MEMO

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CC: **Dr. Susan Youngblood, Dr. Candice Welhausen**
Subject: **Portfolio Introductory Memo**

Though plain language can be used and understood in a variety of contexts (e.g., in the legal, medical, finance, government fields), this memo addresses the topic as it relates to documentation in the field of technical and professional communication (TPC). Specifically, as part of this introduction to my coursework, I define plain language, discuss its variability among differing audiences, and draw attention to the importance of end-user input when considering a text's readability.

Keywords: plain language, HCD, rhetoric, readability, audience analysis, user input, usability

INTRODUCTION

Central to the practice of TPC is the responsibility to "[produce] communication that is easy to use and appropriate for the needs of users" (Walton, 2016) while understanding that such needs vary drastically between audiences. In other words, technical communicators, as authors and designers of information, must recognize how audiences decode their work and adjust communications accordingly if they're to achieve success (Slack, Miller, & Doak, 1993).

Today, with the growing ubiquity of online documentation, technical communicators "face increasing pressure to create effective content appropriate for broad audiences" (Matveeva, Moosally, & Willerton, 2017). In response, practitioners are turning to the plain language movement and its principles to ensure their work is more universally understood.

As a web content strategist for Auburn University's College of Liberal Arts (CLA), I've witnessed the growing need for plain language firsthand from a marketing perspective. My role as arbiter between subject matter experts (in the case of CLA, university administration and department heads) and end-users (prospective students and other site visitors) has required me to approach language and design flexibly to ensure that the needs of all stakeholders are met. Often, this entails making use of a "rhetorical methodology," in which "participation with users" takes precedence over mere observation (Rose, 2016), to determine what plain language means to those who interact most with the content I create.

PLAIN LANGUAGE DEFINED

Plain language, sometimes referred to as plain writing or plain English, first gained traction as a movement in the 1970s after President Carter issued an executive order mandating its use among government agencies (Greer, 2012). Over the course of a decades-long political tug-of-war in which plain language legislation was repealed and passed again, the movement became popular among practitioners in the

private sector as well. Today, organizations such as the Center for Plain Language (CPL) and Plain Language Association International (PLAIN), exist solely to promote the use of plain language across industries.

Most succinctly, plain language is defined as "communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it" ("Federal plain language guidelines", n.d.). In addition to this understanding, text effectively written in plain language enables one's audience to efficiently accomplish the tasks they've set out to achieve. It is worth noting that, while it makes documentation easier to use and understand, plain language does not result in "dumbed down" or "unsophisticated" text (Kimble, 1994). In fact, plain language can, and should, be achieved at all reading levels and across documentation in every industry.

In an effort to give this definition more nuance, Dr. Annetta Cheek identifies three approaches or categories of definitions for plain language: numerical or formula-based, elements-focused, and outcomes-focused.

The first of these, the numerical or formula-based approach, examines a text's plainness or readability through mathematical means. More explicitly, via this approach, formulas such as the Flesch-Kincaid Index and Gunning Fog Index are used to detect elements like "word and sentence length, number of syllables, [and] lengths of paragraphs" within a piece of text (Cheek, 2010). These readability formulas generate numeric or grade level values which can then be interpreted against organizational standards. For example, long sentences or words with many syllables are considered difficult (i.e., a higher grade level), while short sentences and small, common words are considered easy (i.e., a lower grade level).

Though a formula-based approach is often the easiest and most cost-efficient in application, findings through this method are generally misleading at worst and grossly simplistic at best. For example, readability formulas are unable to truly determine the difficulty of writing, as not all large words are uncommon or difficult, and not all short words are common and easy. Additionally, "readability formulas, being strictly text based, do not reflect the interactive nature of the reading process" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Simply put, readability formulas are good indicators of an underlying illness, but not necessarily of the specific symptoms causing the illness.

The second approach, an elements-focused definition of plain language, "is based on the techniques used to [make] writing clear" (Cheek, 2010). These techniques, often presented as guidelines or checklists, address the language itself (e.g., encouraging the use of active voice, direct reader address, and shorter sentence lengths) as well as the layout of information (e.g., use of white space, headings, and bulleted lists). Essentially, through this approach, writers fill the absence of a real audience with elements they believe that audience will need. Though this approach "is much broader than the formula-based definition," Cheek notes difficulties in its application as it is both more time-consuming and "requires judgement and writing skill" (2010).

To conclude, Cheek identifies and gives support to an outcomes-focused approach in which documents are assessed based on their actual usability among users and not just on language and design elements. Through this definition, she declares that the needs of the audience supersede any other consideration and that language can only be considered plain when readers "[have] the best possible chance of readily finding what they need, understanding it, and using it" (2010).

In my own work with CLA's Office of Communications and Marketing, I approach plain language as a method of advocacy. This means writing or rewriting text with an understanding that our site visitors come

from many cultural backgrounds, with differing abilities, and via a multitude of devices. In higher education (or any industry for that matter), subject matter experts tend to lose touch with non-expert audiences as they grow more specialized. The role of plain language, then, is to help narrow this divide for the benefit of users.

PLAIN LANGUAGE IN TPC

Though some scholars note an apparent lack of plain language instruction in business communication courses (Greer, 2012), others point to an intrinsic link between plain language principles and TPC best practices (Matveeva et al., 2017).

Indeed, throughout my time in Auburn's MTPC program, I've been exposed directly and indirectly to elements of plain language in courses covering topics like technical editing, document design, usability testing, proposal writing, web development, and public policy writing.

From a document design perspective, for example, elements of plain language are closely linked to Gestalt principles of design. In their article "Inclusivity, Gestalt Principles, and Plain Language in Document Design," Turner and Schomberg note the complementary relationship between language and the layout of a document when discussing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by explaining how "visual displays of information should make a document easier to understand" in much the same way that writing does (2016).

In other instances, elements-focused plain language elements like word choice, voice, and organization of information are often discussed in relation to rhetoric in the field of TPC. In the MTPC program, this linkage is perhaps best exemplified through client work. With each project, (whether the subject matter expert was an executive director of a nonprofit or a mechanical engineer) as a technical communicator, I situated myself, linguistically, in the tradition of various genres and subjects to produce rhetorically appropriate content.

THE VARIABILITY OF PLAIN LANGUAGE

If we're to accept "plain language as UX where people can (1) find what they need, (2) understand what they find, and (3) act appropriately on that understanding" (Redish, 2010), then we must also recognize that user needs, and thus plain language criteria, vary between audiences.

Though the tendency is to equate plain language with non-expert readers, research indicates "that many documents intended for expert audiences fail to meet the expert reader's needs" (Schriver, 1991). As evidence, Schriver draws attention to astronaut training documentation and the need to facilitate problem-solving under actual conditions instead of only providing procedural instruction.

Further, elements-focused plain language techniques like avoiding "jargon, technical terms, or abbreviations" ("Federal plain language guidelines", n.d.) are unlikely to apply in every situation (e.g., astronaut training documentation will require their use). Thus, as previously stated, plain language should be viewed as audience-dependent and not, as some argue, universally dumbed down or simplified writing.

In my own work, the variability of plain language is evident across every project. One example, the grant proposal package and accompanying white paper for an adult literacy nonprofit organization, exhibits how information on a single subject can vary depending on an audience's level of expertise. Specifically, the

grant proposal itself is directed to funding agencies that possess a good understanding of the subject matter and, therefore, includes terminology and proposal-writing conventions that lay audiences are not likely to understand. Conversely, the white paper which accompanies the grant proposal is written such that non-experts can pick the document up and understand it without full context.

Due to the variability of plain language between audiences, it is the technical communicator's responsibility to research those they're representing or writing documentation for. More than focusing only on novice audiences, industry professionals note a need for TPC practitioners to learn more about audiences with technical backgrounds (St. Amant & Melonçon, 2016). Through research and consistent communication, technical communicators can reconcile the needs of very different stakeholders through appropriate language and design choices.

THE NEED FOR AUDIENCE INPUT

Following Cheek's definition, plain language is best assessed when the intended audience participates in the development process, as "writers need more feedback than text-based tests can provide" (Schriver, 1991). Technical communicators, therefore, must employ heuristic evaluation and usability testing methods (i.e., outcomes-based) to determine whether their language and design decisions are meeting the needs of their intended audience.

Plain language usability testing may be approached either qualitatively (what does the audience think?) or quantitatively (does the numerical data suggest that the document is successful?) depending on the availability of time and resources (Schriver, Cheek, & Mercer, 2010). Such tests are cross-cultural (since the focus is on outcomes rather than specific language) and might take the form of focus groups, protocol testing, or controlled studies.

When employing usability testing methods, technical communicators should be mindful that "the iterative application of plain language techniques has a positive effect on usability, understanding and respondents' experiences" (Burger & Stadler, 2019). In fact, Burger and Stadler's study reveals how the second and third versions of a revised document show significant improvement in relation to user experience. Thus, technical communicators should consider protocol-aided revision processes to ensure a document's usability across multiple contexts.

Technical communicators unable to conduct usability testing with their intended audience might turn, instead, to a persona-led heuristic evaluation. Through this methodology, real user research (e.g., end-user interviews, stakeholder discussions, and past user observations) is used to construct "hypothetical archetypes" to "understand, focus, and clarify user goals" (Friess, 2015). These personas might include information like specific user motivations, goals, frustrations, demographic information, and potential scenarios. At my own work in CLA's Office of Communications and Marketing, user personas are used to situate my writing when resources and time are unavailable to work with users directly. This means, I bring value to my team by constructing a fictionalized audience (made up of all types of our site visitors) to whom we can direct our efforts towards.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

As an emerging technical communication professional, I believe that my understanding of and ability to create documentation in plain language sets me apart from many of my peers. By understanding the needs

of end users through research, analysis, and feedback, I am able to adapt to different rhetorical frameworks and create documentation for audiences of varying levels of expertise.

My goal is to find work as an end-user document creator so that I may continue serving as an advocate for public audiences.

PORTFOLIO WORK

The documents included in this portfolio are representative of the body of work I completed as a master's student in Auburn University's MTPC program and at my position with CLA's Office of Communications and Marketing. As a collection, they speak to elements of plain language in both writing and document design and to the variability of plain language between audiences as discussed throughout this memo.

Plain Language Research Report and Accompanying User Guide

The plain language research report and its accompanying user guide are two projects completed during my time working at the CLA Office of Communications and Marketing. These artifacts, when looked at side-by-side, speak to the duality of plain language in the higher education industry. Specifically, though both include very similar information, their presentation and approach differ based on the rhetorical frameworks through which they're situated. The research report is intended to inform university administration and decision-makers of an issue, while the accompanying user guide is intended to train content editors on how to resolve said issue.

User Personas

The user personas were created during my time working at the CLA Office of Communications and Marketing and were used to aid in a large-scale usability study for the College's departmental websites. They were created using real enrollment data and helped me and the web team visualize our intended audience as real users and not, simply, "components of the interface" (Johnson, 1998).

IJAV Manuscript

The International Journal of Acoustics and Vibration (IJAV) article was edited during my time in ENGL 7000: Technical Editing. The article, titled "Electromechanical Modeling and High Speed Design of a Tubular Ultrasonic Motor," is co-authored by an international group of engineers and conveys highly technical findings. This artifact demonstrates my ability to recognize the variability of plain language; though I was asked to edit for clarity, I also had to be mindful of the intended audience and, thus, preserve the author's original meaning.

Document Redesign

The document redesign project was completed during my time in ENGL 7080: Document Design. I've included it in my portfolio because it demonstrates the importance of design principles as they relate to plain language. Specifically, while designing, I was especially mindful of Gestalt theory and the intended use of the document.

Grant Proposal and Accompanying White Paper

The grant proposal and its accompanying white paper were created during my time in ENGL 7070: Grant and Proposal Writing. Like the aforementioned plain language report and guidelines, these two artifacts

work in tandem to demonstrate how different rhetorical frameworks influence the presentation of information.

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Should you have any questions about this introductory memo or my portfolio as a whole, please contact me at: jdn0023@auburn.edu