

Beyond the plain language edit: Going the extra mile

9:00–10:30 a.m. April 1, 2016

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Agenda

- Plain language and beyond
- Word choice
- Readability formulas
- Punctuation
- Numbers
- English as a second language

Canadian literacy statistics

- 42% of adult Canadians have low literacy. ¹
- More than 15 million Canadian adults will have low literacy by 2031, up 25% from 2001. ²

1 Canadian Literacy and Learning Network

2 Adult Literacy & Life Skills Survey (2003) published 2007 by Canadian Council on Learning

Canadian diversity ¹

- 21% of the Canadian population are immigrants (Philippines, China, India).
- Only 58% of Canadians have English as their mother tongue (22% French, then Chinese languages, Tagalog, Punjabi).
- There are over 200 mother tongue languages in Canada.

¹ Statistics Canada 2015 (census 2011)

Factors affecting literacy

- reading on small laptops, tablets, cell phones
- multi-tasking
- visual ability
- age
- stress
- cognitive ability

What is plain language?

- the art and science of writing clearly
- clear organization and layout
- reader-centred writing and design

Plain language 101

- Use the active voice.
- Write directly to your reader.
- Use short words and simple sentences.
- Use common words instead of jargon.
- Use lists, short paragraphs and lots of white space.
- Choose the right typeface.

Use common words

abdominal pain → stomach pain

myocardial infarction → heart attack

cognitive functioning → ability to think

medication → medicine or drug

feces → stool or poop

Define unfamiliar but necessary words

Your mammogram takes place in a clinic or screening centre. A mammogram is an x-ray of the breast. Mammograms help find tumours or cysts in the breast.

Be consistent

Before

A breast **mass** is often found by a woman or her partner, or by a test, such as a mammogram. A piece of **tissue** or even an entire **mass** (or **lump**) is removed from the breast. A pathologist diagnoses whether or not the **tissue** is cancerous. They analyze the **tumour** ...

After

A **lump** in the breast is often found by a woman or her partner, or by a test, such as a mammogram. Part or all of the **lump** is removed from the breast. A pathologist diagnoses whether or not the **lump** is cancerous. They analyze the **lump** ...

Be careful with abbreviations

DNA vs. deoxyribonucleic acid

HIV vs. human immunodeficiency virus

AIDS vs. acquired immunodeficiency
syndrome

CT scan vs. computed tomography scan

Be careful with abbreviations

HIV is the name of the virus that causes AIDS. AIDS destroys the blood cells in the body that fight germs, foreign substances or cancer cells. When these cells are destroyed, the body cannot protect itself from infection.

Concept words

wellness → good health, feeling good

collaborate → work together

intake → what you eat or drink

Concept words

Before

We want to **empower** you and your caregivers to take control of your diagnosis and **engage** you as an active partner in your care, by **arming** you with a **toolkit to navigate your cancer journey.**

After

We want to help you and your family make decisions about your treatment. We will give you information to help you while you are having treatment.

Category words

poultry → turkey or chicken

health professional → doctor, nurse,
social worker

Value judgment words

If you have excessive bleeding, call your doctor.

Don't lift anything heavy.

high-intensity exercise → running

adequate rest → get at least 8 hours of sleep each night

Labels

Before

Your HPV test result is positive. (*Good news, right?*)

After

Your HPV test result is positive. A positive HPV test means that you have HPV on your cervix.

Your HPV test shows that you have HPV on your cervix.

Readability best practices

- Know your audience
- Print (average: grade 8)
- Web (average: grade 6 to 8)
- Context
- Subject matter
- Testing

Readability formulas

- SMOG, or Simplified Measure of Gobbledygook
- Fry Readability Formula
- Gunning-Fog Index
- Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
- New Dale–Chall Readability Formula
- readability-score.com
- specially designed software, such as Readability Calculations, Readability Plus, Readability Studio
- checklists, such as SAM (Suitability Assessment of Materials)

What formulas get wrong

Dr. Smith said I should call if my child has a temperature of 100.2.

The order of words doesn't matter at all.

All at matter doesn't words of order the.

Benefits of reading formulas

- They're objective and easy to use.
- The scores get people's attention.
- They show improvements that result from editing.

Punctuation

- Use minimal punctuation.
- Good punctuation still matters!

Fussy marks

- colon (:)
- semicolon (;)
- asterisk (*)
- ellipsis (...)
- footnote and reference marks (*†‡§)

Bulleted lists

Before

Offer lots of high fibre foods, including:

- breads, cereals, pastas and rice made from whole grains;
- fruit, especially berries, dried fruit and citrus fruit; and
- vegetables, especially broccoli, carrots, corn and leafy greens.

Bulleted lists

After

Offer lots of high fibre foods, including:

- breads, cereals, pastas and rice made from whole grains
- fruit, especially berries, dried fruit and citrus fruit
- vegetables, especially broccoli, carrots, corn and leafy greens

Contractions

Some contractions are easier than others to say or spell.

Easier

I'm, can't, don't, you're, who's, what's, where's

Harder

could've, will've, shouldn't, isn't, aren't, weren't, doesn't, didn't

Parentheses

Before

You need to take a different drug for your diabetes (starting Monday).

After

You need to take a different drug for your diabetes. You start the new drug on Monday.

Numbers

Use **digits** rather than spelling out numbers.

- 18 vs. eighteen

Spell out **units of measure** or define them at first mention.

- 15 min.
- 1000 IU

Numbers

Avoid tricky constructions with dates.

Before

Back x-rays will no longer be covered by OHIP after 09/10/12.

After

OHIP will not cover back x-rays after September 10, 2012.

Numbers

Percentages can be hard to understand.

- 12% of people have side effects.
- 12 in every 100 people have side effects.

Numbers

Avoid fractions.

- $3/8$ of your normal dose.
- $5-1/4$ or $5\frac{1}{4}$

But...

- Half a teaspoon of cough syrup
- 5,000 vs. 5.000 vs. 5 000

The ESL perspective

- verb tenses
- idioms
- phrasal verbs

Verb tenses

Use more **common verb tenses**.

- **Simple present tense**

You have diabetes.

- **Present continuous**

Are you taking medication?

Verb tenses

Use more **common verb tenses**.

- **Future**

You will go to the hospital tomorrow.

You are going to the hospital tomorrow.

- **Past**

I took medication yesterday.

Verb tenses

The **present** works for both present and future situations.

Before

I am going to start my new medication tomorrow.

After

I start my new medication tomorrow.

Verb tenses

The **present** works for both present and future situations.

Before

When you go to the hospital, the doctor will take your blood and will do other tests.

After

When you go to the hospital, the doctor takes your blood and does other tests.

Verb tenses

Use the **present** instead of present continuous.

Before

I am taking medication for my heart.

After

I take medication for my heart every day.

Verb tenses

Use **regular** verbs in the past.

Examples

I talked to the doctor yesterday.

I spoke to the doctor yesterday.

Idioms

- Are you feeling under the weather?
- You seem on the ball.
- This will cost an arm and a leg.
- Let's get the ball rolling!
- Keep an eye out for these symptoms.

Phrasal verbs

A phrasal verb is a verb followed by a preposition or an adverb. The combination creates a meaning different from the original verb.

Phrasal verbs

take over

put off

work out

call off

check out

cut out

cut down on

end up

rule out

figure out

go on

get over

Exercise

Conclusion

- Know your audience.
- Apply plain language principles.
- Go beyond.
- Think about the second language perspective.
- Test with users.

“There is no rule of language I won’t break if it makes things easier for the reader.”

Patrick Neylan

May 9, 2013 (retweet from Cheryl Stephens)

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Questions?

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