THE PLAIN LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

Joanne Locke
Senior Policy Advisor and Plain Language Coordinator
U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Health and Human Services Department

In the United States, the plain language movement officially began in the 1970s when the federal government started to encourage its regulation writers to be less bureaucratic. The goal was to make “all major regulations understandable to those who must comply with them.” A few federal agencies responded by publishing regulations that were more clearly written than usual, but most agencies did not respond.

In 1998, President Clinton revived this movement by issuing a Presidential Memorandum requiring that all new regulations be written clearly by January 1, 1999. He wrote, “By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers.” This message was directed primarily at regulation writers and government attorneys. They were told to use “logical organization; common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms; ‘you’ and other pronouns; the active voice; and short sentences.”

Although the response varied from agency to agency, some noticeable progress was made this time. Agencies published regulations that featured plain language techniques such as headings, shorter sentences, more use of the active voice, and even personal pronouns—techniques that writers traditionally did not use in writing regulations.

What Exactly Is the Plain Language Movement?

The plain language movement is an attempt to demonstrate the benefits of writing clearly and concisely, in a reader-focused style. You will find members of the movement in the United States and abroad, in government and private industry, in the world of finance and the world of science. Advocates of plain language spread the message that writing in plain language can save the writer and the reader time, effort, and money.

What Does “Plain Language” Mean?

How is “plain language” (or “plain English,” terms that are often used interchangeably) defined? There is no universally accepted meaning. At the February 2002 planning meeting for the Center for Plain Language, however, leaders of the movement proposed the following:

People who use documents written in plain language can quickly and easily

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Act on that understanding

Plain Language at the FDA

In 1998, plain language supporters at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) developed a Plain Language Action Plan to ensure that all FDA employees were aware of the President’s 1998 directive that states “The Federal Government’s writing must be in plain language.” Short, hands-on training sessions were offered to FDA writers to give them practice in using the tools and the techniques of plain language. Staff writers began writing regulations that were easier to understand.

The FDA also began to examine how it was sharing important health information with the public. One noteworthy example was the FDA’s requirement that information on over-the-counter (OTC) drug labels be easier for consumers to understand. As of mid-May 2002, most OTC drug labels do not contain medical jargon or “medical-ese” and are in a much larger typeface. Consumers find more white space, bullets, and bolded headings that make it much easier to locate the information they need in OTC labels. For example, the “Warnings” section includes allergy alerts and identifies situations in which the drug should not be used, such as possible harmful interactions with other drugs. The section called “Ask a doctor before use if you have...” is also very clear and to the point. Here is an example:

**OLD LABEL**

Warnings: Do not take this product unless directed by a physician, if you have a breathing problem such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis, or if you have glaucoma or difficulty in urination due to enlargement of the prostate gland.

**NEW LABEL**

Warnings: Do not take this product unless directed by a physician. If you have a breathing problem such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis, or if you have glaucoma or difficulty in urination due to enlargement of the prostate gland.
NEW LABEL

Warnings
Ask a doctor before use if you have
• glaucoma
• a breathing problem such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis
• trouble urinating due to an enlarged prostate gland

The FDA also uses plain language on its Web site. In fact, the information on the FDA's Web site (www.fda.gov) is so clearly presented and easy to understand that it has been recognized by several news and health organizations as one of the best Web sites of the federal government.

Plain Language and FDA Scientists

Despite success with some FDA writers, many FDA scientists protested the suggestion that they use plain language in writing research articles for peer-reviewed journals. These scientists still believed that they needed to write only for colleagues or experts in their own fields. They insisted they were not interested in writing so that scientists in other disciplines could readily understand their documents. They needed to understand the advantages of expanding their audience.

So, in the past year, the FDA's plain language supporters began to reach out to agency scientists and science writers to encourage them to use some of the tools and techniques of plain language. Our working group hopes to convince them that clear, understandable science writing benefits both science writers and their audience, especially as clearly written articles are more likely to be read thoroughly. The same message holds true for biomedical communicators.

The good news is that many FDA scientists and science writers are beginning to enthusiastically support the change to plain, clear writing. In fact, plain language will be an important topic at the 2003 FDA Science Forum, an annual conference that attracts more than 1,000 attendees who want to learn more about science at the FDA.

Motivating Science and Medical Writers

Remember the old acronym WIIFM—What's in it for me? Science and medical writers need to identify What's in it for them before they will agree to use plain language. Why should these writers, many of whom have helped clinicians and scientists publish journal articles for years, even consider changing their writing styles? Perhaps because they are starting to realize that their readers are overwhelmed, overloaded, and too busy to wade through dense writing. Floyd Bloom, MD, former editor of Science, has described the attempt to absorb the onslaught of new scientific data as "...like trying to drink from a fire hose. In our bright, new data-packed world, finding the highlights approaches on being an absolute requirement" (written communication, March 30, 2002).

Most biomedical communicators would benefit from expanding their reading audience, and they might be surprised how easy it can be. They will find they can go from reaching experts in only one field to including professionals in other fields just by using a few of the tools and techniques of plain language. It is possible that more medical and scientific breakthroughs will be realized if those additional readers are enlightened or inspired by clear, understandable articles.

The same holds true for scientists. Those scientists who reach a wider audience might be more successful in persuading policymakers to fund their research. In addition, grant applications written plainly and clearly probably stand a better chance of being understood and funded—assuming, of course, they are worth funding.

Some scientists need more than a little coaxing before they will agree to use plain language. In a conversation with Daniel Casciano, PhD, director of the FDA's National Center for Toxicological Research (July 19, 2001), he mentioned he would not give his scientific staff (who are extensively published in their disciplines) an article titled, "How to Write a Paper." He said he is certain they would be turned off by such a title and probably would not read it. However, even writers who are reluctant to read a "How to . . ." article or to change their style might be motivated to add a few new techniques as they reach out to their secondary audiences.

What Science and Medical Journals Want

Science and medical writers know that their journal submissions must adhere to journal Instructions for Authors, and some of these clearly encourage plain language. For example:

- In its Instructions for Authors, the Journal of the American Medical Association states, "Manuscripts should meet the following criteria:...writing is clear . . .
conclusions are reasonable and supported by the data, information is important.”

- On its Web site (http://bmj.com), the British Medical Journal states, “Please write in a clear, direct, and active style. Write in the active [voice] and use the first person where necessary. Try to avoid long sentences that have several embedded clauses.”

Some science organizations now have two publication tracks for accepted articles. The author writes the usual scientific journal article and then writes the article again so the general public not only can understand it but also can actually be intrigued enough by the title and layout to want to read it. For example, the National Academy of Sciences will launch a multiyear, multimillion dollar release of simplified versions of some of its reports, thus making the reports more understandable and accessible to the public.

At the FDA, colleagues challenged me to find some journal editors who would support my contention that articles written plainly and clearly are more likely to be published. The editors who replied to my query were unanimous in their support. Here are a few of their responses.

“...[C]lear writing is an essential ingredient of any communication and especially scientific communication. For example, in Science, we don’t encourage clear writing, we insist on it.”

Alan Leshner, MD, Chief Executive Officer, American Association for the Advancement of Science

During a presentation on science writing at the Smithsonian Institution (February 10, 2001), Julie Ann Miller, Editor of Science News, said, “Write for a scientist in another field. Don’t underestimate your readers’ intelligence, but don’t overestimate their knowledge of a particular field. When writing about science, don’t simplify the science, simplify the writing.”

Plain Language Techniques to Try

Biomedical communicators and science writers do not need to “dumb down” scientific writing or omit technical terms to write plainly and clearly. They do need to define or to explain terms that may not be familiar to their audiences. They also need to write logically, building from what information the reader knows to what new information the reader will learn in the article. I propose the following plain language techniques for journal articles.

- **Stress main points in the abstract.** You are not writing a mystery novel, so do not make your readers wonder what you are writing about. As the abstract frequently gets more attention than any other part of your article, attempt to make the abstract so interesting that it grabs the readers’ attention and leads them to read the complete article. You do not need to save your “conclusion” until the end of the article.

- **Use structured abstracts.** The Instructions for Authors in some journals, such as the Journal of the American Medical Association and the British Medical Journal, state that authors should use structured abstracts. Give busy readers a chance to scan for information in your abstract by organizing it under headings such as Objective, Design, Setting, Main Outcome Measure, Results, and Conclusion. Even if the journal to which you are submitting your article does not require this format, you might still consider structuring the information in your abstract this way.

- **Write the opening and conclusion in plain language.** Avoid overwhelming readers with technical terms and jargon, especially at the beginning and end of your article. State clearly what the article is about. Do not open with a broad generalization that could cover almost any topic, such as, “This work addresses a central question of modern surgery.” And no matter how fascinating a conclusion might be, no one wants to work hard at understanding it; present it in clear, concise language so that your results are easily understood.

- **Define “news” in call-out or summary boxes.** If the publication allows this format, summarize and highlight your key points in a box using two headings, as in the following example from the British Medical Journal.
What is already known on this topic:

The neonatal autopsy rate dropped in Illinois during the 10 years from 1984 to 1993.

Over recent years there has been a large amount of negative publicity surrounding neonatal autopsies in the United Kingdom.

What this study adds:

Over a quarter of neonatal autopsies yielded new information; in 3% of cases this information was crucial.

This finding is likely to be of use to bereaved parents who are asked to give permission for autopsy and provides a more positive perspective on the utility of neonatal autopsies.

- **Purge unnecessary jargon.** Which title do you prefer: “The Etiology of Mental Illness” or “The Causes of Mental Illness”?

- **Keep sentences short.** Some writers aim for an average of 20 words, with no sentence longer than 40 words. If you have to reread a sentence to understand it, it is probably too long.

- **Favor the active voice over the passive voice.** In most cases, you will use fewer words and readers will find your message easier to understand.

**Words to Live by**

In an interview with *Scientific American* (April 21, 1997), Neal Lane, former head of the National Science Foundation, quoted Allan Bromley, former President of the American Physical Society. According to Lane, Dr. Bromley said, "If you can't explain what you're doing and why you're doing it to any intelligent layman, that really means that you don't understand it yourself." I believe audiences—both primary and secondary—will be grateful if science and medical writers keep this statement in mind every time they write about their subjects.

**A Vision for the Future of Plain Language**

The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN), a group of plain language enthusiasts from several federal government agencies, continues to meet monthly at the White House Conference Center. PLAIN sponsors a Web site (www.plainlanguage.gov) that has a wealth of information and resources. The network has joined with others to explore the formation of the Center for Plain Language, a unique collaboration of academic, government, and private sector enthusiasts. The Center would be designed to promote research, education, and the use of plain language.

Plain language supporters hope the future Center will be the primary North American location of a global movement. This movement promotes the ethical values and economic benefits to government, business, and the public of having documents that are well organized, clearly written, and designed for easy use.

In her report from the planning committee (November 25, 2001), Susan Kleimann noted, "The Center for Plain Language will transform how people think about communication. We will educate people to demand plain language in public communications and will help businesses and government to meet that demand."

Working together, we can make science and medical writing part of this vision.

**References**


