The Power of Plain Language
Connect and Reach Across the Web

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After this talk, you will be able to:

• Recognize the importance of plain language

• Identify ways to improve your writing using plain language
“The curse of knowledge: when we are given knowledge, it is impossible to imagine what it's like to LACK that knowledge.”

• Chip & Dan Heath, Made to Stick

9 OUT OF 10 adults struggle to understand and use everyday health information

Kutner et al., 2006
Reader who does NOT have limited literacy skills

Reader who has limited literacy skills

Colter & Summers, 2014

“Writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience.”

• Plain Writing Act of 2010
Plain language is defined by results.

It is easy to understand, read, and use.

Nielsen (2008) found that people read an average of 18% of the content on a web page. The percentage goes down with more text.
Plain Language Principles

Simplify complicated words
   Better term:
   Off and on

Intermittent

Explain terms as they are introduced
   Further explain:
   A test to see how strong your bones are

Bone density screening

Plain Language Principles

Be specific
   Further explain:
   Don’t lift anything over 25 pounds.

Don’t lift anything heavy.

Avoid abbreviations
   Better:
   As needed

PRN
**PASSIVE VOICE**
Tests will be ordered by the doctor.

**ACTIVE VOICE**
The doctor will order tests.

**INDIRECT**
The patient will submit the form to the doctor’s office.

**DIRECT**
You will submit the form to the doctor’s office.
Shorter isn’t always better

Version A: You can prevent problems from diabetes. You should lose weight. You should take your insulin as prescribed.

Version B: If you lose weight and take your insulin as prescribed, you can prevent problems from diabetes.
“No matter how wonderful a sentence is, if it doesn’t add new, useful information it should be removed.”

• Kurt Vonnegut

Remove unnecessary words

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A large number of</td>
<td>Many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the event that</td>
<td>If</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At this point in time</td>
<td>Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present a report</td>
<td>Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize</td>
<td>Use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Keep it conversational

• Contractions are okay.

• Avoid trendy abbreviations (you’re not UR).

• Use first and second person (I, we, you).

• Write like you talk.

Let’s recap...

• Simplify words
• Explain terms as they’re introduced
• Be specific
• Avoid abbreviations
• Use active voice
• Speak directly to readers
• Shorter isn’t always better
• Remove unnecessary words
• Keep it conversational
What about readability?

• Readability formulas assess difficulty of vocabulary and sentence structure

• Several options
  (Flesch-Kincaid, SMOG, Fry Formula)

• Results are often reported as a grade level

How do they calculate readability?

1. Sentence length
   (average words/sentence)

2. Word length
   (average syllables/word)
Hemingway App makes your writing bold and clear.

- Check inspection scores. Check a restaurant’s score at your health department’s website. Ask the health department for a copy of the report, or look for it when you get to the restaurant.

- Look for certificates that show kitchen managers have completed food safety training. Proper food safety training can help improve practices that reduce the chance of spreading foodborne germs and illnesses.

- Look for safe food-handling practices. Sick food workers can spread their illness to customers. Most kitchen areas are out of the customer’s sight, but if you can see food being prepared, check to make sure workers are using gloves or utensils to handle foods that will not be cooked further, such as deli meats and salad greens.

- Order food that is properly cooked. Certain foods, including meat, poultry, and fish, need to be cooked to a temperature high enough to kill harmful germs that may be present. If you’re served undercooked meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs, send them back to be cooked until they are safe to eat.
Simplify Numbers in Your Writing

- Use absolute risk over relative risk
- Use frequencies, if possible
- Avoid decimals and fractions

55 out of 100 adults struggle with quantitative skills
- National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003

**RELATIVE**
New drug reduced Alzheimer’s risk by 50%

**ABSOLUTE**
New drug reduced Alzheimer’s risk from 2 per 100 people to 1 per 100 people
Beyond words and numbers

• Keep sections and paragraphs short
• Avoid typing in all caps
• Create white space
• Omit slashes and semicolons
• Create lists to break up text
• Use headers to guide your readers

“In well-educated and well-trained adults, short-term memory can rarely store more than seven independent items at one time.”

• Doak, Doak, & Root (1996)
A few notes on headings

• Use strong verbs and active voice

• Be as descriptive as possible

• Use questions to form headings

Example 1
• What ketones are
• Why ketones are produced
• What happens when ketones are produced
• When to test for ketones
• How to test for ketones
• What ketone tests are available

Example 2
Ketones: What are they?
What ketones are
What happens when ketones are produced?

Testing for Ketones
Why test for ketones
When to test for ketones
How to test for ketones
What ketone tests are available

Example from:
Doak, Doak, & Root (1996)
A few notes on using lists

• Lead-in sentences give context (be sure to use parallel structure)

• Great to use when order is important

• Creates white space on the page

• Don’t overuse

Without lead-in sentence
Appointment needs
1. Your insurance card
2. Payment method for your co-pay
3. A list of questions for your doctor

With lead-in sentence
When you come to your appointment, please bring:
1. Your insurance card
2. Payment method for your co-pay
3. A list of questions for your doctor
Without parallel structure

At your appointment, your doctor will ask to review your:
• health history
• current health concern
• verify your medication list

With parallel structure

At your appointment, your doctor will ask to review your:
• health history
• current health concern
• medication list
Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease in which blood sugar (glucose) levels in your body are too high. Diabetes can cause serious health problems, including heart attack or stroke, blindness, problems during pregnancy, and kidney failure.

Q: What are the different types of diabetes?
A: The three main types of diabetes are:
- **Type 1 diabetes.** If you have type 1 diabetes, your body does not make insulin, so you must take insulin every day.
- **Type 2 diabetes.** This is the most common type of diabetes. With type 2 diabetes, your body does not make enough insulin or is not able to use its own insulin correctly.
- **Gestational diabetes.** Gestational diabetes happens only during pregnancy. Gestational diabetes can cause health problems for the baby and the mother if not controlled.

Q: Am I at risk for diabetes?
A: Risk factors for type 1 diabetes:
- Age: It often develops in childhood.
- Family health history

Risk factors for type 2 diabetes:
- Overweight or obesity
- Older age: 45 or older
- Family health history
- Family background of African-American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Having a baby that weighed 9 pounds or more at birth
- Having diabetes during pregnancy (gestational diabetes)
- High blood pressure: Taking medicine for high blood pressure or having a blood pressure of 140/90 mmHg or higher. (Both numbers are important. If one or both numbers are usually high, you have high blood pressure.)
- High cholesterol: HDL cholesterol of 55 mg/dL or lower and triglycerides of 250 mg/dL or higher
- Lack of physical activity: People who are active less than three times a week
- Having polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- Personal history of heart disease or stroke

Source: CDC

Always check your employer’s style guide
Guidelines and Toolkits for Writing

Federal Plain Language Guidelines
https://plainlanguage.gov/

Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills
https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/resources/teaching-patients-with-low-literacy-skills/

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Written Materials Toolkit

ADA National Network, Guidelines for Writing
https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing

Tools to Get You Started

Icon Array
http://www.iconarray.com/

Readable
https://readable.com/

Hemingway Editor
http://www.hemingwayapp.com/

University of Michigan Medical Dictionary
https://www.lib.umich.edu/plain-language-dictionary
“Anyone who says writing is easy isn’t doing it right.”

• Amy Joy

Questions?

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References


