



Plain English Bootcamp: Part II – Tips for improving understanding of written materials

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Part I of this plain language series, Health literacy and clear writing go hand in hand – Make the connection between literacy level and plain English, defined plain language and demonstrated how the theory can be put into practice. You can read it on this site at <http://www.ohpe.ca/node/11343>.

I Introduction

This feature article, the second in a three-part series on plain language, builds on the May 28 2010 feature, Health literacy and clear writing go hand in hand – Make the connection between literacy level and plain English.

Being able to read is important. Being able to understand what you read – that's important too. It is clear that a key component to enhancing literacy is not only increasing the ability to read written information but also to understand it. Health literacy is "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions." (Health Literacy in Canada, Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).

However, as reported by the Canadian Council on Learning, "Approximately 800 studies published between 1970 and 2006 indicate that most health-related materials are written at reading levels that exceed the reading skill of an average high-school graduate." Add to this that "the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey indicates that close to half of the Canadian adult population aged 16 and over, performed below Level 3 on the prose and literacy scale, the 'desired level' of competence for coping with the increasing skill demands of the emerging knowledge and information economy" (OECD and Statistics Canada, 1995) and it is obvious that there is a mismatch between our target readers' literacy levels and health-related information.



II Plain English to the rescue

To improve health literacy, we can begin to remedy this ‘mismatch’ in terms of written information and our target readers’ ability to process and understand it, by incorporating plain English principles into health-related materials. Read the following to see the difference:

Before plain English: Eye strain manifests from excessive exertion of the ocular muscles. Any muscles that are kept immobile for a lengthy duration will result in overuse of the respective muscle, causing the muscles to strain.

After plain English: Eye strain happens when the eye muscles are in one position for too long.

Intuitively, the ‘after’ example just seems better – better because it is easier to read and understand. But what specifically makes it better? What is it that makes it easier to read and understand? Introducing plain English...

Although learning a variety of plain English principles cannot transform someone into a clear and concise writer overnight, learning plain English concepts can go a long way in helping you gradually improve your materials as you write or critique them. There is definitely no magic formula, however, the following questions and bootcamp-style ‘drills’ provide a hands-on way to get into the habit of incorporating plain English principles.

III Plan Ahead: Know who you are targeting and why

The following exercises or ‘drills’ assume that before writing yourself, or critiquing someone else’s writing, you have developed or have been informed of the information’s objective. Ideally, there is an objective based on the target readers’ characteristics and the information was planned by answering questions like:

- Who do you want to write this communication piece for?
- Who needs to know this information? Is there more than one intended type of reader?
- What specifically do you want to write about?
- What’s in it for them?
- What is their demographic profile? (e.g., age, income, gender, literacy level)
- What is their psychographic profile? (e.g., needs, values, wants)
- What is their current knowledge regarding the topic?
- What is their current interest level in the topic? Are they motivated?
- Where/how will they access the communication piece?
- When do they need to know it? When is your completion date?
- Why should they care? Why do they need to know it?
- Why are you bothering to write this communication piece? Why will they consider it valuable?
- How do you want them to use the information? What do you want them to do?
- How will the information meet their needs?

Integral to assessing the target readers is determining their literacy level by asking questions like:

- Is English their first language?



- What level of education do they have?
- Do they have other issues that may influence literacy?
- Where would they fall on the four International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey literacy levels or whatever scale you feel is appropriate? (Please refer to the Resources section for a link to the Adult Literacy and Skills Survey.)

Although the key to increasing understanding is to be a plain English matchmaker – by matching writing style with the target reader – even if your target reader is high literacy, like a professional target group or specific industry ‘insiders,’ plain English still greatly enhances understanding and usefulness:

- *High literacy* readers appreciate clearly written information because it is quickly engaging and makes it easy for them to take from it what they need.
- *Low literacy* readers need clearly written information so they can not only read it, but also understand it. This is why it is important when field testing to ask for readers’ interpretation of the information, not just what they remember or their ‘regurgitation’ of it.

As a guideline, experts recommend writing documents intended for the general public at the 8th or 9th grade level and often recommend that important health and safety information be written as low as the 5th grade level. Making an assessment of the reading ability and literacy level of your audience is one thing, writing at this level is another thing all together because it is usually difficult to write to a level that is not your own. These plain English bootcamp-style ‘drills’ should help...

IV Here’s the drill...

Whenever you are writing or critiquing written information, try these exercises. Ideally, they will eventually become a habit—even an addiction (the positive kind that is...):

Drill #1: Engage the readers right off the top and be logical throughout

Organize the information from the readers’ perspective ensuring a logical flow that guides them through the information. Ask yourself these questions:

- Does the information begin with a statement of personal relevance or discussion as to why they should learn about or care about the information?
- Does the information flow logically? For example, from most important to the reader to least important, or easier information first followed by more complex, or things that affect many before those that affect few, or from the general to the specific?
- Are they being guided easily through the information through use of sub-headings, bullets, checklists, *charts*, and so on?

Drill #2: Be relevant; focus on the readers’ needs

Only provide information that the readers need or want to know and focus them, not yourself or your organization. Try this: After every sentence, ask yourself, “So what? Is this information relevant to the reader?” If yes, and the information is relevant, ask yourself, “Is it presented in a way they will understand and use/act on?” If no, and the information is not relevant, cut it!



Drill #3: Be concrete

Avoid vague terms and ideas; only include concrete information. If concepts are not concrete try to improve them by, for instance, adding examples to make them concrete. Ask yourself these questions:

- When I say X, what do I really mean? Can I see it, touch it, act on it, or is it too vague?
- What questions might this information trigger from the readers? How can I re-work the information to cover off the answers?
- Is the language I have used as specific as possible? For example, what does “in the near future” mean?

Drill #4: Be appropriate

Select the best tone for the specific type of reader and topic, and only use industry language that they will understand and that is helpful. Try this:

- Circle anything written in the third-person (e.g., “customers”, “clients”) and ask yourself, if the first-person and/or second-person would be more effective? Would it make the information more direct, personal, friendly? (I/we/you/your)

Drill #5: Be engaging

Use the active voice wherever possible. Try this: Circle the subject and verb in each sentence and then ask yourself:

- Is the subject doing/done or will do the action stated by the verb?
- If not, revise so that the subject is doing the action. For example, “The mat was sat on by the cat” becomes “The cat sat on the mat.”

Drill #6: Be concise

Use short sentences and short words and take out unnecessary words. Try this:

- Check that each sentence only includes one complete thought, not numerous thoughts strung together.
- Circle any sentences that are more than 30 words; aim for 15 – 20 words.
- Look for any unnecessary words and cut them.
- Try to keep the subject and verb close together, ideally near the beginning of the sentence by circling the subject and verb and looking for this standard word sequence: subject, verb, object (e.g., “The cat sat on the mat”, “The boy loved the girl”, “The dog ate my homework.”)

Drill #7: Be direct

Avoid redundant phrases and repetition unless repetition adds clarity. Ask yourself:

- Is this phrase or specific word useful? Does it add to the content or make it confusing?



- Does it make the information unnecessarily repetitive or longer than it needs to be?
- Scan for common phrases that are redundant. Keep a list to check in the future (e.g., “in order to” can usually be deleted).

Drill #8: Be authentic

Don't use 'big words' unless you are sure that they are appropriate for the readers, and make sure you explain technical or complicated terms at the level appropriate for the readers. Try this:

- Circle all words that are longer than six letters and ask yourself, “Is it the best word?” and “Is there a simpler alternative?” Keep a list to check in the future.
- Circle all technical terms and complicated language and double check. Ask yourself if the readers would understand this? If you are not sure, define technical terms right after you have introduced them using brackets, examples, illustrations, etc.
- Circle all words that end in –tion, -al, -ance, -ment, -ure and ask yourself, “Is this really a verb that I have turned into a noun?” (This is called nominization.) For example, with nominization: “The implementation of the operational plan will be done by the nurses and health promotion professionals.” Without nominization: “The nurses and health professionals will implement the operational plan.”

Drill #9: Be selective

Only use idioms (i.e., jargon, clichés), if they are appropriate for your reader, and only use abbreviations, and acronyms if you are sure they add clarity. Try this:

- Circle all idioms, acronyms and abbreviations and ask yourself, “Do I really need to include this?” “Does it add clarity?” “Is it educational/helpful?”
- If abbreviations and acronyms do add clarity, only use them if they appear more than once in the document by putting brackets around the first reference. If they don't appear more than once, you don't need the abbreviation – adding them just adds clutter.

Drill #10: Be accurate

Be consistent by checking for consistency of structure. Try this:

- Circle all headlines and sub-headlines and check that they follow a consistent style (e.g., question-and-answer format).
- Circle all lists and check that their structure is consistent (e.g., all start with verbs or all start with nouns).

Drill #11: Be accurate

Make sure that all information is accurate with no contradictions. Try this:



- Check your content at the macro, 'big picture' level by asking yourself, "Is all the content accurate with no contradictions?" (e.g., descriptions, instructions, facts).
- Check your content at the micro, 'details' level by asking yourself, "Are all details accurate and consistent? (e.g., dates, quantities, contact information, product/service names).
- Check for grammar errors and typos with proofreading done by someone who has not been involved in the development process. Our eye becomes trained to see what we want it to see; proofreading requires a fresh pair of eyes.

Drill #12: Field test at every stage possible

The importance of gauging the effectiveness of your information by going directly to the target reader cannot be overstated. Although listed here as Drill #12 (to provide a logical sequence!), ideally, try to run your ideas by your target readers as many times as possible throughout the writing process. Ask early and ask often. For example, run topic ideas by your target readers while you develop your outline and when reviewing drafts. Think of ways to test your information by finding out from your target readers:

- Do they want to read it?
- Can they read it?
- Can they understand it?
- Can they make use of it?

A word of advice here, don't literally ask your target reader, for example, "Can you understand it?" because this type of question lends itself to closed-ended answer like "yes" or "no." Instead, ask your target reader specific questions about the content of your information so that their answers demonstrate whether they can in fact both read and understand it.

Ultimately, your goal with field testing is to assess whether you met your objective – and remember to have an objective and outline planned in advance. Things come full circle back to Step 1; review your objective and, based on the feedback directly from your target readers, assess whether you met it or not – and be prepared to revise... assess again.... revise again... assess again ...and so on. Effective writing is all about the revisions – collaboration moves you closer and closer to clarity, understanding, and usefulness.

Drill #13: Be visually appealing

Use design to enhance plain language and further increase readability, understandability, and usefulness.

The old adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words" could not be more valid than where enhancing written information is concerned. In fact, it can be the deal breaker; even the most expertly written information in superb plain English will remain unread if its design scares the reader away. Everything from font size to use of white space to image selection can either improve or take away from readability and understanding. Ask yourself:

- Is the information easy to find through consistent font usage and styles?
- Is the font choice appropriate for the audience?
- Is the layout inviting with an appropriate amount of white space?



- Are the images and graphics relevant to the content and relevant for the reader?

V Practice makes perfect

Quoting another old adage, “practice makes perfect” could also not be more valid than where writing is concerned. Hopefully this plain English bootcamp-style ‘drill’ provides a hands-on reference tool to use as a reminder while you write or critique to get in the habit of incorporating plain English principles into your writing. However, it in no way replaces good old-fashioned practice, practice, and more practice. Ideally, the principles will become automatic as you gradually adopt plain English as your ‘default’ writing style.

There is always more to learn: The other half of the clear language equation

To be read and understood, legibility cannot be ignored. Be sure to read part three in this three-part series in October where we explore the importance of design in plain language. Please also feel free to share this article; health literacy works better when we all work together.

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