3. Engaging Plain Language in the Technical Communication Classroom

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Abstract: This chapter encourages instructors to engage with plain-language strategies in technical communication courses. Robust plain-language strategies overlap substantively with core aims of technical communication. They prioritize users' needs through effective content, style, and design, and by involving users themselves. By exploring plain language in a course context, instructors can also pursue with students a theoretical inquiry into the fraught concepts of "plain" and "clear," the capacity and limitations of the movement to promote social justice, and the intersections of technical communication and rhetoric. In practical terms, instructors can show that technical communication expertise is central to the plain-language movement, which is well-anchored and recognizable across fields (business, law, health, the sciences) and across the globe. This chapter provides introductory information to understand, frame, and further explore plain language through a technical communication lens, as well as five in-class applications that engage plain language in theory and practice.

Keywords: plain language, plain-writing movement, plain writing

Key Takeaways

- Effective plain-language guidelines overlap many of the goals of technical communication, such as prioritizing users' needs and interests, involving users in producing texts, and using effective organization and design.
- Instructors can treat plain language as a practical application in technical communication courses, as well as an object of critical inquiry for students to explore its contextualized history, its potential support of social justice, and its rhetorical assumptions.
- Plain-language experience offers students a marketable, recognizable skill that they can strategically use to contextualize other specialized technical communication knowledge in their future careers.

In recent decades, the use of plain-language guidelines has dramatically increased in government communications, law, business, healthcare, and elsewhere (Schriver, 2017; Willerton, 2015). Plain-language guidelines have become a strategy in these fields to solve communication problems, effectively prioritize audiences, and save resources. Effective plain-language strategies, such as those showcased by the U.S. federal government and organizations like the Center for Plain Language, coincide with the goals and best practices of technical

communication. I argue that plain language is an important framework for technical communication teachers and students because it is an opportunity to see our field anchored to an established public movement, to use our disciplinary knowledge to critique and address the movement's limitations, as well as to interrogate assumptions about social justice, "plainness," and access with our students. Given the global popularity of plain language, I also suggest that it offers technical communication courses a new way to engage with international communication practices and policies. In short, this chapter is intended to persuade instructors to engage theoretically and practically with plain language in their courses and to provide the introductory content, questions, and resources for doing so.

What exactly are plain-language guidelines? Many approaches have developed over time, and while some approaches use readability formulas or decontextualized rules, this chapter will focus on current, popular guidelines that are robust, rhetorical frameworks. These guidelines address audience and context, written style, information design, and user-testing. For example, the Center for Plain Language (CPL) defines plain language in the following way: "A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information" (2019).

The CPL then offers the following five steps, each with nuanced sub-steps, to communicate in plain language:

> Step 1: Identify and describe the target audience
>
> Step 2: Structure the content to guide the reader through it
>
> Step 3: Write the content in plain language
>
> Step 4: Use information design to help readers see and understand
>
> Step 5: Work with the target user groups to test the design and content

In Figures 3.1 and 3.2, I include before-and-after examples to briefly illustrate these revision steps in action. The revision reflects attention to direct language, organization, document design, and key actions for the reader.

Figure 3.1 gives a preliminary look at the way the CPL's guidelines emphasize an audience's ability to locate, understand, and use texts to complete tasks, effectively paralleling some of the key goals of technical communication. Other popular strategies, such as those found at plainlanguage.gov, support a similar approach. These strategies are much more than readability formulas or decontextualized rules aiming at a shallow concept of "the public." Indeed, plain language has become a critical and highly relevant site where students can grapple with technical communication's theories, practices, and effects in organizations, governments, and various other field contexts.

> Dear _____,
>
> City Water of XYZ is implementing a water meter replacement plan in partnership with our city's Green Utility Projects. It is intended that this plan, as well as several others, will minimize our city's use of unnecessary utilities, including water, waste, and power. A mandatory part of this initiative is to replace old water meters with more efficient "smart" meters that can be read automatically and can better detect water usage that is likely due to leaking faucets and infrastructure. This letter provides options for city residents regarding their meter replacement.
>
> **Water Meter Replacement Plan Options**
>
> Standard Replacement Appointments:
> - City Water of XYZ has hired ABC Utility Suppliers to install the meter upgrades. Each city district will be addressed in sequence over the next 12 months. Each district has been assigned a 2-month period during which their meters will be replaced. Each household will sign up for their appointment in the month preceding their replacement period. Please see our website for the sign-up and replacement periods and for appointment sign-ups: www.citywaterxyz.com. You will also receive a reminder.
> - City Water Resident Help Line can answer any questions or concerns.
>   - (xxx) xxx-xxxx from 8am-5pm Monday through Friday.
>
> Special Circumstances appointments:
> - If your household or meter has special circumstances (such as having a recently updated meter, having a meter in a location that requires special accommodations, or being unable to be present during your allotted Ward installation period), you may coordinate with City Water of XYZ by contacting us via phone or email.
>
> There are no fees or charges associated with this water meter upgrade. We do not anticipate any changes to the monthly billing process for residents. Any problems or concerns can be directed to City Water Resident Help Line [(xxx) xxx-xxx] or info@citywaterxyz.com.
>
>
> Sincerely,
>
> City Water of XYZ

Figure 3.1. "Before" water meter upgrade letter.

Over the past decade, technical and professional communication (TPC) researchers have considered empirically whether plain-language communication benefits readers and their attitudes in the areas of health literacies (Grene & Marcus-Quinn, 2017), environmental texts (Derthick et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2012), and in city governments (Dreher, 2017). Other scholars have worked to theorize and interrogate the ethical (Ross, 2015; Willerton, 2015) and social justice (Cheung, 2017; Jones & Williams, 2017; Williams, 2010) work that plain language does—or does not—do in TPC. Further, Karen Schriver (2017) has documented recent trends in plain language that move beyond comprehension and task completion to building user trust. Plain-language research also necessarily intersects with design (Mazur, 2000). A great deal of research connected to the Center for Civic Design has well established the design/plain language relationship through effective voting ballots. In some of this work, such as Summers et al. (2014) and Ramchandani et al. (2017), the authors couple "plain language" with "plain interaction" (Summers et al, 2014, p. 22), which helps to capture the breadth and scope of what "plain language" has come to mean.

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City Water of XYZ

Contact City Water of XYZ:
info@citywaterxyz.com

Resident Help Line: (xxx)xxx-xxxx
Mon-Fri | 8am-5pm

www.citywaterxyz.com

\<DATE\>

\<Resident's Name\>
\<Address\>

Dear \<Resident's Name\>,

City Water of XYZ is upgrading all water meters to meet the goals of XYZ's new Green Utility Project. In this upgrade, ABC Utility Supplier will install "smart" water meters in all city households over the next 12 months. Below we describe what the upgrade and installation process means for you.

Does the water meter upgrade apply to me?
Yes, this city-wide upgrade is mandatory for all households.

What do I need to do?
Schedule an appointment for the meter installation through our website or Resident Help Line. A household member will need to be present during the 60-minute appointment.

When do I need to schedule my appointment?

If you live in district...	Visit our website in...	To schedule an appointment in...
1	January	February or March
2	March	April or May
3	May	June or July
4	July	August or September

*Watch for a reminder in the mail before your sign-up period.

If you have special conditions, such as a recently replaced meter or limited availability, please contact us.

Will this cost me anything?
No, you will not pay for the upgrade or have any billing interruptions.

Why are we upgrading our water meters?
The city's Green Utility Project aims to minimize wasted resources in XYZ City through better management, maintenance, and awareness of our city utilities. The new "smart" water meters better identify leaks and problems and they automatically report water consumption levels to residents and City Water of XYZ. More information about the Green Utility Project initiatives and the meter upgrades is available on our website.

Thank you for your cooperation in this exciting initiative! Please contact us with any questions.

Sincerely,

_____
Vice President of City Water of XYZ

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Figure 3.2. "After" water meter upgrade letter.

Plain-language experience can help students characterize their expertise in recognizable, marketable ways outside the classroom. It can serve as a launching point to introduce more specialized technical communication expertise in areas like healthcare, government, and the sciences, since these fields and others have developed specific forms of plain language for their unique audiences and tasks.

This chapter introduces teachers to the plain-language movement and its current trends and goals, as well as five in-class applications. I begin with a brief but necessary discussion of readability formulas in the mid-twentieth century—formulas that we resist in technical communication for good reason, but that do persist and can affect conceptions of what is "plain." Following this brief address, I explore plain language as a rhetorical strategy to 1) prioritize users across different fields, 2) support social justice, and 3) save resources. In each of these sections, I consider the successes and limitations in these efforts from a technical communication perspective. I then propose intersections between plain language and the rhetorical tradition for instructors who seek, as I do, to contextualize the movement in this way for students, and I address some objections to plain language. Lastly, I detail five specific activities for instructors to use in the classroom, as well as a list of further resources.

A Precursor to the Plain-Language Movement: Readability Formulas

In the 1940s, readability formulas emerged as a strategy to quantify and evaluate text in relation to audience comprehension. Readability formulas like the Flesch Reading Ease Formula and the Gunning-Fog Formula used surface features like syllables, word-length, and sentence counts to rate texts at different education levels. Longo (2004) describes these formulas as "cultural artifacts" emerging in a post-World War II moment that championed the idea that "[a]n educated citizenry would be better prepared to understand and act on rapidly changing social, technological, and political situations" (p. 166). In short, these formulas were thought to better equip the US to disseminate complex information for wide audiences.

Readability formulas have had a significant influence on the concept of clear or plain language since the 1940s. They link plainness to surface textual features and length—metrics they believe measure an audience's presumable comprehension. Researchers and practitioners have shown the severe limitations of readability formulas, citing their lack of attention toward real audiences, material contexts, document organization, and design, as well as a host of other rhetorical considerations (Redish, 2000; Schriver, 2000; Selzer, 1983). Readability formulas are often presumed to be part of the plain-language movement, but they can be inimical to what plain language has come to represent.

Despite the evidence against them, readability formulas and their metrics of plainness continue to thrive, so students should be aware of them. Organizations seeking to write plain documents continue to use these formulas because they are quick, inexpensive, and offer seemingly concrete evidence of improved writing. They are also easy to access. For instance, many versions of Microsoft Word come with the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula already built in for users. For these

reasons, readability formulas and their limitations are important to address in technical communication courses, even briefly. Readability formula limitations also help to show students that the concepts of "clear" and "plain" are not neutral, but rather dynamic concepts that reflect the paradigms, histories, and constraints of different communities.

■ Plain Language as a Strategy to Prioritize Users

In a 1991 edited collection entitled *Plain Language: Principles and Practice*, Irwin Steinberg defines plain language as "language that reflects the interests and needs of the reader and consumer rather than the legal, bureaucratic, or technological interests of the writer or the organization the writer represents" (p. 7). Steinberg's definition captures the prevailing motive of the plain-language movement. Researchers and practitioners then and now are working to parse through what it means to prioritize the audience effectively. What began with sentence-level readability metrics now routinely includes user testing, information design, and organization, as well as an ever-deepening understanding of the relationship between readers, writers, and contexts.

One way to explore how plain language prioritizes users is through an ethical lens. In *Plain Language and Ethical Action*, Russell Willerton (2015) theorizes the extent to which plain language can constitute ethical communication in technical writing. Drawing on Martin Buber, Willerton proposes that in plain language, the relationship between writer and reader can reflect an "I-You" relationship rather than "I-it," allowing the writer to partner or dialogue with the reader to prioritize their goals and enable their important actions (p. 53). As such, he proposes that plain language can be used to promote ethical communication, especially in contexts that are bureaucratic, unknown, rights-oriented, and critical for users. That said, ethical communication is not inherent to plain language (Ross, 2015), and in teaching, we must explicitly recognize that using plain language doesn't guarantee ethical communication. Yet, a plain-language framework like the one supported by the Center for Plain Language remains a useful tactic for writers and organizations who seek to build an ethical, dialogic relationship with users.

Various fields prioritize users by using plain language for a range of reasons. Sometimes plain language is tied to government mandates and regulation, to building users' trust of a brand or company, to disseminating knowledge effectively for the greater good, or often simply to being cost-effective (see the section "Saving Resources"). In the remainder of this section, I address the motivations for using plain language in four loosely clustered, and sometimes intersecting, fields of practice, all of which produce a great deal of technical communication: government and law, business and finance, health-related fields, and the sciences. The barriers to users that exist in these fields are not all issues plain language can address; many issues are deeply systemic and social. But the plain-language

movement supports the assumption that effective communication can still drastically improve access, action, or trust for users in these and other contexts.

Within Government and Law

Government policies and regulations have prompted much of the development of plain language in the US. Clear, plain communication has long been championed as a way for the government to prioritize the needs of the population, a way to serve the public. Often cited as an initiator of plain language in U.S. government, Congressman Maury Maverick called for an end to "gobbledygook language" in 1944, claiming it "fouls people up" (cited in Greer, 2012). Several presidents have issued executive orders regarding clear and direct prose, including Jimmy Carter's 1978 Executive Order 12174 and Bill Clinton's Executive Orders 12988 and 12866 in the 1990s. These calls all support the notion that unclear writing impedes citizens' and the government's abilities to function effectively. Former Vice President Al Gore furthered the obligation of the government to be clear in his often-cited 1998 statement that "Clear writing from your government is a civil right" (https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/quotes/government-quotes/).

In a more recent and crucial step of the plain-language movement, Barack Obama signed into law the Plain Writing Act of 2010, the purpose of which was "to improve the effectiveness and accountability of Federal agencies to the public by promoting clear Government communication that the public can understand and use" (US House, 111th Congress). Note the explicit link made here between serving the public and clear communication. This act requires all government agencies and departments to adhere to federal plain-language guidelines. While the act has been critiqued for not having the "teeth" it needs to enforce these requirements, it has prompted a significant increase in funding for quality guidelines and resources. Plainlanguage.gov, developed and curated by The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN), houses public guidelines for federal agencies to compose and revise documents, guidelines supporting the same kind of principles emphasized by The Center for Plain Language in the example earlier in this chapter. Through the Plain Writing Act, federal government communication became linked to the plain-language movement and, arguably, to technical communicators' expertise.

Dozens of local and state governments enforce various plain-language requirements as well. The state of New York led the way in 1977 with the first state-based plain-language mandate for certain legal contracts, and many states have followed since, including California, New Jersey, Washington, Florida, Oregon, Minnesota, and many others (Kimble, 1992, p. 33). Numerous city and local governments have used or required plain language in multiple ways as well. A large city government in the Midwest, for instance, recently revised its city charter with plain language, and city government insiders reported significant improvements in the use of the document for internal processes (Dreher, 2017).

In parallel, plain legal writing has made great strides through the efforts of folks like Joseph Kimble and Bryan Garner, as well as long-running publications like *The Clarity Journal*. Lawyers and law scholars have raised many questions about plain language and its effects on laws and legal documents (see, for example, Assy, 2010), but the plain-language camp has claimed its ground, prompting significant changes in the field. Willerton's (2015) chapter on restyling the Federal Rules of Evidence offers a look into the stakeholders, process, and negotiations involved in revising these sorts of texts. Willerton's chapter helps to show the robust possibilities the plain-language movement offers for deepening the relationship between technical communication and law.

▪ Within Business and Finance

Businesses use plain language to serve many different goals. One goal has been to meet the requirements of government mandates that enforce plain-language standards. These mandates, like those discussed above, link plain language to prioritizing and *protecting* users. Recent laws linked to finance, like the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, make plain and easily accessible documents a requirement in many financial contexts. Schriver (2017) describes this Act as an "important step forward in assessing the quality of financial disclosures" because the Act requires user testing (p. 361). Other requirements for plain language are included in laws regulating business communication, such as the 2009 Credit Card Act, which calls for plain language in credit agreements with consumers.

Another goal in business for using plain language is consistent with Schriver's (2017) claim that plain language has become a way to build user trust. Plain language helps to advance the broader trend in business to build audience trust and personal loyalty through transparency. For example, important documents such as end-user license agreements for applications (Kunze, 2008; Willerton, 2015) or company privacy policies (Center for Plain Language, 2015) are now scrutinized for their easy access, clarity, and design. In a privacy policy analysis, the Center for Plain Language suggests that the access and language of these texts denotes whether or not a company wants users to read them, showing the trustworthiness (or not) of that company.

▪ Within Health Fields

Across health fields, communicating complex medical information to patients and other non-experts is a perennial challenge. Unclear information can severely inhibit a patient's or caretaker's ability to understand and make decisions about health, as well as their ability to logistically navigate medical care and insurance. Research shows that using plain language can make health communication more effective, especially for those with low levels of health literacies (Grene et al.,

2017), and plain language has been framed as a tactic for patient advocacy and empowerment (Bonk, 2015).

The Federal Plain Writing Act of 2010 has far-reaching implications for the health fields through the National Institute of Health, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other health-related government offices under the purview of the Act. These offices are obligated to meet plain-language standards and have developed resources for revising and composing health communication accordingly, such as the publicly available NIH Plain Language Training and the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion's Health Literacy Improvement materials (available in the chapter resources), all of which prioritize audience needs and tasks and encourage writers to work with users. Further, many documents that fall under the regulation of HIPPA law are required to be in plain language. In his research exploring ethics in technical communication, Willerton (2015) traces the uses of plain language in several medical communication-related nonprofits, stating that many of the high-stake situations in which plain language can support ethical communication are related to health. The meteoric rise of e-health sites and applications has further amplified the use of plain, accessible language in health fields.

◾ Within the Sciences

The sciences have seen a dramatic increase in the need to make complex, specialized scientific findings more available to new and wider audiences. Scientific fields have taken up plain language and other similar strategies as a framework for making science more usable and accessible. For instance, many scientific journals now require authors to compose plain-language summaries or abstracts of their research. Scientists are, in these cases, responsible for framing and plainly communicating their work to a much bigger pool of readers, who bring with them different goals, histories, and expertise. This kind of access helps non-experts—ranging from any interested individual, experts from other fields, journalists, public officials, and others—use scientific findings to inform voting and policymaking (American Geophysical Union, n.d.). The Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science takes an interesting approach to science communication that is founded on empathy, dialogue, and personal connection—an approach that I think can help to deepen the potential scope of plain language in courses. As science plays an increasingly visible role in public life and government deliberation and legislation, effective and responsible communication becomes equally as critical in scientific disciplines.

◾ Plain Language as a Strategy to Advance Social Justice

Any deep, substantive consideration of audience, especially in light of the recent plain-language movement focus on user trust (Schriver, 2017), demands

that technical communication scholars confront the complex system of language and power that surrounds access to information. How is the notion of "plain" or "clear" language bound to race, class, and linguistic privilege? Does the plain-language movement support social justice? The recent turn of the technical communication field toward social justice and accountability further emboldens us to ask these questions. Natasha N. Jones (2016) defines social justice in technical communication as "critical reflection and action that promotes agency for the marginalized and disempowered" (p. 343). Insofar as plain language is intended to prioritize users and not institutions or writers, the plain-language movement may contribute to this kind of social justice work. However, few studies directly inquire into what extent plain language can promote the agency of marginalized and disempowered audiences. Plain language may offer an important strategy for advancing social justice, but if used shallowly, it may deflect attention from vulnerable audience groups or other issues of access, and it may re-inscribe existing marginalization.

A few technical communication scholars have begun to conduct this important research. Miriam Williams (2010), for example, found in a study that African American business owners felt increased trust toward a city government due to regulations written in plain language. Williams' project extended the conversation about plain language—especially in the context of government regulatory writing—into more specific histories of institutionalized discrimination and disadvantage. She revealed the work plain language could accomplish in generating trust and familiarity within historically marginalized groups. In another study, Jones and Williams (2017) consider the history of marginalization of African American homebuyers to help explore the ways plain-language ARM mortgage disclosure statements can affect vulnerable homebuyers. They found that fine-grained issues in plain-language revisions can subtly re-inscribe systematic biases, as well as reinforce the mistrust marginalized audiences already feel toward institutions. The authors call for a wider consideration of contextual and historical factors that may link to textual features and that may inhibit or promote user agency. Iva W. Cheung (2017), using cognitive load theory, argues that social justice ends may be pursued through plain language, calling it an ethical imperative. In short, the plain-language movement offers strong, publicly anchored strategies of communication that scholars and practitioners can explore as a potential way to advance social justice work, but they must constantly interrogate their practices and assumptions, always remaining alert to the way plain language may deflect attention from systemic and social issues.

▪ Plain Language as a Strategy to Save Resources

An argument for plain language at play throughout the preceding overview is that it is cost- and resource-efficient. The promise of efficiency helped fuel the readability formulas, as well as the later plain-language movement. For example,

in the 1940s, the U.S. federal government worried about the expanding paperwork and documentation following World War II and the New Deal, and plain writing spoke to that need (Longo, 2004, p. 167). This concern has only grown over time, and ultimately the Paperwork Reduction Act, which was passed in 1980, was heavily tied to calls for plain language. More recently, the Federal Plain Writing Act of 2010 and other regulations regarding plain writing also have been linked to saving practical resources.

The plain-language movement finds an anchor in the fact that effective communication prevents problems and saves time and money for both users and organizations. Joseph Kimble (2012), a leading plain-language expert in law and policy, devotes a large portion of his book *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* to fifty examples where revising in plain language saved immense resources. For instance, Kimble details the $4.4 million saved by the Veterans Administration Bureau in 1999 after they revised a single letter instructing veterans to update their life insurance beneficiaries. He points out that small, targeted plain-language revisions to documents that serve thousands, or millions, of users can save incredible resources. Kimble tracks multiple areas of saved resources: employee time necessary to complete tasks, reduced materials, and retained comprehension by users. In other examples of medical instructions, manuals, and tax forms, Kimble mentions the increased positive attitudes and decreased frustrations that coincide with plain language—changes that also connect to better bottom lines for companies and organizations. Apart from the fact that these examples serve as compelling arguments to use plain language, they provide insight into the way technical communication intertwines with the material, financial, and personnel resources of different contexts.

Plain Language, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication

For those instructors inclined to intersect technical communication with rhetoric in their courses, as I am, plain-language guidelines serve as a useful, practical opportunity to do so. In this section, I offer three ways that instructors can invoke the rhetorical tradition to help deepen students' approach to plain language and technical communication. First, I offer a very brief look at the plain style in the rhetorical tradition. Second, I discuss audience as it links to clarity and plainness. Third, I suggest that instructors and upper-level students consider the turn toward user trust in the plain-language movement in terms of persuasion.

The concept of plainness has a long history in the rhetorical tradition; the plain style has been among the most durable categories over the past two millennia. Deployed for different ends across periods, the plain style was initially linked to the teaching or instructive portions of orations by Cicero and Quintilian. In English traditions, there are various accounts of the roots of plain style, including the well-known narrative of Francis Bacon, Thomas Sprat, and the Royal Society

of London during the early modern period to use plain style in science. They sought to remove ornamentation and ambiguity in order to foreground uninhibited scientific truth (see Halloran & Whitburn [1982] for further discussion). This narrative, which I only briefly touch on here, is often positioned as a precursor to technical and professional writing practices. But a counternarrative by Elizabeth Tebeaux (2004) roots technical communication in older utilitarian writing, including instructional, administrative, and record-keeping documents, among others. Unlike the scientific writing under Bacon's purview, much of this utilitarian writing was intended to be accessible and comprehensible by wide audiences and even spoken aloud. "Plainness" in this case reflected everyday speech and everyday needs. These two accounts provide only the briefest glimpse into the myriad of ways "plainness" hasbeen deployed to meet different goals over time. Introducing even brief histories of plainness can reveal for students the idea that through plain language, we are promoting a conception of the term that embeds and conceals contemporary values within it. We can then ask students, what are those values?

A second area of rhetorical studies we may use to deepen students' understanding of plain language is the relationship between written text and audience. In "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing," Carolyn R. Miller (1979) troubles the windowpane myth of language, the notion that "language provides a view out onto the real world, a view which may be clear or obfuscated" (p. 611). This approach treats style and content as discrete categories, implying that content is independent, and the goal of the writer is simply to reveal it in transparent text. Miller states, "We have not said anything very useful about the writer-reader relationship when we say the purpose of technical communication is to be clear" (p. 615). With a windowpane approach, one would only consider "the relationship between the reader and reality (and whether the reader is mentally adequate to the reality)" (p. 615).

Readability formulas and limited, rule-governed iterations of plain language might be said to rely on this windowpane theory, suggesting that a particular metric of clarity should ensure comprehension. But more robust approaches to plain language engage audiences and their tasks in much more nuanced ways, raising questions of communication design, users' goals and histories, written style. A discussion of rhetorical audience can help students approach plain language as a highly contextualized, reflexive, and, as Willerton (2015) suggests, dialogic strategy to prioritize audience.

Lastly, I see the recent move in plain language toward building user trust (Schriver, 2017) as a way to acknowledge and investigate the ways plain language is persuasive. Framing plain language in the terms of persuasion can reveal more clearly the stakeholders, socio-political implications, and assumptions about language and clarity undergirding the movement. This move is important to keep present, particularly in light of the social justice work that plain language may potentially support.

◼ Potential Resistance to Plain Language

A key reason I engage plain-language guidelines and the movement in technical communication courses is that they are already firmly anchored in industry, government, and elsewhere. Put differently, they are a *starting point* where public attention to language and communication is already established and integrated into policies, practices, and industries. This opportunity cannot be underestimated. However, the realities of plain-language application can be fraught, surface-level, rule-based, decontextualized, and exclusively reliant on readability scores. These kinds of applications are unfortunate and can deter instructors from engaging with plain language at all. But I believe that the plain-language guidelines promoted by national organizations and the federal government reflect a public investment in rhetorically grounded strategies to revise communication and prioritize users. We can prepare our students with resources and tools to recognize and—I hope—challenge weak applications of plain language. By teaching them stronger ways to define and apply plain language, we help bolster against weak applications in the future while harnessing the public buy-in that currently exists for the movement.

Instructors may also resist plain language because it doesn't widely consider its effects on speakers of other languages. Some research shows that while speakers of Germanic languages tend to appreciate English plain-language documents, those who speak Latinate languages (French, in the cited study) may not, due to the elimination of longer Latinate words and the use of phrasal verbs (Thrush, 2001). This kind of objection also prompts us to consider what other audiences are quietly obscured by plain language and, as I mention in the section on social justice above, how plain language offers both opportunities and potential risks for marginalized groups. These concerns should be made visible in the plain-language movement as we grapple with them in our classes. These concerns also help us emphasize that involving users is a crucial step to any plain-language work.

Other objections to plain language have been routinely levied and well-addressed, such as its oversimplification of material. I encourage instructors to read through the exchanges about these objections in the resources and references in this chapter, particularly Beth Mazur (2000) and any texts of Joseph Kimble.

▌ Applying Plain Language in Technical Communication Courses

In previous sections, I offer introductory information and examples that can be used to situate and frame plain language in technical communication courses. In this section, I offer five strategies for incorporating this material into a syllabus through low-stakes assignments that can parallel existing syllabus materials. Effective plain-language guidelines tend to parallel the common goals of introductory technical communication classes already, so it can require little work to use them to support existing syllabi. In brief, instructors can introduce the plain-lan-

guage movement in the beginning of the semester, then connect each existing unit to relevant aspects of plain-language guidelines. A few applied points of connection include audience analysis, content organization, effective use of headings and document design, and usability or user experience. These skills all can be linked to steps of existing plain-language guidelines and training tools (see Example 1). The remaining examples provide guidance on other ways to take up plain language as a theoretical, interdisciplinary, and international platform.

Plain-language materials can encourage student buy-in—especially if the examples are from plain-language resources in fields students have stakes in. These materials can also help students to see where their technical communication expertise can extend plain-language practices. In other words, students can make sense of themselves as practitioners who have highly marketable plain-language skills, and they can also lean to speak confidently about how and where they offer even more as technical communication experts.

■ Example 1: Applying Plain-Language Strategies

Assignment Context: In conjunction with some of the assignments above, I recommend that instructors prompt students to apply plain-language strategies to real texts. These kinds of write/rewrite or before/after assignments can be done as in-class activities, more extensive high-stakes assignments, or can be incorporated into the writing of existing projects. These kinds of applied tasks not only give students practice composing and revising texts with real contexts and audiences, but they lend themselves to student portfolios later. Nearly every plain-language framework included at the end of this chapter includes practice and before-and-after examples that instructors can introduce and use in the classroom. Instructors can provide the "before" version to students and work through various guidelines, including user testing in the classroom when possible, then introduce the "after" version along with students' revisions.

Below, I offer guidance on how an instructor might use the examples from earlier in the chapter (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2), to introduce application exercises. Note that while user involvement is a crucial portion of plain-language strategies, short, in-class application exercises often preclude effective user-tests; however, students in class can still brainstorm and prepare for user tests throughout the revision process. If higher-stakes assignments take up plain language, then teachers should encourage students to engage users to whatever extent is possible in the class context.

Exercise: Plain-Language Application – Water Meter Upgrade Letter

1. In groups of 2-3, you will receive a hard copy of a water meter upgrade letter sent out to eligible U.S. residents before. Take a

few minutes to become familiar with this letter and brainstorm with your groups any readability issues that are evident to you as technical communicators. What do you notice straight away?

2. Next, read over the plain-language guidelines provided to you by your instructor. Where do the issues you identified fit in the guidelines?

3. Using the strategies, develop a plan to revise the letter in plain language. Your plan should consider content, style, organization, and document design. Feel free to take some artistic license: if you believe something is missing, invent the content you believe is necessary. You may type your revised letter or sketch the layout and (rough) text on the blank paper provided. Be prepared to explain your decisions and your reasons.

4. With the class, discuss your group's decisions, reasons, and drafted product.

5. As a class, strategize how you would involve users to test this document at various stages of development and product. By what metrics would you measure success?

These in-class applications can be used in more targeted ways as well. For instance, plain-language guidelines and style textbooks both tend to recommend strong subjects and strong verbs, so targeted sentence-level work can map on well to these exercises. "Before" examples can offer real-life contexts for written style practice in relation to real user needs or actions. Alternatively, students can focus solely on other areas, such as content organization or use of headings/subheadings. These targeted exercises also help students discover that in real communication, such areas are not actually so neat or discrete.

Example 2: Making Sense of the Disciplinary Intersections in Technical Communication

Assignment Context: Technical communication intersects many other areas of expertise, including design, usability and user experience, content strategy, web design, and others. As such, students can struggle to make sense of themselves in the job market and even within the university. I suggest here that researching and practicing plain language can help ground students in these intersections of our field with others, helping them to see the common goals and the collaborative work possibilities. In the 1990s, technical communication largely abandoned plain language due to the limited ways it was being put into practice; plain language was understood in many cases to "dumm[y] down" texts (Schriver, 1997, p. 26). Much of the work of plain language at the time was taken up in fields like information design (Mazur, 2000). Technical communication recently stepped back into the ring of plain language, but other sister fields, such as usability, have

grown considerably too, and they have also developed stakes in plain language. It has become a multi-disciplinary movement. I recommend class discussions that use plain language as a microcosm to make sense of the productive intersections and overlaps between technical communication and other fields.

Exercise: Plain Language: An Interdisciplinary Platform

Please read Beth Mazur's (2000) article titled "Revisiting Plain Language" before class. Compose answers to the following prompts. Be prepared to discuss them as a class.

1. Identify each common critique of plain language and Mazur's responses.
2. Discuss the ways Mazur positions plain language within and across disciplines. How do those disciplinary boundaries seem to be constructed?
3. Develop your own rationale for why technical and professional communication offers a strong foundation for developing and applying plain-language strategies.

Example 3: Plain Language in Specific Fields

Assignment Context: As I've mapped out earlier in the chapter, plain language has been taken up in both general ways (for instance, the Center for Plain Language's five steps), as well as in specific field contexts (health, law, business, web writing, etc.). An opportunity for engaging students who have other disciplinary bases—perhaps students who are majoring in something else but minoring in technical communication—is to prompt them in low-stakes activities to explore the plain-language resources in their own fields. Asking students to apply their field-specific plain-language resources to assignments can increase their benefit and buy-in while maintaining a relatively consistent class-wide assignment for the instructor to manage. Further, asking students in an in-class activity to compare guidelines across each other's fields can yield productive discussion about unique audience needs and tasks as well as the disciplinary cultures of different fields.

To prepare for this assignment, ask students to identify their disciplines (or anticipated disciplines). Place them in loose disciplinary groupings to the extent possible.

Exercise: Plain Language in Your Discipline

First, individually perform basic web research on any plain-language activity or requirements in your field. Start with basic Googling, then focus in on specific professional institutions or specific field expectations.

Second, come together as a group to discuss, compare, and compile what you found.

Each group should post two deliverables to our class-wide discussion board:

1. Introduce your field/sub-fields and post an annotated list of resources, including any relevant links and information.
2. Short Answer: What unique strategies, content, or considerations do the field-specific plain-language resources offer compared to the more general guidelines offered by plainlanguage. gov or Center for Plain Language?

Your instructor will compile the posts and provide students a "Plain Language Across Disciplines" resource for future professional use or reference.

Example 4: Approaching International Technical Communication through the Plain-Language Movement

Assignment Context: In introductory courses, I find it challenging to discuss issues of international and intercultural technical communication with adequate depth. I offer here a way to use plain language as a touchstone to engage with a global conversation about technical communication. Dozens of countries around the world have taken up plain-language initiatives in quite different ways. Instructors can ask students to explore and compare approaches from different nations and international organizations, looking for core values and strategies. This kind of assignment can also highlight multi-lingual students in the class, as they can investigate the strategies of non-English speaking countries as well. Two resources that can support this kind of work are the Plain Language Association International, which networks over 30 countries seeking to develop plain-language policy, and Clarity International, which publishes a regular journal, *Clarity*, that focuses primarily on law. Both are included in this chapter's list of resources.

Exercise: International Technical Communication and Plain Language

To complete this discussion post, first spend 5-10 minutes exploring the Plain Language Association International (https://plainlanguage-network.org) website to gain a sense of the breadth of plain-language movements across the globe. Next, select one country's plain-language resources to explore more deeply by following the links provided on the site and by searching for others yourself. You have some flexibility in terms of the scope of your exploration. (If you are able to navigate

information in a language other than English, you are encouraged to do so!)

Provide an overview of what you have found by answering the following questions:

1. What nation's plain-language resources have you selected for this activity?
2. In your selected nation, what institutions or organizations have you found that support plain-language communication?
3. What do they claim plain language accomplishes? Provide evidence (in the form of cited quotes or screenshots of the websites you explored) and explanation.
4. How does their approach to or definition of plain language compare to some of the guidelines and goals of plain language in a U.S. context, such as those we have reviewed in class? Be specific in your answers.
5. Do they provide examples? If so, please include a screenshot of at least one example.
6. Is there anything else you noticed or would like to discuss about what you found?

To aid your readers, embed all relevant links in answers to questions 1-6.

The goal of this discussion post is for students to 1) explore a specific plain-language movement outside the US, 2) develop technical communication knowledge that is relevant outside the U.S. context, and 3) collectively archive a range of approaches to plain language for students' potential future use.

▪ Example 5: Investigating Power and "Plainness"

Assignment Context: As I describe above, the plain-language movement is connected to prioritizing and protecting users. In this way, it is an important strategy to shift power to groups who are historically marginalized. However, we can't lose sight of the fact that being "clear" or "plain" can often be conflated with concepts like "standard edited English," which is bound up with linguistic, racial, and class privilege and a long, complex history of systemic inequalities, especially in education. We need to push our students to interrogate "plain language" as an evolving framework that should be continually (re)directed to challenge long-held power structures like these. Below, I offer some in-class discussion prompts that may help students begin to think through these issues, and I recommend referring back to some of the sources listed in the "Plain Language as a Strategy to Advance Social Justice" section.

▪ Discussion 1

The concepts of "clear" or "plain" are not objective or neutral. As a class, come up with examples that show how these terms (and other concepts commonly associated with them, like "standard" or "proper" English) are non-neutral. Instructors can bring in examples or research from our field or others that help to make this point. I've found success with excerpts from the College Conference on Composition and Communication's (CCCC) statement, Students' Right to Their Own Language (https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/srtol-summary). Using each example, discuss how a robust plain-language framework guards against (or should guard against, if it doesn't) participating in a "neutral" conception of language. The goal here is to not only think about how language is non-neutral but to think about how we act on that knowledge.

▪ Discussion 2

Using one or two sets of guidelines, identify the dimensions of communication that plain language includes (or should include) beyond surface words. Discuss in specific terms how each dimension speaks to its ability to empower marginalized users. For example, a current tenet is involving real audiences. How can this involvement happen in a deep, collaborative way that allows for empowerment and moves beyond simply testing for effectiveness? The goal here is to again use plain language as an opportunity to point to specific actions or guidelines that enact or enable the values we want to support.

▪ Discussion 3

One of the reasons plain language is anchored so strongly across fields is that prioritizing audiences sells itself—literally. Using plain language has proven to be very resource-effective in industry, government, and elsewhere. As a group, brainstorm scenarios where interests conflict and truly prioritizing audiences could create tensions for businesses or institutions. In these important cases of slippage, what can we learn? How does (or how should) plain language navigate such slippage to maintain its integrity?

▪ Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide instructors an overview of plain language, a preliminary map of its traction in technical communication across fields, and practical strategies and resources for incorporating plain language in courses.

These serve as launching points to help instructors see plain language as a recognizable, marketable skill for graduates as well as a platform to help students grapple with technical communication's theories, practices, and values in the world.

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◾ Appendix. Web Resources for Plain Language

Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science: https://www.aldacenter.org/
Center for Civic Design: https://civicdesign.org/
Center for Civic Design – Language Access: https://civicdesign.org/projects/language/
Center for Plain Language: https://centerforplainlanguage.org/

Clarity International: https://clarity-international.net/
Compiled Style Guides for Government Administrations and Agencies: https://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/guides/
"Health Literacy" (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion): https://health.gov/our-work/health-literacy
NASA Headquarters Library:
https://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/hqlibrary/pathfinders/edusci.htm#web
NIH Online Plain Language Training: https://www.nih.gov/institutes-nih/nih-office-director/office-communications-public-liaison/clear-communication/plain-language/training
Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN):
https://plainlanguage.gov
The Plain English Campaign (UK): http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/
Plain Language Association International: https://plainlanguagenetwork.org/
Plain Writing at the National Archives: https://www.archives.gov/open/plain-writing