Plain Language Strategies

Kelly Warmington | BScH BEd MEd PMP
Program Manager, Knowledge Translation
The Hospital for Sick Children
March 3, 2016
Learning Objectives

Following this sessions 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
About me...
About me...
The Hospital for Sick Children

2014 - 2015

10,440 staff, students and volunteers

15,817 inpatients

69,507 ER visits
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%)
- Don’t know how (13%)
- ...

Culture of jargon

Difficult to convey complex ideas
Building Capacity

- Education
- Plain Language Use
- Practice
- Time
- Culture Shift
Plain Language in Research

Knowledge Translation (KT)

Lay Summaries

Research

Consent Forms

Posters/Publications
Plain Language in Knowledge Translation
What is Plain Language?

How would you define plain language?
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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Written</strong></th>
<th><strong>Oral</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brochures</td>
<td>Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay Summaries</td>
<td>Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>Facilitation/teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper and web-based knowledge products</td>
<td>Webinars, online meetings or education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational materials</td>
<td>Everyday communication with colleagues, patients, clients, knowledge users, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>Videos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consent forms</td>
<td>Virtual Instructor-led Training</td>
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<td>eLearning development</td>
<td>Stakeholder communication</td>
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<td>...</td>
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</table>
Why is PL Important?

“The hardest thing in the world to understand is the income tax.

- Albert Einstein

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
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
# Literacy

## Reading Level of Adults in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>13 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>44 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>29 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>14 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Literacy in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of U.S. adults who can’t read (below a basic level)</td>
<td>14 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of U.S. adults who can’t read</td>
<td>32,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U.S. Department of Education, National Institute of Literacy
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
Why is PL Important?
**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)
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.”
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.

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.

http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/
Categories of PL Tools

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

Design
- Page set-up
- Graphics
- Fonts
- Branding

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

But First...
The Hospital for Sick Children

2014 - 2015

10,440 staff, students and volunteers
15,817 inpatients
69,507 ER visits
The Hospital for Sick Children

2014-2015

10,440 staff, students and volunteers
15,817 inpatients
69,507 ER visits
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
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.
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
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.
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.
Word Choice - Example

Compensation will be provided upon completion of the questionnaire.

→ To whom?
→ By whom?
→ What kind of compensation?
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.
Words and Wording

4. Use Active Voice

The bricks were laid by the construction workers.

The construction workers laid the bricks.
Reading Level and Readability

Readability Consensus Calculator
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.

https://www.superteacherworksheets.com/reading-comp/
RheumInfo.com provides the most accurate and reliable information on arthritis and musculoskeletal disorders, as well as the medications that treat them.

RheumInfo is led by Dr. Andy Thompson, a practicing rheumatologist and an associate professor of rheumatology. This website contains a wealth of educational resources and tools for both patients and physicians.

For Patients...
- Learn more about your disease and how to manage it
- Learn more about your medication and how to take it properly

To help with your next visit to your rheumatologist:
- Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) Symptom Assessor
- Ankylosing Spondylitis (AS) Symptom Assessor
- Psoriatic Arthritis (PsA) Symptom Assessor

For Physicians...

http://rheuminfo.com/
Maybe easier isn’t really better...

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

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/
Living with too much anxiety?
*Resources, Results, Relief.*

Did you know that anxiety disorders are the most common mental health illness in Canada? We provide my 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.

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**QUICKLINKS**
- Youth
- Educators
- DVD Store
- Contest 2016
- User Survey

**MINDSHIFT**
MindShift will help you learn how to relax, develop more helpful ways of thinking, and identify active steps that will help you take charge of your anxiety.

**MEMBERS**
We need you. Help reduce stigma and increase understanding about anxiety by being involved.

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http://www.anxietybc.com/
Resources

- Lay Summary Samples:  
  http://researchimpact.ca/resources/research-summaries-search/

- Lay Summary Toolkit:  

- Thesaurus for Health Communication:  

- Writing Health Information for Patients and Families:  
Using the Plain Language Writing Checklist

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### Instructions

Before going through the checklist, think about the most important thing you want your reader to learn or know.

- Read the checklist items below. Cross out items that do not apply to your document. For example, if there are no pictures in your document, then cross out “Uses relevant and uncluttered images or diagrams.”
- Read your document once to get a sense of the overall readability and flow. Read the document again considering the items on the checklist. Make changes if required. If appropriate, ask others to review the document when you are finished.

### Word Choice

- Uses familiar words
- Uses “you” and other pronouns to speak to the reader
- Uses active voice
- Uses base verbs
- Limits excess words
- Uses the simplest tense possible—simple present tense is best
- Uses “must” to express requirements
- Places words carefully (avoids large gaps between the subject, the verb, and the object; pats, exceptions first, places modifiers correctly)

### Design

- Uses short sections and sentences
- Has useful headings
- Uses lists and tables to simplify complex material
- Uses no more than two or three sub-levels
- Uses relevant and uncluttered images or diagrams

### Knowledge Transferable Principles

- Written for the reader
- Organized to serve the reader’s needs
- Content is accurate and evidence-based
- The material is actionable
Using the Plain Language Writing Checklist

Plain Language Writing Checklist - Detailed

SMT (Single Most Important Thing):

[Blank lines]

[Blank lines]

[Blank lines]

(AIM (Actionable Immediate Message))

[Blank lines]

Word Choice:

- Use familiar words
- Use “you” and other pronouns to speak to the reader
- Use active voice
- Use correct tense
- Use simple words

[Blank lines]

Design:

- Use short sentences and paragraphs
- Use headings
- Use bullet points

[Blank lines]

Written Communication Principles:

- Written for the reader
- Organized to serve the reader(s)
- Concise
- Logical structure
- Evidence-based

[Blank lines]
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 been 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.
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!
Thank you!

kelly.warmington@sickkids.ca
Learning Objectives

Following this sessions 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
Thank you!

Please tell us how we did:

Get in Touch:

ktdrr@air.org
The contents of this presentation were developed under grant number 90DP0027 from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (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.
Plain Language Strategies
Activity
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.
Let’s Make It Better

Why is PL Important?

32 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 5th grade level, and 19 percent of high school graduates can't read.

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

1. Reactions
   - How did that go?

2. Summary
   - What was your process?
   - What did you discuss?

3. Analysis
   - What went well?

4. Lessons Learned
   - What will you take away from this exercise?
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
• …
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.

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