

**Transcript for Accessibility Bites: Plain Language
BCcampus webinar hosted on September 26, 2024
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KAITLYN VECCHIO:

All right. Thank you. As you know, my name is Kaitlyn Vecchio. I am in Prince George, on the unceded territory of the Lheidli T'enneh. And today, we're going to be talking about plain language, making everyday documents clear.

So first, why plain language? So the communication philosophy behind it is that people have the right to understand the information in documents that is important to their daily lives. During this 30-minute webinar, I really want you all to think, how is plain language relevant to you in your work and in your daily life? And when you're creating documents and you're communicating to the people you communicate with on a daily basis, how can you incorporate plain language? Why would it be important to incorporate plain language? These are three wonderful resources. If you are new to plain language take a read. The first one is actually OER open education resource document, so you don't need to purchase it. You can find it, I'm at the College of New Caledonia. We have it in our catalogue, you could access that way or any other way. The second one is a design book because plain language and design actually go hand in hand. They are able to, they work together essentially to make the document clear. I'm noticing there's something in the chat, Helena, are you able to watch the chat because I don't want to take off.

HELENA:

Yes. Don't worry. I will let you know if you need to stop, but people can have questions at the end.

KAITLYN:

Okay. Thank you. What is plain language? A communication is in plain language, if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information. I've got a nice infographic from the first book that I shared with you. It's very clear. We want readers to find the information, understand the information, and be able to use that information the first time they read something.

Why is plain language so important? Well, I've got two slides of different literacy statistics, and this looks more at the federal perspective. So 49% of Canadians struggle to understand complex texts and 27% of Canadians with post-secondary education struggle to understand complex texts. Those are significant numbers. We also have to keep in mind everyone has a different cognitive capacity. When I say that, everyone has a different ability to retain and obtain as

much information that they're reading, and every reader has a different reading fatigue. People can only read for so long and that is really dependent on an individual and they really do vary.

These stats are more British Columbia focused, where we all are. More than 700,000 British Columbians have significant challenges of literacy, 45% of British Columbians age 15 to 65 have difficulty understanding newspapers, following instruction manuals, reading health information, and other daily living tasks. And 52% of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 have difficulty calculating interest on a car loan, using information on a graph, and calculating medicine dosage and other daily living tasks. These stats just show us right now where literacy levels are at and why plain language is really important to incorporate in our daily lives.

The plain language focus. We want to organize information so that it makes sense to the reader. We want it to speak directly to the reader, explain technical terms, and use examples that relate to the reader's experience, and use design and layout appropriate to the content and of the document and the needs of the reader. The key word here is "the reader." When we're creating documents and we're writing information, when we're sharing anything, our focus has to be the reader. It's very important to know your audience, and we'll get into that in a bit.

We have some myths about plain language. One is plain language is simple-minded and talks down to people. That plain language is just condensing text, that it takes too long and it costs too much. That plain language isn't necessary for people who read well and that you can't write in plain language because you need to use technical terms. And all of these are just incorrect. Plain language focuses on the information that we need to communicate and it's not simple-minded, it's not just condensing text. It's using the best words for the sentence to share the information.

So we'll go through five principles to consider. The first one is audience and purpose.

First, you want to start with a strong base. You really want to know who your reading audience will be. This will vary from person to person, from the jobs you're in. You really might have to shift the writing style, depending what that is. You have to know why you're writing to them and you want to know what outcome you want. I really like this one example, this one juxtaposition. You want to put people in the position of power. You don't want to put them in the position of compromise because when you put people in a position of power, they understand what they're doing. They feel confident, they don't need to ask questions and they're not unsure. But when you're putting someone in a position of compromise and say they're reading information that they're not familiar with and they're struggling with understanding, you're causing doubt, you're causing insecurity and you're not even meaning to. It's just that indirect contact where you can either when you share a document with someone, you can either put a person in the position of power or compromise. That's a good juxtaposition to think about because you can create a relationship before you even meet someone.

Some audience questions to ask yourself. How many audiences are there? This is a great one for educators. You have asked a variety of audiences. What is the reading level? Changes as well. Is English the first language? And how much do they know about my topic? The last point, how much do they know about my topic? This is really important when you're thinking about your audience. Who's reading your document? You might be sharing something with someone that knows a lot about the information that you're sharing, and you could use more technical terms. But again, it's just knowing exactly who your reader is and who your audience is.

How to focus on the reader. You do not focus on what do I want to say, or how do I protect my interests, or how can I impress you? That's not what you want. You want to focus on what does the audience need to know? How can I serve the audience's interests? And what can I clearly express to the audience? I also like to share, a lot of us joining us today, we come from backgrounds of higher education with a bachelor's degree, master's degree, PhD, and you've been trained and taught to write in a specific way so we can achieve the grades that we wanted. That was important. We were writing to our audience. But now that we're out of our academic journey, and we're in these different positions. It's a shift on how we need to write. I always share with people. It's not your fault if you don't know how to write plain language and it's not your focus because we weren't taught that. We were taught to write another way. It's just really learning how to shift and adapt to a different writing style.

With purpose, there's questions you want to consider. So why are you writing it? Who will use the document? What do you want this document to achieve? So think about your goals. Are you wanting to persuade someone? Are you wanting to inform someone? Are you wanting to gather information? If you're writing a survey, you want it to be definitely as clear as possible. You can get as much information and accurate information as well.

We look at the structure. You want to organize information logically and answer readers' questions. You want the information to be quick to find. You want to use descriptive labels, do you want to use headings, dividing information by categories, and using lists. That really helps with the structure of a document.

When we're looking at expression now, there's things to consider. You're really wanting to be mindful of the tone in the words that you're choosing, the word choice, the jargon. We really want to remove as much jargon as possible, your sentence structures and your verbs. I'm going to go over the next two slides, highlight some verbs. That can be shifted.

So here you can see some hidden verbs that would be much better to use in a document written in plain language. For example, conduct an analysis, "analyze, present a report, just report, do an assessment, assess, provide assistance, help. Excuse me, they're just words. These are verbs that are much more plain language, reader-friendly, essentially. There's lots of different lists, especially in the first resource that I shared with you on the second slide that have lots of different examples. This is another example of using just every day words, anticipate, expect, attempt, try. These words on the right, they're not dumbed down and

they're no worse or better than the ones to the left, but they are more simple and they're much more clear for people to read, especially if they have those lower literacy skills.

This is a great example that I like to share. This is an actual example of a college photo waiver. As you can see, there's various different texts, different fonts, some are all in caps. The alignment is not clear. After looking at that and editing that, we turn that into this. Linda did. That's who did this. As you can see, this document, compared to the previous one, it's much clearer and much easier to read and to navigate. Not only is the text and the language a lot clearer, but the design is a lot clearer as well, and that's where those two principles come hand in hand. Everything on that last slide with that document, the exact same information is here. It's just laid out much clearer.

Now we'll talk about the design portion. The objectives of plain design is to present information in a clear and organized way, to improve readability, so how easily a document can be understood, to increase or support the reader's understanding of text.

Here we're going to look at contrast, alignment, repetition, and proximity. So first, contrast. The principle of contrast is the difference in visual properties that make an object or it's a representation of an image distinguishable from other objects and the background. Saying this in plain language is really, things which look different from one another. And the key things on here are create interests on the page. Organize information logically. You can contrast to typography, colour, size, line thickness, shape, space, format. The key takeaway with contrast is if items are not the same, make them different, it's just easy to view. Just know, I'm going through these slides really quickly. If you want to touch base with me afterwards, I'm happy to do that and go more detailed to these things.

The second portion of design is alignment. So nothing should be placed on the page arbitrarily. Everything should have a visual connection with something else on the page. In plain language you want to unify and organize the page. I like this one example when you're in your house and you're in the kitchen and you know you've got stuff over the counter and you've got a messy sink, but it feels so good when you put everything away and where it needs to be, and that's very similar with alignment. When it's aligned nicely, it just looks much smoother.

The key point is you want to create a visual connection, create unity, avoid using more than one text alignment on the page. That really helps with the visual aspect of it. Your key takeaway when you're thinking about the alignment portion of design is you want to be conscious of where you place elements.

Now repetition. This is a good piece for the design process as well. Repeating some element of the design throughout the entire piece. Repetitive element may be the bold font, a certain bullet, colour, format, spatial relationships, and headlines. Anything our reader will visually recognize consistently. I've got an example here on this page.

So you can see that there's a consistent type base on the headlines and subtitles. There's consistent spacing. The alignment, you can see, is consistently a left alignment. The page numbers are even on the same place and the same typeface on each page and the single rule repeats across the bottom and the top of each page. Those little pieces are just more visually appealing for people to view.

Also, the principle of proximity. Group related items together. So physical closeness implies a relationship. When you're creating a document and you've got various different topics, the things that relate to each other, add them together.

I really like this little exercise. If you can see it, take 10 seconds and squint your eyes slightly and count the number of visual elements on the first business card and count the number of times your eyes stop. And you will see your eyes stop five times. That's the idea of proximity. You want to make it as smooth as possible. On the second business card, your eyes stop once and they just slide down, and it's very easy.

So with proximity, you want to be conscious of where do you start looking? What path do you follow? Where do you end up? After you've read everything, where do your eyes go next? And that's really helpful. If you've created a document, it's nice to pass it along to someone so they can actually see where do your eyes go next. I'm sure many of you have had experience when you're going, I find this on certain websites. You think you know exactly where you need to go. You think you should know where to click, but this design Some websites are just designed, So not user-friendly, you don't know where to click, right? So it's always good to keep in mind where your eye naturally flows. So essentially, the logical progression, the reader should be able to determine a definite beginning and end. The key takeaway with proximity is group related items and close proximity. So even think of a restaurant menu, right?

Pictures can be key as well. You don't always have to use a lot of text. You can use infographics, and those can be very helpful as well.

I've obtained this checklist, and I'm sharing it because I find it extremely helpful when it comes to the design portion of a plain language document. It goes through each of these, the CARP acronym, the contrast, alignment, repetition and proximity really well. And you know when you're creating a document, you can easily go through this checklist and you can make sure the fonts are easy to read on the print or on the screen. The headings stand out from each other. The text aligns to wherever possible. And it really makes sure if you are really wanting to create a very plain and clear document, if you go through this, you really won't miss a step. This is a very handy tool that I encourage you all to share. I still reference this time and time again.

Another, the last actually, main principle is evaluation. Evaluation is very important because I've seen people thinking that they're writing in plain language, but they're not, and that's okay because it takes practice. You could do a Cloze Test. That's where you replace every fifth word with a blank and see if the person who's reading your document can fill that word in. That can

be very helpful. There's also the Flesch Reading Ease Score. That actually, you can use that just in Word. I'm sure many of you know that you could actually see readability statistics, and that's very helpful. And you can use the checklist as well.

This is a quick, just take 1 minute to read this over. It can't be interactive, I understand. But we're just thinking of, Okay, how could this have been written clearer? What are the headings that we could have thought about? I'll just wait 10 seconds and then give you a chance to quickly read it through and just try to think in your head, three main headlines that could really organize this paragraph better. Then I'll show you the next slide what I've done.

Here are the headline options. What is Toast? How to Make Toast. History of Toast. When I've done some workshops, I've gotten some other suggestions, but these are three key ones that would have organized that paragraph a little bit there.

Here's another exercise that I've done before. You can quickly take 10 seconds to read this. Then I'll show you on the next slide how it was rewritten in plain language. You really want to try to identify the purpose, the main purpose, and the primary audience, and what the key message is.

So here you can see, revised in plain language. You know, you've eliminated the passive voice. You've eliminated the hidden verbs and the redundancies to make it really as clear as possible. And also the language of "we" and "your" and "his," they make statements more personable too, which is nice.

Final thoughts. I wanted to leave 5 minutes, 5 to 10 minutes for discussion because I know there's a lot on this topic and there's a lot of questions, and I think that even sharing your experience and how you implement plain language can really help others adapt to that. I want you all to think how will this affect your work and organization if you do not write a plain language? And you really want to make your message central. I'm not sure what's in the chat, but if I'm happy to answer any questions right now and have people quickly share if they've changed some of their documents into plain language and the benefits of that. Does anyone have anything to share or have any comments about plain language?

PARTICIPANT:

I just wanted to say in my former institution, we did plain language training across all departments and all schools. It made a huge difference for everyone because a lot of our procedural documents were really difficult for people to follow, and teachers made changes in their teaching materials as well. Just thinking about the audience and how to make the message as clear as possible was a real benefit.

KAITLYN: And did you ever receive any feedback?

PARTICIPANT:

Oh, yeah. Tons of feedback. Students liked it. People in the different departments liked it. We got requests for more training. Anyone who hadn't been able to go through the first set of training. And we started with new policies requiring that they were edited or written by somebody who had plain language experience, like IT policies, for example, that kind of thing. Absolutely. Nobody reads them because they're so complicated. [laughs] Yeah, it was very beneficial.

KAITLYN:

Thank you for sharing. Anyone else want to share anything or ask me any other questions?

HELENA:

Some nice comments, Megan said that she reviewed a handbook and contract for student housing and tried to use more plain language. It was a big improvement, but there were certainly some challenges. She said the main issue we ran into is the indemnity clause. There were concerns from others that using plain language in that section wouldn't be as strong from a legal standpoint.

KAITLYN:

Actually plain language and legal documents is actually a huge movement right now as well. Because as you all know if you're not familiar with the law and you're not familiar with legal documents, there's actually a few resources out there that talk about plain language for lawyers and for legal use. Yeah. I understand, I understand that comment, but it's actually moving forward as well.

PARTICIPANT:

Yes. I understand the point and I'm trying to, you know, have my documents more accessible. But just, you know, the other side is that I think doesn't this go against what we're doing, like say for teachers like teaching the passive voice in higher learning where we're required to use a higher-level vocabulary, are we lowering the standard, maybe in any way?

KAITLYN:

I think when you say it in your syllabus, and if you are giving instructions, being as clear as possible in your instructions on what you want them to do. Because here's the thing. You're writing to them and they're writing to you. So you're their reader. They're expected to write a certain way because they're accommodating their reader, which is you. But you are writing to them in a way to make sure that they understand exactly what the assignment is and what they need to do. So it is a little different because the audience is different. Does that help?

PARTICIPANT: Thank you.

HELENA: There is a specific question if you have any resources that speaks to EAL learners?

KAITLYN:

I can take a look and if you wanted to reach out, I have my email on the last slide of this PowerPoint. And if you have any more questions about wanting specific resources, if I don't know right at the top of my head right now, I'm happy to look into that for you. Thank you all so much too. I see the thank you's and the comments, and I appreciate that you all joined and just listened to what I had to say. I know I went through things quite quickly because we've only got a half an hour time here. But if you're interested in the topic, please reach out. I really like doing these. I've done lots of workshops on these. So I'm happy to chat more about plain language. Thanks, everyone.

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