




# Plain Language Crash Course: Tips for Communicating More Effectively

## TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

1. Given the nature of social media and community, making a plain language course available to those who write in this space would be beneficial, particularly to those who write communication for an external audience.
2. Plain language may be a difficult concept for some companies, especially those organizations that are very traditional. Using plain language within these organizations will require a culture change. The main concept to understand is that plain language is not about writing to a higher grade level to prove your education. If you are writing at a fifth grade level, it does not mean you are writing for a fifth grader or “dumbing down” to the reader. It is simply a valuable skill used to help deliver effective messaging. The following is from one of the Clarity in Plain Language Conferences attended by Erin:
  - a. Fact: Judges and lawyers prefer plain language over convoluted text, as does the public.
  - b. Fact: Readers who do not understand what they are reading lose respect for the writer.
  - c. Myth: Readers feel dumb by not understanding.
3. The use of pronouns within company communication helps to humanize the brand and warm up the copy. This is especially true when writing for customers. You want to make sure that they do not feel as though the company is providing them with system-generated copy, but rather that the communication is provided by a human being.

 <b>SNAPSHOT</b>
<p><b>SPEAKERS</b></p> <p>Erin Winker, Aetna &amp; Hillary Boucher, TheCR</p>
<p><b>COMPETENCIES</b></p> <p>Community Management</p>
<p><b>MATURITY PHASES</b></p> <p>CMM1, CMM2, CMM3, CMM4</p>

## OVERVIEW

Erin's Background: Erin has worked with Aetna for the past 10 years, primarily in the print side. She is now with the social media team as a Community Manager.



- Erin shared that she is most proud of her contribution to the creation of the Writers' Center for Excellence, which is an internal website that includes all copy/brand guidelines, resources and training needed to certify writers and quality reviewers within Aetna. That means that those within Aetna will know what to follow in terms of their brand voice and how to apply plain language principles.
- Erin teaches the course on plain language. In this presentation, she reviewed those principles and how they can be applied.

### Plain Language Defined

Erin offered the following definition :

- Plain language (also called plain English) is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it. Language that is plain to one set of readers may not be plain to others. Written material is in plain language if your audience can:
  - Find what they need
  - Understand what they find
  - Use what they find to meet their needs

### Plain Language and Community

In the social space, one of the goals is to build and maintain a healthy community. You want people to feel safe, to contribute, to help people feel welcome and you want people to feel a connection to the brand through humanization. Therefore, in order to build and maintain a healthy community, we need to connect with our audience. Clear communication helps us to do this. With audience understanding, we have:

- Less customer complaints
- Fewer phone calls seeking help
- No need for explanatory letters

Clarity Matters: Many of us were taught to use words that make us sound smart. We use these long words and sentences with a lot of detail, but it does not help the people that we serve. To illustrate this point, Erin used a before and after example from the plainlanguage.gov website:

## Before & after example

### Medicare fraud letter :

#### **Before**

Investigators at the contractor will review the facts in your case and decide the most appropriate course of action. The first step taken with most Medicare health care providers is to reeducate them about Medicare regulations and policies. If the practice continues, the contractor may conduct special audits of the providers medical records. Often, the contractor recovers overpayments to health care providers this way. If there is sufficient evidence to show that the provider is consistently violating Medicare policies, the contractor will document the violations and ask the Office of the Inspector General to prosecute the case. This can lead to expulsion from the Medicare program, civil monetary penalties, and imprisonment.

#### **After**

We will take two steps to look at this matter: We will find out if it was an error or fraud.

We will let you know the result.

(Source: [http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before\\_after/medicarefraudltr.cfm](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/medicarefraudltr.cfm))

Figure 1 - Before & After Example - Slide 11

All slides used with permission from Erin Winker in her presentation to TheCR on March 18, 2014 entitled: "What is Plain Language and Why Should I use it in the Social Space?"

- Hillary asked Erin if there are situations where legalese is needed vs. plain language. Erin replied that she could only answer this based on her experience in the Medicare space from an insurer's perspective. There were many technical terms that she could not change. However, Erin did re-write into plain language some of the Medicare open enrolment kits. It is possible to get the legal message across while still clarifying the writing and making it simple. That said, there are situations where you do have to use certain words. In the provider space, terms like pre-certification or medical terminology must be used. Therefore, it is a good idea to either break up the copy with sub-headings or explain the terminology that must be used.
- The Flesch-Kincaid tool is an instrument that can be used to assist in this type of scenario. It is a way to score your writing when you need to use terms that are more complex and cannot be simplified with other words. See the Best Practices Section for further information.

## BEST PRACTICES

The following is a summary of the various best practices that emerged from the discussion with members:

### Understand the Principles of Plain Language:

Erin shared the following principles:

- Keep sentences and paragraphs short
- Erin recommends keeping sentences between four and five paragraphs. Anything longer will be too lengthy.

Additionally, Erin suggested that sentences should be no longer than 12-15 words.

- Use familiar, simple words – This is particularly true in the social space. Erin gave the word “utilize” as an example. The word “use” is a better choice because it is a more simple and familiar way to say the same thing.
- Create charts, bullets and numbered lists – These are design elements of plain language.
- Maintain white space – This goes hand-in-hand with the above point as a design element of plain language because it helps to balance copy, charts and graphs so that you can digest information and scan content more easily. It also helps with your understanding of the material.
- Avoid jargon and passive voice – Jargon is a common language within an industry. Erin tries to avoid using jargon even internally because the more that jargon and acronyms are used in your language, the more likely they are to creep into your writing and/or language when talking to customers.

The same concept applies to passive voice, as well. Passive voice is the opposite of active voice. By hiding who is doing the action, it makes the other person think that you are hiding something, which can cause trust issues. Therefore, if you know who is performing the action, you should use pronouns to explain the content to your clientele.

- Use examples to help tell a story – If you have to explain a complex term, give an example to help people to better understand it. Furthermore, it is better to take two or three sentences to help explain a complex topic. To make the explanation too brief will only cause further confusion.
- Be conversational in tone – This is very popular in the social space.
- Do not sound robotic or too formal – The reason behind this principle is so that you can humanize the brand without sounding robotic.
- Humanize your brand with pronouns – A good way to humanize the brand is to use pronouns.

### Consider Using the Flesch-Kincaid Tool

The Flesch-Kincaid tool was developed by J. Peter Kincaid for the Navy in the 1970s. Erin uses this tool often. It gives you a percentage of passive voice in your writing. There are other tools out there, but this is in Microsoft Word and is very easy to install. It is found within the spelling and grammar options. It is activated when you enable the readability specifics. Once installed, it will always give you your readability statistics.

## How the tool works

1. Highlight what you want to test.
2. Go to “Spelling and Grammar” check.
3. You’ll get a prompt. “Word has finished checking the selected. Do you want to continue checking the remainder of the document.”
4. Click “NO”

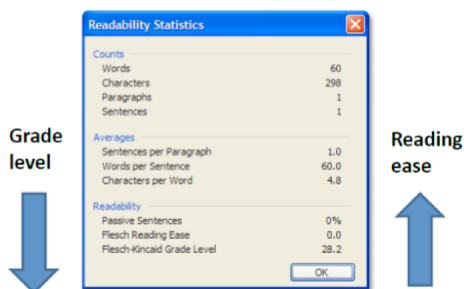


Figure 2 - How the Tool Works - Slide 17

- The above slide shows what will pop up when you score a piece of writing. Highlight the copy that you want to test and run the spell check. A prompt will ask if you want to check the remaining document; click ‘no’. When you click no, this readability statistic pops up. In particular, focus on the bottom half of this – the readability. It shows the passive sentences, the Flesch reading ease and the Flesch-Kincaid grade level.
- In this example, there is 0% passive voice, which means that the reading grade level on what has been scored is 28.2. That is fairly high. Many government documents are required to be written at the eighth grade level. The idea is to lower this number.
- As your passive voice goes down, so will your reading grade level, making the content easier to read.
- Other tools that can perform this function are listed in the Resources Section.

### Avoid the Use of Acronyms:

Erin recommends writing out words in full vs. using acronyms. However, if an acronym must be used, put the full word in parentheses after the acronym, especially in those cases where an acronym might be more recognizable than the full word, i.e. Centers for Medicare/Medicaid Services is better known as CMS.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The following is a summary of lessons learned as shared by participants within the discussion:

Erin has attended one of the Clarity in Plain Language Conferences hosted by the Center for Plain Language in the past to hear from others in this space. She has learned the following facts, which have debunked several writing myths:

- Fact: Judges and lawyers prefer plain language over convoluted text, as does the public.
- Fact: Readers who do not understand what they are reading lose respect for the writer.
- Myth: Readers feel dumb by not understanding.

To further add credence to the above, an online survey was conducted by a lawyer for a firm's clients and broader audience. The survey consisted of 376 respondents, 54% of whom were clients. The survey categories consisted of active vs. passive voice, verbs vs. nominalizations, plain words vs. complex terms and explaining legal terms vs. not doing so. That survey was then shared at the above conference:

- 80% of respondents preferred the plain language versions.
- As the complexity of the sentences increased, so did the preference for plain language.
- As education levels increased, so did the preference for plain language.
- Active voice prevailed in all scenarios.
- Most people preferred to have complex/difficult terms explained, even if it meant that the paragraphs became longer.

One participant explained that he feels the need to use business writing and jargon when communicating with upper management. He asked if others felt the same need and how they handled it:

- One participant shared that she maintains the same style of communication from the time she steps into her position. That style is usually plain language.
- Adding to this, this same participant stated that if she has to have a conversation about an action that has to be taken, she will have that conversation face-to-face to explain the basics. She then follows that up with an email that has more content in it. In the written content she will use bullet points to help keep the content succinct. In this participant's experience, the higher up the management ladder that the communication is going to, the more bullet points and white space she uses for that audience.
- The participant who asked this question countered with the fact that his scenario is different. Since his colleagues are in different cities, he does not have the opportunity for face-to-face meetings. Most of his communication is written and he wants to be professional and match the C-level tone while also ensuring that his communication easy to understand.

Hillary replied that while she does not condone the use of jargon, she knows that it cannot always be helped. The idea is to simplify the language without using buzz words. This requires a culture change.

Erin added that it is not about writing to a higher grade level to prove your education. If you are writing to a fifth grade level, it does not mean that you are writing for a fifth grader. Understandably, that is a very difficult concept for many people. Plain language is a way to achieve clarity. In Erin's experience, people would prefer simple vs. complex. Therefore, in Erin's opinion, that is being professional vs. writing content that has to be deciphered. The idea is to communicate in a way that aligns with the tone of the brand.

Erin cautioned participants against over-using the scoring tools. She recommended writing as you normally would and then going back to test the content. Use it as a guide to ensure that sentences and paragraphs are not too long and that you are using less passive vs. active voice.

Writing in this manner requires a shift in culture and it might be challenging to initiate at first. However, keep in mind this statistic:

- "84 percent of the public would trust a company whose written information was easy to understand."
  - Siegal + Gale

Hillary asked Erin to share how this program affects Aetna, who it touches and who is leading it. Erin explained that it is not a formalized program. However, plain language is part of their brand voice. This is why they certify writers who communicate externally. The plain language course is offered by an instructor, as well as an online technology-based version.

- As mentioned earlier, Aetna has the Writer Center for Excellence, which is a part of their overall brand website. In addition to offering tools and resources for writers, they have tip documents for words to use, words not to use, etc. There is a department in Aetna that owns the website and is solely responsible for updating it and maintaining it, as well as ensuring that the necessary training is available.
- The Writer's Center was launched in 2012. This is an ongoing process. In healthcare it is very important that Aetna communicates clearly to not only their members, but brokers and providers and potential customers. It is a big part of their brand. This will be particularly helpful given the Affordable Care Act because all future communication must be clearly written.

Hillary asked if everyone on the community and social team within Aetna go through the plain language training. Erin replied that she has taught the plain language course to her social team. She also has plans to train the customer service team. However, the plain language courses are primarily a pre-requisite for anyone who wants to become a certified writer.

Erin recommends the book: "Simple – Conquering the Crisis of Complexity" to help simplify writing. She also recommended following the Center for Plain Language, as well as Joseph Kimble, a lawyer who is a huge proponent of plain language.