Using 'Plain Language' When It Matters Most: A Case Study in Higher Education

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Introduction

> Ask ordinary citizens for an example of unreadable prose, and half of them will show you a government document; the other half will point to something written by a lawyer (Byrne, 2008).

Plain language, plain writing – these terms have been used interchangeably to refer to written work that enhances, rather than detracts from, clarity and understanding. There is no one definition[1] for either but rather a constellation of meanings that include attention to the word choices, grammar and syntax, structure or document design (Mazur, 2000). The first U.S. federal legislation for plain writing in government publications defined it as "clear, concise, well-organized" writing that "follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience" (Plain Writing Act of 2010). A memorandum sent to federal agencies adds, "such writing avoids jargon, redundancy, ambiguity and obscurity" (Office of Management and Budget, 2011). Other, non-governmental sources also highlight writing principles in their definition (e.g., Byrne, 2008) such as "reader-friendly formatting" (Ridpath, Greene, & Wiese, 2007, p. 7). On the other hand, others' definitions of plain writing highlight the readers' perspective or being reader oriented (e.g., Steinberg, 1991, in Mazur, 2000; Byrne, 2008), or reading outcomes, such as readers' ability to find what they need and understand it (e.g., PLAIN, 2011; Schriver, 1991; Byrne, 2008). Fundamentally then, "plain language embodies clear communication" (Stableford & Mettger, 2007, p. 75); if a document uses plain writing effectively, readers should be able to read a text once and be able to understand, use and act on the information it contains (PLAIN, 2011; Center for Plain Language, n.d.).

Although such an outcome seems implicitly valuable to most organizations, many produce writing that does not meet those plain writing standards (e.g., Center for Plain Language, 2012). This paper presents a case study of such a document from our university. Our analysis and revision is informed by two theoretical perspectives that help illuminate influences on authors' rhetorical choices: the development of common ground (e.g., Clark, 2002) and politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In addition, our suggested revision relies on writing principles from plain writing advocates and writing scholars. For example, plain writing advocates suggest that organizational writers first define their intended audience because "what is 'plain' to one audience may mystify and confuse another" (Schriver, 1991, p.2). Therefore, the revision is strongly aligned with our assumptions about who the readers are, what they may already know, what they need to know, what questions they may have, and what needs to be said to support any needed action as recommended by plain writing guidelines (PLAIN, 2011). The analysis reported here, and the recommended revision, are the first steps in a collaborative partnership with the Registrar's office to improve their communication with students through reviewing, revising, testing, and collecting outcome data on document templates used to inform students of action they need to take.

Shedding Light on Authors' Rhetorical Choices

Common Ground

For many years, communication theorists have emphasized the role of common knowledge and the communication codes used in creating or conveying it as core building blocks of communication effectiveness. Clark (1992, 2002), in particular, has documented the linguistic and pragmatic resources available to interactants to create a sense of understanding. Interpersonal communication is more than just an exchange of turns and utterances; in spoken, unscripted talk, people coordinate on the 'content' of the words spoken, as well as 'process' of designing what is said as they attempt to understand one another (e.g., Clark, 1996). They have multiple resources to coordinate meaning such as language, paralinguistic signals (such as back-channel responses) or nonverbal behaviors. Through this interactive process, the speaker and listener demonstrate coordination on *what* is said as well as *when* it is said (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). This coordination requires that they must assume what is "common ground" -- that is, their "mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions" (Clark & Brennan, 1991, p. 127). Fundamentally, these inferences may arise from a variety of sources, including previous communicative interactions, physical perceptions during the interaction, linguistic elements within the talk's content or perceptions of community and whether membership in that community is shared (Clark & Marshall, 1992).

In everyday talk, individuals' coordination of meaning occurs simply enough that it belies the complexity of the underlying processes; Clark refers to this complexity as the Mutual Knowledge Paradox (Clark & Marshall, 1992). In trying to understand one another, we have to infer what the other knows or rather, the 'common ground' we share. What might be mutual knowledge is potentially infinite, yet we have to make this assessment within a time limitation -- virtually, microseconds -- so that we can proceed in the interaction. Thus, Clark (1992) suggests that the paradox is resolved or managed by the heuristics we use -- a combination of evidence, assumptions and inductive reasoning -- which leads to a *presumption* of mutual knowledge and thus common ground that we rely on during the discourse.

If the discourse content is more complex, the conversation is likely to proceed through multiple, reiterative instances of presentation of references to common ground (Clark, 1992, p. 115). As those references are either accepted or rejected, assumptions about what the other person knows are tested and validated at each step. Indeed, various linguistic or paralinguistic signals may lead speakers to anticipate problems for a listener and make moves to prevent misunderstandings or at least alert the listener of the speaker's misstep (Clark, 1994). In essence, through such ongoing processes, individuals "establish the mutual belief that the addressees have understood, well enough for current purposes, what the speakers meant" (Clark, 1996, p. 330). Thus, assumptions are made, tested and corrected throughout the speaking interaction and the interactants come to achieve coordinated meaning.

Communication between writers and readers can also be seen to invoke the Mutual Knowledge Paradox. In order to tailor their writing to their audience, the writers must make decisions about what is shared or mutual knowledge from a possibly infinite set of choices. Yet in order to be actionable, those decisions must take place within limited time -- ultimately, the writers must produce text. In order to make inferences about common ground, the writer first must be very thoughtful in identifying the reader. As Clark suggests, "all writing presupposes a certain class of readers" (1997, p. 581); that is how the author determines what textual elements are necessary to include, or acceptable to exclude, for readers' understanding. Thus, authors rely on assumptions of mutual knowledge or common ground to choose their words. The problematic issue though is the *unquestioned* assumption of common ground, because writers and readers cannot coordinate meaning in real-time.

Written media (whether electronic or hard copy) create specific limitations for the writer and reader in determining common ground (Clark & Brennan, 1991). First, there are fewer cues to misunderstanding because the writer and reader are not in the same physical area and cannot refer to objects in a shared environment. Furthermore, they lack the ability to see or hear nonverbal signals of misunderstanding. Second, time is relevant. The acts of writing and reading are separated by time, are asynchronous or may be interrupted by other messages or activities. Thus, readers are challenged in getting back to the writer/sender if they have doubts about the message. Finally, written media allows the writer time to revise their message. At best, the writer has an opportunity to fix potentially confusing text before it goes out; however, at worst, the writer has no opportunity to self-correct their message (like speakers do) if they have made mistakes in their assumptions of mutual knowledge.

Written documents are not dynamic speech events, but static ones; therefore, meaning cannot be coordinated with readers as they move through the document. Because of this, we suggest that organizational writers carry a greater burden of responsibility to identify their readers and to understand the lens or perspective through which the reader will perceive the written message. As Clark describes, “language is rarely used as an end to itself”; it is instead “an instrument” to a purpose (2002, p. 387). In this case study, the language in written messages serves a goal in which the institution must alert students to obstacles to graduation and enable them to take action. If the document’s authors did all they could to remove obstacles to understanding and tested the document with some of its potential readers, then it follows that there would be textual evidence within the document of consideration of the reader’s community membership (e.g., the perspective of a student), an attempt at establishing common ground (e.g., framing the issue in terms of what the student already knows) or a pre-emptive move to coordinate meaning on the importance of the message (e.g., provide specific information by which the student knows what action to take).

Politeness Strategies: A socio-linguistic lens for understanding indirect writing

Writers who need to convey potentially unfavorable news may attempt to balance explicitness against politeness expectations inherent in social norms; this leads to a range of communication tactics. (That this is a social norm suggests that writers may not be explicitly conscious of their inclination to enact face-saving behaviors.) The conceptualization of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987) is grounded in Goffman’s notion of face (e.g., Goffman, 1967) as the image we desire to claim and have accepted by others. Brown and Levinson (1987) extended the concept of face to include two forms: positive and negative face. In addition to having our desired self-image validated by others (‘positive face’), we also expect others to accord us the proper respect, rights and deference we perceive due to us (‘negative face’). Negative face may be most relevant in communicating bad news that requires a call to action. As Goldsmith (2008) explains, “asking someone to do something, or reminding someone of an obligation, can threaten that person’s negative face wants for respect and freedom of action” (p. 257). Thus, people may take different approaches in their communication in order to mitigate that threat to ones’ own or another’s face. Brown and Levinson (1987) detailed four strategies on a continuum from being completely explicit to very indirect: (1) bald on-record, which is explicitly direct with no effort to cushion the message, (2) positive politeness, which attempts to minimize any potential face threat by hedging, assuming agreement, avoiding disagreement, or attending to the hearer’s perspective in making a request, (3) negative politeness, which assumes face threat is inherent in the situation but attempts to mitigate it. These tactics include being indirect in your request, asking for forgiveness in advance, verbally minimizing the potential imposition, or speaking as 'we' instead of 'I' in the act that imposes on the other, and finally, (4) off-record, which avoids responsibility for the imposition by only hinting at the issue, being ambiguous or sarcastic in the message. Both positive and negative politeness strategies are indirect linguistic choices (compared to bald on-record and off-record) because they require more verbiage and structure to minimize or mitigate the face-threatening aspect of the message.

The choice of politeness strategy is influenced by the interpersonal context, particularly perceptions of (1) power, status and control, (2) relational closeness and social similarity, or (3) the extent of the imposition inherent in the request or the depth of the face threat (Holtgraves, 2002, p. 76-77; Goldsmith, 2008, p. 259). Accordingly, both individuals in the interaction rely on these dimensions in conveying or interpreting meaning. However, it is difficult to definitively predict how and when people will use specific strategies or how their use will be evaluated by others; both may be dependent on the situated context of the interaction (Goldsmith, 2008, p.262).

Other Perspectives on Authors' Choices

Writing scholars have focused more on document attributes than a theoretical understanding of the social interaction. Thus, understanding the definition of direct or indirect approaches may be based on the message's organizational structure (e.g., Creelman, 2012). Direct messages present negative news[2] early in the message, but indirect messages include elements such as a buffer, explanation, relationship-building elements or a positive ending. In her discussion, Creelman (2012) points out a third option -- emphasizing the process of organization based on audience and context analysis rather than "rely on pat formulas for message arrangement" (p. 185). Yet, she suggests that in teaching writing, many textbooks and instructors have not yet abandoned the "either/or paradigm" of a direct-indirect organization (p. 187).

The 'plain writing' perspective, with its emphasis on the intended audience and the readers' needs, endorses the third option that Creelman identified. Fundamentally, plain language guidelines suggest that organization should be driven by the purpose the reader has in engaging with the material. Therefore, elements like buffers that serve the author, but not the reader, seem unnecessary.

Context of the Case Study

Institutional Context

Education policy is changing dramatically in Oregon with the '40-40-20' goal signed into law in June 2011; by 2025, the state is aiming for 40% of adults having earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 40% an associate degree or other post-secondary credential, and 20% having a high school diploma or equivalent (Oregon University System, 2012). A newly created entity, the Oregon Education Investment Board, is empowered to ensure state investments in education are tied to institutional performance. Therefore, now more than ever before, institutions must consider any impediments to graduating students within specific timeframes.

Degree progress is a key process in which to consider improving efficiency. Making satisfactory and timely progress requires students to navigate a complex system of degree requirements and course scheduling. Multiple factors increase the complexity: the number of faculty actively teaching in a department, the amount of flexibility in courses that satisfy degree requirements, the quality of faculty advising on course planning or even the students' flexibility with daily schedules. Regardless, students' time to graduation is one dimension by which the institution is evaluated, particularly because it is perceived to have an effect on the community as a whole. As one Oregon University System report states, "Students who persist and graduate in a timely manner pay and borrow less for their education, start careers earlier, and begin contributing sooner to Oregon's economic and community well-being" (Oregon University System, 2011). Thus, communicating effectively with students about their degree progress is important for the student and the institution.

At our institution, faculty advisors have primary responsibility for student progress until the student is within one year of graduation. Then, three terms before their intended graduation date, students are required to file degree evaluation plans with the Registrar's office which tracks their progress through the remaining terms. Each term thereafter, students who do not yet meet graduation requirements are notified via letter and email by the Registrar's office. The goal is to alert the student to obstacles to graduation so that they may be addressed before or during the next term. If the message is not clear to readers, then the organization's goal is much more likely to be compromised.

Communication Context

In 2009, an internal investigation by our computing department into university email usage by students found that many students resisted or avoided using the system entirely, granting some credence to common faculty frustration with students' lack of response to their emails. The culprit was an unexpected programming glitch; once a student was admitted and assigned a user name, their email account activated. Thus, after students arrived in fall term and logged in for the first time, they would find themselves besieged with thousands of emails that had accumulated since their date of formal admission. The number of emails was the outcome of "all student" or "all university" addressee lists used across the campus, in addition to any personalized email. Thus, it was believed that students who were familiar with systems such as Facebook, which allows the user to customize contacts, reacted to the unwanted contacts by ignoring the system. This programming glitch was corrected in early 2010 so that students do not begin to receive email until they log in the first time; in addition, students now must 'opt in' to receive mail from various mass-addressee lists. Therefore, the students who are likely recipients of the case study email (e.g., hoping to graduate in June 2012), may still have some lingering perceptions of the University email system as a primarily junk-mail conduit (University Computing Services, personal communication, June 11, 2011).

The high level of undifferentiated email to student accounts is more than just perception, however. In the past academic year, 985 administrative mass-emails were transmitted between university offices or student groups to the entire student (University Computing Services, personal communication, June 11, 2011). Thus, students who had 'opted-in' received an average of nearly seven emails every day of fall, winter and spring terms. These emails range from a reminder from the Registrar's office to see an advisor before registration to announcements from student clubs about events or activities. In addition, students receive emails specifically addressed to them from faculty or university offices. Fundamentally, our students, just like individuals in other organizational environments (e.g., Berghel, 1997) are subjected to 'email overload,' which challenges the receiver to distinguish between senders of more or less importance or emails with more or less value. Therefore to be effective, organizational sources must not lose sight that emails arrive in cluttered inboxes, and must clearly distinguish the message and its importance.

Technology may influence readers' behavior in other ways. First, phones have become nearly ubiquitous on higher education campuses; in 2010, Ball State found 99.8% of 5,500 students owned a mobile phone (Hernandez, 2010). Furthermore, the University of Colorado, Boulder found in a survey of 517 students that 53% with a mobile phone own a smart phone possessing internet capability; 93% of those owners send and view email regularly on that phone (Dean, 2010). On smart phones then, organizations are not only competing with other senders in a cluttered environment, but also competing with the owner's attention to other functions such as texting or accessing social media sites. Furthermore, all of this is occurring on a much smaller screen than traditional laptop or desktop computers so there is less time and space to grab the reader's attention.

Call to Action

Although there are multiple points of contact between student-advisees and their faculty advisors or the Registrar's office after students file an application to graduate, we, the authors, found ourselves facing two panicked, senior advisees who had received a telephone call from the Registrar's office indicating they were not eligible to graduate at the end of the term. In talking with the Registrar, we learned the phone calls were made only after sending several letters and emails. We began to understand the problems the Registrar's office faces in getting students to read, respond or take appropriate action to warning letters and emails in terms prior to the expected graduation date. These problems not only lead to confused and angry students or parents but also create a significant burden for the Registrar's office. For example, staff members spend hours calling students who have applied for graduation and appear to be nearly within its reach, but do not qualify. This extra effort is intended to ensure that students who may be missing something, such as a signed course substitution form or transcripts from another institution, may still walk in graduation and appear in the graduation program. Our institution puts a high value on this kind of individual attention to students; however, this time may be better spent on other activities. Thus, as communication and writing scholars, we are collaborating with the Registrar's office to review, analyze, and revise the four templates for their warning letters and emails. The existing templates share three paragraphs and differ only in one. However, the similarity in messages may not serve their functional goal across the academic year as students come closer to graduation. Therefore, this paper details the analysis of only one template used for both a letter and email message at the beginning of spring term before graduation in order to situate the message within its specific context.

Analysis

Document Description

The email under study was sent March 12, 2012 to alert over 300 students that they did not meet requirements to graduate at the end of the quarter on June 16. This could have been because a student was missing a particular core curriculum course, a requirement for a specific degree program, or a university requirement. At our institution, a student who has met all of the requirements for a specific major and minor, including all lower-level university requirements, could still be short of the total 180 credit hours required for graduation because some majors require fewer credit hours. However, it could also happen because paperwork like a course substitution form, or a transcript from another school, has not been submitted. Therefore, this document could be perceived by some addressees as positive or neutral, but by others as negative or distressing. The same content was used in a printed letter and as email text; however, we are focusing on the email version in order to illustrate channel-specific issues.

Email Address—To, From, and Subject Lines

The ‘From’ and ‘Subject’ line for this email does not convey the importance of the email. First, the ‘From’ line identifies the source as an individual email account, with a first and last name. (Usernames for individual accounts are typically last name first initial@institution.edu.) There is no indication that this is correspondence from the Registrar’s office. Second, the subject line reads “Spring 2012 Projection”; this is jargon specific to the Registrar’s office but without any meaning or relevance to students in general or the targeted reader particularly. The combination of the two, in the way that they are typically displayed in an email inbox, displays a lack of attention to the perspective of the recipient. Therefore, there is a missed opportunity to begin to coordinate the meaning of the email with the recipient and to build shared understanding of the problem it announces.

If the email is opened, the internal addressing details are still problematic. The email was directed to over 300 individuals, but no name shows beside ‘To:’ in the email inner address. Students may not understand that it was sent as a ‘bcc’ (blind courtesy copy) that hides addressees from one another; the text does not explain this to them. The lack of personalization is echoed in the salutation; students are not addressed personally but by ‘Dear Student,’ and none of the information in the email is customized. These details are problematic here because they reinforce a perception of the email as irrelevant or impersonal. In essence, the email is less personalized than even generic junk mail.

Body of the Message

This email is sent every term (at the end of the registration window for the following term) to students who have filed their plan to graduate within the coming year, but do not yet meet that timeline. Therefore, in addition to potentially unfavorable news, it is also implicitly a call to action; students must act to resolve problems, or they will not graduate. However, the text’s poor organization, indirect wording and lack of plain writing negate its purpose and value. The first paragraph heralds these problems:

> **[Original Text -- 1st paragraph]**
> The Registrar’s Office has been tracking your progress toward graduation. Upon review of your degree evaluation, including Spring 2012 registration, we find that you may not complete your degree as scheduled for graduation in Spring 2012.

Plain language guidelines, such as those recommended to federal agencies (PLAIN, March, 2011) emphasize attention to the reader, the reader’s needs, and the reader’s goals or purposes with any particular document. Thus, the order of the information in the document should parallel its importance to the reader relative to their use of the material, with the more important information appearing earlier.

This email fails in the order of importance because it places the most critical information last, and starts with identifying the source. If the source had been clearly identified as the Registrar’s office in the ‘From’ line, then the need to state this in the first line would be eliminated. In letter format, the letterhead would have served the same identifying function. Thus, the email would have been able to begin with the readers’ needs.

Then, the most critical part of the second sentence takes an indirect approach with “we find” and employs the conditional verb form “may not” which hedges in delivering the bad news; in these two choices, the paragraph displays both positive and negative-politeness strategies. Fundamentally, these tactics reduce the directness and clarity of the bad news. Therefore, in the first paragraph, the critical key point that the student's graduation is at risk has not been effectively communicated. The next paragraph continues the confusion:

> **[Original text -- 2nd paragraph]**
> To review your remaining requirements, please check your online degree evaluation. You can run this evaluation by logging into [site name], select "Student Records" and then "Degree Evaluation." If you believe your evaluation is incorrect, contact our office with a specific description of the discrepancy. Refer to the following website if you have questions regarding how to run your evaluation: [site URL].

This paragraph does not build on the idea at the end of the first paragraph -- that the student "may not" graduate. Rather, it de-emphasizes the point that the official record shows the student is not ready for graduation. Instead, three functional goals are expressed in this paragraph: (1) to verify the Registrar's evaluation by running their own evaluation, (2) to instruct the student in how to run a degree evaluation, and (3) to encourage the student to initiate contact. Yet, the authors have not explained how this information does, or does not, help the reader solve a specific obstacle to graduation. There is an assumption that if the student runs the evaluation, that s/he will be able to accurately interpret the result.

The remainder of the body of the message further obscures the critical point. Here is the original text for the remaining two paragraphs:

> **[Original text -- 3rd paragraph]**
> Please let our office know as soon as possible if you are completing the requirements elsewhere during your last term or planning to complete your degree at a later date. If you are taking courses elsewhere, make sure to order official transcript(s) to be sent to the [school] Registrar's Office as soon as possible after grades are recorded. If you plan to complete course substitution forms please submit those to the Registrar's Office as soon as possible. We recommend you speak to your academic advisor regarding possible course substitutions.
>
> **[Original text -- 4th paragraph]**
> In-Progress repeated coursework does NOT count on your degree evaluation until you have received a grade and could be why you are receiving this letter. If so, you can disregard this letter. For example, if your evaluation shows 178 earned credits and you are taking CJ 409 for 4crts, the 4crts. will not count until you have received a grade. The total credits would then reach 182.

The third paragraph is complicated by offering four explanations for potentially not graduating: (1) taking courses at another institution during the last term, (2) a change in the planned date for graduation, (3) transcripts needed for courses at other institutions, and (4) missing course substitution forms. However, the document does not provide information to help the reader put the information into context. For example, should the reader perceive these as reasons why the Registrar's office is wrong, why the email should be disregarded, or actions that should be taken? Furthermore, the paragraph entwines 'what might be wrong' with 'actions to remedy those problems' in a way that makes it difficult to know *what* must be done and *who* must be consulted. This further blurs the line between action that must be taken to graduate, and action that simply clarifies one's academic record. We argue that this paragraph could be considered alternatives in calls to action. Accordingly, clarity about the call to action could be improved by using descriptive headings as recommended by plain language guidelines (PLAIN, March 2011).

This final paragraph further obscures the critical intent of the email by switching subjects, using jargon without explaining it, and underlining part of the text. It starts with jargon: "in-progress repeated coursework", that is, courses being repeated in order to replace a failing grade or improve a course grade. (This is an option that some students choose in order get an 'F' grade off the transcript or to raise their grade point average; therefore, it only applies to a much smaller subset of the student population.) Then, the email suggests that repeated coursework is problematic because the grade is not yet recorded. Unfortunately though, the text is not clear enough to explain the term, its relevance, or to whom it is relevant. Therefore, the suggestion that "you can disregard this letter" is risky at best. Finally, the example offered to illustrate "in-progress repeated coursework" is not detailed enough to explain the term to most students but at the same time, lacks specificity to make it meaningful to students to whom it applies. It is not relevant if "you are taking CJ 409," but only if you are *re-taking* that or any other course.

Overall then, this email fails in several significant ways: to consider the readers' perspective (particularly in its differences from the authors'), to align meanings and build common ground through language choice and message structure, and to convey in plain writing the critical purpose for the email and what the reader must do. These are not just important from a functional perspective, they also bring into question broader institutional obligations. Limaye (1997) for example, admonishes organizational writers to consider that "providing a reasonable explanation is the sender's moral obligation; receiving such explanation is a natural right of the target" because hegemony is ever-present. His explanation is insightful and particularly applicable to a public institution of higher learning:

> First, a right to receive an adequate explanation for bad news means a right to be treated with respect, the mirror image of which is the sender's moral obligation to provide such reasonable explanation. Second, democracy demands accountability, creating at least a perception that one is not arbitrary and autocratic. Third, if democracy is good for the body politic, it is also good for the body economic (that is, for business organizations). Providing reasons for bad news is sharing with targets information they are not privy to. Providing reasons for bad news means resisting the temptation to patronize or manipulate the recipients of bad news. In a democracy, wanting to share information is a legitimate demand, and satisfying such demands is ethically obligatory. (p. 41-42)

In the context of unfavorable news about academic progress, then, we are accountable to convey our messages as clearly as possible in order to enable readers to act, to act responsibly, and to act in time. This kind of accountability, however, is not limited to any particular office, or any specific functional area within our university; instead, it is implicit at every turn within any public institution. Indeed, plain language has been heralded as a "civil right" (Locke, 2004).

A revised, 'plain writing' version of the full email follows to demonstrate the principles we have discussed.

Revised Email

Subject: Missing Requirements to Graduate in June

Dear [Student Name]:

Your current degree evaluation shows you HAVE NOT met the requirements to graduate in June 2012. This email tells you how to resolve the problem.

Check your online degree evaluation. From that, you'll learn if you have a simple paperwork error or if you are missing requirements. **Either way, you must act quickly**. The deadline for applying for graduation is **[date].** If the situation is not resolved by then, you will not graduate.

Why You Are Getting this Letter

There are several reasons why your degree evaluation may appear incomplete:

- We may not have received transcripts for courses taken at other institutions.
- You are missing required courses for your major, minor, or general education requirements (e.g., writing-intensive courses or cultural diversity credit).
- You have not taken 62 credits of upper-division courses.
- You have met the requirements for your major and minor, but you have not met the total of 180 credits required for graduation.
- You may not have submitted course substitution forms to us yet. (These forms allow you to substitute other courses for required courses in your major.) Your advisor must approve and sign the substitution form.
- You are re-taking a course in order to replace an F-grade, but you have not received the final grade yet.

What You Need to Do

1. Check your degree evaluation -- missing requirements will be highlighted in red. Here is the site to use: [website URL]
2. If your degree evaluation is incorrect, call us. Be ready to clearly explain the problem.
3. If you are missing transfer credits, order official transcripts from that school to be sent to the Registrar's Office. Call us to tell us you have ordered the transcripts.
4. If you are missing course requirements, contact your advisor to determine how to fulfill the missing coursework (e.g., course substitutions, registering for additional coursework this term or in the summer).
5. If you are planning to graduate in a later term, please contact us, and we will revise your degree evaluation.

Please contact us or your advisor to determine the best way to meet your degree requirements. We want to help you resolve problems. Here is how you can reach us: [Telephone, Email, Office address]

Sincerely,
[Name]/ [Title] / Registrar's Office

The subject line for an email is one of the first signals to the reader about the message's purpose. It is critical then that the authors make two important rhetorical choices: (a) focus on the reader's perspective, and (b) use language the reader will understand clearly rather than jargon. Thus, the subject line has been revised to be very direct about the risk to graduation. Then, the first two paragraphs serve the goal of explicitly communicating the problem, the purpose of the email, issuing a call to action and providing a deadline for their action. For the third paragraph, a heading is used in order to list the reasons why the recipient may be receiving this message. By putting the reasons together in one section, the reader is better able to evaluate them. Bullets are used to make the list easier to review, as well as to convey that all items are equally valued. The fourth paragraph also starts with a heading and provides a list of what the reader needs to do. The items are numbered in order to convey a priority of steps for the reader. Finally, the last paragraph encourages the reader to contact the office or their faculty advisor for help.

Throughout the revised email, we attempted to incorporate plain writing principles appropriate to this audience, message and context. First, the terms "you" and "we" were used to refer to the reader and author respectively. This makes the email more personal, more direct and less cluttered with repetitive references to the office's name. Second, listed items are consistent in their wording structure. For example, "we may," "you are," "you have," and "you may not" start the beginning of each line under the list of reasons for receiving the letter. Third, an attempt was made to avoid any jargon and to use everyday language for all explanations. Thus, instead of telling the reader to "submit" information, they are told to "call us" or to "contact your advisor." Instead of using the term "in-progress repeated coursework," we incorporate the definition by saying "you are re-taking a course in order to replace an F-grade but you have not received a final grade yet." Fourth, the text is organized by chunking, or organizing, related information together. Thus, it starts with the reason for the email in very explicit terms. Two sections with headings in bold type follow in order to convey reasons for the why the reader is getting the email and what the reader needs to do. Finally, the last three lines provide the final call to action to contact the office (or the faculty advisor) and the appropriate contact information.

Discussion

Conveying important information upon which readers must act to mitigate negative consequences is challenging in any organizational environment. Writing such messages in 'plain language' is even more challenging because it requires writers to reorient to the readers' perspective and to understand, adapt and apply plain writing guidelines. Fundamentally, writers must reorient to a process, rather than memorize composition rules. For example, we must consider the context in which our message arrives, the assumptions we make about what our reader does and does not know, the ways in which the reader must use the information we provide, and how our message can serve the readers' purposes (e.g., PLAIN, 2011).

There is substantial evidence that plain writing improves organizational efficiency and reduces both direct and indirect costs of operation (e.g., Kimble, 2012; Center for Plain Language, "Benefits," n.d.). Granted, plain writing does not substitute for inadequate planning by students. However, plain writing may help us in communicating that error to them, in a timely fashion and in a way that prompts action as needed. In the example email we analyzed here, there were very real consequences to misunderstanding. Students who had to unexpectedly complete requirements in the summer (or later) had unplanned tuition and fee expenses. Both authors of this paper had seniors expecting to graduate in June who did not file for federal financial aid the previous January; subsequently, they lacked financial aid to cover the expense. Furthermore, because class offerings are limited in summer, we know of students who were not able to leave the area to pursue jobs because they had to remain on campus to complete required coursework in fall term. Unfortunately, other than anecdotal information, we cannot quantify the impact. Detailed data to quantify number of contacts with any specific student and then their graduation outcome (or reason for delay) is not currently collected. However, we are in discussions with relevant stakeholders to determine what simple, and cost-effective measures could be put into place to quantify outcomes.

There is perhaps another, equally compelling reason to advocate for using plain language: plain writing enables the people that an organization or agency serves to understand better, participate more fully and be more empowered in that relationship. We would argue that this holds true regardless of whether the organization is private or public, or even profit-driven or not. In the case of public higher education, all of us who serve students have an ethical responsibility to use best practices in conducting the business of the institution, including communicating with our students. In essence, in an institution of learning, we advocate that a spirit of ‘walking our talk’ should prevail. As scholars, we should endeavor to advance the benefits of knowledge which is furthered by the way in which we communicate information. Thus, institutional communication such as the course catalog or university policies, administrative communication from sources such as Financial Aid, the Registrar’s office or academic advisors, or everyday faculty communication with our students are all opportunities to demonstrate better communication practices like we discuss here.

In summary, this paper explained plain writing and offered two interpretive perspectives that guided the analysis. First, we highlighted social or rhetorical behavior that serves to build common ground and mutual understanding in spoken communication and endorsed a view that considering how to align meaning with one’s audience in writing can lead to better compositional choices. Unfortunately, authors may be blind to the need for such efforts because they are self- rather than other-focused in writing. For many authors, composition is driven by ‘what do I need/want to say’ rather than ‘what do my readers need to understand to act.’ Second, we noted the concept of face and politeness strategies used in conversational interactions, particularly those used to minimize or mitigate face-threatening acts. These strategies are implicitly endorsed by some business writing textbook authors who advocate indirect or hedging tactics; however, we align our revision with those who argue for a more direct approach when the situation warrants it. Our analysis relied on an everyday example of organizational writing in the higher education setting. It was a choice of convenience that allowed us to demonstrate concepts in our pursuit of understanding challenges to communicating potentially negative news. As such, it is not intended to represent a ‘worst example,’ nor is it intended to be a reflection on its authors; it was simply a timely example that intrigued us. Finally, we offer a revised email example to display what we believe to be a more-appropriate composition using plain writing guidelines. Our changes follow recommendations found in several of the better guideline sources (e.g., Federal Plain Language Guidelines, the Security Exchange Commission Guidelines, and other sources, all accessible through the Center for Plain Language website). We will be testing students’ understanding of the original and revised version as we work collaboratively with the Registrar’s office to create templates for their annual mailings (electronic or hard copy). In addition, in the coming year we hope to use institutional examples like the one we have revised here to work with our peers in plain writing workshops as well as students in the classroom. Introducing plain writing into an organization is a process; this is one of our first steps along that path.

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[1] We have arbitrarily chosen to use the term ‘plain language’ in the title to refer to a broader concept of intentionally designed clarity and ‘plain writing’ throughout the paper either to refer to compositional processes or to align with our sources’ use of the term.

[2] Creelman (2012, p.187) noted that the literature typically uses labels such as negative or bad news, but noted one scholar (Meyer, 2010) who used the term “unfavourable” [sic] instead. This suggests an important distinction. Whereas a writer may need to convey information that is potentially unfavorable to the reader’s position, it is the *reader* whose perception leads to a possible interpretation as negative or bad news. Therefore, we’ve used ‘unfavorable’ wherever applicable.