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Plain Language for Disability Culture

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Summary: Sometimes people in disability culture and activism use big words and complicated ideas. Big words and complicated ideas mean some people can't be part of disability culture and activism. Plain language is a way to include those people. Plain language is a way of writing or speaking so people understand you the first time they read or hear it. People have been using plain language for a long time in a lot of different places. This means that there are a lot of different ways of using plain language. These include using short sentences, common words, and headings. Critical disability researchers point out that some disabled people don't communicate in ways that are quick and easy to understand. Sometimes disabled people communicate in ways that have more than one meaning. Maybe plain language can exist with this. Maybe disabled people can make their own way of using plain language. This could make disability culture and activism accessible for more people.

Note on writing: This chapter is written in what I call a semi-plain language style. This means I do the following:

- Use an active voice
- Mostly use the 6000 most common words in the English language
- Use short sentences
- Use 14 point font
- Use "I" and "you"

There's some places in this chapter where I've used words that aren't among the 6000 most common English words. This is because some words mean very specific things and I want you to read that one meaning. For example, in this chapter

I use the words **disabled** and **impairment**. This is because I often find it helpful to think about disability using the social model. The social model of disability explains that everyone has differences in the ways their bodies and minds work. Some of these differences are considered unusual or not "normal." These differences are called impairments. Society creates barriers for people with impairments that prevent them from participating in the full range of human experiences. These barriers can be people's attitudes or inaccessible architecture, processes, and policies. So people are disabled by society (Shakespeare 2006). Often, making the world accessible means removing barriers. I don't think the social model is the only way to understand disability. But it often works well when I'm thinking about access. Any other uncommon words I've explained in the text.

I hope you find this chapter clear and easy to read.

WHY IS PLAIN LANGUAGE IMPORTANT?

"Disability advocacy spaces can be unfriendly to people who don't know all the right words" (Luterman 2020, 4). Sara Luterman wrote this at the start of the plain language translation of "Disability Visibility" by Alice Wong. When I read this, I thought about all my disabled friends who aren't interested in the ideas coming from disability culture and disability activism. These friends had told me that when they read these ideas or hear people talk about them, they feel like the ideas aren't for them. My friends can't hold complicated ideas in their minds long enough to understand them because of brain fog or pain or cognitive impairment. Big words reminded them of university. There were a lot of barriers to my friends' doing well at university. This made them feel bad about themselves. Now, when they read ideas that are new and complicated, sometimes they feel like they are back in university. They feel like they can't have conversations with people using long sentences and words they don't know. When Luterman wrote, "Disability advocacy spaces can be

unfriendly to people who don't know all the right words," I felt the truth of that. I also knew I had made disability culture and activism spaces unfriendly because I love big, complicated ideas and I sometimes write in ways that aren't clear.

I care about accessibility. Accessibility is when someone can take part in an experience in a way that feels meaningful to them (Ellcessor 2017, 6). This means the way the content is shared and the content itself has to be accessible. Accessibility is one of the ways disabled people get to have the experiences they want to have. I want to make disability culture and activism spaces and ideas more accessible. Plain language is a tool that can make disability culture and activism more accessible to people who feel like complicated language and ideas aren't for them.

Plain language is a way of writing and designing text. Plainlanguage.gov says, "Plain language (also called plain writing or plain English) is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it" (n.d., para. 1). This means that people reading plain language don't have to work to understand the text. Usually, people creating plain language documents want to make knowledge available to people who are not experts (Myers and Martin 2021, para. 7), often so they can make better decisions (Jones and Williams 2017, 415; Sims 2020, 14). Usually these decisions are about practical things like what to buy, whether someone should sign a contract, how to fill out a form for the government, what kind of medical treatment to try first, or who to vote for.

In this chapter I'm going to tell you some of the things I've learned about plain language. This includes some of the history of plain language. Plain language is used in a lot of different places. Because it is used in so many different places, there are a lot of different ways to write plain language. I talk about some of the ways critical disability researchers (McRuer 2006; Price 2011; St. Pierre 2015, 2017; Yergeau 2018) have thought about disability and communication. These researchers say that disability communication can have multiple messages and

can take a lot of work to make and understand, and we don't always know what people are trying to say. Often, people think good communication is the opposite of this.

One of the reasons we think it is important for communication to be clear and easy to understand is that we live in a capitalist society. Capitalism is a system in which we give people money in order to get the things we need to live. It's useful for communication to be quick and easy in capitalism because then people can buy and sell things more quickly and people can make more money. Capitalism is not kind to disabled people. Disability communication doesn't work well with capitalism. But plain language is all about communicating clearly and easily. So does plain language support capitalism and reinforce "normal," nondisabled ways of doing things? At the end of the chapter I talk a bit about why we might still practice plain language and the future of plain language in the disability community.

HISTORIES OF PLAIN LANGUAGE

I found that plain language has complicated histories. For the most part those histories do not include disability. Researchers trace plain language back to many different starting points. Russell Wilterton (2015) says people in the fourteenth century cared about clear communication. In 1948, Rudolf Flesch developed the first version of his Reading Ease test. This test scores documents for how long the words and sentences in it are.

Eleanor Cornelius (2015) says that in the 1960s and 1970s people in Australia, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, India, Singapore, South Africa, Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand all started to ask for consumer information in plain language. This means information like whether a company will fix something you bought from them if it breaks, what companies will do with information you give them, and whether you can return something that doesn't work.

Today, plain language is used in a lot of different areas, including government documents, legal writing, technical writing, and medical information. The US government has passed several laws saying the government must communicate clearly. The most recent is the Plain Writing Act of 2020, which requires each federal agency to monitor documents released for plain language and give their employees training and resources in plain language (Sims 2020, 13). Plain language is also an important part of legal writing in Canada, the United States, and Australia (Balmford, n.d, para. 54; Wilterton 2015, 7). Plain language has been adopted as a tool in technical writing. This is because people doing technical writing are starting to think about how their work can help create a more just world (Jones and Williams 2017, 427; Sims 2020, 17). Finally, some medical researchers have started including plain language summaries in their articles (Myers and Martin 2021, para. 7). This means medical researchers write a few sentences at the start of the article so people who are not doctors can understand it. The idea that people should communicate clearly has been around for a long time. So there are many different places and fields where plain language is practiced. There are also a lot of different places and fields where people say plain language should be used.

Karen Shriver (2017) reviewed over a hundred documents related to the development of plain language in the United States. She found that over the past seventy years, there has been a shift from thinking about how easy the document is to read based on sentences and words, to thinking about the whole document (2017, 368). This includes thinking about how the text is laid out and designed—for example, how big the letters are and the font used. There is now a focus on whether people can use the information in the document and also whether people trust the information.

Researchers who want to know if people can trust and use the information in a document often call this a "human-centered design approach" (Jones and Williams 2017, 427).

This means that the people who will be using the document should be involved in creating the document. This is because confusing content is not the only way writing creates problems for people. For example, Natasha Jones and Miriam Williams (2017) looked at the documents people use to decide whether they should borrow money from a bank to buy a house. They found that one of the issues with these documents was that they left out important information. The information that was there was understandable, but people needed more information to actually decide whether they should borrow money. The people who will use the documents should be involved in the process of creating them, right from the start, so they can have a say in everything involved with the documents.

In the 1960s and 1970s people thought plain language was mostly for people making decisions about what to buy. Now people who write plain language think of their work as being for a lot of different people. Shriver (2017, 375) says people who write plain language started thinking about disabled people using plain language in the 2000s. It's difficult to trace the history of disabled people using plain language. Lots of disability groups, such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (n.d.) and the Green Mountain Self-Advocates (2020), provide plain language information to their members. Alice Wong asked Sara Luterman to make a plain language translation of "Disability Visibility" (Luterman 2020). Just because some people writing plain language didn't think about disabled people needing plain language until the 2000s doesn't mean that disabled people weren't using plain language before then.

People who write plain language want people to make good decisions for themselves (Maaß 2020, 41). This is a value shared by disability rights activists who demand independence and decision making for disabled people (Charlton 1998, 128). Disabled people need clear, easily available information in order to make decisions too.

HOW TO WRITE PLAIN LANGUAGE

Plain language is used in many different fields and places. So there are a lot of ways to write it. I read five pieces of writing that explain how to use plain language. I chose the "United States Federal Plain Language Guidelines" (plainlanguage.gov, 2011), the "Plain Language Commission Style Guide" from the United Kingdom (Carr, 2019), "Five Steps to Plain Language" from Center for Plain Language in the United States (n.d.), and the Australian government's "Style Manual" (2021) because people writing about plain language often talk about these pieces of writing. They also come from different places in the English-speaking world. I included Luterman's foreword to the plain language version of "Disability Visibility" as an example of using plain language to share disability culture. When I read through all of these guides, I found 72 ways to write plain language. Only 14 of these ways are in two or more guides. The following are the 14 ways to write plain language:

- Know who you are writing for.
- Put your information in an order that makes sense.
- Use headings.
- Write short sentences.
- Use the active voice.
- Use contractions like **don't** and **couldn't**.
- Use **you** for the reader and **we** for the organization preparing the document.
- Don't use unnecessary words.
- Try not to use abbreviations.
- Use words to mean what they usually mean.
- Write short sentences.
- Write short paragraphs.
- Use words or phrases that help the reader move between paragraphs.
- Ask the people you want to use your documents to test them.

All these suggestions are good suggestions. But generally, people don't agree on how to write plain language. Shriver (2017, 348) notes that there is a lot of research that could tell us how to write plain language. But this research is spread over many different areas of study like linguistics, education, and technical writing. People who write plain language need someone to bring together all this research and tell us how to write plain language based on research. Until then, most people won't entirely agree on how to write plain language.

CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES, PLAIN LANGUAGE, AND COMMUNICATION

No matter how we write plain language, we want clear writing that people understand quickly. This way of writing is very different from the way some critical disability studies researchers have thought about writing and communication. Critical disability studies researchers are often interested in how disability can change the way the world thinks we should speak or write. Critical disability studies researchers like Robert McRuer (2006), Joshua St. Pierre (2015, 2017), M. Remi Yergeau (2018), and Margaret Price (2011) often write about nondisabled people assuming that everyone should write or speak:

- clearly
- quickly
- in an order that makes sense to a lot of people
- so there is only one meaning, and
- efficiently, so that other people don't have to work to understand.

As I mentioned earlier, the world assumes people should write or speak in these ways because of capitalism. Capitalism teaches us to value speed and efficiency (Adam 2004, 64). For example, think of a factory. The factory owner wants to increase the speed of production and to eliminate any pauses in making the product. This is because if the factory can

produce more of the product in a shorter time, then the factory can make more money. Capitalism also teaches us that time needs to be linear and there should be a direct movement from past to present to future. This way of thinking about time is everywhere in Western culture. We want to be as efficient and direct as possible. But often disabled people are not efficient or direct.

St. Pierre (2015), Yergeau (2018), and Price (2011) all explain how disabled people's communication can be different from the ways people are generally expected to communicate. These differences between how disabled people communicate and how they're supposed to communicate can help us imagine how the world could be different. In particular, they help us imagine a world that is not about efficiency and directness. A world without efficiency and directness could be a better world for disabled people.

St. Pierre (2015, 2017) is a researcher who writes about stuttering and fluency. For him, **fluency** is a word that is related to the world's ideas about what is normal. Fluency is about time. Fluency is the smooth movement from the past to the present to the future at a pace that most people feel OK with (St. Pierre 2015). People who are fluent don't look like they're working hard when they speak. Fluency creates a singular meaning. Disabled people may have a hard time creating fluency. Sometimes disabled people speak at a speed that is not expected by other people. For example, someone who stutters speaks at an uneven pace. Or someone who types to speak will create long pauses in the conversation. Sometimes disabled people have to work really hard to make other people understand them. For St. Pierre (2017), **disfluency** is a word for the way people who speak with a lot of effort, or who speak at an unexpected speed, or whose words can mean a lot of different things force us to consider different ways of speaking and communicating from our usual, fluent ways. It's important to note that St. Pierre (2015) is talking

about speech, but I think what St. Pierre (2015, 2017) says is often true of writing as well.

Sometimes we value writing that takes time to read or has multiple meanings. But often we are taught to write in ways that will be quick to read and have one clear meaning. McRuer (2006) describes the university composition classroom as "intent on the production of order and efficiency" (151). Composition class is a class where students learn to write. McRuer means that university writing classes teach people to write in a very specific way that can be quickly and easily read. He also points out that:

> Composition theory has not yet recognized (or perhaps has censored the "imagined possibility") that the demand for certain kinds of finished projects in the writing classroom is congruent with the demand for certain kinds of bodies (2006, 158–159).

McRuer is saying that disabled people have a hard time producing the kind of writing that the people who write composition theory and teach composition class demand. This is similar to St. Pierre (2015, 2017) saying that disabled people have a hard time speaking in the ways the world expects them to. In both cases the world expects people to write and speak in ways that are easy and quick to understand.

Yergeau (2018) is a researcher who has written about autistic rhetoric. Autistic rhetoric includes the ways people write and talk about autistic people and how autistic people actually communicate. Yergeau writes about echolalia. Echolalia is the repetition of words and phrases. Yergeau says that the repetition of words and phrases is often not about the words and phrases themselves. The words and phrases are tools to communicate a wide range of feelings and meanings. Echolalia uses words or phrases to mean many different things. But the world doesn't value ways of speaking or writing that create multiple meanings.

If the way you communicate has multiple meanings or is confusing, then people will say you don't make sense. Price (2011, 26) also writes about teaching writing to university students. She points out that one of the ways the world recognizes people as people is to ask if they make sense. Making sense can mean communicating only one meaning. It can mean communicating with only the right amount of emotion. If a writing student doesn't make sense, then writing teachers might decide the student is disabled. But deciding a student is disabled doesn't mean that the teacher will make their classroom more accessible or try to help the student. Instead, the teacher might create more barriers. This is because if people don't make sense, the world is unkind to them.

St. Pierre (2015, 2017), McRuer (2006), Yergeau (2018), and Price (2011) all talk about how disabled people can't communicate the way the world expects them to. If people can't communicate the way the world expects them to, then they are discriminated against. This could mean that there might be more barriers to their finishing university, getting a job, and connecting with other people. So critical disability researchers want to make it OK for disabled people to communicate however they communicate. They want to make it more than OK. They want all the ways disabled people communicate to be respected.

In many ways plain language is the opposite of the kinds of communication St. Pierre (2015, 2017), McRuer (2006), Yergeau (2018), and Price (2011) are talking about. Using short sentences, lists, and the most common words possible are all ways of writing to make reading quick and easy. Using the most common words possible is also contrary to the ways disability communities have consistently reclaimed and reshaped language. In other chapters of this book, you might have read words like **crip** or **mad** or **neurodivergent**. The people who wrote those chapters used those words because they mean very specific things. But they also used them

because they are unfamiliar, or they are used in unfamiliar ways. They are meant to stop the reader. These words slow the reader and make them consider ways of understanding disability and the world that the reader has not previously considered. These words change the pace you read at, the same way St. Pierre (2015) says stuttering changes the pace you listen at. Plain language is all about being quick and direct and asking the reader to do as little work as possible.

Disability could change the world because it forces us to question our focus on speed and efficiency. I also kept thinking about the ways I had seen disability culture and disability activism be unfriendly to many disabled people because of the ways we ask people to read. If there is one thing I have learned from disability culture, it is that there is never one right way of being, doing, or communicating. Usually the best way to make things accessible is to have lots of different ways of communicating.

I think plain language documents should exist alongside complex text, much the same way we might make sound recordings of writing, caption videos, or have important information translated into our local sign language. Critical disability scholars need to think about how we write and who we write for. Is complex language the only way we can imagine new ways of thinking and being? Who do we exclude from new thinking about disability when we use big words and complicated sentences? I can be excited about the ways disabled people communicate that make me work to understand. And I can understand that for other people that can be a barrier. I don't want disability culture and activism to only be for some people; I want everyone to be welcome.

DISABILITY CULTURE PLAIN LANGUAGE

Beyond this, I want disabled people to claim and imagine plain language for ourselves. Nondisabled people don't agree on how to write plain language. So maybe disabled people can develop a version of plain language that is for disability communities.

When I was describing the history of plain language, I mentioned that some researchers want plain language to take a human-centered design approach where the people who will use the documents are involved in the creation of documents. Involving disabled people who need plain language in making plain language documents could lead to new ways of writing plain language. Developing new access tools and better ways of creating access is one of the things disabled people do best.

I think Luterman (2020, 3) is right that everyone should have access to what disabled people think about disability. Plain language shouldn't just be for making decisions about what to buy, what medical treatment you should have, or who to vote for. Those are important. But so are the ideas coming from disability culture. Everyone should be able to read writing that is about how incredible disabled people are. Everyone should be able to see or listen to art about the ways disabled people care for each other. Writing that celebrates and loves disabled people can make people much happier. It can be life-saving.

Plain language can be an important tool in sharing disability culture with everyone who needs it. Involving people who need plain language to understand disability culture and new ways of thinking about disability could help me, and other people, find a version of plain language that is for disability culture.

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