Plain Language Summit 2018
Welcome!
#PlainSummit2018

Follow us @govplainlang
Plain Language Action & Information Network (PLAIN) Co-Chairs

- Kathryn Catania, USCIS
- Katherine Spivey, GSA
What is PLAIN?
The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) is a group of federal employees from different agencies and specialties who support the use of clear communication in government writing.
Our goal is to promote the use of plain language for all government communications.
Using **plain language** saves federal agencies time and money and provides better service to the American public.
Using plain language helps the audience:

- *Find what they need*
- *Understand what they find*
- *Use what they find to meet their needs*
Plain language is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.

(also called plain writing or plain English)
Welcome

Donna Garland
Deputy Associate Administrator, Communication
We would like to thank:

Digital.gov + DGU
18F — design
Federalist — platform
GSA + Listservs

Plain Language Summit / 2018
Plain language makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications.

Learn more
Keynote

Ginny Redish
Redish & Associates
Putting our work in context

A brief history of plain language in government writing

Janice (Ginny) Redish, Ph.D.
Redish & Associates, Inc.
Bethesda, Maryland

www.redish.net
@GinnyRedish
Ginny Redish

Plain Language Summit
GSA, Washington, DC
July 20, 2018
A brief timeline – 1940s to today

1940s
- Orwell
- Scribes

1950s
- Maverick

1960s
- Strunk & White
- Mellinkoff
- O'Hayre
- CB radio rules
- Carter exec order
- Document Design Project

1970s
A brief timeline – 1940s to today

- **1980s**: CMU Communication Design Center
- **1990s**: VBA Letters; Reader-focused writing
- **2000s**: Clinton memo
- **2010s**: Federal group PEN → PLAIN "No gobbledygook" awards

- **1980s**
- **1990s**
- **2000s**
- **2010s**

- **Center for Plain Language**
- **usability.gov**
- **plainlanguage.gov**
- **Plain Writing Act of 2010**
- **digital.gov**
- **18F.gov**

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Plain Language Summit Slide 17
"In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing."

https://faculty.washington.edu/rsoder/EDLPS579/HonorsOrwellPoliticsEnglishLanguage.pdf

I list the photo sources at the end of the slide deck.
Orwell's 6 rules

Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

Never use a long word where a short one will do.

If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

Never use the passive where you can use the active.

Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.
SMALLER WAR PLANTS CORPORATION  
Washington, D.C.

TO: Everybody in Smaller War Plants Corporation  
March 24, 1944

FROM: Maury Maverick, Chairman & Gen. Manager

SUBJECT: Lengthy Memoranda and Gobbledygook Language.  
Be short and use Plain English.

Memoranda should be as short as clearness will allow. The Naval officer who wired "Sighted Sub - Sank Same" told the whole story.

Put the real subject matter - the point - and even the conclusion, in the opening paragraph and the whole story on one page. Period! If a lengthy explanation, statistical matter, or such is necessary, use attachments.

Stay off gobbledygook language. It only fouls people up. For the Lord's sake, be short and say what you're talking about. Let's stop "pointing-up" programs, "finalizing" contracts that "stem from" district, regional or Washington "levels". There are no "levels" - local government is as high as Washington Government. No more patterns, effectuating, dynamics. Anyone using the words "activation" or "implementation" will be shot.

First use of "gobbledygook"

Maury Maverick

https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7788338
1951 - today

Scribes
The American Society of Legal Writers

Joe Kimble

1984 - today

SBM
State Bar of Michigan

https://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/home

Bryan Garner

My go-to source for why legal writing does not need "shall."

www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/shall_we_abandon_shall
First edition, 1959

Strunk's original book, 1920

The edition you would buy today
1. Choose a suitable design and stick to it.
2. Make the paragraph the unit of composition.
3. Use the active voice.
4. Put statements in positive form.
5. Use definite, specific, concrete language.
6. Omit needless words.
7. Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
8. Express coordinate ideas in similar form.
10. In summaries, keep to one tense.
11. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

https://www.writingclasses.com/toolbox/tips-masters/strunk-white-11-composition-principles
"Most law can be expressed in ordinary English."

Remnants of an oral tradition where alliteration and rhythm help people remember:

- aid and abet
- new and novel
- to have and to hold
- part and parcel
- safe and sound

*Language of the Law, p. 43*
Because England had English speakers and French speakers:
  fit and proper
  free and clear
  goods and chattel
  keep and maintain
  new and novel
  shun and avoid
  will and testament

*Language of the Law*, p. 122

What was plain language centuries ago is not necessarily plain language today.
This responds to your memorandum dated February 21, 1964, requesting that we review and comment concerning the subject Roland trespass on certain lands under reclamation withdrawal.

We appreciate your apprising us of this matter and we certainly concur that appropriate action is in order to protect the interests of the United States.

O'Hayre's revision

Got your memo on the Roland trespass case. You're right; action is needed.
Federal Communications Commission
Rules for CB radios, 1977

- 5 people answering calls
- 10% of callers getting through
  90% called later or gave up
- What could they do?
95.419 Mailing address furnished by licensee

Except for applications submitted by Canadian citizens pursuant to agreement between the United States and Canada (TIAS No. 6931), each application shall set forth and each licensee shall furnish the Commission with an address in the United States to be used by the Commission in serving documents or directing correspondence to that licensee. Unless any licensee advises the Commission to the contrary, the address contained in the licensee’s most recent application will be used by the Commission for these purposes.
95.423 What address do I put on my application?

(a) You must include your current complete mailing address and station address in the United States on your CB license application.

(b) A Canadian General Radio Service licensee may supply a Canadian address if he or she is applying for permission to operate under TIAS No. 6931.
"...to make the Federal Register more readable through procedures which would require simple language." (page 6)

"Language should be simplified and regulations shortened where possible." (page 16)
Regulations shall be as simple and clear as possible.

... the regulation is written in plain English and is understandable to those who must comply with it.

http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30539#axzz1LyPW5HnC
✓ Research
✓ Technical assistance
✓ New academic curricula and programs
Research

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) also revised regulations for using two-way radios on pleasure boats.

The new rules

- included only relevant content
- had headings that were questions
- had short paragraphs
- used personal pronouns
- were written in clear English
Question 5.

Starting time for this page: __ __: __ __

Find the information.
Circle the correct answer to question 5A.
Answer question 5B.

5. Thomas Miller is licensed to operate a marine radio aboard his recreational boat. He then sells his boat to a neighbor and tells him that the ship station license goes with the boat.

5A. Is Mr. Miller correct?
   Yes  or  No (circle one)

5B. Why or why not?

![Table with data]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of user</th>
<th>Old rules</th>
<th>New rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexperienced</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Found information faster
Measured as minutes per problem

Answered more questions correctly
Measured as number of questions answered correctly (out of 20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of user</th>
<th>Old rules</th>
<th>New rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>12.78</td>
<td>16.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexperienced</td>
<td>8.54</td>
<td>17.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rated the new rules as much easier to use
Measured on a scale of 1 - 5 where 1 = Easy and 5 = Hard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of user</th>
<th>Old rules</th>
<th>New rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexperienced</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Technical Assistance

25 guidelines with citations to the research that supports them (up to 1980)

✓ New academic curricula and programs

Master of Arts in Professional Writing
Master of Arts in Rhetoric
Ph.D. in Rhetoric
Document design
Plain language
Information design
Information architecture
Usability, User experience
The whole process
Plain language and usability both mean that the people who must (or should) use what you write or develop can

- **find** what they need,
- **understand** what they find, and
- **act** appropriately on that understanding (use what they find to meet their needs) in the time and effort that they are willing to spend.

[https://www.plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov)
Grassroots research, 1990s

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Dear [Name],

Please furnish medical evidence in support of your pension claim. The best evidence to submit would be a report of a recent examination by your personal physician, or a report from a hospital or clinic that has treated you recently. This report should include complete findings and diagnoses of the condition which renders you permanently and totally disabled. It is not necessary for you to receive an examination at this time. You may need a report from a doctor, hospital, or clinic that has treated you recently.

This evidence should be submitted as soon as possible, preferably within 60 days. If we do not receive the information within 60 days from the date of this letter, your claim will be denied. Evidence must be received in the Department of Veterans Affairs within one year from the date of this letter; otherwise, benefits, if entitlement is established, may not be paid prior to the date of its receipt.

SHOW VETERANS FULL NAME AND VA FILE NUMBER ON ALL EVIDENCE SUBMITTED.

Privacy Act Information: The information requested by this letter is authorized by existing law (5 U.S.C. 310(a)(1)) and is considered necessary and relevant to determine entitlement to maximum benefits applicable for under the law. The information submitted may be disclosed outside the Department of Veterans Affairs only as permitted by law.
Dear ____________:

Please furnish medical evidence in support of your pension claim. The best evidence to submit would be a report of a recent examination by your personal physician, or a report from a hospital or clinic that has treated you recently. The report should include complete findings and diagnoses of the condition which renders you permanently and totally disabled. It is not necessary for you to receive an examination at this time. We only need a report from a doctor, hospital, or clinic that has treated you recently.

This evidence should be submitted as soon as possible, preferably within 60 days. If we do not receive this information within 60 days from the date of this letter, your claim will be denied. Evidence must be received in the Department of Veterans Affairs within one year from the date of this letter; otherwise, benefits, if entitlement is established, may not be paid prior to the date of its receipt. SHOW VETERAN’S FULL NAME AND VA FILE NUMBER ON ALL EVIDENCE SUBMITTED.

Privacy Act Information: The information requested by this letter is authorized by existing law (38 U.S.C. 210 (c)(1)) and is considered necessary and relevant to determine entitlement to maximum benefits applied for under the law. The information submitted may be disclosed outside the Department of Veterans Affairs only as permitted by law.
Dear ____________:

We have your claim for a pension. Our laws require us to ask you for more information. The information you give us will help us decide whether we can pay you a pension.

What We Need

Send us a medical report from a doctor or clinic that you visited in the past six months. The report should show why you can't work. Please take this letter and the enclosed Guide to your doctor.

When We Need It

We need the doctor's report by [date]. We'll have to turn down your claim if we don't get the report by that date.

Your Right to Privacy

The information you give us is private. We might have to give out this information in a few special cases. But we will not give it out to the general public without your permission. We've attached a form which explains your privacy rights.

If you have any questions about this letter, you may call us at 1-800-827-1000. The call is free.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average calls per month per counselor</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls per year 10 counselors</td>
<td>1128</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of calling 750 old letters 710 new letters</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Work by Reva Daniel with VBA counselors in Jackson, Mississippi
Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies

Subject: Plain Language in Government Writing

The Vice President and I have made reinventing the Federal Government a top priority of my Administration. We are determined to make the Government more responsive, accessible, and understandable in its communications with the public.

The Federal Government's writing must be in plain language. By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the Government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers. Plain language saves the Government and the private sector time, effort, and money.

Plain language requirements vary from one document to another, depending on the intended audience. Plain language documents have logical organization, easy-to-read design features, and
PEN = Plain English Network (1996)
PLAIN = Plain Language Action and Information Network (2000)

Plain language makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications.

Law and requirements »
Learn about the Plain Writing Act, policy memos, and executive orders that require agencies to use plain language.

Plain language guidelines »
Official writing guidelines for understanding your audience, being clear and concise, and testing your content.

https://www.plainlanguage.gov
Award #3 to Jim Harte and Umeki Thorne of GSA


https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/41/301-10.8

https://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/awards

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Public Law 111–274
111th Congress

An Act

To enhance citizen access to Government information and services by establishing that Government documents issued to the public must be written clearly, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.
This Act may be cited as the “Plain Writing Act of 2010”.

SEC. 2. PURPOSE.
The purpose of this Act is to improve the effectiveness and accountability of Federal agencies to the public by promoting clear Government communication that the public can understand and
Federal plain language guidelines

These are the official guidelines for the Plain Writing Act of 2010. We developed these guidelines to help you and your agency write clearly, so your users can:

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Use what they find to meet their needs

Contents

The guidelines are organized into sections, but many of the topics fit within more than...
Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines

usability.gov
Improving the User Experience

Methods
Templates & Documents
Guidelines

Recruiting Participants & the Legend of "The General Public"

Basics of User Experience
Content Strategy

© 2018, Janice (Ginny) Redish
Plain Language Summit Slide 51
National Cancer Institute Launches New User Experience Lab

BY POOJA SAWANT, JONATHAN RUBIN | SEPTEMBER 4, 2014 | DESIGN, METRICS, USER TESTING & RESEARCH, UX

18F partners with federal agencies to improve the user experience of government.

Get in touch
Hey fourth graders! See America’s natural wonders and historic sites for free.

Every Kid in a Park
You and your family get free access to hundreds of parks, lands, and waters for an entire year.

https://www.everykidinapark.gov

https://my.uscis.gov
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo sources</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orwell</td>
<td>Wikipedia</td>
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<td>Maverick</td>
<td>Wikipedia</td>
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<td>Kimble</td>
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<td>Garner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strunk</td>
<td>goodreads.com</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>biography.com</td>
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<td>Redish</td>
<td>personal photo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schriver</td>
<td>researchgate.net</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persona of veteran</td>
<td>iStock photo licensed to Redish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persona of VA reviewer</td>
<td>Flickr cc photo by russelljsmith</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>twitter.com</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cheek</td>
<td>plainenglishawards.org.nz</td>
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<tr>
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<td>LinkedIn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kleimann</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercer</td>
<td>blogs.va.gov</td>
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<td>LinkedIn</td>
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<td>Koyani</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thank you!

Janice (Ginny) Redish, Ph.D.

www.redish.net

@GinnyRedish

Ginny Redish

More questions?
ginny@redish.net

References from the slides plus other suggested books, articles, and websites:
QUICK BREAK!
TL;DR Amendment

Anne Meeker & Eric Kanter
Office of Congressman Seth Moulton

Plain Language Summit / 2018
TL;DR: legislation and plain language

Anne Meeker and Eric Kanter
We are committed to making government services easy to access, easy to work with, and easy to understand. We know the PLAIN network has been doing this work for years. How can we support PLAIN’s mission and volunteers in Congress?

This bill is a first step. What more can we be doing? How can we learn from the PLAIN network’s experiences?
To improve communication from Federal agencies to individuals by requiring clear instructions, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MARCH 15, 2018

Mr. MULFLUR (for himself, Mr. MEADORS, and Mr. LOEBHACK) introduced the following bill, which was referred to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

A BILL
To improve communication from Federal agencies to individuals by requiring clear instructions, and for other purposes.

1 Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Too Long; Didn’t Read Act of 2018” or the “TL;DR Act of 2018”.

SEC. 2. RESPONSIBILITIES OF FEDERAL AGENCIES.

Not later than 6 months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget shall develop and issue regulations that
“Not later than 6 months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget shall develop and issue regulations that direct the head of each agency to provide a clearly marked section at the top of a communication (both hard copy and electronic) that the agency sends to an individual if such communication requires or authorizes such individual to take action. To the extent practicable as determined by the head of the relevant agency, the clearly marked section at the top of the first page shall include—

(1) the action item;
(2) if a response is required, optional, or not required;
(3) the deadline, if applicable;
(4) how to complete the action item; and
(5) the agency’s contact information.”
Provider: NORTHEAST HOSP CORP
Episode of Care Beginning:

This claim has been administratively and clinically reviewed to determine if you have met the eligibility requirements for medical care service. We are pleased to inform you that you have met the requirements of 38 U.S.C. 1703 and payment to the above non-VA provider will be made on your behalf in accordance with VA reimbursement methodology set forth in Code of Federal Regulations Title 38 Chapter 1 for the following line items:

Approved:
Service Date: 2016 Revenue Code: GASTROINTESTINAL (GI) SE HCPCS Code:

By Federal regulation VA is the primary and exclusive payer for medical care it authorizes. As such, the Veteran or any other party may not be billed for any portion of the care authorized by VA.

Payment made on Non-service Connected Unauthorized Claims by the Veterans Health Administration indicates payment in full for the approved dates of service (displayed above).

Payment was not approved for the following line items:

Unapproved:
Service Date: 2016 Revenue Code MEDICAL/SURGICAL SUPPLIE HCPCS Code:
NonPayment Reason: CPT/HCPCS Error
The VA approved your application for 15 sessions of acupuncture therapy through the Veterans' Choice program at the Beverly, MA facility listed below.

The VA did NOT approve the following. You will receive a bill for procedures not covered by the VA.

- Lab work at XYW Pathology Labs
- Medical supplies billed by XYW Pathology Labs

If you believe we have made a mistake, you have 30 days to appeal. You can appeal this coverage decision by submitting a letter to us explaining your reasons for disagreement. For more information on how to submit this letter, please see attached VA form 4107 VHA.

If you have questions or concerns, please call 1-800-VHA-HELP.
Questions

How can we support PLAIN’s mission and volunteers in Congress?

What more can we be doing? How can we learn from the PLAIN network’s experiences?
Contact information

Anne Meeker
978-531-1669
Anne.Meeker@mail.house.gov

Eric Kanter
202-225-8020
Eric.Kanter@mail.house.gov
Plain Language, Customer and User Experience

Jon Rubin
CFPB
Plain Language with a User Experience Twist

Jonathan Rubin | Plain Language Summit, July 20, 2018

Bureau for Consumer Financial Protection
Controversy level: Mild
Get more out of Plain Language with...

1. Evolution
2. Evaluation
3. Collaboration
Human Factors
How do you define Plain Language?
Your wear many hats. Which is in your title?
1. Evolution
Plain Language: The Next Generation?

- Content more important than ever, yet craft less valued
- I don’t think this is going to change
- The need for clear communication will always be there but the role may be different
- Where trends are pointing:
  - Content design
  - Content strategy
  - Content marketing
  - Systems design
  - User centered design
Plain Language: Next steps?

- Content more important than ever, yet writing less valued
- I don't think this is going to change
- The need for clear communication will always be around but the role may be different

Where trends are pointing:
- Content design
- Content strategy
- Content Marketing
- Systems Design
- User Centered Design
2. Evaluation
Plain Language and User Experience

**Plain language** makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications.

- PlainLanguage.gov

**User experience** encompasses all aspects of the end-user's interaction with the company, its services, and its products.

- Nielsen Norman
Plain Language tenets

1. Know your audience

2. Choose words familiar to your audience

3. Use short sentences and paragraphs

4. Aim for a 6th-8th grade reading level

5. Follow web-formatting rules for readability

- Nielsen Norman
Plain Language tenets

1. Know your audience (UX)

2. Choose words familiar to your audience (UX)

3. Use short sentences and paragraphs (Writing)

4. Aim for a 6th-8th grade reading level (Writing)

5. Follow web-formatting rules for readability (Writing)

- Nielsen Norman
Federal plain language guidelines

These are the official guidelines for the Plaín Writing Act of 2010. We developed these guidelines to help you and your agency write clearly, so your users can:

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Use what they find to meet their needs

Contents

The guidelines are organized into sections, but many of the topics fit within more than one section. We start with a discussion of your audience because you should think about them before you start writing or planning to write. From there we move to organization, because developing a good organization is important during your planning stage. Next, we discuss writing principles, starting at the word level and moving up through paragraphs and sections. This is the most extensive topic. We follow principles of writing documents with principles of writing for the web. We conclude with a short discussion of testing techniques.
Observed in practice:

Plain Language = Creation, self-evaluation

UX = User-centered evaluation
Plain Language isn’t just about writing.

It’s about **Research**.

Do your **clients** know that?
ONE TRICK PONY

DIANE NGUYEN
Has this ever happened to you?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A text (literary theory) is any object that can be read, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Religious text, a writing that a religious tradition considers to be sacred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Textbook, a book of instruction in any branch of study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Computing and telecommunications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Plain text, unformatted text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Text file, a type of computer file opened by most text software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Text string, a sequence of characters manipulated by software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Text messaging, a short electronic message designed for communication between mobile phone users. Examples: text messages, text alerts, text messages for short text messages, text messages for personal text messages, and text messages for corporate text messages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arts and media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Text, a Swedish term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• &quot;Text&quot; (The Believing Text), an academic journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• &quot;Text&quot;, a 2013 song produced by J. R. Rotem, featuring Marc and Jason Derulo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• TXT (txt), a .txt file extension for text files</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Or this?

Text on a page

Data Visualizations / Infographics

Explainer Videos

Flow charts
Good writing isn’t enough.

We need to help people think about:

1. **Audiences**
   - Analytics
   - Personas
   - Previous research

2. **Channels / formats**
   - Tweets vs prose
   - Infographics and data viz
   - Repetition of information / education

3. **Evaluation**
   - Measurement
   - Testing
Qualitative Research avenues (a few)

UNSTRUCTURED
- Informal Observation
- Formal Observation
- User Interviews
- Co-Design

MORE STRUCTURED
- Focus Groups
- Diary Studies
- User Tests
Plain Language Element

IN THIS SECTION
- Write for your audience
- Organize the information
- Choose your words carefully
- Be concise
- Keep it conversational
- Design for reading
- Follow web standards
- Test your assumptions

Data we need

Who are they?
What do they want?
What do they need?
What info do they have?
What format - print? mobile?

Is it what they wanted?
Do they recognize what it does?
Can they accomplish tasks?
Does it change their workflow?
How do they feel while using it?
Does it provide value?
Plain Language Element

IN THIS SECTION
Write for your audience
Organize the information
Choose your words carefully
Be concise
Keep it conversational
Design for reading
Follow web standards
Test your assumptions

Data we need

Who are they?
What do they want?
What do they need?
What info do they have?
What format - print? mobile?

Is it what they wanted?
Do they recognize what it does?
Can they accomplish tasks?
Does it change their workflow?
How do they feel while using it?
Does it provide value?

How to find it

Previous Research!
User Interviews
Market Research
Competitive Analysis
Personas (maybe)
Survey (maybe)

User Interviews
Usability Tests
Survey (maybe)
3. Cooperation
Potential Plain Language Allies

- Product owners
- Analytics
- Accessibility
- Educators
- Communications / External Affairs
- Videographers
- Procurement
- Data vizualizers / Designers
- UX / researchers
- Business analysts
- Search Engine Optimizers (SEO)
Potential Plain Language Allies

- Product owners
- Analytics
- Accessibility
- Educators
- Communications / External Affairs
- Videographers
- Procurement
- Data vizualizers / Designers
- UX / researchers
- Business analysts
- Search Engine Optimizers (SEO)
- Content Strategists
1. Analytics - Your content detective best friend
2. Search Engine Optimization folks

YEAH, IF YOU COULD MAKE US #1 ON GOOGLE OVER THE WEEKEND

THAT'D BE GREAT
2. SEO 101

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the practice of increasing the quality and quantity of organic traffic to a website through search engines.

Achieve it via:
3. Encourage partners to link to us
2. Populate meta content appropriately
1. Create quality, unique content
3. Procurement
4. User Experience
Create your own community
In Summary

1. Evolution
2. Evaluation
3. Collaboration

Bright colors wake up sleepy people :)
Questions?
jonathan.rubin@cfpb.gov
In case you were wondering....
How to Design Custom Plain Language Training

Katina Stapleton
Dept. of Education
CUSTOMIZING PLAIN LANGUAGE TRAINING TO MEET SPECIFIC AGENCY NEEDS

Katina R. Stapleton, Ph.D.
Trainer, Plain Language Information and Action Network

Program Officer, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Research
GETTING STARTED
Start with PLAIN’s Principles of Plain Language Presentation

**Principles of Plain Language**
Write clearly, concisely for your audience – and for you

Plain Language Action and Information Network
The Principles of Plain Language

Presentation covers . . .

Agenda/Course Objectives

- Logical organization
- Tools you can use
- Short sentences, short paragraphs
- Easy-to-read design features
- Where do you go from here?
Customization

• Provides examples specific to the agency/office
• Can address specific problems/issues identified by the agency/office
• Can increase buy-in of participants
• Requires an additional time-commitment by the trainer
How much time should you devote to customization?
The “Good Enough” Rule

Before customizing your presentation for a specific agency, determine whether the standard PLAIN presentation already meets the agency needs.

Does the “Principles of Plain Language” presentation address agency needs?

- Yes
  - Give presentation “as is”
- No
  - Add Agency Specific Examples
  - Completely Customize Presentation
Background research will be helpful in determining what tweaks (if any) need to be made to the standard PLAIN presentation.
Identifying Your Audience’s Needs

- Who am I giving the presentation to?
- Why did the agency request this presentation?
- What do participants need to know?
- What do they already know?
Step #1: Decipher the Training Request

• “Scientific Review Center is seeking a plain language trainer for an upcoming seminar for their administrative and scientific staff.”

• “Federal Executive Board – asking for a managers’ briefing at their monthly meeting.”

• “Environmental Resource Institute would like a class in September.”

• “We have a class request from the Outreach, Diversity, and Inclusion Center.”

• “The Child Care Agency would like a PL for the web class sometime in the fall.”

• “I heard you are our agency’s plain language trainer. Can you create a presentation for our contracting office?”
Step #2: Ask lots of probing questions via email and/or by phone

- Which office is requesting the training?
- What is the purpose of your office?
- Who will be attending the workshop?
- What kinds of writing do they do on a daily basis?
- Why are you requesting this training?
- Are there any trouble spots you would like me to address in my training?
Hypothetical Responses:

• “I would like the trainer to provide practical advice about how to write scientific and nonscientific prose in plain language for grantees and laypersons.”

• “Our staff write like they are writing papers for college, but that’s not what we need. Can you help?”

• “My office is responsible for training, but the correspondence we send out isn’t clear and is often full of errors. We need tips on writing and editing.”

• “Our website isn’t user-friendly. We’d like to know how to improve the content using plain language techniques.”

• “A report from our office was featured in the national news as an example of bad writing! Help!”
Step #3: Ask for Writing Samples

Quick tip:
People may be hesitant to give you examples to use in your presentation because of the potential for embarrassment. Ask for “authorless” publicly available documents or documents that “everyone agrees” need improvement.
Step #4: Visit the Agency Website
Adding agency-specific examples should only take a few minutes each, but the process can end up being time intensive if you add lots of examples.
Quick Tip: Screenshots

Use screenshots to create examples directly from the agency website or documents.

Picture “styles” can be used to give the screenshot added dimension.
Add a slide that signals you have added custom content
Add a “Mission Statement” slide

OCFO’s Purpose?

OCFO PROVIDES ACCURATE, TIMELY, AND USEFUL GRANT, CONTRACT AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT INFORMATION AND SERVICES TO THE AGENCY’S PROGRAM OFFICES AND AMERICA’S SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS.

“accurate, timely, useful”

http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocfo/index.html
Reference the Agency’s Plain Language Website
Add a Personalized Audience Slide

Who is the OCFO Audience?

ED Program Offices
Contractors
Students
Congress
Schools
Media
Policymakers
Customize Jargon Examples

When possible use specific examples from agency guidance

Avoid using this word except when required by law; e.g., use of the word “dependent” may be required to satisfy explicit statutory requirements about entitlement to benefits or privileges. Instead, use such terms as “family member,” “spouse,” “parent,” “unmarried child,” or “beneficiary.”

Source: Writing Style Guide and Preferred Usage for DOD Issuances
Include Field-specific Examples of Jargon

Reduce Potential for Misinterpretations

Example: “No Effect”

Original:
“Findings from the study show that the new curriculum had no effect on reading scores”

Problem:
Multiple Interpretations

Revised:
“The study found that students using the new curriculum increased their reading scores by the same amount as students using the current curriculum.”

ies.ed.gov
Customize Acronym Exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>2020 Company, LLC (ETSS contractor prior to merger with Acentia)</td>
<td>EDFacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>504</td>
<td>Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a statute which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities. A 504 plan is an individual education plan for a special-needs student.</td>
<td>Legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD LDS</td>
<td>Active Directory - Lightweight Directory Services</td>
<td>IT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>Administrative Data Division (Office within IES/NCES)</td>
<td>ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEM</td>
<td>Applied Engineering Management Corporation</td>
<td>EDFacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFGR</td>
<td>Averaged freshmen graduation rate</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIMS</td>
<td>Analytics and Information Management System (AIMS) – SAS suite</td>
<td>EDFacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AITQ</td>
<td>Academic Improvement and Teacher Quality (ED program)</td>
<td>ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMAO</td>
<td>Annual Measurable Achievement Objective – Used by ESEA Title III programs</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANSI</td>
<td>American National Standards Institute (replaced FIPS for the two digit State Codes)</td>
<td>Data, IT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Advanced Placement, a curriculum sponsored by College Board</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APR</td>
<td>Annual Performance Report</td>
<td>ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AYP</td>
<td>Adequate Yearly Progress</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIE</td>
<td>Bureau of Indian Education, formerly the Bureau of Indian Affairs, part of the Department of the Interior</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPMS</td>
<td>Business Process Management System (Appian is a BPMS)</td>
<td>IT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRG</td>
<td>Business Rules Guide (the published document used by SEAs) – see also BRR</td>
<td>EDFacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRR</td>
<td>Business Rules Repository (the database) – see also BRG</td>
<td>EDFacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Education’s Acronym List
Provide Agency Examples of Plain Language Techniques

Examples should show at least one successful technique but don’t have to be perfect.
Customize List Examples

**Before:**
Departure information will include the complete forwarding address, the reporting date to the new unit, the order and paragraph number, the issuing headquarters, and the date of departure.

**After:**
Departure information will include:
- complete forwarding address
- reporting date to new unit
- order and paragraph number
- issuing headquarters, and
- date of departure.

**After—alternate style:**
Required departure information:
- Complete forwarding address.
- Reporting date to new unit.
- Order and paragraph number.
- Issuing headquarters.
- Date of departure.

Source: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Action Officer’s Guide for Staff Writing
Customize Heading Examples

**Question is Explicit:**
Why this Study?

**Question is Implied:**
What did this study examine? What is this study about?
Do “Live” Edits of Agency Website

Ask for feedback on what works and what could be improved.

STEPS TO APPLYING FOR IES GRANTS

1. Identify a current funding opportunity that matches your research interests and identify the relevant Letter of Intent and application deadlines.
2. View a funding opportunities webinar to learn more about the application process and choosing an appropriate funding opportunity.
3. Download the appropriate Request for Applications and application package (Search for CFDA 84.305 or CFDA 84.324).
4. Submit your Letter of Intent (optional but strongly encouraged).
5. Register (or update) your organization on Grants.gov and SAM.gov (Note: The registration process has changed).
6. Submit your application to Grants.gov before the application deadline.

STANDARDS AND REVIEW

The Standards and Review Office (SRO) is responsible for the scientific peer review process for the grant applications.

RESEARCH FUNDING WEBINARS

Check out our funding opportunities webinars to receive information on choosing the correct funding opportunity, grant writing, the application process, and more.

FY 19 FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING

Federal Register Notice (5/21/2018)

Important Dates and Deadlines

Education Research and Training

- Education Research (84.305A)
- Education Research and Development Centers (84.305C)
- Statistical and Research Methodology in Education (84.305D)
- Partnerships and Collaborations Focused on Problems of Practice or Policy (84.305H)
- Low-Cost, Short-Duration Evaluation of Education Interventions (84.305I)

Special Education Research and Training

- Special Education Research (84.324A)
- Research Training Programs in Special Education (84.324B)
- Low-Cost, Short-Duration Evaluation of Special Education Interventions (84.324I)
- Research Networks Focused on Critical Problems of Policy and Practice in Special Education (84.324N)

Other IES Funding Opportunities

- Unsolicited Grant Opportunities
- Small Business Innovation Research
Conduct “Rewrite” of Agency Document

Identify a short document or a section/passage in a longer document and ask participants to improve it using plain language principles.
“FULL" CUSTOMIZATION

AKA “Going the extra, extra mile”
Creating “Fully” Custom Presentations

• Decide whether it is worth your time and effort
• Typically, I only do “fully” custom presentations for my own agency.
Going the Extra, Extra Mile . . .

May include

• Working closely with office over several weeks to determine the content

• Giving the requestor the opportunity to review the presentation beforehand and provide feedback

• Creating a presentation that addresses a specific issue (e.g., scientific writing or contracts)

• Reformatting the presentation using the office’s template.

• Incorporating the office’s style guide or other writing tools/guidelines to show how they complement plain language techniques

• Creating new units (e.g., email)
Example: Addressing Specific Topic

Writing about Research in Everyday Language
Katina Stapleton, Program Officer, National Center for Education Research

ies.ed.gov
Example: Addressing Specific Techniques

Four Tips for Writing in Everyday Language

✓ Identify your audience
✓ Reduce jargon
✓ Focus on what your readers need to know
✓ Reduce potential for misinterpretations
Example: Black Template
Example: Adding a Unit to Address Specific Concerns

P.A.S.S. model

- **P** – What is the **purpose** of this communication, and does this purpose related to an objective
- **A** – What **action** is required; is there a due date; and who owns the action?
  - FYI Only
  - Read Only
  - Response Only
  - Physical Action Required
- **S** – What **supporting documentation** does the recipient need?
- **S** – Does the **subject** line effectively **summarize** the message?

[Writing email that elicits action](http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook-help/write-email-messages-that-get-attention-HA00133039.aspx)
Any Questions?
Katina R. Stapleton
Plain Language Trainer
Katina.Stapleton@ed.gov
LUNCH

Be back by 1:15pm
Translation Considerations

Laura Godfrey
GSA
Legal Framework

Executive Order 13166

- Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency
- The EO requires federal agencies to provide meaningful access to information to LEP communities
- The EO also applies to recipients of federal financial assistance who provide services to applicants and beneficiaries at the state and local levels
Who is an LEP Individual

The Department of Justice defines this population as:

- People who don’t speak English as their primary language and
- Have a limited ability to read, speak, write or understand English
Multilingual Landscape in the U.S.

Languages

61.5 M people in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home

- Spanish – 40.5 M
- Chinese – 3.4 M
- Tagalog – 1.7M
- Vietnamese – 1.5M
- French – 1.3
- Korean – 1.1 M

Spoken at Home

U.S. Census – ACS
LEP Population in the U.S.

Behind the numbers...

25 million or 41% of the people who speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home are LEP

there’s a human story
Beyond Language Ability: What Does LEP Really Mean

- Diversity: Different backgrounds
- Culture: Acculturation/assimilation process
- Expectations: Different expectations
- Trust: Disparate among countries
- Challenge: Effectively reaching LEP populations requires awareness of above premisses
The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw
The Multilingual Challenge

• Delivering information & services for a diverse population
  – Achieving agency mission efficiently and effectively
  – Expanding reach and access, equity

• Improving language access beyond Google Translate
  – Translation quality: Accuracy, consistency, fluency
  – Integrating human translation
  – Balancing quality, cost, time
  – Digital content may involve translation and interpretation
KEEP CALM & BE MULTILINGUAL
Language Access Foundation

- Create solid content for the audience
- Design for multilingual materials
- Work with professional translators
- Build a consistent process
- Include mobile

Resource: [Script direction and languages](#)
Plain Language and LEP Communications

Helps readers understand the content first time they read it.

- Clear and concise text
- Simple words
- Active voice
- Reader-focused
- Clean, well-organized layout
- Good for all readers
- Improves quality of translations
Translations

- Understand cultural references
- Ensure translation quality
- Follow a style guide
- Hire qualified translators
- Get help
Culture Matters

- Understand your audience
- Adapt vs. translate = transcreation
- Check message integrity: it’s not just about words
- Think about images/graphics
Ensure Translation Quality

Translator’s credentials

- American Translators Association certified
- Years of experience
- Lives in the United States
- Review translation samples
Ensure Translation Quality

Prescriptive Translation

● Rigid – values high standard terminology over audience reach
  ○ Ministerio to refer to a government agency or department
  ○ Lugar de cuidados terminales to refer to Hospice

Functional Translation

● Flexible – values audience reach over strict terminology
  ○ Departmento or Agencia instead of Ministerio or Organización
  ○ Condition: condición instead of trastorno o desorden
  ○ Hospice: Hospicio
Ensure Translation Quality

Functional Translations – Numbers

● Money: Use the American way to write numbers
  ○ Use: $1,276.50
  ○ Do not use: $1.276,59

Numerical Information in Spanish from USAGov Bilingual Style Guide
Numerical information by country from RIUSS
Follow a Style Guide

- Create your own, include all languages offered
- Borrow from USA.gov’s Bilingual Style Guide
- Develop glossaries
- Consult DigitalGov Spanish Language Style Guides and Glossaries
- Check out this DigitalGov page for additional bilingual style guides and materials
Hire Qualified Professionals

- Hire qualified translators
  - Translation, Getting it Right: A Guide To Buying Translation from the ATA

- Hire qualified interpreters
  - Interpreting, Getting it Right: A guide to Buying Interpreting Services from the ATA
Additional Resources

● Join the Multilingual Community of Practice
  ○ Lean on the community to help you find answers to your questions
  ○ Review: Evaluating Translation – A Manual for Requesters available on RIUSS.org

● Find help
  ○ Post language details on Open Opportunities
Thank you!

Contact: Laura Godfrey
laura.godfrey@gsa.gov
Center for Plain Language Report Card

David Lipscomb
Center for Plain Language

Plain Language Summit / 2018
Federal Report Card

David Lipscomb, Center for Plain Language

GSA, July 20, 2018
Federal Report Card

Today

- Why do it
- How we did it in the past
- How we will do it this year
- What we ask from you this year
Federal Report Card: Why do it?

- Evaluate how well agencies comply with the law
- Evaluate how well agencies apply plain language standards — as defined in *Five Steps to Plain Language*
- Advise agencies on how to apply PL standards better
Federal Report Card: How we do it

- **Compliance scores** every three years
  - Plain language webpage accessible from homepage
  - Name, title, contact info for the PL senior official(s)
  - Implementation plan, including required training
  - Annual compliance reports, including required training
  - Feedback mechanism (email on PL webpage or in compliance report)

- **Report Card grades** every year
  - Slight change this year
How do we approach the Report Card grading?
Federal Report Card grading:  
Our guiding definition: plain language

- From *Five Steps to Plain Language*:
  - “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.”

- This definition guides our Federal Report Card approach, our judging and our feedback.
Federal Report Card grading: How we did it in the past?

- Requested submissions from PL leads (last year agencies submitted Q&As and infographics)
- Graded submissions using the same rubric used for Clear Mark (each submission evaluated by 3 judges)
- Released results in Oct (white paper, press conference)
- Provided agency teams with feedback
Federal Report Card grading: How we’ll do it this year?

- Identify documents consumers frequently use (this year: the agency’s homepage and most-visited page)
- Grade documents using the same rubric used for Clear Mark (each submission evaluated by 3 judges)
- Release results in Oct (white paper, press conference)
- Provide agency teams with feedback
Federal Report Card:
What we’ll ask from you?

- Confirm the most-visited webpage that we'll identify in an email to each agency — and also provide us with the 12-month data that supports this identification (by 8/15).

- Complete a brief Google form that will help us understand your audience(s) and purpose(s) for your homepage and most-visited page (by 8/15).
Example text example text example text example text example text example text example
QUICK BREAK!
Meeting People Where They Are

Meredith Larson
Department of Education
Meeting People Where They Are

Meredith Larson, Ph.D.
U.S. Department of Education
Institute of Education Sciences
National Center for Education Research
Take Away for Today

The person you are writing for is probably not the person you think you’re writing for.
Take Away for Today

When it comes to literacy, the struggle is real.
What We’ll Cover Today

• What do we know about adults’ literacy skills?
  – Review of results from a recent international assessment, the PIAAC

• Can education research help inform Plain Language practice?
  – Research result trends

• What steps can we take?

Accommodations can help everyone.
What is the PIAAC?

The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is an international large-scale survey with

• A **direct assessment** of Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Problem Solving

• A **background questionnaire** on education, work experience and training, skill-use at work and at home, demographics, income, health, and civic participation
What is *Literacy* in the PIAAC?

“understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential”

(OECD, 2012b)
Descriptions of the PIAAC proficiency levels for literacy defining what adults can do at each level

Below Level 1 (0-175)
- Locate single piece of information in familiar texts.

Level 1 (176-225)
- Read relatively short digital, print or mixed texts to locate single text.

Level 2 (226-275)
- Make matches between text and information that may require low level paraphrasing and drawing low-level inferences.

Level 3 (276-325)
- Identify, interpret, or evaluate one or more pieces of information and often require varying levels of inference.

Level 4 (326-375)
- Perform multiple-step operations to integrate, interpret, or synthesize information from complex texts, and may require complex inferences.

Level 5 (376-500)
- Integrate information across multiple, dense texts; construct syntheses, ideas or points of view; or evaluate evidence based arguments.
Disclaimer

Data here were compiled strictly for the purposes of this presentation.

Refer to the NCES website for official documents, data files, and tables:
https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/
Preschool Rules

Welcome to our Preschool! We are looking forward to a great year of fun, learning and getting to know each other. Please take a moment to review our preschool rules.

- Please have your child here by 9:00 am.
- Bring a small blanket or pillow and/or a small soft toy for naptime.
- Dress your child comfortably and bring a change of clothing.
- Please no jewelry or candy. If your child has a birthday please talk to your child’s teacher about a special snack for the children.
- Please bring your child fully dressed, no pajamas.
- Please sign in with your full signature. This is a licensing regulation. Thank you.
- Breakfast will be served until 7:30 am.
- Medications have to be in original, labeled containers and must be signed into the medication sheet located in each classroom.
- If you have any questions, please talk to your classroom teacher or to Ms. Marlene or Ms. Tree.
### Who Can Do This?

PIAAC Literacy Percentages for U.S. Adults, 16-74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At and below Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4 and 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do we know about this group? Who are they?

Standard errors not shown. Numbers subject to rounding. Data compiled from [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/)
The U.S. has a slightly larger percentage of the population at level 4/5 than the International Average and a larger percentage in the bottom two levels.

Percentage of adults age 16 to 65 at each level of proficiency on the PIAAC literacy scale: 2012/2014
Who Are They?

Are they older? Maybe they didn’t have access to education or may have other complicating factors.

No. Low skills are fairly evenly distributed.

Standard errors not shown. Numbers subject to rounding. Data compiled from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/
Who Are They?

Are they perhaps mostly non-native speakers?

Although Non-Native speakers are likely to be in this group, 80% are US Citizens.

Percent of US Adults At or Below Level 2 by Country of Birth

- US: 80%
- Outside US: 20%

Standard errors not shown. Numbers subject to rounding. Data compiled from [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/)
Who Are They?

Are they unemployed?

No. Most (62%) are employed.

Percent of US Adults At or Below Level 2 by Employment Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Labor Force</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors not shown. Numbers subject to rounding. Data compiled from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/
Does education matter?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>At or Below Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4/5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; High School</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School/GED</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College (e.g., certificate)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's Degree</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; BA/BS</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education level helps to predict, but adults with college degrees demonstrate low literacy.

Standard errors not shown. Numbers subject to rounding. Data compiled from [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/)
Your Audience

Assume that your audience includes adults who fall into the “low literacy” group.
What Else Can We Try?

If so many adults struggle with purely written text, can we use tables, graphs, or numbers to help with information?
What is Numeracy?

“the ability to access, use, interpret, and communicate mathematical information and ideas, to engage in and manage mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life”
Unit 2 - Question 1/2

Look at the thermometer. Using the number keys, type your answer to the question below.

What is the temperature shown on the thermometer in degrees Fahrenheit (°F)?

°F
Who Can Do This?

PIAAC Numeracy
Percentages for U.S. Adults, 16-74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At or Below</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4/5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An even larger portion of our population struggles with basic numeracy.

Standard errors not shown. Numbers subject to rounding. Data compiled from [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide/)
The U.S. has smaller percentage of the population in the top three levels than the International Average and a larger percentage in the bottom two levels.

Percentage of adults age 16 to 65 at each level of proficiency on the PIAAC numeracy scale: 2012/2014

United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below Level 1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4/5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PIAAC international average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below Level 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4/5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Can Education Services Help?

Approximately 112.6 million adults are at or below Level 2 in literacy, with 40.2 million at or below Level 1.¹

In 2016-17, the adult education system served 1.5 million.²

1) https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/2017/awc/table1_1.asp
2) Data from the National Reporting System: https://wdcrobp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/login.cfm
Ok…So What Are Our Options?

Is there research on how to accommodate adults with low literacy, especially those with the lowest literacy?
What We’re Learning

Reading, cognition, and linguistic researchers are focusing on adults with low literacy:

– Do models of reading developed for children work with adults?
– What are the component skill profiles by subgroups?
– Are the measures valid?
The Reading Process

Adult readers with low literacy skills

– More likely to rely on world knowledge relative to children learning to read
  • May struggle with new words (e.g., sounding out), though non-native speakers appear better at this

– Are not “fluent” readers
  • Don’t take pauses in the same places as skilled readers
  • Punctuation may not help
The Reading Process

Adult readers with low literacy skills

– Will notice oddities and inconsistencies in a text
  • Won’t know what’s wrong
  • Won’t use repair strategies

– Struggle with reference
  • If you use different noun phrases
  • If pronouns are ambiguous
The Reading Process

Adult readers with low literacy skills

– May experience cognitive overload
  • Sheer amount of text may be overwhelming
  • Having to navigate around a document may be overwhelming

– Likely to lack metacomprehension or accurate estimate of ability
  • Likely to be overconfident
  • (Actually true for all readers)
Things to Consider

1. Your audience is likely to be highly motivated.
2. Your audience is coming with questions and may be in crisis mode.
3. Your audience may not be familiar with common conventions (e.g., “FAQ”).
4. Your audience is not likely to seek assistance or clarification.

And now for some informed guesswork
Things to Consider

Keep it simple and convenient.

– Short, canonical sentences
– Common words and rhetorical markers
– In text supports (e.g., hyperlinked definitions)
– Provide sound files (mind your prosody)
Things to Consider

Layout matters.

– Bullets may help
– Periods and commas may not
– Avoid multiple pages and redirects
– Consider the ordering and presentation of text
Things to Consider

Activate background knowledge but clearly identify conflicts between common assumptions and new information.

– Titles and headers
– Pictures
– Rhetorical markers
Things to Consider

We writers/designers don’t know...

– What our audience is trying to do
– What they struggle with

We should assume...

– They may get lost
– They may not tell us
Things to Consider

Consider asking readers for feedback*

- Surveying general population, not other in your organization
- Using open-ended questions
- Focusing on knowledge checking

* Health literacy research suggests that practitioners are more likely to use close-ended questions with adults with low health literacy and rarely use knowledge-checking questions.
Questions? Thoughts?
Sample of Sources:


Contact: Meredith.Larson@ed.gov or on LinkedIn
No, the Law Does Not Normally Require Legalese

Joe Kimble
Distinguished Professor Emeritus
Western Michigan University
Plain Language Action & Information Network (PLAIN) Co-Chairs

- Kathryn Catania, USCIS
- Katherine Spivey, GSA
Thank you!