SAY WHAT?
The benefits of plain language in academia

Sasha Im
Web content strategist
sashaim@uw.edu

W

What is plain language?

Plain language is writing that ensures your readers understand your words

- quickly
- easily
- completely

It's a law and a movement

Plain Writing Act of 2010

Law that requires that federal executive agencies:

- Use plain writing in every agency document
- Train employees in plain writing
- plainlanguage.gov - great resource with examples

"The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing"

A new movement strives for simplicity

Victoria Clayton, The Atlantic, Oct 2015

https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255/

W

From "The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing"

"Academics, in general, don't think about the public; they don't think about the average person, and they don't even think about their students when they write. … Their intended audience is always their peers. That's who they have to impress to get tenure."

But research shows that clear, simple words can make authors appear more intelligent.

-- Daniel Oppenheimer, professor of psychology at Princeton

If people understand more of what you're saying, they will likely feel that you make sense.

Clear = Smarter

- Forces writer to organize thoughts more coherently

- Higher engagement with audience

- Benefits everybody, from expert readers to international ESL speakers.

- Easily searchable, leads to better SEO ranking. Plain copy often uses words that people enter in search engines.

  Ex. "Hot laptop shuts off" vs. "Laptop thermal failure"

Plain language is not dumbing-down

Does not oversimplify concepts, but presents information in a way that is easier to understand and use.

"You're not simplifying the science, you're simplifying the expression of it."

-- Dr. Jean-luc Doumont, physicist and communications trainer, author of English Communication for Scientists

W

Arguments and your responses

Subject matter is abstract and complex; it can't be simplified.

- Plain language is not simplifying the topic. It's simplifying the communication of it.
- The most successful researchers are the ones whose writings cross over to the general public.

Scholars cannot avoid technical terms altogether. Tedious to define *transcription factor* every time it's used.

- Define the jargon at first use and use it sparingly.
- A lot of jargon can be replaced without sacrificing accuracy.
  - Replace *murine model* with *rats and mice*.
  - Replace Latin expressions like *ceteris paribus* and *inter alia*, and write *other things being equal* and *among other things*.

Gatekeepers of journals and university presses insist on ponderous language as proof of one's seriousness.

- This is a myth. Editors appreciate readability.

From Steven Pinker, "Why Academics Stink at Writing," The Chronicle of Higher Education, Sep 2014. Author of *The Sense of Style* (2014) and professor of psychology at Harvard University.

W

What experts appreciate

- Facts, not outlandish interpretations
- New information that they haven't considered or heard of
- Contradictory information that is contrary to their existing knowledge or beliefs
- Good storytelling

What experts have in common with general public

- Experts scan and don't read text completely.

- Experts don't like long, high-level introductions.

- Experts aren't necessarily tech savvy.

- Experts appreciate summaries and subheadings.

W

Plain language is successful

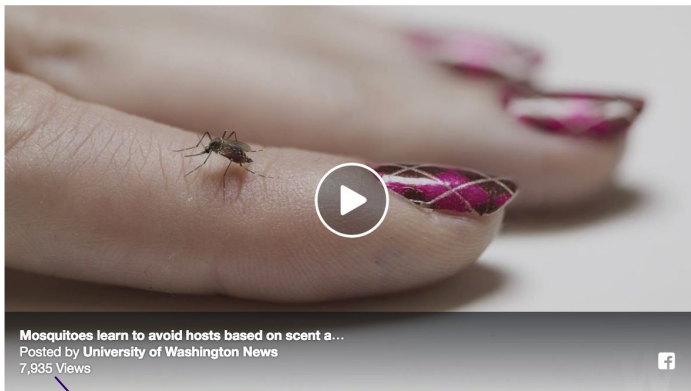UW News re-tells stories published in scientific journals for a larger audience.

UW NEWS

NEWS RELEASES | RESEARCH | SCIENCE

January 25, 2018

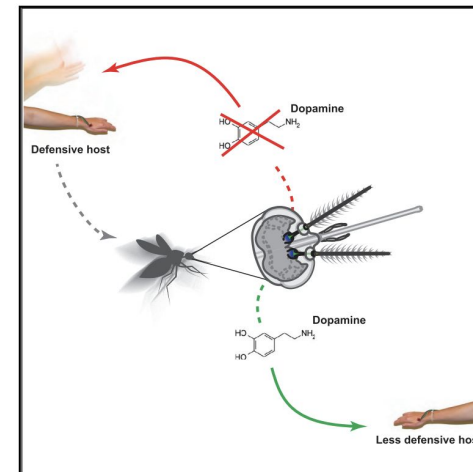### If you swat mosquitoes, they may learn to avoid your scent

UW News staff

Mosquitoes learn to avoid hosts based on scent a…
Posted by University of Washington News
7,935 Views

Close to 8000 video views in 6 days

Current Biology

Article

Modulation of Host Learning in *Aedes aegypti* Mosquitoes

Graphical Abstract

Dopamine
Defensive host
Dopamine
Less defensive host

Authors

Clément Vinauger, Chloé Lahondère, Gabriella H. Wolff, ..., Omar S. Akbari, Michael H. Dickinson, Jeffrey A. Riffell

Correspondence

jriffell@uw.edu

In Brief

Mosquitoes show an ability to avoid defensive hosts, but the mechanisms mediating these shifts in host preferences are unclear. Vinauger et al. show that *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes rapidly learn host odors and that learning is dependent on the dopamine-1 receptor. Understanding the mechanisms of learning may provide new tools for mosquito control.

Good stories use plain language

TheConversation.com publishes stories from academia.

Academics get the byline but are edited by journalists for clarity.

Sometimes a story gets picked up and re-told by a larger outlet like CNN or The Washington Post.

Most successful academics write for broader audience:
- Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist, *The Selfish Gene*
- Siddharta Mukherjee, physician, professor, *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*
- Neil deGrasse Tyson, astrophysicist, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*

W

How to write in plain language

- Put the most important information at the top in every paragraph.

- Use meaningful headings to help readers skim text and find what they are looking for.

- Use short sentences and only include the necessary information.

- Be direct and concise and go for an easy flow.

- Use active voice and speak to the reader.

- Include hyperlinks that take readers to supporting details on deeper-level pages.

W

Use active voice

Passive voice

The lake was polluted by the company.

New regulations were proposed.

The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.

Active voice

The company polluted the lake.

We proposed new regulations.

You must include the following information in your application.

From plainlanguage.gov

W

Use bullet points and white spaces

Before:

Mitigation is the cornerstone of emergency management. It's the ongoing effort to lessen the impact disasters have on people's lives and property through damage prevention and flood insurance. Through measures such as building safely within the floodplain or removing homes altogether; engineering buildings and infrastructures to withstand earthquakes: and creating and enforcing effective building codes to protect property from floods, hurricanes and other natural hazards, the impact on lives and communities is lessened.

After:

Protect your community from natural disasters.

- ○ Build safely in the flood zone, or remove buildings altogether
- ○ Engineer buildings and infrastructure to withstand earthquakes
- ○ Create and enforce effective building codes

Simplify text and re-format

Before:

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the month if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the month if you submit your application electronically.

After:

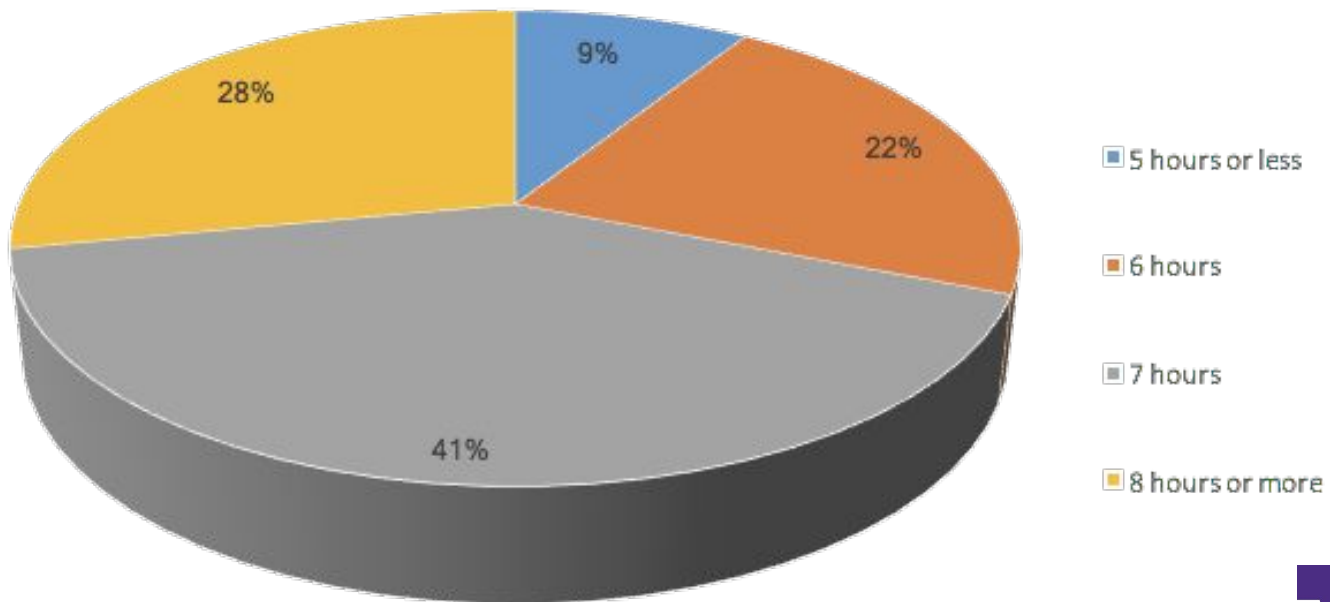| Submit your form:	We must receive it by:
Electronically	25th day of month
Snail mail	15th day of month

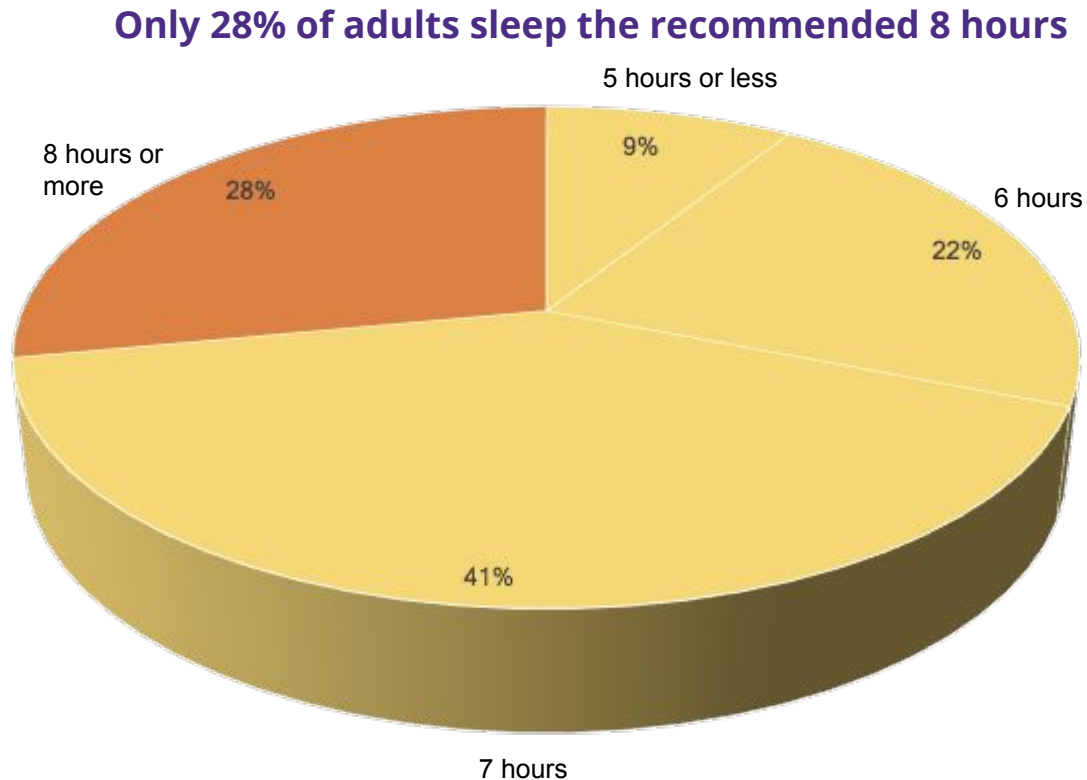adapted from plainlanguage.gov

W

Use charts effectively: Before

This chart makes people look at legend and go back to the pie chart. Colors are arbitrary.

Distribution of the number of sleep hours for adults

- 9%
- 22%
- 41%
- 28%

- 5 hours or less
- 6 hours
- 7 hours
- 8 hours or more

adapted from *Trees, Maps and Theorems* by Jean-luc Doumont

Use charts effectively: After

This makes a key point with the title and puts the meaning of numbers closer to the chart. Colors highlight the point.

Only 28% of adults sleep the recommended 8 hours

5 hours or less
9%

8 hours or more
28%

6 hours
22%

41%

7 hours

adapted from *Trees, Maps and Theorems* by Jean-luc Doumont

Co-writing with subject matter expert

- A structured brain dump saves time later.

- Get agreement on key points, format, illustrations.

- Spend less time reviewing by getting the expert invested.

- Get authentic language, tone and register straight from the outset.

- Let the expert do the chunking to avoid error later on.

Ellen de Vries, "How to collaborate with a Subject Matter Expert,"
https://gathercontent.com/blog/how-to-collaborate-with-a-subject-matter-expert

Plain language = Better for academia

"Why should a profession that trades in words and dedicates itself to the transmission of knowledge so often turn out prose that is turgid, soggy... unpleasant to read and impossible to understand?"

-- Steven Pinker, author, psychology professor Harvard University

"No one has ever complained that a text was too easy to understand." -- Hoa Loranger, Nielsen Norman Group

W

References

Victoria Clayton, "The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing, A new movement strives for simplicity," The Atlantic, October 2015. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255/

Ellen de Vries, "How to collaborate with a Subject Matter Expert," Gathercontent, 2009.

https://gathercontent.com/blog/how-to-collaborate-with-a-subject-matter-expert

Jean-luc Doumont, "English Communication for Scientists," Nature.com, January 2014.
https://www.nature.com/scitable/ebooks/english-communication-for-scientists-14053993

Jean-luc Doumont, *Trees, Maps and Theorems*, 2009. http://www.treesmapsandtheorems.com/

Hoa Loranger, Kate Meyer, "Writing Digital Copy for Domain Experts," Nielsen Norman Group, April 2017.
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/writing-domain-experts/

Steven Pinker, "Why Academics Stink at Writing," The Chronicle of Higher Education, Sep 2014.
https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Academics-Writing-Stinks/148989

Plain Language official website www.plainlanguage.gov

W