

9-20-2016

# My Website Reads at an Eighth Grade Level: Why Plain Language Benefits Your Users (and You)

Danielle Skaggs

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, [dskaggs@wcupa.edu](mailto:dskaggs@wcupa.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/lib\\_facpub](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/lib_facpub)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Skaggs, D. (2016). My Website Reads at an Eighth Grade Level: Why Plain Language Benefits Your Users (and You). *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning*, 1-10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1533290X.2016.1226581>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact [wccressler@wcupa.edu](mailto:wccressler@wcupa.edu).

My Website Reads at an Eighth Grade Level:  
Why Plain Language Benefits Your Users (and You)  
Danielle Skaggs  
West Chester University

Writing in plain language aims to help users find what they need and ensures that the information is both useful and understandable. This is key for distance students whose primary library interaction may be with the library website. A mix of user research and readability scores can be used to measure whether content is findable, useful, and understandable. There are several strategies authors can adopt to help them write in plain language, including keeping the users' needs and tasks in mind and structuring the content so that it can be quickly scanned. Converting existing website content to a plain language format can be a large task; running a content audit can help determine which pages should be prioritized for revision. Once the website is written in plain language, an ongoing content strategy is necessary to help it stay that way.

As library resources have gone increasingly online, the library website has gained importance. It's where library users are encouraged to go to get high quality sources, where librarians have poured out their knowledge in subject guides, and where library policies are kept. Online interaction is becoming the main type of interaction that users have with the library. This has certainly been true for distance students who often do not have the option to come in to the library but it is increasingly true even for on-campus users. They find it easier to stay in their office or dorm room, or even to stay upstairs in their study room while they text or chat with the librarian downstairs at the reference desk.

The growth of usability testing for library websites reflects the increased importance of the library website for interactions with the library community. Running a usability test on the homepage to clear out jargon and increase the navigability for users has become increasingly common; there is now even an established list of jargon to avoid based on a compilation of these studies (Kupersmith, 2012). However, much of the focus of these usability tests has been on "navigation, search, and findability" of the website itself (Schmidt & Etches, 2014, p. 103). The usability of the content itself is usually not tested, as "content planning, development, and management" are not as robust in most libraries (Schmidt & Etches, 2014, p. 103).

The problem with not focusing on the usability and understandability of the content on library websites comes from two common behaviors of web users. The first is that "people are often on a mission when they're using the web" (Schmidt & Etches, 2014, p. 107). A study of traditionally college-aged students found that the web is often a tool they are using to accomplish their goals, not the end in itself (Nielsen, 2010). The second common behavior is that most people decide whether a page is going to be useful for accomplishing their goal after 10 seconds or less of scanning the page (Nielsen, 2011b). If libraries are not designing their content with

these two behaviors in mind, library users may become frustrated and leave. Enough frustrating experiences, and the library's usage and perceived relevance can drop.

One method to help counteract these problems is to adopt plain language throughout your website. Plain language focuses on understanding and writing for the user's goals, making content easily scannable for the user, and writing in easy to understand sentences. All three of these aspects help library users when they are on a mission and increase the likelihood that they will find the content they need.

### **What is Plain Language?**

The United States government defines plain language as "communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it" (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.-e). The government definition is helpful since the modern plain language movement began with efforts to improve government information, particularly regulations and consumer information, culminating in the passage of the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.-b; Locke, 2004).

There is no simple test for determining whether a website's content consists of plain language based on this definition, in part since it depends on what audience is being measured. The government provides a three-part question to determine if content is written in plain language. Can users from the specified audience "find what they need; understand what they find; and use what they find to meet their needs?" (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.-e)

### **Measuring Plain Language**

One way to assess whether website content is meeting plain language requirements is to conduct usability testing focused on the website content, instead of focusing on navigation or labels. To get started with this type of testing, determine tasks for a particular audience through user surveys, the development of personas, or a combination of the two. Then test these tasks, particularly those that involve choices based on text. For example, if an institution has more than one type of interlibrary loan and there's a page describing which type to use, give the user an interlibrary loan task and start them on that page. If they are able to choose the correct type of interlibrary loan service, the content is successful at guiding users.

Another assessment method is to use Cloze testing, which tests a user's reading comprehension of the page being analyzed (Nielsen, 2011a). To conduct a Cloze test, take a web page, copy it into a document (as in Figure 1), and replace every 6th word with a blank space for the user to fill in (as in Figure 2). Every 6<sup>th</sup> word replaced is a good standard to start with but this ratio can change based on the content; increasing the number of words between blanks makes it easier to fill out. The document is then given to one or more users, who fill in the blanks with their best guess as to what word should be there. To score the test, calculate the percentage of blanks filled in correctly (count synonyms as correct answers). Pages with a score of 60% or above are generally considered well-written. While this doesn't answer all three questions that go

into determining plain language, it does answer whether users are able to understand what they find on the website.

## Who is Considered a Distance Student?

The WCU Libraries define distance students as students who:

- take all of their classes online -or-
- take all of their classes at [WCU in Philadelphia](#) -or-
- take all of their classes at the [Graduate Center](#) -or-
- take a combination of online classes, classes at WCU in Philadelphia, and classes at the Graduate Center.

Non-distance students may find the information in this guide useful for accessing resources while off-campus, but they will not be able to request books be mailed to their home.

Figure 1. Sample text from a webpage put into a document to be used for Cloze testing.

## Who is Considered a Distance \_\_\_\_\_ ?

The WCU Libraries define distance \_\_\_\_\_ as students who:

- take all \_\_\_\_\_ their classes online -or-
- take \_\_\_\_\_ of their classes at [WCU in Philadelphia](#) - \_\_\_\_\_ -
- take all of their classes \_\_\_\_\_ the [Graduate Center](#) -or-
- take \_\_\_\_\_ combination of online classes, classes \_\_\_\_\_ WCU in Philadelphia, and classes \_\_\_\_\_ the Graduate Center.

Non-distance \_\_\_\_\_ may find the information in \_\_\_\_\_ guide useful for accessing resources \_\_\_\_\_ off-campus, but they will \_\_\_\_\_ be able to request books \_\_\_\_\_ mailed to their home.

Figure 2. Every 6<sup>th</sup> word removed to create the Cloze test.

While user testing is central to the assessment of plain language, readability scores are another method that can help determine whether a website uses plain language. These scores provide a quantified measure of how easy or hard it is to read the content being assessed. An easily-accessible readability score is the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, which Microsoft Word provides as part of the statistics shown at the end of the spellcheck process (see Figure 3). Using this readability score is a relatively easy way to improve your content (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2013b); however, this option within Microsoft Word must be turned on (“How to Use Word’s Readability Score to Improve Your Writing,” 2011). The higher the grade level, the more education the reader needs to understand the content. The text that generated Figure 3 was not very readable, requiring readers to have 17.1 years of education (the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree plus one year of graduate work). In general, a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 8

is recommended for lower literacy users (Nielsen, 2005). While academic library websites are aimed at users with a higher level of literacy, aim for a Flesh-Kincaid Grade Level lower than that of the expected user. While college students generally have a high literacy level, when they are reading on the web, they “prefer to scan” and aiming for a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level lower than that of the expected audience (such as 10 or 11) increases their ability to successfully scan for the right information (Nielsen, 2010).

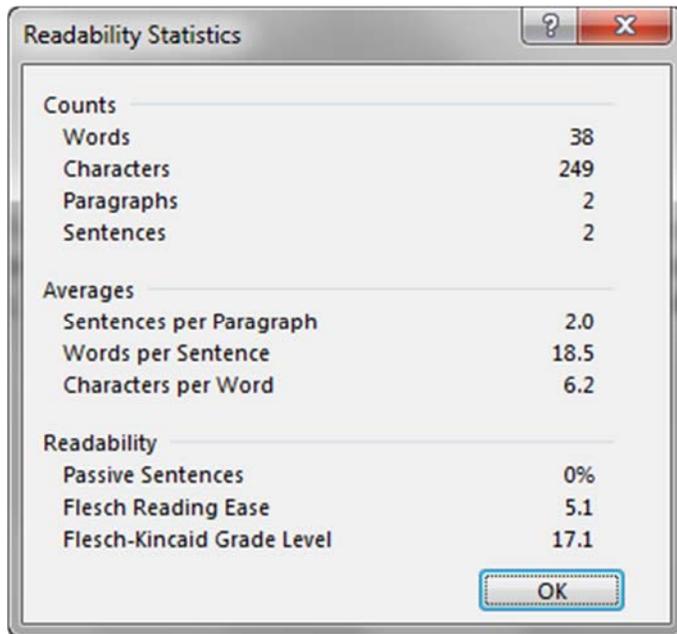


Figure 3. Readability statistics presented at the end of Microsoft Word’s spellcheck.

### Strategies for Writing Plain Language

Guides for writing in plain language, sometimes called writing for the web, are numerous (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2013b; Nielsen, 1997; Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.-a, n.d.-d; “Write better,” n.d.). The following guidelines are based on the advice common to all of these sources.

#### Write for the User

Make sure that text on the page helps users carry out the tasks they need to accomplish. Personas, mentioned briefly earlier, can help with understanding what tasks your users want to accomplish. Calabria (2004) outlines the process from a general user experience perspective while Tempelman-Kluit & Pearce (2014) provide a process based on analysis of chat reference transcripts.

Content should also be written simply and addressed directly to the user. This means using active voice and the present tense as a general rule. Address the reader as “you” and use a conversational tone. The reading level of the text should be appropriate for that of the user; a page for high school outreach should have a lower reading level than that designed for faculty. As an example of what plain language looks like in practice, compare Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4

provides an example that is not focused on the user, while Figure 5 presents a possible revision of the content to address plain language requirements.

**NOTE: Libraries engaged in borrowing materials nationally and internationally are subject to protocols which preclude the borrowing and lending of the following materials:**

- **Textbooks required for current WCU courses**
- **Books published within the last 12 months**
- **Certain video, CD, DVD and microfiche/microfilm materials**
- **Certain dissertations/theses**

Figure 4. Language is not addressed to the user or to the task the user is trying to accomplish.

### **Are there restrictions on what I can request through ILL?**

In general, we can't get you:

- Textbooks required for current WCU courses
- Books published within the last 12 months
- Certain video, CD, DVD, and microfiche/microfilm materials
- Certain dissertations/theses

Figure 5. Text from Figure 4 has been rewritten to address the user and a heading to improve scannability has been added.

## **Provide Useful Headings and Links**

Headings help break up the page into chunks of information, and users often scan headings to see if the information following will help them accomplish their task. Writing headings that correspond to user tasks and/or questions improves the ability of users to find the information they need. One improvement made from Figure 4 to Figure 5 is the addition of a heading addressing a potential user question.

When writing link text, similar treatment applies. The text of the link itself should provide a clear indication of what content will be found on the page to which the user will be taken. This not only helps users navigate to other parts of the website, it also increases the accessibility of the website for screen reader users. These users can navigate from link to link, and descriptive links are for more helpful to this group of users than links such as “click here.” Ideally, the link text will match the title of the page to which it leads; however, if that title has not yet been written in plain language, it might be better to provide a concise description as the link text.

## **Avoid Jargon**

The text of the page should be free of jargon, including the library-specific jargon identified in previous usability studies (Kupersmith, 2012). Avoiding jargon also includes eliminating unnecessarily complicated terminology. For example, if a user needs to do something, avoid using *shall* in the text and instead use *must* to indicate that the action is required.

### **Put the Most Important Information First**

Since users are likely scanning the page, put the most important information at the top of the page. Journalism has depended on this style of structuring information, called the inverted pyramid, for years. This limits the amount of work the user has to do to find that important information, and also ensures that the user finds it before giving up on the page. Deciding on what information is the most important for users may be clear to the page authors, but if it is not, user research may be necessary.

If the information on a page is of relatively equal importance, it may be useful to organize the information in logical order instead. For example, if the page details how to sign up for an account, presenting the information in order of what the user needs to do makes sense.

### **Be Concise**

Library websites often reflect the desire to provide knowledge about all potential problems or approaches a user might need to know. However, a study of how users read on the web found that reducing the text of a web page by half increased the usability of the web page by 58% (Nielsen, 1997). This might be because it is easier for users to scan shorter blocks of text. A crucial step in writing in plain language is to be concise.

Beyond paring down excess words in a sentence, consider paring down content as well. Include only the content that the user needs; don't provide information for every contingency the user might encounter or any task the user might want to do. The top half of Figure 6 is an example of trying to provide the user with information on all of the options that are available, while the bottom half demonstrates how to only provide the information that the user needs.

### **Reference Services for Alumni:**

As part of the University Library's mission to assist researchers with their questions regarding the collections, resources and services of the University of Michigan libraries, U-M alumni are encouraged to contact the [various reference service desks](#) for assistance, either in person, via phone, via email, or via instant message. University Library reference staff and subject specialists are happy to help you use our collections and resources. Just [Ask a Librarian!](#) If you need assistance with your research, please feel free to browse the library's [subject-based guides](#).

### **Can Alumni use Reference Services?**

*-Yes. See [Ask a Librarian](#) service page for options.*

*Figure 6. Example of rewriting for conciseness and writing for the user; before (top) and after (bottom). Chapman, S. (2014). *Lightning Talk at ConFabEDU*. Retrieved from <http://confabevents.com/downloads/slides/higher-ed-2014/chapman.pdf>*

Try to avoid large blocks of text. Rearranging information into lists and tables can help break up large amounts of text, and also serves to improve the scannability of the page. Lists and tables also help incorporate white space into the page; incorporate white space into the page design as a way to provide visual breaks between chunks of content. Headings help provide white space as well.

### **Implementing Plain Language for an Existing Website**

Implementing the guidelines for writing plain language when composing a new web page are relatively straightforward. How should the much larger task of reviewing and revising an existing website to use plain language be tackled? One key idea to take from the government's tips are to aim for continuous improvement (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.-c). Having a plan for improvement and goals are necessary, but it may take time to get the various stakeholders on board with plain language. Part of getting stakeholders on board is to provide training on what plain language is and how to write in plain language.

Continuous improvement applies not only to the entire site, but can also be mirrored in the approach to individual pages. Instead of attempting to start over fresh for each page, instead take multiple passes at reviewing the content; tackle one strategy for writing in plain language on each pass (Schmidt & Etches, 2014).

### **Conduct a Content Audit to Assess What Currently Exists**

The first step of the project to rewrite the website in plain language should be to gather information about what content already exists. This provides an idea of the scope of the project and can shape the strategy or timeline for the project. The content audit is the primary methodology for determining what content exists. A content audit is an inventory of all content on the website, including linked documents that can be downloaded. In the content audit, each piece of content (webpage, PDF, audio or video file) is assigned a unique ID, and then quantitative data about the content is gathered such as the content name and URL. Additional types of quantitative data you may want to collect are provided on the usability.gov website (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2013a).

Making qualitative assessments as to each piece of content's usability and importance is a valuable part of the content audit process that can help with prioritization. Schmidt & Etches (2014) recommend rating each piece of content on how "useful to members" and "useful to library" it is (p. 105). Content that is highly useful to either members or the library can be prioritized in the project timeline. Assessing the estimated level of work to rewrite the page in plain language would be an additional piece of useful information to gather, since it would help with project timeline estimates. Adding website analytics such as page visits for each piece of content is also useful.

### **Decrease the Number of Web Pages**

After conducting the content audit, the amount of content contained by the website may be surprisingly large. At this point, considering whether the library has the resources to properly maintain this content may be necessary. A balance may need to be struck between what users want and need to accomplish on the site, what the library needs to have on the site, and the size of the site that can be improved and maintained with existing resources. If the website's size is reduced, more attention can be paid to improving the remaining content (Schmidt & Etches, 2014).

Having website analytics included in the content audit can help at this stage of the process. If a piece of content has extremely low traffic and hasn't been rated highly useful, it could be considered for complete removal from the website. If cutting content isn't a possibility, content with low traffic and low usefulness could be moved to the end of the project timeline while the initial phase of the project focuses on higher traffic and highly useful content.

### **Maintain Plain Language on the Website Using Content Strategy**

Once plain language has been implemented on the website, there still needs to be a strategy for keeping new content and revised content written in plain language. Content strategy

is a growing discipline devoted to the “creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable content” (Halvorson, 2011, p. 23). At this point in the plain language implementation, several aspects of content strategy, such as a content audit to understand the scope and state of existing content and rewriting existing content to better serve users, have already been undertaken. Now the need is to plan for reviewing new and revised content, ensuring that the website continues to be written in plain language.

There are a number of resources devoted to understanding and implementing content strategy (Halvorson, Rach, & Cancilla, 2012; Kissane, 2011; McGrane, 2012), and a growing body of work within librarianship on the topic. One key question to answer as content strategy is implemented is who will be responsible for oversight and governance; Earley (2010) outlines a strategy for determining who to include on the library’s governance committee or team. For an in-depth example of how to implement content strategy at a library, Blakiston (Blakiston, 2013) describes the University of Arizona Libraries implementation of content strategy.

## **Conclusion**

Advocating for plain language means advocating for paying as much attention to the content of library websites as is paid to the usability of website navigation and labels. Many libraries are adopting a user-centered focus; writing in plain language extends this focus to website content. Writing in plain language requires authors to shift their focus from providing extremely comprehensive content to providing findable and useful content as defined by users (instead of librarians).

This shift to writing in plain language is necessary for libraries. Library users are no longer as dependent on academic libraries to find resources, and they bring expectations for how the web should act to the library website. Adapting the library website to what is known about the online behavior of users is necessary to keep the user’s experience positive, particularly when the website is the user’s first line of contact with the library. Libraries already are known for providing credible information; being known for providing findable, useful, and comprehensible content could help libraries compete against other online resources.

## References

- Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs. (2013a). Content inventory. Retrieved from <http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/content-inventory.html>
- Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs. (2013b). Writing for the web. Retrieved from <http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/writing-for-the-web.html>
- Blakiston, R. (2013). Developing a content strategy for an academic library website. *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship*, 25(3), 175–191.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/1941126X.2013.813295>
- Calabria, T. (2004). An introduction to personas and how to create them. Retrieved from [http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/kmc\\_personas/](http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/kmc_personas/)
- Earley, S. (2010). Developing a content maintenance and governance strategy. *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, 37(2), 29–32.  
<http://doi.org/10.1002/bult.2011.1720370210>
- Halvorson, K. (2011). Understanding the discipline of web content strategy. *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 37(2), 23–25.  
<http://doi.org/10.1002/bult.2011.1720370208>
- Halvorson, K., Rach, M., & Cancilla, S. (2012). *Content strategy for the web*. Berkeley: New Riders.
- How to use Word's readability score to improve your writing. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.dorisandbertie.com/goodcopybadcopy/2011/06/02/how-to-use-readability-score/>
- Kissane, E. (2011). *The elements of content strategy*. New York: A Book Apart.
- Kupersmith, J. (2012). Library terms that users understand. *eScholarship*. Retrieved from <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3qq499w7>
- Locke, J. (2004). A history of plain language in the US Government. Retrieved from <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whatisPL/history/locke.cfm>
- McGrane, K. (2012). *Content strategy for mobile*. New York: A Book Apart.
- Nielsen, J. (1997). How users read on the web. Retrieved from <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web/>
- Nielsen, J. (2005). Lower-literacy users: Writing for a broad consumer audience. Retrieved from <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/writing-for-lower-literacy-users/>

- Nielsen, J. (2010). College students on the web. Retrieved from <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/college-students-on-the-web/>
- Nielsen, J. (2011a). Cloze test for reading comprehension. Retrieved from <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/cloze-test-reading-comprehension/>
- Nielsen, J. (2011b). How long do users stay on webpages? Retrieved from <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-long-do-users-stay-on-web-pages/>
- Plain Language Action and Information Network. (n.d.-a). Document checklist for plain language on the web. Retrieved from <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/weblist.cfm>
- Plain Language Action and Information Network. (n.d.-b). Government Mandates. Retrieved from <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whatisPL/govmandates/index.cfm>
- Plain Language Action and Information Network. (n.d.-c). Starting a plain language program. Retrieved from <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/tipsforstarting/index.cfm>
- Plain Language Action and Information Network. (n.d.-d). Use plain-language techniques on the web. Retrieved from <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/webTechniques.cfm>
- Plain Language Action and Information Network. (n.d.-e). What is plain language? Retrieved from <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whatisPL/index.cfm>
- Schmidt, A., & Etches, A. (2014). Online presence. In *Useful, usable, desirable: Applying user experience design to your library*. Chicago: Amer Library Assn Editions.
- Tempelman-Kluit, N., & Pearce, A. (2014). Invoking the user from data to design. *College & Research Libraries*, 75(5), 616–640. <http://doi.org/10.5860/crl.75.5.616>
- Write better. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/5-steps-to-plain-language/>