# Webcast: Plain Language Strategies

Presenter: Kelly Warmington

Text version of PowerPoint™ presentation for webcast sponsored by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), Center on Knowledge Translation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research (KTDRR). Webcast information: [https://ktdrr.org/training/webcasts/webcast33](http://ktdrr.org/training/webcasts/webcast33)

**Title slide template:** Blue background with American Institutes for Research (AIR) on the bottom of the page, underneath AIR logo.

# **Slide 1: Title**

Plain Language Strategies

Presenter: Kelly Warmington

Hosted by Joann Starks

**Slide Template**: White background with blue bar at bottom. On far left inside the blue bar, a picture of adult holding a smiling baby. On bottom to the right of the blue bar, the logo SickKids. The word Sick is light blue; Kids is darker blue. Above the s in Kids is the letter R in a small circle.

**Slide 2: Plain Language Strategies**Kelly Warmington, BScH, Bed, Med, PMP. Program Manager, Knowledge Translation, The Hospital for Sick Children. March 3, 2016

**Slide 3: Learning Objectives**

Following this session participants will be able to:

* Define plain language
* Choose appropriate plain language tools when writing and reviewing documents
* Use the Plain Language Writing Checklist

**Slide 4: About me**

On the left: picture of an x-ray of a knee joint

In the center: picture of an apple

On the right: picture of a child bending over with top of head and hands on the ground.

(Images: <http://biorevive.com/>)

**Slide 5: About me**

Picture of presenter Kelly Warmington sitting in her office.

**Slide 6: The Hospital for Sick Children**

Picture of the Hospital for Sick Children, a tall building in urban setting.

2014-2015

* 10,440 staff, students and volunteers
* 15,817 inpatients
* 69,507 ER visits

Three intersecting blue circles are to the right of the picture of the hospital.

Top circle: Clinical care

Center circle: Learning

Bottom circle: Research

**Slide 7: Plain Language at SickKids**

The importance of plain language use…

* 96% of respondents value PL use in their work
* PL is perceived to be important at the department (93%) and hospital levels (96%)

Barriers to plain language use…

* No barriers (40%)
* Lack of time (24%)
* Other (21%)
* Speech bubble with “Culture of jargon”
* Speech bubble with “Difficult to convey complex ideas”
* Don’t know how (13%)
* …

**Slide 8: Building Capacity**

5 light blue hexagons with different words in them:

Center left, largest: Plain Language Use

Top left: Education

Top right: Time

Bottom right: Culture shift

Bottom left: Practice

**Slide 9: Plain Language in Research**

A set of 5 circles with lines connecting them. Three are top to bottom and three are left to right, with the same circle in the center.

Top: Knowledge Translation (KT)

Center: Research (connected below KT)

Bottom: Posters/Publications (connected below Research)

Left: Lay summaries (connected to the left of Research)

Center Right: Consent forms (connected to the right of Research)

**Slide 10: Plain Language in Knowledge Translation**

A set of four circles with three of them connected with a line to a central circle with the following words:

Knowledge Translation (in center)

Main messages (connected at top)

Clear communication of findings (connected on bottom left)

Stakeholder engagement participatory research (connected on bottom right)

**Slide 11: What is Plain Language?**

How would you define plain language?

# **Slide 12: Plain Language (PL)**

Plain language is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.

* Written material is in plain language if your audience can:
* Find what they need;
* Understand what they find; and
* Use what they find to meet their needs.

(plainlanguage.gov)

# **Slide 13: When to use PL…**

Table with two columns

Column 1 (on left) with title “Written”

* Brochures
* Lay Summaries
* E-mail
* Paper and web-based knowledge products
* Educational materials
* Websites
* Consent forms
* eLearning development
* …

Column 2 (on right) with title “Oral”

* Meetings
* Presentations
* Facilitation/teaching
* Webinars, online meetings or education
* Everyday communication with colleagues, patients, clients, knowledge users, etc.
* Videos
* Virtual Instructor-led Training
* Stakeholder communication
* …

# **Slide 14: Why is PL Important?**

“The Hardest thing in the world to understand is is the income tax” – Albert Einstein

Image of section from the income tax form: “Complete the application calculation below and enter the result on line 3. If you paid 5% GST, 12% or 13% HST or if you paid 15% HST after June 30 2010, under an agreement entered into after May 2, 2006, do the following calculation:”

(GST190 Worksheet Canada Revenue Agency)

**Slide 15: Literacy**

# Literacy is understanding, evaluating, using, and engaging with written text to participate in the society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/understandingliteracy.html)

**Slide 16: Literacy**

Reading Level of Adults in the U.S.

* Proficient: 13%
* Intermediate: 44%
* Basic: 29%
* Below Basic: 14%

Literacy in the U.S.

* Percent of U.S. adults who can’t read (below basic level): 14%
* Number of U.S. adults who can’t read: 32,000,000

(U.S. Department of Education, National Institute of Literacy)

**Slide 17: Why is PL Important?**

EXTRA EXTRA!!! Read All About It! Real news headlines..

* Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers
* Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
* Miners Refuse to Work after Death
* Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
* Man Struck By Lightning Faces Battery Charge
* Kids Make Nutritious Snacks

**Slide 18: Why is PL Important?**

Picture of a garage entrance with buildings and trees in the background, with multiple signs on a post and on the sidewalk, such as Single lane; Two way traffic; Parking; Enter, Notice. Largest sign says “Garage temporarily under construction sorry for any inconvenience”

**Slide 19: PL in the News**

Toni Cordell vividly remembers, she was stunned when the nurse asked, “How are you since your hysterectomy?”

“I just wanted to scream. I really didn't know I was surrendering part of my body.”

“I didn’t read a single word. I didn’t even try because I suspected the medical jargon would make the documents too difficult to understand.”

(The Washington Post, February 20, 2007)

**Slide 20: PL in the News**

President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 on October 13, 2010. The law requires that federal agencies use, “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.”

(plainlanguage.gov/pllaw/)

**Slide 21: PLAIN**

Picture of screenshot for Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) (<http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/>)

Image in center with Plain Language in English and 12 other languages.

Below image on left: Who are we? Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) is the international association for plain language supporters and practitioners around the world. Our growing network includes members from over 20 countries working in clear communication in at least 10 languages.

Below image on right: What is plain language? A communication is in plain language if the language, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

**Slide 22: Categories of PL Tools**

Three columns

Column 1 (left): Word Choice

* Word choice
* Reading level (word, sentence, paragraph length)
* Grammar

Column 2 (center): Design

* Page set-up Graphics
* Fonts
* Branding

Column 3 (right): Strategy-specific

* Choosing the right KT strategy
* e.g., Lay summaries, writing for the web, academic posters

**Slide 23: The Hospital for Sick Children**

(Same as Slide 6)

Picture of the Hospital for Sick Children, a tall building in urban setting.

2014-2015

* 10,440 staff, students and volunteers
* 15,817 inpatients
* 69,507 ER visits

Three intersecting blue circles are to the right of the picture of the hospital.

Top circle: Clinical care

Center circle: Learning

Bottom circle: Research

**Slide 24: The Hospital for Sick Children**

(Similar to Slide 23, but uses larger font; centered awkwardly on page; circles are larger and purple)

Picture of the Hospital for Sick Children, a tall building in urban setting.

2014-2015

* 10,440 staff, students and volunteers
* 15,817 inpatients
* 69,507 ER visits

Three intersecting purple circles are to the right of the picture of the hospital.

Top: Clinical care

Center: Learning

Bottom: Research

**Slide 25: Visuwords**

Picture of screenshot of Visuwords (visualize a word). It isa scatter gram showing words connected to each other, with various colors and arrows indicating parts of speech and relationships.

(http://www.visuwords.com/)

**Slide 26: Word Choice**

“I never write ‘metropolis’ for seven cents because I can get the same price for ‘city’.” --Mark Twain

1. Use Everyday Words

Due to the fact = Because

In the event of = If

Has the capability to = Can

**Slide 27: Word Choice - Example**

Being a teenager can be stressful – managing school, friends, family, hobbies, and everything else. Now imagine being a teen with a chronic disease. You also need to manage medical appointments, medications, exercises and therapies, all while you’re not feeling 100%.

Being a teenager can be stressful. **You have a lot to think about**, like school, friends, family, and hobbies. Now imagine being a **teenager** with a chronic, **or life-long**, disease. You would also have to think **about doctor’s appointments, medications and therapies**.

**Slide 28: Word Choice**

2. Use Base Verbs (Only use one verb)

Give a description of = Describe

Provide assistance with = Assist = Help

Complete the construction of = Construct = Build

**Slide 29: Word Choice - Example**

Your healthcare providers can help you learn how to monitor your anxiety.

Your **social worker** will **teach you** how to **track** your anxiety level.

You will learn how to track your anxiety level.

**Slide 30. Word Choice**

3. Pronouns

A pronoun can replace a noun. Examples include: I, you, she, they, me him, it, etc.

* They engage the reader, and
* Tell you who is doing what

Be sure to define who/what your pronouns refer to.

**Slide 31. Word Choice - Example**

Compensation will be provided upon completion of the questionnaire.

* To whom?
* By whom?
* What kind of compensation?

**Slide 32. Word Choice - Example**

Compensation will be provided upon completion of the questionnaire.

When **you** finish the survey the **research coordinator**will give you **ten dollars**.

**Slide 33: Words and Wording**

4. Use Active Voice

The bricks were laid (verb) by the construction workers (subject).

The construction workers laid the bricks.

**Slide 34: Reading Level and Readability**

[Readability Consensus Calculator](http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php)

<http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php>

What Australian mammal can leap 25 feet in one hop and move for short periods at 35 miles an hour? The red kangaroo.

A full grown male stands as tall as a six foot person and weighs 200 pounds. This is slightly bigger than the grey kangaroo, making it the world’s largest marsupial.

What’s a marsupial? Marsupial females have a pouch for carrying, feeding and protecting their young. While a red kangaroo may be the largest marsupial, the newborn baby is tiny, under an inch long. After a few months of sleeping, nursing and growing in mom’s stomach pouch the young kangaroo (joey) begins to come out. But it hurries back to the pouch fast when frightened, hungry or cold. Eventually, the joey gets so big it hangs out of the pouch. Then, at eight months old, it stays out. But the joey remains close to mom until ready to live on its own.

*Image description: Photograph of a mother kangaroo standing in a field with a baby kangaroo in her pouch.*

(<https://www.superteacherworksheets.com/reading-comp/>

Image: <http://hdwallpapersbee.com/kangaroo-wallpaper.html>)

**Slide 35: RheumInfo**

Screenshot image of RheumInfo website.

Image description: RheumInfo “the leading rheumatology resource for patients and physicians.” The homepage includes this quote at the top: “RheumInfo.com provides the most accurate and reliable information on arthritis and musculoskeletal disorders, as well as the medications that treat them.” The page has a site search bar, recent updates, separate sections for patients and physicians, and the following 4 tabs: Diseases, Medications, Physician Tools, and About RheumInfo.

(<http://rheuminfo.com/>)

**Slide 36: Make Your Day Harder**

Screenshot image of Make Your Day Harder website.

Maybe easier isn’t really better…

Our generation has a severe case of Sitting Disease. We need to find ways to get up and moving! Will you join the movement?

Image description (in center of page): Black and white cartoon drawing of a crowd of people holding a banner that says “Let’s make our day harder.” The people are smiling, their arms are up in the air, and one woman is holding a megaphone. An older man with glasses is in the front and center of the image with his hands on the banner, and another man has an arm around his shoulders.

Medical research has shown that we’re living longer than previous generations – but we also suffer from more chronic disease, obesity, and lower self-rated health. So what can we do? To start with, we can make our days harder to get moving.

([www.makeyourdayharder.com/](http://www.makeyourdayharder.com/))

**Slide 37: Inuit Health Matters**

Screenshot image of Inuit Health Matters website.

Image description: The homepage has the following tabs with accompanying colorful cartoon images of people: Guide for Expecting Families, Sexual Health, Pregnancy, Prematurity, and SIDS. There are also 4 different language options.

(<http://inuithealthmatters.aboutkidshealth.ca/>)

**Slide 38: Anxiety BC**

*Screenshot image of AnxietyBC website.*

Image description: The homepage has the tag line, “Living with too much anxiety? Resources, Results, Relief,” followed by this description: “Did you know that anxiety disorders are the most common mental health illness in Canada? We provide anxiety plans (MAPs) to help you understand and manage anxiety. Empower yourself by watching our educational videos, downloading the MindShift app and getting involved through Membership.” The page has a close-up image of green leaves on a branch in the background. The top navigation bar has the following tabs: Home, Resources, Self-Help, Youth, About Us, and Get Involved. There are 3 sections in the bottom half of the page: Quick Links, MindShift, and Members.

(<http://www.anxietybc.com/>)

**Slide 39: Resources**

Lay Summary Samples:

<http://researchimpact.ca/resources/research-summaries-search/>

Lay Summary Toolkit: <http://www.dcc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/publications/HowToLaySummariesDec2012.pdf>

Thesaurus for Health Communication:

<http://depts.washington.edu/respcare/public/info/Plain_Language_Thesaurus_for_Health_Communications.pdf>

Writing Health Information for Patients and Families: <http://www.hamiltonhealthsciences.ca/workfiles/PATIENT_ED/Writing%20health%20information%20Sept%203%2008%20With%20hyperlinks.pdf>

**Slide 40: Using the Plain Language Writing Checklist**

Image description: Image of page 1 of the Plain Language Writing Checklist. Headers in the document are: Instructions, Word Choice, Design, Knowledge Translation Principles, SMIT (Single Most Important Thing), and BLAM (Bottom Line Actionable Message).

**Slide 41: Using the Plain Language Writing Checklist**

Image description: Image of pages 2 and 3 of the Plain Language Writing Checklist - Detailed. Headers in the document are, in order: SMIT (Single Most Important Thing), and BLAM (Bottom Line Actionable Message), Word Choice, Design, and Knowledge Translation Principles.

**Slide 42: Key Messages**

Image description: Paragraph of text (below) with “JUST KIDDING” overlaid in a large font.

Plain language techniques can be used in most professional settings and situations. Plain language is defined not by a single technique, but rather by the results observed when a document or resource has be utilized by a reader or user. Truly plain language content is a combination of audience-specific language, appropriate reading level, medium-specific best-practices, and visually appealing design. You should also pilot written materials with your audience. They will be able to provide you with valuable feedback about the usability of your content and the appropriateness of the format you have chosen. Don’t forget to provide clear action items for user. The key to becoming proficient at using plain language is practice. You can practice using plain language writing techniques, as appropriate, everyday in e-mails, conversations and professional writing. Remember, plain language communication is audience-specific.

**Slide 43: Key Messages**

* Plain language communication is audience-specific.
* Plain language writing is a combination of appropriate word choice, design and KT strategy.
* There are many resources available to you:
* Writing and editing tools (e.g., checklists, samples, etc.)
* Strategy-specific tools
* Expertise (e.g., plain language, health literacy, graphic design)
* Practice, practice, practice!

**Slide 44: Thank you!**[kelly.warmington@sickkids.ca](mailto:kelly.warmington@sickkids.ca)

**Slide 45: Learning Objectives**

Following this session participants will be able to:

1. Define plain language
2. Choose appropriate plain language tools when writing and reviewing documents
3. Use the Plain Language Writing Checklist

**Slide 46: Thank you!**

Please tell us how we did: <http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/2629404/EvaluationU5>

Get in Touch: [ktdrr@air.org](mailto:ktdrr@air.org)

**Slide 47: Disclaimer**

The contents of this presentation were developed under grant number 90DP0027 from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research ([NIDILRR](http://www.acl.gov/programs/NIDILRR/)). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this presentation do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

**Slide 48: Plain Language Strategies Activity**

**Slide 49: Let’s Make It Better**

* Work in teams of 2-5 to recreate the slide. Use plain language writing and formatting techniques to get your message across.
* Be creative.

**Slide 50: Let’s Make It Better**

Why is PL Important?

3 million adults in the U.S. can’t read. That’s 14 percent of the total population. 21 percent of adults in the U.S. read below a fifth grade level, and 19 percent of high school graduates can’t read.

U.S. Department of Education, National Institute of Literacy

**Slide 51: Debrief**

1. Reactions

* How did that go?

1. Summary

* What was your process?
* What did you discuss?

1. Analysis

* What went well?

1. Lessons Learned

* What will you take away from this exercise?

**Slide 52: Discussion Points**

* Visuals – data visualization, graphs, graphics, images
* What is ‘accurate’? – How exact do numbers/statistics need to be?
* Using reference points – Grade level, high school
* Do you need to use numbers at all?
* Framing – positive or negative; consider emotion, guilt, fear mongering
* What were your key messages?
* Who was your audience?
* Consider formatting
* Credibility – references, branding
* Word use
* …

**Slide 53: Discussion Points - Detailed**

* Images – Use simple graphs, where appropriate. Images should be culturally sensitive, universal and/or supplemented by text.
* Accuracy – what does the user NEED to know in order to use the information to meet their needs? Be ruthless when it comes to data. Include only what is absolutely necessary.
* Reference points – These should also be culturally sensitive and universal. Avoid them if certain users won’t be able to relate.
* Numbers – People struggle with numbers. Use simple (e.g., avoid percentages; use 1 out of 5), smaller (e.g., try not to talk about hundreds of thousands of people; use numbers of things/instances/individuals that people can picture), and fewer (do you need to use that number?) numbers where possible.
* Framing – This is an ethical issue. Framing can engage the user and reach them on an emotional level. Framing can also confuse and bias people. For behavior change, you would usually use negative framing to get someone to stop doing something and positive framing to get someone to start doing something.
* Main Messages and Audience – ALWAYS be clear on your main message(s) and your audience. Test this. Do users agree with the intended message?
* Formatting – Design is so important. For example, market research shows that people feel uncomfortable when there isn’t enough white space. They may not be able to articulate why, but design can make it easier or harder for a user to interact with a knowledge product.
* Credibility – References, brand colours, logos, etc. all have their place. Find out what is required of you – does your organization require you to use certain colours or fonts? References may or may not be important depending on the user.
* Word use – Very often we use excess words. Don’t be redundant. Try to write as you would speak.