Writing for cognitive accessibility: a guide to plain language

Reid Caplan - Accessible Academia

Agenda

-Intros

-Plain language 101

-Break (15 minutes)

-Plain language workshop

Introductions – in the chat

- Name
- Pronouns
- Organization
- (Optional) Answer one question below:
    - What do you already know about plain language or writing for cognitive accessibility?
    - Have you ever tried writing in plain language?
    - What is something you hope to learn about cognitive accessibility/making your work more accessible to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities?

What is plain language?

- **Plain language is a way of writing. It uses smaller words and shorter sentences. This helps people understand the main ideas more clearly.**

- 6-8th grade reading level (aim lower)
- There is no one "right way" to write in plain language - this workshop is just a guide.
- There is also Easy Read!
    - 3-5th grade reading level
    - Image supports for each sentence
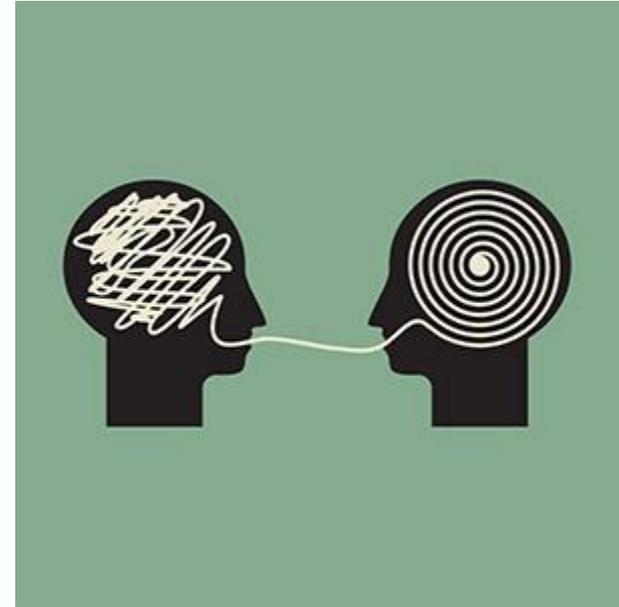
Why write in plain language?

- Access for:
    - People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD)
    - English language learners
    - Most adults in the United States
        - More than half of U.S. adults have an eighth-grade reading level or below.

- More people understand your writing = larger impact for your advocacy
- Plain Writing Act of 2010 - mandated federal executive agencies to write documents in plain language - we should lead by example!

The most important things to know

- Plain language can be done!
- Plain language resources should have *the same information* as non-plain language resources.
- Think about writing from your reader's point of view
    - You may need to "move backwards" to give background information
    - For each sentence or paragraph, ask:
        - **"why?"**
        - **"so what?"**
        - **"how does this affect me?"**

How to start - outlining

- What is the main idea?
- What questions do you want your reader to have answered by the time they finish reading?
- Who is your audience? What background information is important?
- How will you split up your ideas?
- What terms need to be defined?
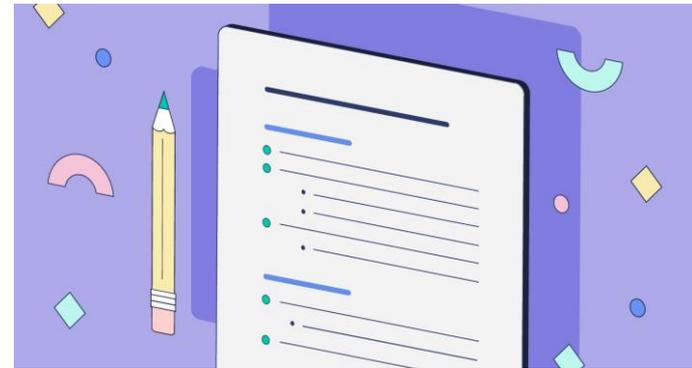
Example outline:

Topic: Affordable housing

Main idea: What is affordable housing?

Sub-headings:

• What does "affordable" mean?

• Who makes affordable housing?

• Who can get affordable housing?

Other ideas?

Things to avoid

- Long sentences
    - Try not to take up more than 1-1.5 lines in a standard Word document in most 12-point font
- Long words and jargon.
    - Think of substitute words
    - Only define words that people need to understand the subject.
- Metaphors or other figures of speech
- Numbered lists
- Words like "this," "they," or "it" if it might not be clear what or who you're talking about.
- Passive voice
    - Active voice: You want to avoid using passive voice in your writing
    - Passive voice: When writing, passive voice should be avoided.

Things to do

- Split longer sentences into two smaller ones.
- Use bulleted lists, unless the order is important
- Check the reading level of your document:
    - Readable.com
    - https://hemingwayapp.com/
    - https://readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php
    - Be sure to take out terms that have been defined in the text

- Use examples to make abstract ideas clearer

An example of an example

Original text:

If you needed to get a COVID vaccination, you could call your local pharmacy, but they may not have appointments available same-day.

As an example:

John needs a COVID vaccine. He calls the pharmacy near him to make an appointment. But the pharmacy did not have any appointments left that day.

Original work vs "translation"

- Remember, any plain language "translation" must have the same content as the original document!
- You may need to take things out of their original order.
    - Start with a new outline to find the "gaps"
- Defining vs replacing words
    - Shorter is not always better
- Summarize as a last resort.

Focus groups - nothing about us, without us!

- Recruitment: People First, ASAN, P&As, DD Councils, CILs.
- 6-10 participants
- (At least) 2 facilitators
    - Try to include one facilitator who knows the participants already
- Send materials in advance
- Set a clear agenda with breaks
- Pay people fairly for their work
- Give people credit for their participation

Guiding questions for focus group

- Does this make sense to you?

- What do you think the main idea is for this section?

- Are we saying the ideas in the right order?

- Is there too much information? Not enough information?

- Would you change anything to make this better?

- How would you summarize this in your own words?

Visual and web accessibility formatting tips

- 14pt font in sans-serif
- Easily accessible table of contents
- Glossary as a standalone page
    - Definitions also within text when possible
- Page breaks
- Space between paragraphs/main ideas
- Color/contrast options
- Consider adding images to emphasize text
    - Charts, graphs, or other infographic
    - Real-world examples

Final thoughts

- No document is perfect. Learning how to write in plain language is a skill. Keep trying!
- Give yourself more time than you think you'll need.
- If you have the time and money to write for a general audience, you should be writing in plain language!
  - Consider how to ask for funding for plain language work in grants, etc.
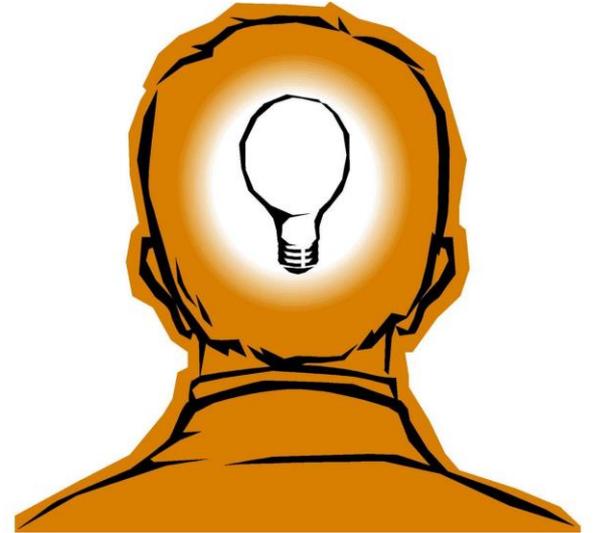
Break

Exercise: Plain Language Workshop

CCD mission statement:

The mission of the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities (CCD) is to engage in concerted advocacy for national public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society free from racism, ableism, sexism, and xenophobia, as well as LGBTQ+ based discrimination and religious intolerance; that enhances the civil rights and quality of life of all people with disabilities and their families; and that reflects the values of the Americans with Disabilities Act and all civil rights law.

Things to think about

- What is the main idea?
- What can be broken down into smaller sentences?
- What words need to be defined? How should they be defined?
- What complex words can be changed so no definition is needed?
- Where might lists be helpful?
- (Bonus) What images could make these sentences easier to understand?

The mission of the **Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities** (CCD) is to engage in concerted advocacy for national public **policy** that ensures the <u>**self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion**</u> of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society free from <u>**racism, ableism, sexism, and xenophobia**</u>, as well as LGBTQ+ based **discrimination** and religious intolerance; that enhances the **civil rights** and quality of life of all people with disabilities and their families; and that reflects the values of the **Americans with Disabilities Act** and all civil rights law.

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Questions? Your own examples?

Thanks for listening!

For more information/contact:

reidcaplan@brandeis.edu

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