

The Importance of Editing: Language for All

An analysis of literacy in the United States found that 54% of US adults, or 130 million, do not possess proficient literacy skills, meaning they read below a sixth-grade level (Rothwell 2020). This does not mean that half of the country cannot read, but rather have somewhat basic comprehension levels of written information. Imagine looking for health insurance information and finding excruciatingly long paragraphs with high-level vocabulary that you are unable to understand. You would be unable to determine if you qualify for that health insurance. That is why plain language needs to exist in written texts to be accessible to the general population. Plain language is simply defined as language that is concise and easily understandable by the target audience (Plain Writing Act of 2010). As a copyeditor, it is crucial to understand when to use plain language and how it works.

Why It Matters

Think back to the example of someone reading health insurance information. This knowledge is crucial for every US adult, meaning there can be absolutely zero barriers to understanding it. Any informational writing that has vital information needs to be written in plain and understandable language. All communication from the US government must legally be written in plain language due to the Plain Writing Act of 2010, meaning it is all comprehensible by the general public (Plain Writing Act of 2010). The importance of this cannot be overstated enough, as the simplicity of government communication allows the population to understand what the government does, how to vote, and other information coming from those in power.

Important messaging is not the only use of plain language. Marketing also relies on the simplicity of the text. Plain language in advertisements builds more loyal fanbases due to the human-like approach and also makes advertising less confusing (Moffett 2021). Popular catchphrases are short and simple, so they are memorable and recognizable to the average consumer. If McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It" were instead "I Hold Deep Affection for the Food Offered Here," it likely wouldn't be the massive fast-food chain it is today.

Plain language is also important for legal documents. Legal documents are generally very long and unintuitive, which can make reading and understanding them challenging for the average person. This is especially true for work contracts. People who do not possess high

literacy may sign contracts and other important documents without fully understanding what they are signing up for. This almost necessitates hiring lawyers, which most people with a low literacy rate are likely unable to do considering the correlation between low literacy and low income (Rothwell 2020).

The Usage

Plain language can be difficult to copyedit due to the subjectivity of how plain it needs to be; however, copyeditors should follow a few techniques when simplifying text. To make language plain, editors should use short sentences and paragraphs, format information like lists when applicable, use simple wording, and write in an active voice (What is Plain Language? 2017). It follows general copyediting procedures you are used to but requires breaking up paragraphs as much as possible and using incredibly simple wording.

Simple language is one of the most important factors of plain language. In school, you learn to spice up your writing by always carrying a thesaurus around and constructing complex or unique sentences. When copyediting technical, government, or any other form of information writing for the general population, your vocabulary must remain simple. While it is fun to use a term such as *contumacious*, most readers will only understand what you mean if you use the term *stubborn* instead.

Simple language is important, but no matter how simple the wording is, comprehending the text will still be difficult if the formatting and breaking up of paragraphs does not occur. As you can see in the figure below, breaking up the paragraph using a list has massively increased legibility for not just those with low literacy, but anybody who comes across that text (Walston 2020). Formatting tools such as lists majorly reduce the complexity of text, allowing the intended audience to consume and act on the information. Other forms of formatting include headers, footers, or even design choices.

Figure 1



An infographic showing plain language. From Valerie Walston in CAPIO, 2020.

<https://www.capio.org/post/power-plain-language>.

This brings up an interesting point about the design of text and language. Copyediting is not just about correcting grammatical errors; copyediting is also about consistency and making the text easier for the reader. Making the text easier includes edits such as clarity changes, but design can also be an important factor. For informational documents, it could be very beneficial to break up sections into more than just paragraphs. Using different colored backgrounds and placement on the document will make the design more attention-grabbing. With Figure 1, notice how the color draws your attention to the boxes of text due to the contrasting colors and excellent use of white space. While it may not technically be considered plain language, they

share similar ideas about getting the message across as efficiently and effectively as possible. Depending on the work you copyedit, design may not play a large factor in your everyday work. Regardless, understanding design and how to simplify messaging is a skill to diversify your portfolio.

You may be wondering how exactly you copyedit for plain language. As mentioned before, it is a subjective task that requires careful consideration of every word. Taking the general guidelines into account is paramount to your understanding of copyediting for plain language. For practice, you could look at complex and wordy sentences in books, on websites, or by creating them yourself. Then, practice implementing the guidelines discussed here. Shorten the phrase, replace complicated vocabulary with basic words, and use formatting whenever possible. Once edited, look back and read through it. Are you able to understand the information after only one read? Could a sixth grader read this and understand it on their first read? These are the questions you must ask yourself to determine if you have successfully edited for plain language.

Comparing to Legalese

I've discussed briefly how legal documents can be very confusing and obscenely long; people are often unable to understand them without the help of a lawyer. This is a type of writing known as legalese, which is much more complicated than plain language. Legalese should be avoided for many reasons: most people are unable to understand it, it is easy to misinterpret the wording, and in terms of businesses, it will drive away consumers (Komnenic 2022). As the US moves away from legalese in official government documents, we can only hope that regular court documents move towards implementing plain language.

Data privacy specialist and data protection officer Masha Komnenic gives an example of legalese in the following sentence: "In witness whereof, the parties hereunto have set their hands to these presents as a deed on the day month and year hereinbefore mentioned." (Komnenic 2022). This phrase was written in legalese to refer to the line after a signature where you put the date. This is the kind of language that takes multiple times to read for the average person to understand. Plain language would be much better suited here. If you were editing the phrase to achieve plain language, you could alter it by writing, "The date was written here," or something

similar. As you can see, plain language is much more concise, clear, and direct than writing it in legalese.

Around the World

While most of the discussion thus far has been about plain language and its place in the US, it certainly has an impact across the globe. The discussion of brand and advertising voice certainly applies elsewhere, as does the lack of literacy that makes plain language so important to sharing information. Because of this, other countries have passed or are working to pass laws surrounding plain language, just like the US did with the Plain Writing Act of 2010. Christopher Balmford discusses some international news in his article, “Plain Language: Beyond a Movement.”

The first country Balmford mentions is Canada, with the “Canadian Securities Administration, the federal Department of Finance, the British Columbia Securities Commission, the Office of the Alberta Auditor General, and the Canadian Bankers’ Association” all in agreement that plain language is the most beneficial writing style for the general public.

The United Kingdom has also been pushing for legislation regarding plain language, according to Balmford. There are now court rules forcing legal proceedings to use simple text, which is a massive step towards the law becoming more accessible. The UK is also trying to rewrite its tax laws to be more understandable.

South Africa’s efforts to introduce plain language are unrivaled, with the country rewriting the entire constitution to be simpler. A constitution is one of the most important documents for a country, one which dictates the rights and rules that everyone in the nation must follow. This is a document where being able to read and understand every facet of it is exceedingly important, making this revision a commendable effort from South Africa. It also shows the dichotomy between South Africa and the US, for example, a country whose constitution has stood still for centuries. Items in the US Constitution could be confusing for the average person to read due to their age and convoluted wording.

In addition to individual countries, Balmford discusses the influence of plain language on the European Union. Sweden pushed for massive reform regarding communication wording during their time in the presidency of the European Commission in 2001. This is also many years after plain language became used more in Sweden since the 1970s. Sweden kickstarted the EU’s

simplification of their text, which has massively increased communication among the countries and with the general public of those residing in countries participating in the EU (Balmford 2017). The EU has also introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which requires all text regarding personal information and data, such as a website's privacy policy or cookie policy, to conform to plain language standards (Komnenic 2022). GDPR standards allow all internet users who fall under EU boundaries to understand exactly what is being said, allowing users to make their own choices regarding safety and privacy.

This brings up the idea of expanding your portfolio. There is a demand for plain language all over the world, meaning you can copyedit just about anywhere. This is especially true if you know languages other than English. Copyediting for another language is certainly a different beast, considering you need to know all the grammar rules associated with that language; however, a knowledge of how to write plain language can help no matter where you are.

Further Reading

You can find much more information regarding plain language than you would initially imagine, with many articles regarding the history behind it. A considerable amount can be found on the [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) website. It includes articles that dive deeper into plain language around the world and even provides training videos and boot camps. There is plenty of information about this topic and I wish you luck in your journey as a copyeditor.

Author Bio

Adam Nardin is a student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He is studying communication with a minor in multimedia communications. While his editing and publications class was his first real experience of copyediting, he was ahead of the curve in understanding grammar rules throughout school, making him the person his classmates asked for help editing their papers.

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