SAY WHAT?
The benefits of plain language in academia

Sasha Im
Web content strategist
sashaim@uw.edu
What is plain language?

Plain language is writing that ensures your readers understand your words quickly, easily, and 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
https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255/
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
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.

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.

From “Writing Digital Copy for Domain Experts,” by Hoa Loranger and Kate Meyer, Nielsen Norman Group, April 2017
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/writing-domain-experts/
Plain language is successful

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

Close to 8000 video views in 6 days
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*
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.
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
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.

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
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
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

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

- 7 hours: 41%
- 6 hours: 22%
- 5 hours or less: 9%
- 8 hours or more: 28%

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
References


Plain Language official website www.plainlanguage.gov