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## **Let's Make it Clear: The Integration of Plain Language into Technical Communication Coursework**

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## Introduction

The challenge: Incorporate plain language into the course Technical Rhetoric & Genres. Through gathering resources, creating graphics, and conducting class discussions and activities, **I seek to educate my peers on the importance of these concepts and connect them to the existing coursework, resulting in a meaningful understanding and applicable writing skills moving forward.**

## Guiding Questions

The main goals of the project were outlined by the following questions:

- How can we incorporate plain language concepts into the course?
- What are the key concepts of plain language to emphasize to non-experts?
- What assignments and course frameworks lend themselves to incorporating plain language?
- What should students take away from these lessons/materials?

## Background

The Plain Language Act of 2012 serves as a resource for creating accessible and clear documentation.

**Plain language ensures that the reader can:**

- can find the information they need,
- understand what they find,
- use the information to meet their needs.

## Plain Language Checklist

- Is it written for the average reader?
- Is it organized for the average reader's needs?
- Does it have short, useful headings?
- Is it chronologically ordered?
- Does it use short sentences and short sections?
- Does it use the simplest tense possible? (simple present is best)
- Does it use active voice where possible?
- Does it use "you" and other pronouns to speak directly to the reader?
- Does it avoid hidden verbs and noun strings?
- Does it omit excess words and use concrete and familiar ones?
- Does it avoid ambiguous wording when expressing requirements?
- Does it use lists and tables to simplify complex material?
- Does it avoid using double negatives?
- Are all images clear and intentional?

## Methods

The following methods and strategies were used to integrate plain language concepts:

### PULL READING MATERIALS

Student readings for expanded understanding/reference:

- Using active voice
- Usability testing for plain language
- Plain language in business and legal writing

### CLASS ACTIVITIES/DISCUSSION

In-class activities and discussion to make connections to ideas and course learning objectives:

- Introduction and connecting plain language to resume writing assignment
- Instruction writing revision activity using checklist
- Organization and document design PPT and activity in small groups

### PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Research from scholarly articles, government plain language resources, and genre-specific publications most relevant to course:

- Plain Language Act & Federal Guidelines
- Technical Communication and Plain Language
- Plain language application to different genres

### CREATE NEW MATERIALS

Resources I made to further understanding of concepts:

- Introduction to Plain Language PPT
- 5 Steps to Communicate in Plain Language Infographic
- Plain Language Checklist

## Outcomes

Students completed an optional survey on the effectiveness of lessons and their experience with plain language.

- All students rated their experiences with the materials, discussions, and concepts as **positive and helpful**.
- Of the course assignments, students felt **instruction writing linked most closely to the plain language principles**.
- In response to how they see themselves applying these concepts they said they've **already started applying the concepts, and will use them to write more clearly**.

## Conclusion

Introducing plain language into Technical Rhetoric & Genres, a course required for multiple degrees and certificates, is crucial in broadening students' understanding of writing audience focused works across all genres. Plain language skills are broadly transferable and allow folks to communicate clearly and concisely.

**Plain language is at the intersection of technical communication and accessibility;** furthermore, it creates a focus on the 3 most important rhetorical considerations, which are audience, purpose, and genre. **Writing while using plain language forces students to deeply consider those ideas and tailor their work with a critical understanding of language, rhetoric, and communication.**

## 5 STEPS TO COMMUNICATE IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

According to the [Center for Plain Language \(CPL\)](#), there are 5 main steps you can take to effectively write in plain language:

### STEP 1. IDENTIFY AND DESCRIBE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

List out the needs of your audience and identify key characteristics that should influence your design (demographic, experience levels, etc).



### STEP 2. STRUCTURE THE CONTENT TO GUIDE THE READER THROUGH IT

Organize your content so that it flows logically and use headings that are clear and indicative of the information to come. Use short sections and chunk information at natural stopping points.



### STEP 3. WRITE IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

Write short sentences and present the most important info first, using transitions to connect ideas and sections. Leave out details that aren't helpful or that will distract readers.



### STEP 4. USE INFORMATION DESIGN TO HELP READERS

Use visual design elements in the document such as headings and sub-heading, as well as typographic styles and whitespace to organize information.



### STEP 5: TEST DESIGN AND CONTENT WITH TARGET USERS

Test your design at multiple points in its development and use evidence-based testing strategies to check that your final produce is accessible, usable, and useful.



## Looking Forward

These concepts should continue to be introduced into the technical communication coursework and beyond. All majors and disciplines can benefit from applying these principles in their work.

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## Contact Information

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