompanied young migrants *Les droits des jeunes personnes migrantes non accompagnées* (see Hertig Randall et al., 2020), developed by students of a previous Law Clinic during the 2019–2020 academic year.

1st activity: Text comprehension and evaluation activity (duration: 10-15 minutes)

In the first activity, we presented students with four short excerpts from the brochure *Les droits des jeunes personnes migrantes non accompagnées* (from the J.1, J.2 and J.3 of the “Droits face à la police” chapters), each accompanied by two simplified texts, the first in plain language and the second in easy language (in French FALC, i.e. *facile à lire et à comprendre*). Students were asked to observe,

²⁰ Examples were taken from the brochure: Canton de Fribourg (2023).

compare and comment on content, language style, and simplification strategies of the two simplified adaptations of the original text, using an online Votamatic survey.²¹ For each chosen excerpt, we asked general comprehension questions on the plain and easy language texts (questions 1 and 2) and whether the simplified adaptations resulted in a change of meaning (question 3) or loss of original textual content (question 4).

One of the four excerpts provided with simplifications is shown below, along with the questions asked and the responses submitted by the participants in the survey.

Original text	Si je n'ai pas mes papiers sur moi ou si la police a des doutes sur mon identité, elle peut m'amener au poste de police pour effectuer des vérifications (ex. : prise d'empreintes, prise de photographies, vérification de la légalité de mon séjour, etc.).
Plain language	Si je n'ai pas mes papiers ou si la police doute de mon identité, elle peut m'emmener au poste de police pour vérifier qui je suis. Ces vérifications peuvent inclure de : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prendre mes empreintes digitales, • prendre une photo de moi, • vérifier si mon séjour est légal.
Easy language (FALC)	La police peut m'emmener au poste de police si je n'ai pas mon autorisation de séjour avec moi, si la police ne sait pas qui je suis . Au poste de police, la police peut : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prendre les empreintes de mes doigts, • prendre une photo de moi, • vérifier si j'ai le droit d'être en Suisse.

Figure 1: 1st excerpt (Droits face à la police).

21 Votamatic is a web application that allows users to participate in online surveys and whose user interface is adapted to small mobile devices such as smartphones or tablets. It is intended for use during classes to improve interactivity and check students' preparation or understanding. See the app's website for more details: <https://votamatic.unige.ch>.

Questions	Answers
(1) The plain language text mainly deals with the following topic:	
• <i>Les raisons d'une garde à vue</i> (grounds for police custody)	10/16 (62.5% of answers)
• <i>La vérification de l'autorisation de séjour</i> (verification of residence status)	6/16 (37.5% of answers)
(2) The easy language (FALC) text mainly deals with the following topic:	
• <i>Les raisons d'une garde à vue</i>	9/16 (56.3% of answers)
• <i>La vérification de l'autorisation de séjour</i>	7/16 (43.8% of answers)
(3) Do the two simplifications change the meaning of the original text?	
• Yes	0/16 (0% of answers)
• The plain language text changes it more	0/16 (0% of answers)
• The the easy language (FALC) text changes it more	7/16 (43.8% of answers)
• No	9/16 (56.3% of answers)
(4) Do the two simplifications result in a loss of content?	
• Yes	0/16 (0% of answers)
• The plain language text loses more content	0/16 (0% of answers)
• The the easy language (FALC) text moses more content	10/16 (62.5% of answers)
• No	6/16 (37.5% of answers)

Figure 2: 1st excerpt (Droits face à la police) – Questions and Answers.

The answers to questions (1) and (2) showed that participants were unsure about the actual content of the simplified texts. We identified comprehension problems, particularly regarding the text in easy language. The answers to questions (3) and (4) clearly show that most participants noticed a change in meaning and a loss of content, particularly regarding the simplifications in easy language (FALC). Within the time frame available for this workshop, we were able to conduct one more survey of the four originally planned. This second survey yielded similar results: simplifications often resulted in misunderstandings, with texts in easy language showing the greatest loss of meaning in comparison to the original text.

2nd activity: Language reformulation activity (duration: 15 & 20 minutes)

During the second teaching unit, the students continued working in the same four groups. Each group was assigned specific topics related to the rights of drug users, which had been addressed during the first part of the academic year 2024–25. Each group received an excerpt featuring the most common issues identified in the analysis stage (see 4.1), along with guiding questions to help them revise their writing and trainers' support. For example, the text reported in example (2) above was accompanied by the following guiding questions:

Aspects to consider:

- Do recipients clearly understand the difference between 'arrestation', 'appréhension' and 'privation de liberté'?
- Are they familiar with the term 'garanties procédurales' and the acronym 'CPP'?
- Can the structure of the first sentence be simplified?
- Would it be possible to divide the text into different sections corresponding to different scenarios? Would using bold type improve the clarity of the text?

Additional aspects to consider for easy language (FALC):

- Can the two titles be separated and integrated into the text?
- Which content should be highlighted? (Is it possible to select the main message, the secondary message and the message to be excluded?)
- Which terms need to be explained?
- Would it be possible to add images? If so, which content would benefit from an image?

No specific simplification method was imposed; as students were free to choose between plain language and easy language, almost all opted for plain language, with only one group willing to experiment with easy language. According to the students, easy language was too difficult to implement in practice for non-language experts. Furthermore, easy language did not seem suitable for the type of texts they were working with. Legal texts require terminological accuracy, which is difficult to achieve with easy language.

Concluding observations (duration: five & 10 minutes)

We concluded the workshop with a general discussion on the practical difficulties encountered, as well as the most suitable simplification methods for the Law Clinic. Students and organizers expressed their interest in the topics covered during the workshop and pointed out how important it is for legal experts to be aware of language simplification.

The idea for this workshop arose from the Law Clinic's interest in simplifying their publications and learning how to write in easy language (FALC). Although simplification in easy language initially attracted the most curiosity and interest, it ultimately emerged as the most criticized linguistic option and was the least adopted in the practical exercises. By the end of the workshop, the participants had unanimously agreed that it is too difficult to implement FALC without risking the omission of important content from the message to be conveyed.

5 Discussion and conclusions

Initiatives such as law clinics offer valuable opportunities for students to develop essential communication skills, particularly in the simplification and popularization of legal content. These abilities are crucial for legal professionals, who must be able to convey specialized information in varying registers depending on their audience, be it other legal experts or laypersons.

In a context where emerging technologies are reshaping both professional profiles and university education, it is vital to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. Preparing students to engage beyond the boundaries of their core discipline equips them to meet evolving professional demands with greater agility.

This workshop aimed to encourage reflection on the relationship between legal expertise and accessible communication. This interdisciplinary experience, which bridged the legal and linguistic perspectives, highlighted the potential and complexity of simplifying legal language and of training future legal professionals. We observed that law students quickly developed greater linguistic sensitivity and acknowledged the necessity of conveying legal information in a more accessible way when guided through a practical and reflective learning

process. Although initially more interested in easy language (FALC), the students found it challenging to apply its strict rules without compromising legal accuracy. Plain language, on the other hand, was perceived as a more feasible compromise between simplification and legal precision. This suggests that the practical application of easy language principles in legal contexts requires further methodological support, which has not been developed yet. The creation of guidelines for linguistic simplification could thus prove useful, but interdisciplinary collaboration would be essential to achieve this.

Our experience also highlighted the value of tailoring training to the specific needs of participants. While designing *ad hoc* activities for a particular audience is more time-consuming than applying a standard model, it can potentially lead to more effective learning outcomes and should therefore be considered when planning workshops of this kind. During the second hands-on activity, discussions among students and with the trainers demonstrated increased awareness of certain aspects in their texts that required improvement, such as clarifying specialized terminology or restructuring dense paragraphs using bullet-point lists. We believe that the results would have been less tangible had we offered a more general overview of numerous issues, including those that seemed not to pose any particular challenge, rather than focusing on pre-identified subjects.

This experience further shows that even short workshops can be useful. Ideally, however, such activities should be embedded within a more extensive module offering regular feedback and follow-up to foster lasting improvements in writing habits. From a research perspective, this would also allow for a more robust analysis of the effectiveness of different teaching strategies and activities – an objective that, based on our current data, remains for the future. While text analysis served as a highly effective starting point to shape the hands-on activities proposed in the workshop, it could also play a valuable role at the intermediate and final stages in longer training programmes. This approach could be adopted in a future iteration of the workshop, which would ideally involve at least two training units. It would enable instructors to track progress, tailor activities to participants' evolving needs, and assess the pedagogical outcome more systematically.

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Pravno in jezikovno poenostavljanje za ranljive osebe: interdisciplinarna učna izkušnja s študenti prava

Temeljni orodji za socialno vključevanje sta dostopna komunikacija in jasen jezik. Javne ustanove in nevladne organizacije tej temi namenjajo vse več pozornosti, kar se kaže v naraščajočem številu seminarjev in programov vseživljenjskega učenja, namenjenih zaposlenim v javni upravi, študentom in univerzitetnemu osebju, bodočim prevajalcem, jezikoslovnim strokovnjakom ter širši javnosti. Prispevek predstavlja delavnico Univerze v Ženevi, ki so jo raziskovalci s Fakultete za prevajanje in tolmačenje (Faculty of Translation and Interpreting) izvedli za magistrske študente Pravne klinike na Pravni fakulteti. Delavnica na temo pravic ranljivih oseb se je osredotočila na jezikovno dostopnost zloženke o pravicah uporabnikov prepovedanih drog v Ženevi, ki so jo pripravljali študenti. Publikacije Pravne klinike sicer že vsebujejo poenostavljeno pravno vsebino, vendar bi jih bilo mogoče nadgraditi s strategijami in pristopi preprostega jezika in celo lahkega branja. Delavnica je združevala teoretični uvod in praktične vaje za raziskovanje teh pristopov. Prispevek poudarja, da je v širšem kontekstu spreminjajočih se poklicnih vlog in izobraževalnih okvirov pomen interdisciplinarnega sodelovanja ključen. Priprava študentov na delo zunaj meja njihove osnovne discipline jih opremi z znanji in spretnostmi, ki omogočajo prožnejše prilagajanje nenehno spreminjajočim se poklicnim zahtevam.

Ključne besede: preprost jezik, lahko branje, poenostavljanje pravnega jezika, izobraževanje, ranljive skupine