Plain Language Products & Clear Writing Tips

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Information in Action 2.0 Lunch & Learn Series

https://library.nshealth.ca/InfoinAction

October 24, 2018
Agenda

- Introductions
- Learning objectives
- Defining plain language
- Identifying jargon
  - Example: Patient info
- Consider your audience
- Think about tone
  - Exercise: Email

- Clear communication tips:
  - Organize your ideas
  - Cut out extras
  - Revise & fine-tune
  - Design for readability
  - Example: Signage
- Access organizational supports & other resources
Introductions

Margaret Angus, Senior Communications Advisor – Patient Relations
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My aim is to make things as simple as possible, but not simpler than that.
- Albert Einstein
Learning objectives

• Define plain language; identify complex language and medical jargon
• Consider clearer ways to express critical information
• Consider your audience and adjust your writing to be both clear and concise
• Use practical strategies to simplify and clarify language without losing meaning
• Flag and remove extra info that distracts from your core message
• What kind of documents are you creating that could benefit from some plain language review or consideration?
What is plain language?

• Plain language materials are designed to inform people – not to provide detailed technical knowledge

• Plain language is a way of organizing and presenting information (writing and speaking) so that it makes sense to people

• Clearly written, easy-to-read materials are preferred by all readers

• Less is more

• Conversational tone
Use simple, everyday language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of:</th>
<th>Use:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accomplish</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ascertain</td>
<td>find out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disseminate</td>
<td>send out, distribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>endeavour</td>
<td>try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expedite</td>
<td>speed up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facilitate</td>
<td>make easier, help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formulate</td>
<td>work out, form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in lieu of</td>
<td>instead of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locality</td>
<td>place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>optimum</td>
<td>best, greatest, most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategize</td>
<td>plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilize</td>
<td>use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://www.lisibilite.net/PlainTrain/](http://www.lisibilite.net/PlainTrain/)
Use simple, everyday language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Straightforward forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>advance planning</td>
<td>planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after this is accomplished</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at an early date</td>
<td>soon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facilitate</td>
<td>help, make possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>five in number</td>
<td>five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the month of October</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the absence of</td>
<td>without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would be appropriate for me to begin by saying that</td>
<td>First,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owing to the fact that</td>
<td>because, since</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to/subsequent to</td>
<td>Before/after</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca](http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca)
Use simple, everyday language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb-noun phrases</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>carry out an examination of</td>
<td>examine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect an improvement to</td>
<td>improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ensure maintenance of</td>
<td>maintain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give consideration to</td>
<td>consider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make an inquiry</td>
<td>Inquire/ask</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca
Identifying jargon

Common NSHA/health care examples:

• Central/Eastern/Northern/Western Zone
• Ambulatory care
• Care continuum
• Interprofessional
• Diagnostic imaging
• Void
Common jargon at NSHA

• Spell out acronyms or initialisms the first time you use them:
  • Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA)
• NSHA Zones – use geographic descriptors from NSHA Style Guide
• Avoid technical terms where you can easily replace them with plain language
  • Incision = cut
  • Physician = doctor
  • Void = pee
• Include technical terms when needed, but be sure to define
Why will you receive radioiodine treatment?
You will receive radioiodine because you and your doctor agree that it is best treatment for your thyroid condition. Most of the radiation from the radioiodine will be absorbed by your thyroid gland and will interfere with the function of the thyroid cells. Some of the radiation will leave your body and it is possible that people who are in close contact with you may be exposed to small amounts. There is no proof that this exposure causes harm. Efforts should always be made to avoid unnecessary exposure to radiation.
Why will you receive radioiodine treatment?

You will receive radioiodine because you and your doctor agree that it is best treatment for your thyroid condition. Most of the radiation from the radioiodine will be absorbed by your thyroid gland and will interfere with the function of the thyroid cells. Some of the radiation will leave your body and it is possible that people who are in close contact with you may be exposed to small amounts. There is no proof that this exposure causes harm. Efforts should always be made to avoid unnecessary exposure to radiation.
Edited

Why will you receive radioiodine treatment?
You and your doctor agreed will receive radioiodine because you and your doctor agree that it is the best treatment for your thyroid condition. Your thyroid gland will take in most of the radiation from the radioiodine. It will be absorbed by your thyroid gland and the radiation will interfere with the function of the gland and change how your thyroid cells work.

After your treatment, some of the radiation will leave your body. It is possible that people who are in close contact with you may be exposed to small amounts of radiation. There is no proof that this exposure causes harm. Efforts should always be made to avoid unnecessary exposure to radiation. This pamphlet has tips to help make sure people around you are exposed as little as possible.
Example again

**Why will you receive radioiodine treatment?**

You will receive radioiodine because you and your doctor agree that it is best treatment for your thyroid condition. Most of the radiation from the radioiodine will be absorbed by your thyroid gland and will interfere with the function of the thyroid cells. Some of the radiation will leave your body and it is possible that people who are in close contact with you may be exposed to small amounts. There is no proof that this exposure causes harm. Efforts should always be made to avoid unnecessary exposure to radiation.
Final

Why will I have radioiodine treatment?
You and your doctor agreed that radioiodine is the best treatment for your thyroid condition. Your thyroid gland will take in most of the radiation from the radioiodine. The radiation will change how your thyroid cells work.

After your treatment, some of the radiation will leave your body. People who are often near you may be exposed to small amounts of radiation. There is no proof that this exposure causes harm. This pamphlet has tips to help make sure people around you are exposed as little as possible.
• Who is your main audience?
Consider your audience

- Who will read this information?
- What do they already know about the subject?
- What do they need to know?
- What is the most important thing for them to understand?
  - What do you want the reader to do as a result of receiving your message?
Consider your audience (2)

• How are they likely to react/respond to your message?
• Are there barriers to them receiving your message?
• How will you know your readers have read and understood your message?
Think about tone

• How do you want people to feel when they read your message?

• Factors that contribute to tone:
  - Style (formal/informal)
  - The words you choose (positive focus)
  - Sentence structure (active voice vs. passive)
  - Formatting (e.g. all caps, bolding), punctuation

• What does it sound like when you read your message aloud? When you have someone else read it?
IMPORTANT NOTICE
EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY

Any Patients not arriving at their appointed times may not be treated.

Be considerate as it affects other patients’ appointments as you take someone else’s time.

You must check with staff if you need to change appointment and not just show up!
Keeping your appointment time helps everyone

It’s important that you arrive on time for your scheduled appointment.

This helps us see and treat all patients who need care. It also helps to keep us on schedule.

If you need to change your appointment time, please let our staff know.

We are not able to see patients who show up outside of their scheduled appointment time.
ALL Patients must REGISTER at the BUILDING MAIN FLOOR
When you arrive for your appointment, please:

1. Register at the electronic kiosks on the main floor, ____ Building. You will need to have your health card with you. If you need help registering, staff will be there to help you.

2. Once you have registered, please come to the clinic. If you need directions, the registration kiosk will provide them.
Email exercise

- Go to your Sent messages folder in Outlook
- Open the last email you sent (if it’s a forwarded message, skip to the next)
- Did you highlight the key action or expected follow up?
- Did you use any jargon / complex language that could have been simpler?
- Did you adjust your tone based on your audience?
- Did you include extra info that wasn’t needed?
- *Was it necessary to send this message?*
✓ Plain language and jargon

Next up: Tips for clearer communication
Tips for clearer communication

How to organize your ideas? Options:

• Most important to least important
• Step by step
• Chronological
• Checklist
Tips...

Cut out extras

• Be clear and concise
• Re-read and flag info that is ‘nice to know’ but not critical’ – can it come out?
• Ask a colleague to review for clarity
• If applicable, have your document reviewed by someone who will use it, and incorporate their feedback (e.g. patient letter)
Tips…

Revise & fine-tune

• Take some time away from your draft to see it with fresh eyes
• Ask a colleague to review and give feedback – is the key message clear? Is the most important action highlighted
• If possible, ask a patient / PFA to review and comment/edit
• Look for ways to shorten your message – remove extra info
Tips...

**Design for readability**

- Left justify your text
- Leave lots of white space
- Keep paragraphs brief
- Use bulleted lists
- Use call out boxes for key information
- Bold rather than underline
- Avoid using all capitals
UPON DISCOVERY OF A FIRE

1. AVOID PANIC — DO NOT SHOUT “FIRE”.
2. QUIETLY DIRECT OR REMOVE PERSON(S) WHO ARE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER.
3. OPERATE NEAREST FIRE ALARM BOX.
5. EVACUATE OTHER AREAS THREATENED BY THE FIRE.
6. IF POSSIBLE, FIGHT THE FIRE WHILE IT IS SMALL USING FIRE FIGHTING EQUIPMENT. THE FIRE MUST NOT GET BETWEEN YOU AND THE EXIT.

IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT ALL STAFF MEMBERS OF THE HOSPITAL BE THOROUGHLY FAMILIAR WITH AND COMPLY WITH THE HOSPITAL DISASTER PLAN.
Access organizational supports

• Communications team – margaret.angus@nshealth.ca
  • Develops communication plans targeted to patient/public audiences
  • Reviews communication materials intended for patient/public audience
    (refers patient education requests on to Patient Education team)

• Patient Education team – pamphlets@nshealth.ca
  • Reviews all patient education pamphlets for plain language
  • Can review other materials intended for patients (e.g., appointment
    letters, surveys) subject to current workload
More resources


• MedlinePlus - How to Write Easy-to-Read Health Materials [https://medlineplus.gov/etr.html](https://medlineplus.gov/etr.html)

• We ❤️ Health Literacy - plain language posts [https://medium.com/wehearthealthliteracy/tagged/plain-language](https://medium.com/wehearthealthliteracy/tagged/plain-language)

Thank you!

Recording will be available at
https://library.nshealth.ca/infoinaction

Questions?