



## Using the Principles of PLAIN LANGUAGE

### To Improve Knowledge Transfer and Facilitate Informed Decision Making

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#### Introduction

There are currently 7,151 languages spoken in the world. The single most effective language of them all is “plain language.” Matt Groening, the cartoonist and creator of the TV series, “The Simpsons,” was fond of saying, “I know all those words, but that sentence makes no sense to me.” So many sentences don’t make sense, especially in the realm of science, medicine and technology. In the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities, language plays a vital part in defining people, allocating services and supports and modifying the expectations of human performance.

HELEN Journal is delighted to publish this article on the use of “plain language.” The push for informed decision-making, helping individuals to formulate choices, decisions and self-determination rely on an understanding of the words that are used to promote those offerings.

Maggie Nygren has made a major contribution to the need to use plain, simple, and understandable language, and we believe she has used that premise in crafting this exclusive article for HELEN Journal.

- Rick Rader, MD, Editor in Chief,  
*HELEN: The Journal of Human Exceptionality*

**P**lain language is one strategy for sharing information that others need for future action. At its most basic level, plain language is an action-oriented approach to knowledge transfer.

#### Defining Plain Language

Plain language is a communication strategy used to transfer knowledge for an audience’s later action. Using the principles of plain language can enhance the ability of professionals to communicate actionable information to nonprofessional audiences.

Plain language is not a language itself; it is a way to adapt and present complex information to a non-expert audience so that they can understand and act on it. Plain language has been adopted in public health campaigns to reach target audiences, by clinicians to connect with patients and families, and by law- and policymakers to clearly communicate rules and regulations.

#### Purpose of Plain Language

Plain language is used when it is important for an audience to quickly understand complex information and take informed action. As plain language informs for the purpose of action, it is an action-oriented communication strategy.

While it might be tempting to think of plain language as just simplified language that a speaker or writer can create on the fly, it is more accurate to view it as a sophisticated adaptation targeted to the needs of a particular audience.

The principles of plain language can be applied in written, verbal, graphic, gestural, and even symbolic communication. Plain language strategies are frequently used in fact sheets, summaries, instructions, graphics, and gestures—situations where information is shared explicitly so that a recipient can later act using that knowledge. The basic principles of plain language are using an active voice, positive tone, common words, and short sentences while presenting information in a way that is well-organized, concise, and appropriate for the intended audience (Dingwall et al., 2019).

### **Retaining Complex Language**

Complex or specialized language is desirable or required in some situations. Creative works, like poetry or fiction, may rely on intricacies of language to express meaning. Mathematical and musical notations use specialized symbols and syntax to convey information. Technical works may require complex language and imagery to effectively transfer knowledge between experts. Some kinds of documents (contracts, audits, lab reports, etc.) must follow strict rules to ensure accuracy and to comply with professional standards, legal requirements, and ethical obligations.



### **Function of Plain Language Summaries**

Plain language summaries of documents and communications using complex language can be created to facilitate knowledge transfer. Plain language summaries are literal adaptations of such works and are not line-by-line translations.

Summaries focus on the important points or findings that an audience might rely on to make decisions. The function of plain language summaries is identical to that of plain language itself: to adapt and present complex information in a way that a non-expert audience can both understand and act on.

### **Considering Historical and Ethical Perspectives**

Movement toward the adoption of plain language in various settings has been growing in the United States since the 1940s (Schriver, 2017). In the 1990s, the federal cross-agency Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) was created; its current resources and guidelines are available on its website, [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov). Executive orders signed by Presidents Clinton (Exec. Order No. 12866, 1993; Exec. Order No. 12988, 1996) and Obama (Exec. Order No. 13563, 2011) directed federal agencies to use plain language in their regulations and communications, and President Obama signed into law the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which required federal agencies to write all public documents in plain language going forward.

Willerton (2015) contends that use of plain language is an ethical issue: that people have a right to understand the information they receive from government representatives, health insurance companies, and clinicians so that they can act in their own self-interests. Willerton further suggests that it is unethical *not* to use plain language in the promotion of informed consent and decision making, particularly in working with those with low health literacy when they face unfamiliar, stressful, and/or challenging situations.

## Using the Principles of Plain Language

Plain language principles can be used to effectively adapt complex information for use by diverse target audiences (PLAIN, n.d.; World Health Organization, n.d.), including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Depending on the diversity of the target audience, attempts to adapt content into plain language may not result in a single, one-size-fits-all product. Language that might be understood easily by one audience might not be understood by another audience with different experiences.

Several different plain language versions may be required to reach diverse audiences. Simply writing to an eighth-grade literacy level will not result in a document that aligns with the everyday language used by audiences of, for example, PhD candidates, small business owners, working parents, and recent immigrants (*Federal Plain Language Guidelines*, 2011).

### Identify the Audience

The first step in preparing plain language communication is to identify the scope of the target audience. The National Archives (n.d.) suggests that authors prepare to write or speak to the intended audience rather than to an audience similar to themselves. Consider if, for example, the audience is all people with intellectual disability or a particular subset, all people at risk of a condition or only those from a particular culture, all people in a neighborhood who would be affected by a policy or only those who take public transportation, and so on.

Knowing the boundaries of the target audience and using the principles of plain language to guide the organization and delivery of information will increase the likelihood that the audience will understand and be able to act on the new information. The basic principles of plain language—using an active voice, positive tone, common words, and short sentences while presenting information in a way that is well-organized, concise, and appropriate for the intended audience—are described below.

## Use the Active Voice

Plain language uses the active voice. The active voice focuses the audience on either the action or the action doer.

### Active Voice

In the active voice, both the action and the doer of the action are clear (“I threw the ball”). The active voice uses a clear and direct sentence construction that focuses on the doer (*I*) and the action (*threw*) rather than on the target of the action (*ball*).

The audience may be the doer in the sentence even if they are not named. For example, instructions using the active voice focus on the steps (actions) for the audience (the doer) to complete. Announcements and signs using the active voice also focus on actionable information (action) for the audience (the doer) to use.

### Passive Voice

In the passive voice, the focus is placed on an action's target rather than the action or the doer of the action (“The ball was thrown by me”). The passive voice results in generally longer sentences that may require the use of additional verbs (Kramer, 2022). Sentences in the passive voice can be harder for some audiences to decode quickly or at all.

Some situations are appropriate for the passive voice. For example, the passive voice is used in a journal article to place greater emphasis on a *finding* than on the *finder*. The passive voice is also used when the doer is unknown (“mistakes were made”) or irrelevant to the point of the sentence (“there was an accident that blocked traffic for miles”).

### Use a Positive Tone

Plain language uses a positive tone. Tone is conveyed through the framing of anticipated outcomes and those words and actions that signal an author's emotional attitude toward the

topic or the audience. Emotional attitude can be signaled by word choice; nonverbal cues the audience attributes to the author's attitude; and other vocal behaviors such as rhythm, volume, or pitch (Roberts, 2021).

### **Frame Outcomes**

Plain language favors framing anticipated outcomes positively rather than negatively, emphasizing benefits to the audience. Persuasive communication in general favors leading with positive outcomes that receivers can anticipate if proposed actions are followed. The following statements convey the same information but in different tones:

- Negative tone: "Late fees will be added to payments received after that date." "You'll get sick/feel worse by doing that." "I'm too busy to talk now."
- Positive tone: "Pay by this date to avoid late fees." "You'll stay healthy/feel better by doing this." "I can talk now, but only for a second."

Presenting information in a well-organized manner will increase the audience's understanding and use of new information.

### **Communicate Emotional Attitude**

Plain language favors the use of words that are positive or without emotional overtones over those that send a negative message. To increase the likelihood that the audience will accept the new knowledge and act on it, plain language communications must signal a positive—or at least a neutral—attitude toward both the audience and the knowledge being transferred.

Public health announcements routinely adopt a positive or a neutral attitude because fear-based or stigmatizing messaging can backfire (Fairchild & Bayer, 2021). Audiences are attuned to verbal and nonverbal cues and are less likely to accept and act on information when they feel disrespected, ignored, or that important information has been withheld.

### **Use Common Words**

Plain language uses common words and phrases. Common words and phrases are those that are short, informal, and familiar to most speakers. Common words are the words of everyday life.

Plain language requires both clarity and brevity to achieve actionable knowledge transfer. Common words can clearly communicate an idea but may not provide the precision of more complex or formal words. While common words may be inexact, they can accurately communicate major points.

### **Use Short Sentences**

Plain language uses sentences that are short, informal, and to the point. Sentences that are long, formal, and/or use complex structures are not as effective in rapidly transferring actionable knowledge as are those that are short and simple.

In addition to their length, plain language sentences share other characteristics. The topics of plain sentences are primarily information- and action-oriented. Nearly all verbs used in plain language are action verbs. Except for presenting information in list form, plain language sentences avoid using clauses or structures that require commas, hyphens, semicolons, or other punctuation to aid a recipient's comprehension.

### **Present Information in a Well-Organized Manner**

Presenting information in a well-organized manner will increase the audience's understanding and use of new information. Organizing information under meaningful headings can enhance an audience's comprehension of the material when it is presented and be useful to reference later to inform specific actions.



As described in *Lessons from the 2021 Federal Plain Language Report Card (2022)*, well-organized, plain language content will:

- Begin with an explanation of the reason or purpose for the presentation, image, or document.
- Focus the content on the needs or interests of the audience rather than on the perspective of the author or sponsor.
- Chunk information into short, manageable sections.
- Provide clear section headings that begin with action words.
- Place the most important information near the beginning and the less actionable information near the end.
- Put action steps in the correct or logical order.
- Avoid including information without explaining its use.
- Limit graphics to important content and at a scale useful for later action.
- Limit the length of lists of additional resources or hyperlinks.

### Be Concise

Plain language is concise. Concise language uses the most effective words to get the author's point across. Concise language omits words that might add emphasis or grace but do not enhance meaning. For example, in "The information is really critical," the word "really" can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence.

The *Federal Plain Language Guidelines (2011)* outline several techniques to develop concise language:



- Omit redundant words and excess modifiers. "Departments A and B worked together on a joint project" will be more concise with the removal of "together" and "joint."
- Avoid repetitive synonyms that convey a single concept. "Due and payable" is easily understood using only the word "due."
- Steer clear of hidden verbs. Hidden verbs are verbs that have been turned into nouns by adding a suffix (e.g., *-ment*, *-tion*, *-sion*, *-ance*) and require an additional verb to deliver the action. The sentence "We will announce" is more concise than "We will make an announcement."

### Be Appropriate for the Intended Audience

Plain language is tailored so that the intended audience can effectively grasp and act on new information. There is no "universal" plain language adaptation. The words and imagery used in plain language presentations or materials must align with the intended audience's knowledge and experience. To be effective, plain language presentations and materials must grab the attention of the intended audience, describe why the knowledge to be transferred is important, and explain how the audience can or should act on the information.

Plain language is a sophisticated adaptation of complex information. Developing plain language materials requires an intentional development process of drafting, testing, and editing to create an effective adaptation of a source document.

### Conclusion

Plain language is a strategy for adapting complex information for a non-expert audience to easily grasp and act on. The basic principles of plain language are using an active voice, positive tone, common words, and short sentences while presenting information in a way

that is well-organized, concise, and appropriate for the intended audience.

Materials and communications may use complex language for legitimate reasons. Plain language summaries of documents can be created to facilitate important knowledge transfer for an audience's later action. Plain language summaries are adaptations of works, rather than line-by-line translations, and may become valuable supplements to the original documents.

Plain language is not a language itself, nor is it possible to create universal plain language materials that will be effective with all audiences. Several versions of plain language materials may be required to effectively reach broad and diverse audiences.

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