Let’s Make it Clear: The Integration of Plain Language into Technical Communication Coursework

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Abstract
Plain language is writing that is clear, concise, and audience focused. Plain language concepts help readers find their needed information quickly and allow them to understand it the first time they read it. Because technical communication shares many of the same goals of plain language, it is imperative that early coursework in technical communication and writing incorporate these concepts; however, this is often not the case. The goal of this project is to integrate plain language into the coursework of Technical Rhetoric & Genres, an English course for both technical communication students and outside majors alike. Through intensive research, material creation, and discussion-based class activities, I seek to form the connection between plain language and technical communications and emphasize the importance of utilizing these concepts to write the most accessible and clear work possible. Doing so reveals that students across all disciplines benefit from these lessons and are able to create connections to their coursework within the class, as well as understand the interdisciplinary application of plain language across all genres and contexts as they move into future coursework and professional writing environments.

This student presentation is available at ScholarWorks: https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/under_showcase_2022/
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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:
- find the information they need,
- understand what they find,
- use the information to meet their needs.

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.