



Clear Language Description

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Introduction

As we move ever increasingly toward digital-exclusive scholarly communications and, in parallel, toward the expansion of Open Access research, clear language description of scholarly works becomes correspondingly necessary. Clear language writing, the most common form of which is often referred to as Plain Language Summaries (PLS), is just one of many strategies under the umbrella of Knowledge Mobilization (KMb). KmB refers to the translation of scholarly research, from methodologies to results, to broader lay audiences to increase the scale of impact beyond the academic sphere. Though elements of KmB are already required for most funded studies these days, Phipps et al. (2020) note that KmB is becoming a distinctly supported "research infrastructure" in its own right, with institutions like York University establishing entire units dedicated to mobilization activities. Funding bodies like SSHRC are now similarly requiring that KmB strategies be outlined in grant application packages so as to "strengthen the impact of publicly funded research on policy and practice across sectors" (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 2).

Though not always linked explicitly to KmB, or even to scholarly research, the Plain Language Movement has long been supported by information providers looking to expand their reach and a lay audience frustrated by obfuscating language (Stewart, 2010). The medical field in particular has a wealth of literature on strategies for communicating health research to patients, a pool that has only expanded with the onset of COVID-19 and the struggle to combat misinformation (Ferguson et al., 2021; Finlay & Wenitong, 2020; Sakhuja et al., 2021). The recent push by funders to communicate scholarly output to the masses raises new questions about best practices for research metadata and description across a wider range of disciplines.

A product of the Making Research Accessible Initiative (MRAi), a partnership between the University of British Columbia's Learning Exchange and Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, the Downtown Eastside Research Access Portal (DTES RAP) aims to bring research about Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood back to the community. Operating from a framework that prioritizes open access and community needs, the portal harvests digital repositories for research related to the DTES, and displays links to these objects alongside descriptive metadata. The inclusion of closed access titles for display in the portal, however, means that the porting of some abstracts or summaries from publisher websites to the RAP would violate copyright. The metadata gap created by these missing abstracts thus provides a valuable opportunity for the DTES RAP team to investigate an as-of-yet unexplored facet of accessibility: clear language description.

This paper explores promising practices in clear language writing and provides a practical guide for the creation of accessible descriptions for items in the DTES RAP. The guide is informed both by existing literature on the subject and consultation with peer researchers in the DTES community. Though this guide is primarily aimed at information "intermediaries", i.e., librarians, library students and other administrators provisioning access to information, the principles listed here can be adapted for most plain language use cases.

Literature Review

Defining "clear language"

Though this paper may employ the phrase "clear language" in order to emphasize the quality of accessibility over style, the concept is most commonly known as "plain language". These terms are hereafter used interchangeably. Though the modern plain language movement can be traced quite far back into the

20th century, perhaps even to George Orwell decrying political jargon in a 1946 essay (Schraver, 2017), the phrase "plain language" has encapsulated a variety of principles, often dependent on the discipline of the source. In an effort to combat any ambiguity, the International Plain Language Federation (IPLF) is working with the International Organization of Standardization to develop a plain language standard for publication in mid-2022 (International Plain Language Federation [IPLF], n.d.-a). The IPLF defines a communication as being in plain language if "its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information" (IPLF, n.d.-b).

The central phrase in IPLF's definition is "intended readers". Plain language is a flexible target that is defined by the communication's audience. In its *Canada.ca Content Style Guide*, the Government of Canada advises that authors trying to appeal to the general public should aim for no higher than an 8th grade literacy level (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020, Section 2.9). It further emphasizes that plain language versions of communications should neither oversimplify nor omit critical source material, but instead bolster access by highlighting only the most essential information without jargon. Other key Canadian and international organizations that have formed in support of the plain language movement cite similar definitions relative to audience (Clarity International, n.d.; IPLF, n.d.-b; Plain Language Association International [PLAIN], n.d.; Plain Language Action and Information Network [PLAIN-2], n.d.-a.).

It is also important to note with this definition that plain language is distinct from "easy language", which has its own connotations in the social sciences. Where plain language is tailored to its intended audience, even if that audience is a very generalized one, easy language is meant for a specific audience with low levels of literacy and/or who are accessing resources in a non-native language (Centre for

Inclusive Design, 2021). Though elements of this guide may be applicable in easy language contexts, it has been informed primarily by plain language conventions.

Whose responsibility?

It's not difficult to understand why plain language resources are so important. Beyond being a legal obligation in certain public contexts, the plain language movement is rooted in the ideal of an inclusive society where the knowledge sharers are proactive in facilitating access and the layperson is not expected to ask for translation.

In the landscape of scholarly publishing, whose responsibility is it then to enact this vision? For many publishers, the inclusion of a PLS is neither a publisher- nor journal-level requirement, but may exist as a voluntary option. SAGE Journals, for example, has recently announced a pilot run of a PLS add-on for a limited number of its Open Access titles (Keating & Conroy, 2022). It is worth noting that the PLS is not a replacement for usual abstracts, replete with academic and discipline-specific jargon, but an addition that authors must choose to write and append to the final paper (for an example of a paper with both its original abstract and a PLS, see Gaviria-Mendoza et al., 2022).

Merga (2021) speaks to the possibilities for publisher support in this area, sharing that some publishers may ask for content in different formats to accompany original research, including podcasts or video interviews, in order to disseminate the research more broadly via social media. Though this would still require extra labour from the researchers, the publisher would be playing a more active role in knowledge mobilization.

The scholars producing the research must also often contend with the professional requirements of their institution, which can make it difficult to

dedicate time to providing PLS for retrospective, or even new, work. With publishing quotas often being part of academic standards for tenure and promotion, alongside possible teaching, grant writing and committee obligations, it is no small demand to ask that researchers produce additional description for their output.

Cooper et al. (2018) recommend, in addition to imploring funders to offer direct KMb support, that universities and "intermediaries" be leveraged to maximize KMb efforts and to take some of the pressure off of researchers and/or other producers of knowledge. In their definition of intermediaries, Cooper et al. (2018, p. 17) include "governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and not-for-profits, and membership/network organizations". I would expand the scope of this call to libraries.

As the ones responsible for administration of institutional repositories and negotiations with publishers for access to eResources, it seems a natural jump to have KMb activities supported by librarians or other information professionals at universities and other research institutions. Though these departments may not have the capacity to be constantly producing research summaries in-house, librarians and library staff have established networks through which to reach out for collaborations. Hackathons, such as the one outlined later in this paper, are an increasingly common event hosted by libraries and one such way that they can tap into their networks in support of KMb.

Elements of plain language

As the ISO standard for plain language is forthcoming (as of February 2022), exact criteria for what constitutes plain language can vary across organizations, even within the same region. The Plain Language Association International (PLAIN), a non-profit incorporated in Canada and one of the three member organizations in

the International Plain Language Federation, identifies the following five areas of focus to consider when producing plain language communications: audience and purpose, structure, design, expression, and evaluation (PLAIN, n.d.). These five focus areas offer a structure for grouping individual recommendations:

Audience. As previously mentioned, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2020, Section 2.9) recommends an 8th-grade level of literacy or lower if aiming for a general audience. In distinguishing plain language from easy language, it is important to remember to tailor the text to the appropriate audience (National Institute for Health Research, 2021; NWT Literary Council, 2015; Translation Bureau, 2015, 13.02). Successful plain language writing does not mean communications should always be crafted for an elementary-level reader. Preliminary assessment of the average literacy skills of the intended audience can improve the overall impact of the text. Ferguson et al. (2021) suggest the Flesch Reading Ease Score, the SMOG Index, and the Readability Consensus Grade Level as three options for instruments to test readability. For authors trying to reach multiple audiences, each group should be addressed in distinct sections to avoid confusion, especially if they are being offered directives or recommendations.

Structure. The resounding consensus regarding plain language structure is that the most important information in a description should appear first (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-a; Skaggs, 2017; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2020, Section 2.1). Sentences and paragraphs should be concise and have logical flow (Center for Plain Language, n.d.). Extraneous details should be omitted; it is best to include only as much information as is necessary to adequately communicate the main points of the text. When describing scholarly research, a common framework is to address the five “Ws” (*who, what, where, when, why*) and *how* (Duke, 2012).

Design. Though not strictly related to language in the way that syntax or vocabulary are, design has significant impact on the accessibility of a text. A writer of a PLS may not have control over factors like font choice or text colour when creating descriptions for a publisher or existing repository, but the use of white space via headers or infographics is an important consideration. The Government of British Columbia (n.d.) notes that headings and lists not only help to break up long sections of text, but can simplify navigation for screen readers. In their *ResearchSnapshot* template developed for York University, Phipps et al. (2020) cover four common components of research papers—background, methods, results and practical applications—but employ plain language headers to clarify these sections (e.g., "What is this research about?"). Question headings like these mimic the potential questions to be posed from the audience, and can help readers to better identify with the material than vague, formal topic headings (PLAIN-2, n.d.-b). Formatted text, such as bolded, capitalized, or italicized text, should be used sparingly to avoid cluttering the summary and making it visually confusing.

Expression. The guides and best practices referenced in this paper unanimously recommend writing in an active voice. Passive construction can feel evasive, as if the subject or author is absent, and often requires extraneous words (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-b). One of the most, if not the most, critical aspect of plain language writing is to avoid jargon and opt for common language. Many domain-specific glossaries and thesauri have been developed to aid researchers in writing PLS, and can further aid intermediaries like librarians who may be providing third-party descriptions. A sampling of these subject thesauri is listed in Further Reading. The Quality Control Checklist from the freely accessible "PLS of Publications" toolkit created by Envision Pharma Group (n.d.) offers

additional guidance on numeracy literacy, including the recommendations to only use essential numbers and to always give meaning and context to any figures given.

Evaluation. Plain language efforts are necessarily informed by target audiences. How can a researcher know what "clear language" means, and build summaries striving for that ideal, without a proper understanding of the needs and literacy skills of the audience? Peer review by a non-expert can help researchers or intermediaries to adjust descriptions as appropriate. After attaining a better understanding of the audience's needs, publicly available tools for evaluating text can be used for final checks. In addition to readability tests like the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and the SMOG Index, the Government of British Columbia (n.d.-c) recommends the Hemingway Editor which draws attention to length constructions and complex vocabulary.

Inclusive description

Inclusive description is a burgeoning topic in the field of information studies, with harmful language statements and commitments to responsible access becoming commonplace features in digital repositories (for examples, see California Digital Library, n.d.; Simon Fraser University Library, 2021; Western University Library, n.d.). In this sort of statement, an institution may: (1) acknowledge the likelihood that users will encounter outdated or harmful language in collections (both in content and legacy metadata), (2) outline steps the institution is taking toward reparative description and responsible access, and (3) offer a venue or contact information for user feedback.

Clear language description is one of many such steps that an institution can take toward provisioning responsible access to materials. Though clear language or, particularly, "plain language" is commonly associated with complexity in grammar

or vocabulary, it is helpful to reflect on the root purpose for providing plain language text: making the content more accessible. If a text has been edited to offer a simple, clear structure and to eliminate jargon, but the language itself continues to prioritize and appeal only to readers with the most social privilege, has it really become accessible? "Inclusive" does not just mean legible; text that is offensive, promotes cultural stereotypes and/or reinforces exploitative power structures renders it inaccessible to marginalized communities.

A term need not be intentionally harmful to cause harm; the act of description is not neutral, and even when using the "plainest" of language, inherent bias affects output. To illustrate with an example from the Library of Congress Subject Authorities—there exists a heading for "Actresses—United States". The narrower terms for this heading are "African American actresses" and "Asian American actresses" (Library of Congress, n.d.). Though neither of these two narrower terms nor the broader heading may cause offense at first glance, the lack of a parallel term for white actresses implies that a racial qualifier for this group is unnecessary because the default race for "Actresses—United States" is white. The heading is further complicated by the question of why we need a gender-ascribing term for a professional title at all.

Recalling IPLF's (n.d.-b) definition of clear language, a communication is considered written in plain language if "its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information". Can an individual belonging to a marginalized community successfully access and utilize information when it is presented in language that reinforces their marginalized status?

These questions highlight the importance of appropriately identifying an audience for a clear language text and seeking feedback from that audience. Finlay

& Wenitong (2020) offer an example of this type of community-informed knowledge mobilization in their study on health communication and Indigenous and Pacific Islander communities. Having identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 but only given generic communication from governments, several Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations in Australia adapted materials to include the various communities' art, vernacular, and Indigenous languages. The modified materials also "reflected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's kinship structures by promoting self-isolation and good hygiene as a way of taking care of family and community" (Finlay & Wenitong, 2020, p. 1). The communications in this example were customized not only for clear language, but to include infographics and cultural elements that would better resonate with the intended audience.

Using the Downtown Eastside and the DTES RAP as a more local example, it is easy to come across phrases such as "contested inner city neighbourhood" or "infamous neighbourhood" in research about the area. While outdated and marginalizing terminology cannot usually be edited out of source material, appropriately written descriptions and metadata can mitigate some of the harm and stigma that this language creates. For researchers and third parties preparing research for public access, it is important to use language that is affirming of all communities, and particularly the one(s) on which the research focuses.

Practical Guide

The following pages combine promising practices from literature and practical documentation on clear language writing. The scope of this guide is limited to descriptions of scholarly research. Unlike "lay summaries" or "plain language summaries", which are increasingly common in STEM publishing, "descriptions" are defined here as much more concise, high-level synopses consisting of one or two paragraphs. This guide is crafted with information "intermediaries" in mind; these are third parties who write descriptions for research that they have not conducted themselves.

1. Audience

Identify your audience

The most important step to writing in clear language is to identify your audience. Without an understanding of who your audience is or how they read, it is difficult to make appropriate adjustments to vocabulary or sentence length. If you are writing for a general audience, aim for an 8th grade literacy level or lower.

Assess your writing's literacy level

Once you have identified your audience and prepared an initial draft of your writing, there are a few tools that you can use to assess your draft's readability. Microsoft Word has a built-in assessment tool. Microsoft 365 users can open the Editor pane from the Review tab, and then click the "Document stats" button under Insights at the bottom of the pane. Microsoft also offers instructions for accessing these tools on older versions of the software. If writing for a general audience, your Flesch Reading Ease score should be between 60 and 70, and your Flesch-Kincaid grade level should be no higher than 8.

If you don't have access to Microsoft software, the Government of British Columbia recommends the Hemingway App in their course on plain language. The Hemingway App is an in-browser review tool that flags things to avoid in your writing, including difficult sentences, adverbs, and passive verbs (see *Fig. 1*). It also calculates a readability score using the Automated Readability Index.

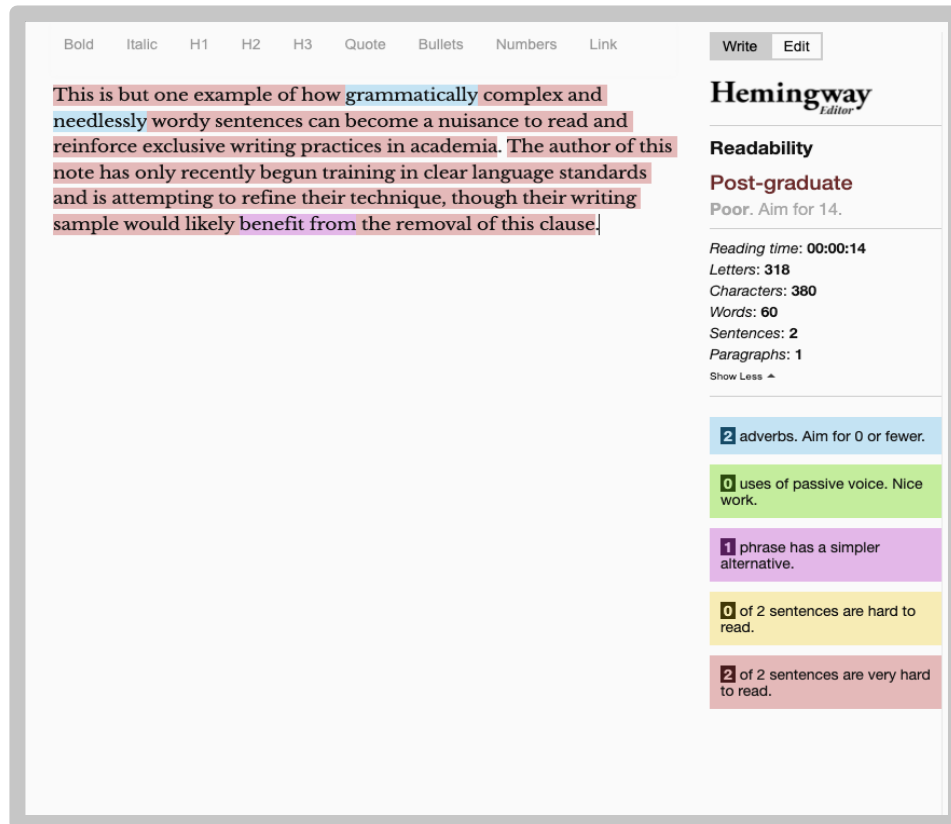


Figure 1: Sample text in the Hemingway App. The readability score and other alerts are displayed to the right of the writing sample.

Though the Hemingway editor offers a clean “writing mode”, it's best to use a different program to write, then copy and paste passages into Hemingway when ready for review. This prevents your work from being erased if the browser refreshes.

2. Structure

Important information first

Start your description with the most important information. Add context and necessary details in the sentences that follow but leave out anything extra that doesn't communicate the main point of your source material.

The five Ws (and H)

To describe scholarly research, it can help to address the five "Ws" (*who, what, when, where, why*) and *how*. This structure mimics the main sections of most studies (background, hypothesis, methods, results, discussion). In short descriptions of only one paragraph, you don't need to turn these questions into actual headers. This framework is simply meant to help you pare down your description to the basics.

For longer summaries that are a page or longer, you may want to consider using question-style headers. These tend to imitate readers' thoughts and help them to connect with the material more than vague title headers. The ResearchSnapshot developed at York University makes use of this "question header" format (Research Impact Canada, n.d.).

Sequential or chronological order

Depending on the nature of your source material, you may want to use a more sequential format. Ordered lists (i.e., alphanumeric bullet points) or transition words (e.g., next, then, second, finally) can help to guide your reader through the material in a set order.

3. Design

Design is less of a consideration for shorter forms of clear language writing. Description fields for a digital collection or research portal, for example, may not allow for rich-text editing and display.

However, it's worth noting the impact of design for clear language writing in general. Using blank space and lists can help to differentiate themes within your writing and is easier for readers to look at than a long chunk of text.

4. Expression

Sentences

Avoid long sentences with complex clauses. While short sentences are ideal, too many in a row can seem choppy, robotic, and difficult to follow. Vary sentence length where possible and try to keep it under 20 words. Each sentence should contain only one main idea.

Wordiness

Clear language descriptions serve a purpose. They strengthen the impact of the source material by ensuring the content reaches its intended audience. Certain expressions that we use in conversation or when writing prose may sound nice, but are distracting if used in a simple description. This includes phrases like “from time to time” instead of “sometimes”, or “as of late” instead of “lately”. Keep an eye out for these “filler phrases” that do not provide any new meaning or value to your description.



I studied for days **in order to** pass the test.

We bring the dog to the vet **on a daily basis**.

The students **made an effort** to speak up.



I studied for days to pass the test.

We bring the dog to the vet daily.

The students tried to speak up.

Verbs are critical to concise writing. When you proofread your writing, highlight any adverbs and determine whether they can be swapped for a stronger verb.

Strengthen your sentences by using the simplest form of a verb, rather than nouns formed from verbs.



put into legislation

make a mockery of

be fully prepared



legislate

mock

be prepared

Be careful with noun strings. Noun strings are clusters of three or more nouns to describe one entity. Though it may add length and prepositional phrases to your description, which is contrary to earlier advice, breaking up these nouns into more manageable portions will help to prevent confusion.



The Oral History Association Metadata Task Force created an **element set builder tool** to help project managers.



The task force on metadata from the Oral History Association created a new tool to help project managers build element sets.

Voice and tone

Use contractions! Contractions are when two words are shortened into a single construction with an apostrophe, like “don’t”, “shouldn’t”, and “they’re”. Many of us have been taught to avoid contractions in formal writing, but they can make research or technical pieces feel more approachable to readers.

Use active voice. Passive verbs flip the usual structure of a sentence and can make the subject difficult to find. Passive structure also adds unnecessary prepositions. You can usually identify passive verbs by the combination of the “be” verb with forms ending in “-ed” (e.g. was hired, are placed, is carried).



The sandwich **was eaten** by me.

My sister **was not** sure when the cat **was discovered** by the neighbours.

The test **must be taken** by every student.



I ate the sandwich.

My sister wasn’t sure when the neighbours discovered the cat.

Every student must take the test.

Don't use double negatives. A double negative usually occurs when "not" is paired with a verb that is already negative by nature. Double negatives cancel each other out and can be replaced with a single positive form of a verb. For example, a politician on the campaign trail may implore the public, "Do not abstain from voting!" However, "to abstain" already means "to decline to vote" or to restrain oneself from doing something. In this example, the politician could just as simply demand, "Vote!"

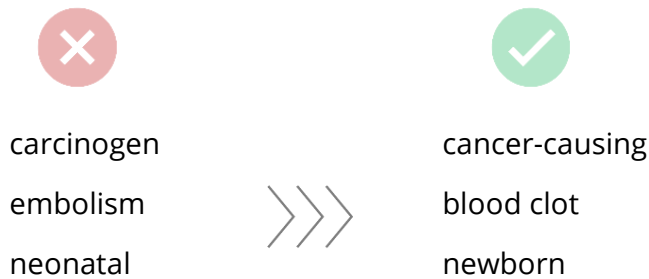
Vocabulary

One of the main features that makes scholarly research inaccessible to so many communities is academic language and discipline-specific jargon. Lay summaries that are author-supplied (i.e., "clear language" summaries written by the same authors as the source material) may still be inaccessible because it is difficult for experts to distinguish jargon in their own field from common understanding.

As you proofread your clear language descriptions, you may find it easy to swap out common phrases for simplified versions (e.g., "instead" for "in lieu of", or "live" for "reside"). The challenge comes in identifying alternatives for **discipline-specific jargon**, especially when that discipline is not your own.

In Further Reading at the end of this guide, there are links to various subject dictionaries and thesauri. These vocabulary lists span the legal, health, and financial sectors, and are the result of clear language efforts by professionals in these disciplines. As you write your own descriptions, you may wish to consult some of these resources.

Examples of alternatives to medical jargon from the U.S. Center for Disease Control's *Plain Language Thesaurus for Health Communications*:



Abbreviations and acronyms can be considered forms of jargon, as you often need background knowledge in a specific organization or subject area to understand them. If you must abbreviate a phrase (e.g., an organization with a long name that must be repeated throughout the description), ensure that you use the full form the first time it appears and that you display the abbreviated version clearly.

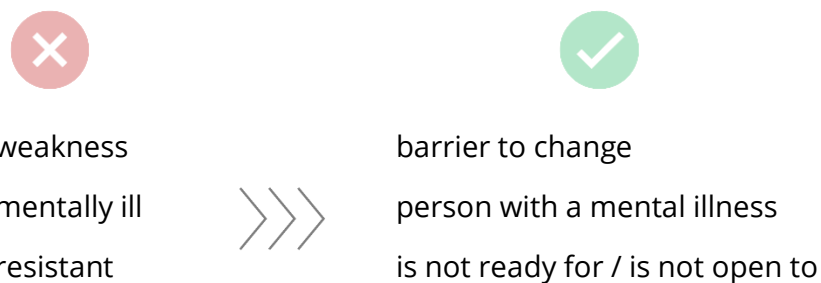
If you start your description with one term to describe a person, place, or thing, stick with that term for the rest of the paragraph. Don't switch back and forth between synonyms for that term. Particularly with writing samples as short as descriptions, it's best to be precise. If you begin by using the term "doctors," for example, don't switch to "medical professionals" or "physicians" unless you are introducing a broader or entirely different group.

5. Inclusion

Person-centred Language

Person-centred language, or PCL, is “language that puts people first rather than the disease, symptoms, or conditions that they may have” (Ontario Centres for Learning, Research & Innovation in Long-Term Care & Behavioural Supports Ontario, 2020). Language has a profound impact on how the people around us perceive each other and in health research settings, the use of PCL can reduce stigma surrounding people living with medical conditions.

Much of PCL is strengths-based, meaning that it focuses on people’s abilities rather than potential deficits. Hyams et al. (2018) offer the following examples of how one can shift some common phrases towards PCL :



Though an important part of PCL is changing the actual structure of a phrase to put the person first (e.g. “person with a substance use disorder”), it is not the only form. Deficits-based language tends to heavily depersonalize an individual with phrases like “addict” or “junkie”, in addition to an over-focus in subsequent description on past difficulties or symptoms. To reframe communications in PCL, Hyams et al. (2018) recommend focusing instead on a person’s capacity for change.

Community considerations

Page 10 of this paper provided some examples of stigmatizing language that can appear in research, such as “infamous neighbourhood”. The best approach for ensuring that you are using terminology that is preferred by the community you are researching or describing is asking community members directly!

Focus groups can provide a valuable space for community members to provide feedback on preferred language **and** structure. After reviewing sample descriptions for the DTES RAP, focus group participants from the Downtown Eastside community shared that they found definitions built into the actual description field helpful for contextualizing the research, and were thus much more likely to read the full paper.

Another way to search for preferred terms is to look for reports on community-based cataloguing and archival description practices. **Further Reading** at the end of this Guide offers a list of several of these guiding documents.

The next section will cover evaluation of your writing. When you are completing your review, it is important to keep an eye out for any duplication of possibly harmful language from the source material. It is difficult to change material that has already been published, but the benefit of clear language descriptions and summaries is that can mitigate some of the potential harm by using more accessible language.

6. Evaluation

The final step in clear language writing is to evaluate your own work and to have it evaluated by peers, or preferably members of your intended audience. They will ultimately be the authority on whether your communication achieves its goal of being “clear”.

In addition to community and peer review, there are some self-assessment checklists that you can consult online to assess your writing. These checklists are linked in the Further Reading section at the end of this paper.

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Further Reading

Inclusive Description & Metadata Resources

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Self-Assessment Checklists

- Government of BC: [Plain Language Checklist](#)
- PLAIN: [Checklist for Plain Language](#)

Thesauri & Clear Language Dictionaries

General

- [Thesaurus.com](#)
- Plain English Campaign: [The A to Z of Alternative Words](#)

Financial

- Write NZ: [Financial jargon buster](#) (email required)

Legal

- RocketLawyer: [Plain Language Legal Dictionary](#)
- Write NZ: [Legal jargon buster](#) (email required)

Medical

- CDC: [Plain Language Thesaurus for Health Communications](#)
- University of Michigan Library: [Plain Language Medical Dictionary](#)
- NIHR Involve: [Jargon buster](#)
- Write NZ: [Medical jargon buster](#) (email required)