

## 23. Plain Language

**Russell Willerton**

PO'OKELA SOLUTIONS, LLC

The plainness of a text, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. One who says to a mechanic, “Please tell me in plain English why the car won’t run,” hopes the mechanic will use familiar words and clear examples instead of insider jargon and complex explanations. The mechanic, in this case, will have to watch the questioner for signs that the answer is clear and understood. People in government, health and medicine, and legal services started to realize decades ago that their constituents could not understand letters, brochures, and policy documents written in dense jargon and presented with poor page *design*. Over the past several decades, plain language has become an approach focused on helping non-expert readers—citizens, consumers, medical patients, and others going about their lives—understand and act upon important documents they receive. Plain-language texts may be recognized by their surface features, but the plain-language approach goes deeper than the surface level. For decades, technical communicators have advocated for audiences by applying plain-language principles and testing documents with readers.

Most who work in plain language today would take a descriptive approach to defining the term rather than a prescriptive (or proscriptive) one. That is, they identify traits that make language plainer rather than setting requirements for what a plain passage should or should not contain. These traits include using familiar vocabulary instead of complex jargon, writing shorter sentences instead of longer ones, writing with clear subjects and active verbs, and using section headings and white space to make reading easier (see a summary in Kimble, 2012, pp. 5-10). The Center for Plain Language, in defining plain language, focuses on the reception of a document by its *audience*:

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*. The definition of “plain” depends on the audience. What is plain for one audience may not be plain at all for another audience. (Center for Plain Language, 2023a)

To understand what plain language means, it is important to know how the term has been used over time. The term *plain English* preceded *plain language* as applied to creating readable, usable documents. Currently, initiatives for *plain English* often appear more frequently in the UK and in some Commonwealth countries, while *plain language* is often used in the US, Canada, and other countries.

A text's plainness comes from the *style* the writer used to write it. Style is one of the canons of classical *rhetoric*, and debates over which style is appropriate for particular situations go back many centuries. Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors (1999) note that rhetoricians identified three fundamental levels of style: the *low* or *plain* style, the *middle* or *forcible* style, and the *high* or *florid* style. Quintilian, say Corbett and Connors, wrote that plain style was best for instructing audiences, middle for moving them, and high for charming them (1999, p. 21).

The advocacy for plain style has a long *history*. Tom McArthur (1991) points out that the Host in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* calls on the (educated) Clerke of Oxenford to speak plainly to reach the pilgrims in the group. Authors of technical books in English in the 16th century used plain style, but such books got less attention than traditional literary genres (Tebeaux, 1997). The first reference to "plain English" as a style choice may be from Robert Cawdrey in the 17th century. Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* of 1604, the first known English dictionary, was written for women, who had much less access to education and less familiarity with Latinate terms (McArthur, 1991, p. 13). Denise Tillery (2005) writes that several advocated for plain style in *science* writing in the 17th century, including Francis Bacon, Margaret Cavendish, and Jane Sharp.

In the 1940s and 1950s, parallel developments in the US and the UK led people to reconsider how governments and large organizations should communicate with their constituents. Advocates for change acknowledged that citizens and even employees within governmental organizations struggle to respond appropriately when they do not understand official, bureaucratic language. Karen Schriver (2017) provides a detailed and authoritative account of plain language activities in the US between 1940 and 2015. Schriver shows how, over several decades, successive efforts by government employees, academic researchers, Congress, and plain-language advocates in industry led bureaucracies to communicate to their constituents more effectively.

Over the years, multiple organizations have been formed to advocate for plain language. Organizations including Clarity International and Plain Language Association International connect people around the world who share the goal of communicating clearly with a variety of audiences. Both organizations sponsor conferences, and Clarity International also publishes its own journal. The Center for Plain Language is a U.S. nonprofit that advocates for plain language in government and industry. As part of its *public* outreach, the Center for Plain Language issues an annual report card to assess how well federal agencies follow the Plain Writing Act of 2010.

Plain language is an active area of professional activity that continues to grow and develop. Academics in professional and technical communication and other fields continue to *research* the history, impacts, and best practices for plain language (e.g., Matveeva et al., 2017). A set of four key terms beginning with "p" provides a way to navigate that research. Plain language is manifest in *products*, in *process*, in *principle*, for a *payoff*.

As Schriver (2017) notes, plain language is manifest in a *product* (a document of some kind). The product is plain enough if it meets the needs of its audience through its language and design. Surface measures of plainness, such as syllable counts and sentence lengths, frequently correlate with audience judgments about a document's helpfulness and usefulness. Insider jargon, which frequently is complex and unfamiliar, often adds a layer of complexity that editors strive to remove. Shorter words and shorter sentences are frequently easier for audiences to understand. In some cases, an organization like an insurance company or a state health agency might require documents for consumers to reflect certain readability scores or grade-level scores (see "Style" in this volume for more information). That said, plain-language practitioners have stated for decades that surface measurements of readability are not enough to ensure that a document is usable by its intended audience. And yet, practitioners of plain language frequently use some measure to assess the surface characteristics of their documents. Informal, unsystematic "eyeball tests" of document readability are not sufficient.

Design choices are also part of a plain-language practitioner's toolset. By skillfully using white space, typography choices, bulleted or numbered lists, and other *visual* cues, writers and designers can complement written content to create a document that is plain and easy to use by the audience (Garner, 2013).

Schriver (2017) also writes that plain language is manifest through *process*. The process of creating effective documents in plain language is just as complex and iterative as that of creating complicated documents for expert users. Testing draft documents with members of the target audience has long been part of plain-language practice; if the target audience cannot use a document effectively, it is not plain enough. Janice C. (Ginny) Redish (2000) emphasizes that an effective process is critical for producing plain-language documents that work for users; merely following "a few guidelines for sentences and words" is not enough (p. 165). Willerton (2015) provides profiles of organizations that create documents in plain language. Reinforcing Redish's point, these profiles show that effective plain-language processes are clear, they allow for iteration and recursion (i.e., incorporating feedback from audience members and experts), and they are focused on serving the audience.

Over several decades, it has been clear that a *principle* of serving public audiences ethically is central to plain language work. "Service is inherent in the mission and components of the plain-language movement" (Matveeva et al., 2017, p. 337). Many plain-language advocates have come from government agencies, where documents with unclear language can prevent citizens from receiving services or benefits. Schriver's (2017) history shows many instances in which government workers realized plain language serves constituents better. In particular, as Willerton (2015) writes, plain language helps readers navigate BUROC situations—situations that are bureaucratic (involving large, complex organizations and policies), unfamiliar (faced infrequently), rights-oriented (related to rights held as consumers and even as citizens), and critical (with significant consequences). A court trial, for example,

is certainly a BUROC situation. Legal documents in plain language, such as jury instructions and court rules, can reduce confusion and help lawyers, jurors, and judges to focus on facts of particular cases (e.g., Kimble, 2012).

In the UK in the late 1970s, Martin Cutts and others campaigning for plain English in government shredded government forms in a public protest in London's Parliament Square (Cutts, 2009, p. xv) to show that unclear documents are bad for citizens. Organizations like Healthwise (Willerton, 2015) and Health Literacy Media (Health Literacy Media, 2023) create information in plain language to support health *literacy*. Documents in plain language can help people with lower health literacy skills to learn more and to make better decisions around *health* and *medicine*. Iva W. Cheung (2017) shows how people in underrepresented and marginalized groups, people who deal with negative stereotypes about themselves, and people with disabilities often face persistent stresses that negatively affect their cognitive load. Cheung argues that communicators have an ethical imperative to use plain language to reduce the cognitive load and promote *social justice* for oppressed people who need information to make important decisions (p. 454). In one example, Aisha T. Langford and colleagues (2020) describe how they used plain language to develop a decision support tool for Black and Hispanic audiences to use in considering whether to participate in cancer clinical trials (CCTs). CCTs are an activity in which members of nonwhite racial groups are often underrepresented. Langford et al. used interviews with cancer patients, a survey of cancer patients, and usability testing to develop a web-based tool in English and Spanish that Black and Hispanic patients viewed favorably. The principle of helping audiences to learn, to use benefits owed them, and to make informed decisions about their lives is central to plain language.

This principle of serving public audiences separates plain language work from other for-profit applications of technical communication and information design. At times, however, boundaries may blur. Federal legislation such as the Truth in Lending Act and the Fair Credit Reporting Act has required certain consumer contracts to have information in plain language. Some for-profit businesses do use plain language in their communication. For example, insurance companies sometimes enter and win in the Center for Plain Language (2023b) ClearMark Awards for effective plain language documents. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission also has rules requiring investment companies to use plain language when writing certain prospectus documents (Securities and Exchange Commission, 2023).

Finally, plain language documents frequently provide better results than those written in bureaucratese; plain language *pays off*. Joseph Kimble's (2012) book *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* provides vignettes of 23 instances in which plain language documents saved organizations time and money, along with 27 vignettes about studies showing that audiences prefer plain-language documents over less-plain counterparts. Later research (Campbell et al., 2017; Trudeau & Cawthorne, 2017) reinforces these studies, showing that working professionals

frequently prefer documents in plain language over those in more complex language. Advocates for plain legal language, including Kimble (2012, 2017) and Bryan Garner (2013), oppose the idea that writing in legalese helps lawyers protect themselves and their *profession*. Instead, Kimble, Garner, and others say that clear language creates trust between clients and counsel, and that clear legal documents are better than convoluted ones.

There are many examples of plain-language documents that embody plain language as product, process, principle, and payoff. One example is the Field Guides for Ensuring Voter Intent (Center for Civic Design, 2023), which are written for local elections officials. This project was first led by Dana Chisnell, a fellow of the Society for Technical Communication, an expert and author on usability testing, and a concerned citizen-turned-consultant for local elections issues. Chisnell was drawn to election operations after 2000, in which the winning electoral votes from Florida were awarded to George W. Bush after a contentious recount and numerous problems from the “butterfly” ballot design that confused some voters. Chisnell spent several years learning how elections are run and found that information that could help local elections officials had been collected and published, but it was written for academic audiences. Chisnell and her team distilled some of this information into a set of small booklets, each of which fits in a shirt pocket when printed (Willerton, 2015). Chisnell’s team produced documents written in plain language and presented on clean, orderly pages. The processes were iterative and audience-focused. The principle of serving the audience—who is serving citizens by administering the voting process—is evident. The payoff from these documents (downloadable from the Center for Civic Design) comes through ballots that are more usable, poll workers who are trained better, voter education guides that are more effective, and local elections websites that tell voters what they need to know.

Redish (2000) notes that over time, document design, plain language, and information design have been used to describe the same core activity. While more than one label may apply in a given situation, plain language stands apart from others with its four P’s—particularly the *principle* of serving an audience using an organization’s information to accomplish critical tasks. With this emphasis on principle, plain language provides a framework suitable for responding to the social justice turn in technical communication (e.g., Walton et al., 2019). Plain language is an approach that technical communicators can use to create effective documents while meeting audience needs ethically and respectfully.

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