
Plain language —

Part 1:

Governing principles and guidelines

Langage clair et simple —

Partie 1: Principes directeurs et lignes directrices

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Contents

	Page
Foreword.....	iv
Introduction.....	v
1 Scope	1
2 Normative references	1
3 Terms and definitions	1
4 Governing principles	3
5 Guidelines	3
5.1 Guidelines for Principle 1: Readers get what they need (relevant).....	3
5.1.1 Overview.....	3
5.1.2 Identify the readers.....	3
5.1.3 Identify the readers' purpose.....	4
5.1.4 Identify the context in which readers will read the document.....	4
5.1.5 Select the document type or types.....	4
5.1.6 Select content that readers need.....	4
5.2 Guidelines for Principle 2: Readers can easily find what they need (findable).....	5
5.2.1 Overview.....	5
5.2.2 Structure the document for readers.....	5
5.2.3 Use information design techniques that enable readers to find information.....	5
5.2.4 Use headings to help readers predict what comes next.....	6
5.2.5 Keep supplementary information separate.....	6
5.3 Guidelines for Principle 3: Readers can easily understand what they find (understandable).....	6
5.3.1 Overview.....	6
5.3.2 Choose familiar words.....	6
5.3.3 Write clear sentences.....	7
5.3.4 Write concise sentences.....	8
5.3.5 Write clear and concise paragraphs.....	8
5.3.6 Consider including images and multimedia.....	8
5.3.7 Project a respectful tone.....	8
5.3.8 Ensure that the document is cohesive.....	9
5.4 Guidelines for Principle 4: Readers can easily use the information (usable).....	9
5.4.1 Overview.....	9
5.4.2 Evaluate the document continually as it is developed.....	9
5.4.3 Evaluate the document further with readers.....	9
5.4.4 Continue to evaluate readers' use of the document.....	10
Annex A (informative) Overview of principles and guidelines	11
Annex B (informative) Sample checklist	12
Bibliography	14

Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

The procedures used to develop this document and those intended for its further maintenance are described in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1. In particular, the different approval criteria needed for the different types of ISO document should be noted. This document was drafted in accordance with the editorial rules of the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2 (see www.iso.org/directives).

ISO draws attention to the possibility that the implementation of this document may involve the use of (a) patent(s). ISO takes no position concerning the evidence, validity or applicability of any claimed patent rights in respect thereof. As of the date of publication of this document, ISO had not received notice of (a) patent(s) which may be required to implement this document. However, implementers are cautioned that this may not represent the latest information, which may be obtained from the patent database available at www.iso.org/patents. ISO shall not be held responsible for identifying any or all such patent rights.

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For an explanation of the voluntary nature of standards, the meaning of ISO specific terms and expressions related to conformity assessment, as well as information about ISO's adherence to the World Trade Organization (WTO) principles in the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), see www.iso.org/iso/foreword.html.

This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 37, *Language and terminology*.

A list of all parts in the ISO 24495 series can be found on the ISO website.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at www.iso.org/members.html.

Introduction

Plain language is communication that puts readers first. It considers:

- what readers want and need to know;
- readers' level of interest, expertise and literacy skills;
- the context in which readers will use the document.

Plain language ensures readers can find what they need, understand it and use it. Thus, plain language focuses on how successfully readers can use the document rather than on mechanical measures such as readability formulas.

Extensive studies have shown that writing in plain language saves time or money (or both) for readers and organizations. Plain language is more effective and produces better outcomes. In addition, readers prefer plain language. For organizations, plain language is an important way to build trust with the readers. Finally, the process of translating is more efficient for plain language documents than for documents that are difficult to understand.

This document will help authors develop documents that communicate effectively with their intended readers. It applies to most written languages and reflects the most recent research on plain language and the experience of plain language experts. See Reference [3] for research on plain language.

Plain language is not to be confused with easy language. Plain language can be used for a general audience, while easy language is used for people who have difficulties with reading comprehension. These difficulties can be caused by health conditions, not being fluent in the given language or other reasons.

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Plain language —

Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines

1 Scope

This document establishes governing principles and guidelines for developing plain language documents. The guidelines detail how the principles are interpreted and applied.

This document is for anybody who creates or helps create documents. The widest use of plain language is for documents that are intended for the general public. However, it is also applicable, for example, to technical writing, legislative drafting or using controlled languages.

This document applies to most, if not all, written languages, but it provides examples only in English.

While this document covers the essential elements of plain language, it has some intentional limits, as follows:

- It does not cover all types of communication. It applies only to printed or digital information that is primarily in the form of text.

NOTE 1 However, creators of other types of communications, such as podcasts and videos, can find this document useful.

- It does not include existing technical guidance about accessibility and digital documents, although the guidance can apply to both.

NOTE 2 For guidance on accessibility, authors of digital documents can consider the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines^[4] and EN 301 549.^[2]

2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

- ISO Online browsing platform: available at <https://www.iso.org/obp>
- IEC Electropedia: available at <https://www.electropedia.org/>

3.1

plain language

communication in which wording, structure and design are so clear that intended *readers* (3.2) can easily

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- use that information

[SOURCE: International Plain Language Federation^[3]]

3.2

reader

member of the intended audience for a *document* (3.3)

Note 1 to entry: While the word “reader” is historically rooted in the verb “to read”, all intended audience members do not necessarily “read” documents. For the purposes of this document, the term “reader” includes the following:

- Everyone who uses a document, whether they view it, hear it, touch it or a combination.
- Someone who will skim or scan a document, looking only for particular information.
- Someone to whom a document is read, whether by a person or a device.

Note 2 to entry: There can be several different audiences for the same document. For example, the primary audience of an income tax form is the taxpayer, and the secondary audience is the tax agency. If the needs of different readers conflict, then the needs of the primary audience have priority.

3.3

document

set of printed or digital information, primarily in the form of text

EXAMPLE Audio description, email, error message, contract, form, podcast script, video manuscript, webpage.

3.4

author

individual or organization who develops or helps develop *documents* (3.3)

EXAMPLE Content developers or managers, editors, information architects or designers, information developers or managers, legislative drafters, professional writers, public relations officers, technical writers, translators, UX (user experience) writers, writing project managers.

3.5

document type

class of *documents* (3.3) having similar characteristics

EXAMPLE Email, webpage, postal letter, instruction manual, newspaper article, form.

[SOURCE: ISO 8879:1986, 4.102, modified — The list of examples has been modified and separated from the text of the definition.]

3.6

image

visual representation of information

EXAMPLE Chart, diagram, drawing, flowchart, graph, icon, infographic, map, picture, photograph, table.

3.7

information design

visual integration of text, typography, *images* (3.6) and multimedia to help *readers* (3.2) find, understand and use information

Note 1 to entry: Information design makes the structure and content visual.

3.8

evaluation

assessment of how well *readers* (3.2) find, understand and use information

4 Governing principles

The four governing principles are as follows:

- Principle 1: Readers get what they need (relevant).
- Principle 2: Readers can easily find what they need (findable).
- Principle 3: Readers can easily understand what they find (understandable).
- Principle 4: Readers can easily use the information (usable).

These principles rest on the premise that a document will be usable if the information in it is relevant, findable and understandable (see [Figure 1](#)).

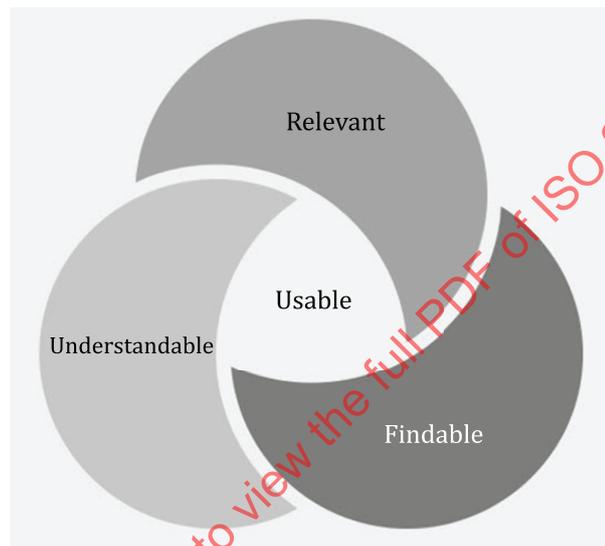


Figure 1 — Relationship of the four principles

From the perspective of authors, following the guidelines under the first three principles will make it likely that readers can use a document. But the only way to ensure that is to evaluate the document continually by applying the guidelines of Principle 4. As a result, this document does not describe a sequential process, because the four principles are interdependent and influence each other. Applying them all together is crucial for developing plain language documents.

[Annex A](#) provides a visual overview of the principles and guidelines. [Annex B](#) provides a checklist to help authors apply this document.

5 Guidelines

5.1 Guidelines for Principle 1: Readers get what they need (relevant)

5.1.1 Overview

This principle focuses on what authors should do before they start drafting. Understanding the readers of a document and their needs is essential to creating a document in plain language. Authors should select the document type and content that fits their readers' needs, purpose and context.

5.1.2 Identify the readers

Authors should identify who their readers are and consider the readers' characteristics, including their literacy and language skills, cultural backgrounds and subject-matter knowledge.

Characteristics also include readers' accessibility needs and preferences, as well as the languages that they understand. Authors should provide the document in a language that their readers know. That can mean complying with official language requirements and translating the document into other languages.

To identify the readers and their characteristics, authors can use the following methods:

- a) Review knowledge gained from previous communications with readers.
- b) Interview readers.
- c) Conduct reader surveys.
- d) Review research and relevant literature on readers.

5.1.3 Identify the readers' purpose

Authors should identify why readers will read the document. For example, readers can be doing any of the following:

- a) following instructions to complete a task;
- b) deciding to do or not to do something;
- c) trying to understand a topic;
- d) finding out what the author wants them to do;
- e) learning about an area of interest;
- f) gaining the required knowledge for a specific purpose, such as getting a driver's licence.

5.1.4 Identify the context in which readers will read the document

Authors should consider the following:

- a) where readers will read the document;
- b) what technology they will use to read it;
- c) how much time they will have;
- d) how long will they stay focused;
- e) how interested they will be in the document;
- f) what their emotional state will be when they read it.

The answers to these questions can be affected by the document type (see [5.1.5](#)).

5.1.5 Select the document type or types

Authors should select the document type or types that fit their readers' characteristics (see [5.1.2](#)), purpose (see [5.1.3](#)) and context (see [5.1.4](#)). If it better serves the readers' purpose, authors can also decide to use an alternative to a document, such as a video.

5.1.6 Select content that readers need

Authors should always keep readers' needs in mind when selecting content, even when the authors' own needs dictate that certain information be included.

Authors should do the following:

- a) Put readers' needs first.
- b) Identify questions that readers need answered (see [5.1.2](#) and [5.1.3](#)).
- c) Select content that fits the readers' characteristics (see [5.1.2](#)), purpose (see [5.1.3](#)) and context (see [5.1.4](#)), as well as the document type (see [5.1.5](#)).
- d) Leave out content that readers do not need (see [5.2.5](#) for guidance on required supplementary information).
- e) Consider the authors' purposes and needs.
- f) Select content ethically:
 - 1) Select accurate content.
 - 2) Do not include false or misleading content.
 - 3) Do not hide or leave out content that readers need to know.

5.2 Guidelines for Principle 2: Readers can easily find what they need (findable)

5.2.1 Overview

Readers should be able to quickly determine what the document is about and whether it serves their purpose. Good structure and design help readers to easily find the information they need. Headings are one of many techniques to help readers predict what comes next and are especially helpful in documents longer than a few paragraphs.

5.2.2 Structure the document for readers

Authors should group related information together and order it in a way that makes sense for their readers. When deciding on order, authors should consider these guidelines:

- a) Place the most important message where readers can easily find it, commonly at the beginning.
- b) Introduce new information by building on information readers already know.
- c) For instructions or processes, present information in chronological order.
- d) Place information that most readers need before information that only some readers need.
- e) If failing to follow a process can lead to damage or harm, place warnings about what not to do before instructions about what to do.

5.2.3 Use information design techniques that enable readers to find information

Inclusive information design techniques make it easy for readers to find what they need. Authors should use the following techniques:

- a) Visually show the following relations between elements:
 - 1) Make important elements more prominent (prominence), by using a larger font, bold type or other methods.
 - 2) Place elements that belong together close to each other (proximity).
 - 3) Make elements with the same function look similar (similarity).

- 4) Clearly signal the reading order of the elements (sequence).
- b) Consider using images and multimedia to attract readers to a specific topic.
- c) Use headings to help readers scan the document and understand its structure (see [5.2.4](#)). If necessary, use multiple levels of headings.
- d) Make the hierarchy visual, using techniques such as consistently formatted headings and indentation.
- e) Use bulleted and numbered lists to help readers find information they can otherwise miss.
- f) Use typography such as fonts, font size, line spacing and contrast that make the physical act of reading easier.
- g) Add a table of contents when it helps readers understand the document's structure or find specific information.
- h) Add an index when it helps readers find specific information.
- i) If there are multiple audiences, clearly identify what information is addressed to each audience.

5.2.4 Use headings to help readers predict what comes next

Headings are one of the most useful techniques to help readers find the information they need. When using headings, authors should follow these guidelines:

- a) Use a new heading when introducing a new topic.
- b) Ensure that each heading accurately describes the information that follows.
- c) Use consistent headings.
- d) Keep headings short enough so that they are easy to scan.
- e) Use enough headings to help readers find information but no more.

5.2.5 Keep supplementary information separate

Sometimes authors can be required to include information that is not important to most readers, such as the legal basis of a policy. Other times authors want to include information that most readers consider less important, such as a list of sources or a detailed explanation. If authors need to include such supplementary information, they should use appendices, bibliographies or other formatting options to separate it [see also [5.2.2 d](#)].

5.3 Guidelines for Principle 3: Readers can easily understand what they find (understandable)

5.3.1 Overview

Individual elements of a document, such as wording and structure, should be easy to understand. These individual elements should work together so that readers comprehend the document as a cohesive whole.

5.3.2 Choose familiar words

Authors should use words that readers are familiar with:

- a) Select words that make the text precise and unambiguous.

EXAMPLE 1 Telling readers to use a “hammer” instead of a “tool” if they need to drive in a nail.

- b) Select words that prompt a mental image for readers.

EXAMPLE 2 Instead of just telling readers to be “kind”, making concrete suggestions such as “let someone go in front of you in line”.

- c) Use specialized terms only in the following cases:

- 1) if readers understand and prefer them,
- 2) if readers need to learn them to achieve their goals (in which case, explain all specialized terms when they first appear).

- d) Use abbreviations only when appropriate, such as:

- 1) when readers are more familiar with the abbreviated form, or
- 2) when the spelled-out version is excessively long.

- e) Spell abbreviations out when they first appear, unless they are common and well understood.

- f) When appropriate, use a shortened form rather than a long phrase, and always explain the shortened form when it first appears.

EXAMPLE 3 Using “the Council” instead of “the Council on Equal Opportunities”.

- g) Be consistent: use the same words for the same meaning and use different words for different meanings.
- h) Use culturally relevant language. Consider what words would be used by age, ethnic, religious or other groups in the audience.

5.3.3 Write clear sentences

To write clear sentences, authors should do the following:

- a) Use a clear sentence structure:

- 1) Use sentence structures that are familiar to readers.

EXAMPLE 1 In English, readers often expect the subject-verb-object pattern.

- 2) Avoid sentence structures that can be interpreted in more than one way.
- 3) Avoid interrupting the main thought of the sentence with supplementary information.

EXAMPLE 2 By not interrupting a sentence with an exception: “Bamboo will bend, but rarely – except when it is damaged, rotten or infested with bugs – will it break.”

- 4) To help readers see the relationships between sentences, begin sentences with information familiar to readers or previously mentioned in the document and then introduce new information.

- b) Address readers directly so they can better relate to the information.

EXAMPLE 3 In English, using the personal pronouns “you” and “your”.

NOTE This document does not use “you” and “your” because International Standards use an impersonal tone.

- c) Help readers understand what is happening and who is doing what.

EXAMPLE 4 In English, using the active voice whenever possible, unless there is a specific reason to use the passive.

- d) Use grammar, spelling and punctuation that readers accept as appropriate.

- e) Follow any official or national language standards, unless these standards fail to meet the readers' needs in the specific case.

5.3.4 Write concise sentences

To write concise sentences, authors should do the following:

- a) Include only one idea in each sentence.
- b) Leave out redundant words, vague modifiers, clichés and other constructions that add little meaning but cost readers time and attention.
- c) Keep sentences reasonably short but vary sentence length to give the document a good rhythm.

5.3.5 Write clear and concise paragraphs

To make paragraphs clear and concise, authors should do the following:

- a) Limit paragraphs to one topic.
- b) State the topic near the beginning of the paragraph.
- c) Make connections among and within paragraphs clear [see also [5.2.2](#) and [5.2.3 a](#)].

5.3.6 Consider including images and multimedia

Authors should consider presenting information in ways other than text. Images and multimedia can capture readers' attention and make information easier to process.

To integrate images and multimedia with text, authors should do the following:

- a) Ensure that images and multimedia support the text, and avoid images that serve only as decoration.
- b) Make images and multimedia as simple as possible.
- c) Place images and multimedia close to the text that they refer to and label them clearly.
- d) Provide white space around images and multimedia, making them easy to notice.

5.3.7 Project a respectful tone

If readers interpret a document's tone as respectful of their needs and situation, they are more likely to read it and do as the authors intend. While authors cannot be sure how their readers will interpret tone without involving them (see [5.4.3](#)), authors should always consider how particular document elements can signal tone.

Word choice is an especially important element. Authors should use language that is inclusive and non-discriminatory. Tone is also signalled by other elements, including:

- a) the document's structure;
- b) information design;
- c) images;
- d) personal pronouns;
- e) sentence patterns.

5.3.8 Ensure that the document is cohesive

All the elements discussed in [5.2](#) and [5.3](#) should work together to form a cohesive document. Even if readers understand the individual elements, their comprehension of the whole document will suffer if all these elements do not fit together. To make a document cohesive, authors should do the following:

- a) Ensure that relationships among all words, sentences, paragraphs, sections, images and multimedia are clear.
- b) Use consistent information design, including following relevant style guides.
- c) Use a consistent tone.

5.4 Guidelines for Principle 4: Readers can easily use the information (usable)

5.4.1 Overview

If authors have followed the guidelines in [5.1](#), [5.2](#) and [5.3](#), it is likely that their readers can use the document. But how can authors be certain? This principle focuses on evaluation so that authors can ensure that readers can use the document. Authors should evaluate each document throughout its life cycle, using evaluation methods that are appropriate for each stage.

Authors should evaluate the document:

- a) continually, as it is developed (see [5.4.2](#));
- b) further, by testing it with potential readers (see [5.4.3](#));
- c) periodically, if it is used for a long time (see [5.4.4](#)).

5.4.2 Evaluate the document continually as it is developed

A plain language document rarely has only one draft or is completed in a single work session. Authors should evaluate the document frequently as it is developed and change the document based on the results of the evaluation.

To evaluate the document as it is developed, authors should do the following:

- a) Carefully review the document based on the understanding of readers (see [5.1.2](#)), readers' purpose (see [5.1.3](#)) and the context (see [5.1.4](#)).
- b) Consider whether the document meets the principles and guidelines in this document.

NOTE To do this, authors can use the checklist in [Annex B](#).

5.4.3 Evaluate the document further with readers

The only way to know how readers will react to the document is to involve them, even if only on a small scale. Evaluating with intended readers adds their perspective about the document. To decide whether to involve readers, authors should consider the following factors:

- a) time and resources available;
- b) complexity of the document;
- c) the number of readers and their characteristics;
- d) the seriousness of the consequences if readers cannot use the document (these can be consequences for the readers or for authors).

Involving readers can vary from simple interviews or asking for instant feedback online to extensive usability testing.

5.4.4 Continue to evaluate readers' use of the document

If a document is used repeatedly or continuously, authors should periodically re-evaluate it to determine whether readers can still use it successfully. If they cannot use it successfully, authors should do one of the following:

- a) If the document is still relevant, change it based on the evaluation.
- b) If the document is no longer relevant, remove it from use.

As part of any continued evaluation, authors should measure outcomes if possible. Outcomes measurements are crucial to deciding if and how authors should change a document after initial use or publication. These measurements can include the number of readers who respond to a document or follow instructions correctly, customer satisfaction rates, sales figures or time spent on queries.

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Annex A (informative)

Overview of principles and guidelines

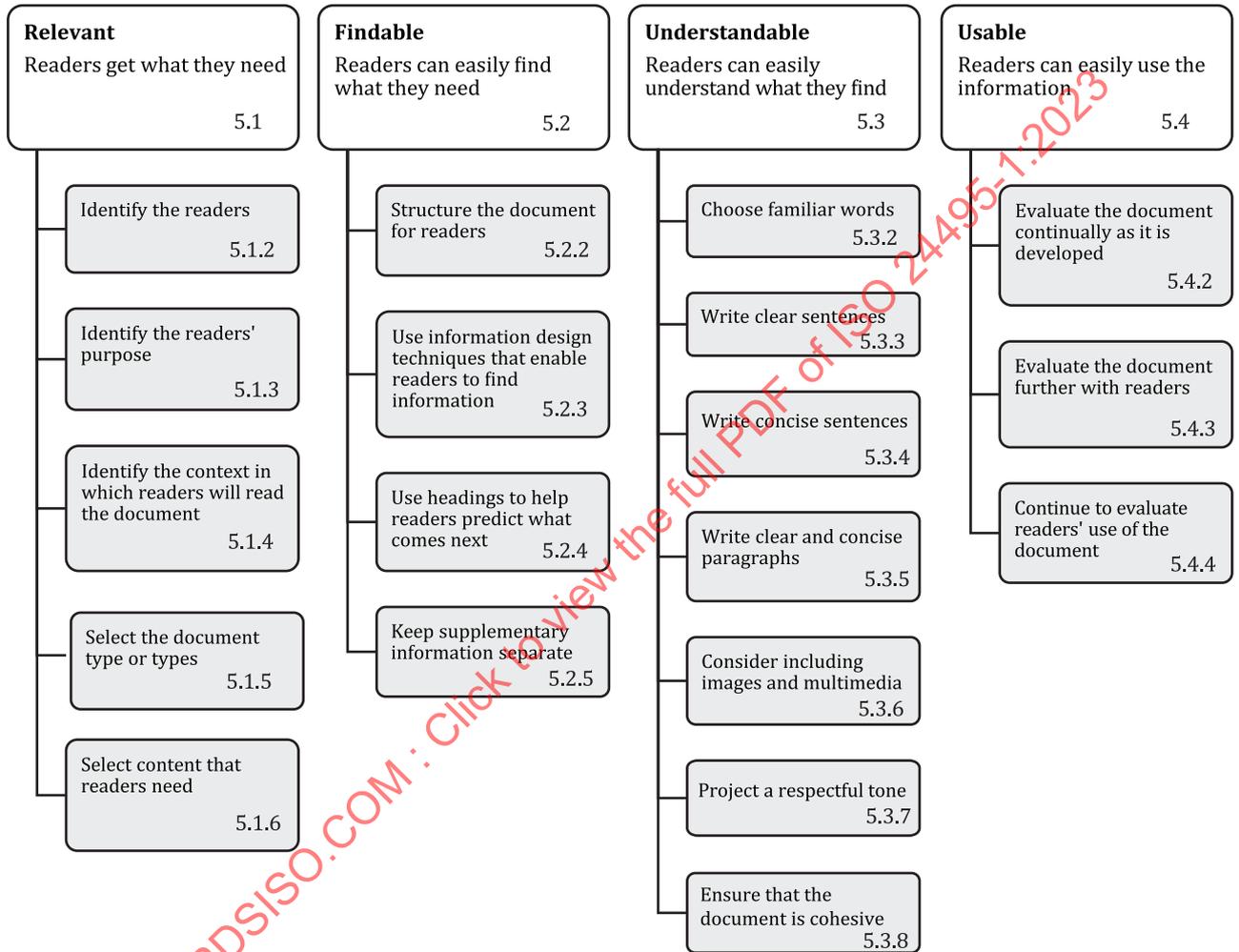


Figure A.1 — Overview of principles and guidelines