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

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
  - Intermittent
- Better term:
  - Off and on
- Explain terms as they are introduced
  - Bone density screening
- Further explain:
  - A test to see how strong your bones are
Plain Language Principles

Be specific

Don’t lift anything heavy.

Further explain:

Don’t lift anything over 25 pounds.

Avoid abbreviations

PRN

Better:

As needed

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A large number of</th>
<th>Many</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<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)
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

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

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About Arthritis

1. What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a disease that affects the joints or tissues around the joint. There are more than 100 types of arthritis.

2. What are the most common types of arthritis?

The most common form of arthritis in the United States is osteoarthritis. Other common types of arthritis include rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, and gout.

3. What are the symptoms of arthritis?

Symptoms can vary in degree and may include pain, swelling, redness, and stiffness.

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Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease in which blood sugar (glucose) levels in the body are too high. Diabetes can cause various health problems, including heart attack or stroke, kidney disease, and eye problems.

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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

