Writing for cognitive accessibility: a guide to plain language

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Agenda

- Intros
- Plain language 101
- Break (15 minutes)
- Plain language workshop
Introductions – in the chat

- Name
- Pronouns
- Organization
- (Optional) Answer one question below:
  - What do you already know about plain language or writing for cognitive accessibility?
  - Have you ever tried writing in plain language?
  - What is something you hope to learn about cognitive accessibility/making your work more accessible to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities?
What is plain language?

- Plain language is a way of writing. It uses smaller words and shorter sentences. This helps people understand the main ideas more clearly.

- 6-8th grade reading level (aim lower)
- There is no one “right way” to write in plain language - this workshop is just a guide.
- There is also Easy Read!
  - 3-5th grade reading level
  - Image supports for each sentence
Why write in plain language?

- **Access for:**
  - People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD)
  - English language learners
  - Most adults in the United States
    - More than half of U.S. adults have an eighth-grade reading level or below.

- More people understand your writing = larger impact for your advocacy
- **Plain Writing Act of 2010** - mandated federal executive agencies to write documents in plain language - we should lead by example!
The most important things to know

- Plain language can be done!
- Plain language resources should have *the same information* as non-plain language resources.
- Think about writing from your reader’s point of view
  - You may need to “move backwards” to give background information
  - For each sentence or paragraph, ask:
    - “why?”
    - “so what?”
    - “how does this affect me?”
How to start - outlining

- What is the main idea?
- What questions do you want your reader to have answered by the time they finish reading?
- Who is your audience? What background information is important?
- How will you split up your ideas?
- What terms need to be defined?
Example outline:

Topic: Affordable housing
Main idea: What is affordable housing?
Sub-headings:
• What does “affordable” mean?
• Who makes affordable housing?
• Who can get affordable housing?
Other ideas?
Things to avoid

- Long sentences
  - Try not to take up more than 1-1.5 lines in a standard Word document in most 12-point font
- Long words and jargon.
  - Think of substitute words
  - Only define words that people need to understand the subject.
- Metaphors or other figures of speech
- Numbered lists
- Words like “this,” “they,” or “it” if it might not be clear what or who you’re talking about.
- Passive voice
  - Active voice: You want to avoid using passive voice in your writing
  - Passive voice: When writing, passive voice should be avoided.
Things to do

- Split longer sentences into two smaller ones.
- Use bulleted lists, unless the order is important
- Check the reading level of your document:
  - Readable.com
  - https://hemingwayapp.com/
  - Be sure to take out terms that have been defined in the text

- Use examples to make abstract ideas clearer
If you needed to get a COVID vaccination, you could call your local pharmacy, but they may not have appointments available same-day.

As an example:

John needs a COVID vaccine. He calls the pharmacy near him to make an appointment. But the pharmacy did not have any appointments left that day.
Original work vs “translation”

- Remember, any plain language “translation” must have the same content as the original document!
- You may need to take things out of their original order.
  - Start with a new outline to find the “gaps”
- Defining vs replacing words
  - Shorter is not always better
- Summarize as a last resort.
Focus groups - nothing about us, without us!

- Recruitment: People First, ASAN, P&As, DD Councils, CILs.
- 6-10 participants
- (At least) 2 facilitators
  - Try to include one facilitator who knows the participants already
- Send materials in advance
- Set a clear agenda with breaks
- Pay people fairly for their work
- Give people credit for their participation
Guiding questions for focus group

• Does this make sense to you?
• What do you think the main idea is for this section?
• Are we saying the ideas in the right order?
• Is there too much information? Not enough information?
• Would you change anything to make this better?
• How would you summarize this in your own words?
Visual and web accessibility formatting tips

- 14pt font in sans-serif
- Easily accessible table of contents
- Glossary as a standalone page
  - Definitions also within text when possible
- Page breaks
- Space between paragraphs/main ideas
- Color/contrast options
- Consider adding images to emphasize text
  - Charts, graphs, or other infographic
  - Real-world examples
Final thoughts

- No document is perfect. Learning how to write in plain language is a skill. Keep trying!
- Give yourself more time than you think you’ll need.
- If you have the time and money to write for a general audience, you should be writing in plain language!
  - Consider how to ask for funding for plain language work in grants, etc.
Break
Exercise: Plain Language Workshop

CCD mission statement:

The mission of the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities (CCD) is to engage in concerted advocacy for national public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society free from racism, ableism, sexism, and xenophobia, as well as LGBTQ+ based discrimination and religious intolerance; that enhances the civil rights and quality of life of all people with disabilities and their families; and that reflects the values of the Americans with Disabilities Act and all civil rights law.
Things to think about

- What is the main idea?
- What can be broken down into smaller sentences?
- What words need to be defined? How should they be defined?
- What complex words can be changed so no definition is needed?
- Where might lists be helpful?
- (Bonus) What images could make these sentences easier to understand?
The mission of the **Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities** (CCD) is to engage in concerted advocacy for national public **policy** that ensures the **self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion** of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society free from **racism, ableism, sexism, and xenophobia**, as well as LGBTQ+ based **discrimination** and religious intolerance; that enhances the **civil rights** and quality of life of all people with disabilities and their families; and that reflects the values of the **Americans with Disabilities Act** and all civil rights law.
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Questions? Your own examples?
Thanks for listening!

For more information/contact:
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