

On Incorporating Plain Language

Plain words, plain concepts, simple layout, clean designs. That is a recipe for simple, beautiful writing. However, a few studies found that:

- People who write using complicated words and text styles are considered less intelligent than people who write in plain language. The problem isn't with long words; it's about using long words unnecessarily, according to the author of the study.¹
- A standard Veterans Administration form rewritten in plain language resulted in 1000 fewer phone calls a year to their office (200 instead of 1200).²
- You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. This is true with applying plain language strategies. A Canadian study showed that although people trained in using plain language incorporated some of the principles in their writing, they didn't apply plain language strategies overall.³

Some excuses for not writing in plain language:

1. My audience is smart; they don't need plain language.
2. People know what I mean without having to write it plainly.
3. It makes me look like a poor writer.

Please read this passage from choreographer Twyla Tharp's book *The Creative Habit*:

“The only bad thing about having a good creative day is that it ends, and there's no guarantee we can repeat it tomorrow. One good day does not necessarily beget another. But there are ways to increase the chances of successive successes.

Ernest Hemingway had the nifty trick of always calling it a day at the point when he knew what came next. He built himself a bridge to the next day. I cannot think of a better creative organizational tool. The Hemingway bridge is how you extend a mini-groove.

I try to do a variation on this bridge. I always quit for the day before everyone's totally exhausted. I stop when there's still some energy left in the room and I know where we would have gone if we hadn't stopped. Knowing what comes next is like crocheting: The end of one day knits into the next, and you wind up with a garment that is flexible but strong.”

This passage tests at a 8th to 9th grade reading level. It is easy to understand and beautifully written. Plain language is a tool for success. With it, you can build a bridge that not only connects people, cultures, and concepts, but also allows for successive successes.

¹ ScienceDaily. *The Secret of Impressive Writing? Keep It Plain and Simple*. Nov. 1, 2005.

² Stephen Barr. *A Push for Plain English*. Washington Post, Oct. 29, 2007.

³ NWT Literacy Council. *Putting Plain Language Into Practice*. May 2004.