PLAIN LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES:

Communication Best Practices to Benefit All Learners

Table of Contents

Interactive Table of Contents

This interactive Table of Contents helps you navigate through the document making each section easily accessible. Return back to this page by clicking the house icon located at the bottom of each page.

Navigation Key

Click to Return to Table of Contents

Click for Additional Resources of Interest

Social Model of Disability

- Disability is the inability to participate in activities fully due to the barriers posed by society's ableist environment
- The social model of disability considers the role of society's expectations and barriers in place within our environments

Medical Model of Disability

- Disability is the presence of a condition that makes it more difficult for someone to participate in activities and the world around them
- Within the medical model of disability, there are three dimensions of disability:
    - Impairment in a person's mental or physical structure or function
    - Activity limitations that impact a person's life
    - Participation restrictions in activities of daily life
- This model can be limiting, as it views the person with a disability as having the problem rather than the environment being inaccessible

Prevalence of Disability

In the United States, 61 million adults live with a disability. **That's roughly 1 out of 4 people.**

What is Plain Language?

- Wording, sentence structure and design are clear and easily understood by your audience
- Plain language is important in written and verbal communication
- Using Plain language:
  - In general, keep language choices at a 6th grade reading level or below
  - Utilize technology tools in writing programs to identify reading level
  - If in Microsoft Word, a readability statistics tool can be found under "Spelling and Grammar"
- Use short, logical sentences
- Include important details, while leaving out unnecessary information that distracts from the main message
- Include visuals to support any written or verbal content

Click the light bulb for more information on the **importance of plain language** ---------->

Why is Using Plain Language Important?

- Using plain language benefits many people with disabilities, people with low health literacy for any reason, and all learners
- Plain language can help bridge gaps in understanding and awareness of topics

Inclusive Language

- Allow individuals to advocate for how they would like to be described
- Be respectful by creating an environment that allows individuals to be themselves
- Open communication by asking how someone would like to be referred to
- Be thoughtful and intentional about when it is appropriate to include specific descriptors or identities for a person

Click the light bulb for more information on the **importance of inclusive language** ---------->

CIN

Person-First vs. Identity-First Language

- Person-First Language: The person comes before the disability
  - Example - Jane is an autistic person
- Identity-First Language: The disability comes before the person
  - Example - Jane is a person who is autistic
- Both language choices are used within the disability community
  - People with disabilities should be listened to individually as to the preference in language options

Words to Avoid	Words to Use Instead
- Able-bodied or normal - Abnormal - Handicap - Wheelchair-bound - Mentally challenged - Special needs	- Person without disability - Atypical - Person with a disability - Person who uses a wheelchair - Person with an intellectual disability - Disability

Plain Language in Verbal Communication

- Simplify communication by using simple sentences, speaking slowly, and taking frequent pauses
- Avoid using jargon and abbreviations that others may have difficulty understanding
- Use concrete language:
  - Concrete language example - Put on your shoes and coat, please.
  - Abstract language example - Go get ready, please
- Don't speak with a raised voice during a misunderstanding, unless specifically asked
- Listen and participate actively:
  - Allow extra time for the person to process and respond
  - Pay attention to the person's tone of voice and non-verbal cues, like facial expressions
- Provide clear explanations as to why something is being done:
  - Example - Please give me a call back. I wanted to talk to you about our plans this weekend.
- Ensure that the person is being understood by asking clarifying questions
- Do not interrupt someone when they are speaking
- Do not finish the person's sentences

Click the light bulb for more information on the **importance of effective communication between caregivers and individuals** -------->

CIN

Plain Language in Written Communication

- Fully complete discussing one topic or task before moving on to another.
- Write in terms that the audience will understand, avoiding jargon or technical terms
  - If a complicated term is introduced, provide a definition in simple terms
- Use everyday words that have clear meanings
  - Example - End vs. Terminate
- Clearly state the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" in your writing
- Avoid providing information that isn't necessary to the bigger message
- Fit the writing style to the message being shared
- Keep sentences short and simple
- Use a present tense, active voice in writing
  - Example - "All people should use plain language" vs. "Plain language should be used by all people"
- Use the grammar tools available through many technology programs to avoid long sentences, passive voice, or other obstacles in clear, readable writing
- Use font types that are clear and accessible:
  - Common fonts are Arial or Calibri
- Involve people with disabilities in the editing process before considering written content final

Click the light bulb for more information on the **importance of plain language** ----------->

CIN

Effective Silent Communication

- Silent communication can include sign language, gestures, or the use of photos
- Possible communication methods could include:
  - Use of visual aids like photos, diagrams, or drawings
    - Example - The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS): Method that teaches people that can't communicate verbally to use pictures to express their thoughts or feelings and ask questions
    - Multiple pictures can be strung together to create sentences
  - Acting things out or demonstrating what is being expressed
  - Use of gestures and pointing
  - Writing or typing
  - Sign language interpretation

Click the light bulb for more information on the **importance of effective communication between caregivers and individuals** -------->

CIN

Visual Impairments

- Speak when approaching the person
- Use a visual description when doing introductions
- Indicate when people are joining or leaving the conversation
- Use descriptive language when sharing information
- Offer to read important written information to the person

Hearing Impairments

- Face the person directly when speaking
- Use non-verbal communication methods, like drawing, writing, or using gestures

Hearing Impairments (cont.)

- Ask clear and short questions
- If an interpreter is supporting the person, face the person with the hearing impairment

Mobility Impairments

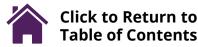- If the person uses a wheelchair, speak at eye-level

Intellectual Disabilities

- Ask the person to repeat themselves if something is misunderstood
- Offer multiple methods of communication, like writing and drawing
- Be patient and take time to fully understand what the person is saying

Click the light bulb for more information on **accessible communication for people with disabilities** -------->

- **"Plain Language Medical Dictionary."** University of Michigan Taubman Health Sciences Library
    - https://www.lib.umich.edu/taubman-health-sciences-library/plain-language-medical-dictionary

- **"Everyday Words for Public Health Communication."** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
    - https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/everydaywords/

- **"Diabetes – Words to Know in Plain Language."** Green Mountain Self-Advocates
    - https://gmsavt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Diabetes-Words-To-Know-in-PLain-Language-1.pdf

Plain Language Checklist

Why is Plain Language Important?

Plain language helps people understand the information. Using plain language benefits many people with disabilities, people with low health literacy for any reason, and all learners.

To revise written or verbal communication, follow these steps:

✓ **Step #1** - Simplify language choices. Avoid jargon and define academic terms or abbreviations.
  - Example: Did you use XYZ when ABC is simpler?

✓ **Step #2** - Use concrete language to improve clarity. Avoiding abstract instructions or phrases.
  - Example: "Send me an email today" (concrete language) vs "Let me know today" (abstract language)

✓ **Step #3** - Use a present tense and active voice so the communication is more readable and digestible.
  - Example: "Everyone should use plain language" (active voice) vs "Plain language should be used by everyone" (passive voice)

✓ **Step #4** - Use inclusive language. Remove outdated and harmful phrases and words from communication
  - Example: "Person without a disability" (inclusive) vs "Normal" (harmful)

More Tips!

- Consider disabilities of your audience members. Make additional accommodations to fit the audience.
- Apply these plain language steps in both written and verbal communication.

Stay Connected

For assistance with disability best practices and successful inclusion of community members, please contact:

Oregon Office on Disability and Health (OODH)
oodh@ohsu.edu

For more information about OODH **click here.**

The Oregon Office on Disability and Health is a public health entity under the Institute on Development and Disability at Oregon Health and Science University and the Public Health Division of the Oregon Health Authority. OODH has been funded since 1994 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Our mission is to promote health equity and well-being of people with disabilities. We collaborate with disability communities, public health entities, healthcare systems, and community-based organizations to prioritize access and equity throughout Oregon.

If you are interested in receiving updated information about OODH's projects and work, please **sign up for our quarterly newsletter here.**