

# Layout change can make licensing agreements more agreeable

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Changing the layout of long and tedious software licensing agreements may not only make those agreements more understandable, but may even make the users like them more, according to Penn State researchers. Participants in a study found that end-user licensing agreements, called EULAs, that contained simpler language and were divided into several pages—paraphrased EULAs—enjoyed increased understanding among end users, according to the researchers.

"Simplifying the layout of licensing agreements—such as by removing jargon, using bullet points and spreading out terms over multiple windows—can help improve users' understanding of the legal contracts they are asked to read and consent to on a daily basis," said T. Franklin Waddell, who recently earned his doctorate in mass communications.

Participants who reviewed the paraphrased agreement had a better attitude about the contract, which the researchers refer to as a halo effect. According to Waddell, the halo effect is a tendency for people to make broad but unrelated judgments based on a specific detail or attribute.

"In this study, it appears that our changes to the contract layout had a halo-type effect, as reflected by the improvement in users' attitudes towards the agreement," said Waddell. "In other words, just as attractiveness can lend a halo to a person, layout can put a halo on contracts that improves attitudes and legal understanding."

Grouping the information on separate pages—chunking—may be a simple way to improve memory and comprehension, according to S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory, who worked with Waddell.

"Chunking is an old psychological strategy for enhancing attention and memory," said Sundar. "The paraphrased EULA that we used essentially breaks down a long legal agreement into bite-sized chunks. It is no wonder that [study participants](#) spent more time reading the EULA when it was chunked in this way."

Although people did spend more time reviewing the paraphrased agreement, the researchers said the increase in comprehension was not related to how much time the participants spent reading an agreement.

"We actually tested two reasons why paraphrased EULAs might improve understanding of legal agreements—either because they improve attitudes towards the contract or because they simply require users to view the contract longer," said Waddell. "We found that paraphrased EULAs improved contract understanding because of a change in attitude towards the information rather than due to a simple increase in time of exposure. We think this shows that designers should focus on layout changes that actually improve the way in which information is presented rather than simply forcing viewers to spend more time with the material."

The goodwill generated by agreements is increasingly important for consumers who are worried about online privacy and security.

"The fact that attitudes, rather than exposure time, enhanced comprehension means that the paraphrased EULA had a [halo effect](#) of goodwill," said Sundar. "Users appreciate the software provider's efforts

to make things transparent. This is particularly important in the current climate of increased privacy and security concerns among computer users."

Waddell said paraphrased agreements may not only help software companies alleviate one of the most annoying parts of the signup process, but also improve online safety for users.

"Many software programs update on a regular basis, with each update requiring users to read another lengthy contract," said Waddell. "Thus, people become accustomed to ignoring these agreements, a riskier proposition than some users might realize for the safety of their hardware or personal information."

The researchers, who present their findings at the ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems today (May 12), recruited 52 participants for the study. The participants were asked to install a program on their computer called Reflexology. The researchers told the participants that the program was designed to measure their reflexes.

Before the program was installed, participants were offered one of three licensing agreements—a traditional EULA, a EULA that required the user to scroll through the entire agreement before it could be accepted and the paraphrased EULA.

The researchers measured the time the [users](#) spent examining the agreement. After the participants agreed to the contract, the researchers also asked [participants](#) about their attitude toward the agreement, as well as quizzing them on their comprehension.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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