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Using Plain Language in Evaluation

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Emily Lauer and Courtney Dutra on Using Plain Language in Evaluation

Hello, we are Emily Lauer and Courtney Dutra from the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Developmental Disability Evaluation and Research (CDDER). As part of our work, we often evaluate programs and projects that support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In this post, we focus on "Plain Language" as a tool for increasing readability and usability.

Why Plain Language? Consider the following real-world examples of language taken from legal documents:
A preponderance of evidence
Failure of recollection is common
Innocent misrecollection is not uncommon

Huh?

Plain Language (also known as Plain Enlgish) is the art of writing simply. It is communication your audience can understand the first time they read it. Plain Language reduces confusion. It is clear, organized, and written for the appropriate audience.

We can rewrite the above examples using Plain Language:
A preponderance of evidence = More likely than not
Failure of recollection is common = People often forget
Innocent misrecollection is not uncommon = People make mistakes in what they remember

Isn't that better?

Plain English is especially helpful for people who: have intellectual and developmental disabilities; don't speak English as their first language, and have low literacy or education levels. However, most people appreciate Plain English! We use it in our work to write simple and clear evaluation questions. We also use Plain English when writing reports for any of the audiences mentioned above. Plain English may also be useful in scientific writing – especially in communicating methods and results to a wide audience – whether a manuscript or a grant application.

Hot Tips
Several tools will help you to decide if your language is too complicated:
1) Microsoft Word has a readability checker that will give you a Flesch-Kincaid grade level. A fourth to sixth grade level can be easily understood by most people.
2) Online-utility.org will analyze your text for free and provide readability statistics and suggestions for improving sentences.

How to write in Plain English?
- Try using an active voice, the "you" pronoun, short sentences, and everyday words.
- Hint: the phrase 'for which' often signals a complicated sentence that can be revised.
- A 'Top Ten' list of tips is here.

Rad Resources
Lots of resources exist online for explaining the importance of Plain English (it's a federal agency requirement) and for teaching writing in Plain English:
1) Plainlanguage.gov – Trainings, examples (see above), tips, tricks and legal guidelines.
2) An example of a web page written in Plain English.
3) A Plain English Medical Dictionary from the University of Michigan. Simply type in your complicated word or phrase and it will generate alternatives in Plain English.
4) Plain English Association International – Articles, tutorials and web links or resources around the globe.