Professional Development & Enrichment Newsletter
for plain language professionals

plainlanguage **Wizardry**
Cheryl Stephens

Brain science & clarity

One of my reasons for launching this newsletter is that I want to share new ideas and new resources. My research preoccupation in recent years has been in cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

Many new tools became available for research of the brain in the 30 years that I have studied clear communication. Their first uses were to understand brain injuries or disease; then, how to treat those.

The interest in developing artificial intelligence required understanding how the human brain works. So researchers turned to this also. And in recent years, these tools are used to study language use and acquisition.

We now know the steps of the reading process and how to facilitate understanding. Research shows the less work audiences need to put into reading, the more they will find sources credible, and the better they will connect with the messages.

Readers balance effort required with information gained to decide how they feel about the messenger and whether the message is credible and trustworthy.

I will elaborate on the research in coming issues.

[Check my wearable products that show people you love plain language](#)

clear
simple
+ human
good writing

Clarity 2022 in Tokyo: Achieving understanding and cooperation through communicating

The Japan Plain English & Language Consortium will host Clarity 2022 in Tokyo, Japan.

The theme will be **With Clarity and Fairness**: the impact of plain language on law, business and society.

[A call for papers will be issued in mid-2021.](#)

We memorize experiences and our process for making decisions

Our memories guide our present actions. They provide us with shortcuts to decisions and actions. Writers should appeal to the reader's past experience to aid comprehension and assist the reader to act appropriately.

Our brain replays tasks and decision sequences to train itself to

∗Better solve similar tasks in the future,

∗Record decision-making strategies.

∗Analyze cost and risk compared to potential benefit.

This starts when the brain decides whether to put in the effort apparently required to read and use the information.

Long-term memories connect to high-level cognitive processes. These bonds create long-lasting traces that allow us to access and recall information, with the help of memory cues.

Memory-making starts in neurons, develops in working memory (where decision-making processes begin), and moves on to memory storage for the long term—unless the decisions is to discard it. scientificamerican.com/article/our-brain-uses-a-not-so-instant-replay-to-make-decisions/

Composition studies classics

In the *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, David Crystal defines register as "a variety of language defined according to its use in social situations, e.g. a register of scientific, religious, formal English.'

In linguistics, a register is a variety of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting determined by such factors as social occasion, purpose, and audience.

The 2 registers suitable to plain language:

Consultative: Two-way participation; background information is provided – prior knowledge is not assumed. Examples include teacher/student, doctor/patient, expert/apprentice, etc.

Casual: In-group friends and acquaintances; no background information provided; ellipsis and slang common; interruptions common. This is common among friends in a social setting.

More: Dr Sarah Eaton at University of Calgary, blog: *Why you can't write an academic paper in gangsta slang.* https://tinyurl.com/SEatonGangsta

Usage or register — using words and structure to convey subtle messages.

Chart adapted from American linguist Martin Joos, showing language varieties according to use.

Register	Definition	Usage examples
Frozen	Language that never changes	Wedding vows, Miranda rights
Formal	Standard English	Speeches, school lessons
Consultative	Less formal standard English	News reports, workplace
Casual	Language between friends	Loose sentence structure, vernacular speech
Intimate	Language between close family and friends	Pet names, inside jokes

Click to buy

Plain Language in Plain English

Trainer Tips

The Plain Train online in French and English.

History, background, and Training Manual explained by Iva Cheung.
www.ivacheung.com/2014/03/plain-language-clear-and-simple/

The Plain Train can supplement your in-person or online training event. Ask participants to view the online program before your session or a week later to refresh the lessons and learning. strengthen the memories and learning.

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Word Frequencies: How to tell if a word is common or familiar to readers

"Use familiar words."

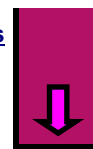How can you know if a word is familiar to everyone or just to people in your neighborhood?

Check the dictionary and thesaurus to make sure the word is apt and the most obvious choice for the particular use—and reflects the meaning in context.

And check a databank or listing to see if the word is one of the most frequently-used 5,000 words.

Read more: **Writing for everyday: What to do instead of readability scores/Write for everybody: What to do instead of chasing grade levels**

skritswap.com/use-familiar-language/

Word Frequency

Google Books Ngram Viewer
Check Google's Ngram to compare that word to other candidates for use.
The GitHub list is 10,000 most common English words in order of frequency, as determined by Ngram frequency analysis of the Google's Trillion Word Corpus." https://github.com/first20hours/google-10000-English

Canadian Newstand
Canadian Newsstand™ has the full text of nearly 300 Canadian newspapers, including their articles, columns, editorials, and features, as far back as the 1970s. Subscription is required; may be available through your library. It is also available through the ProQuest® web interface.

Word Frequency Lists
https://www.wordfrequency.info/free.asp
(pdf files) Use your search to check whether a word is in the top 5,000 or top 10,000 words according to frequency of use.

iWeb corpus - English-Corpora.org - BYU
https://corpus.byu.edu/iweb/help/iweb_overview.pdf

The **News On The Web (NOW** corpus)
14 billion words from spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts since 2010. A new feature, virtual corpora, lets you create interest-area collections of texts. (PDF overview at https://corpus.byu.edu/iweb/help/iweb_overview.pdf)

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Cheryl M. Stephens produces this newsletter. She could not do this without the general encouragement and support of Allen H. Soroka, so he gets a spot on this masthead.

Nameplate designed by Flora Gordon

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What is Universal Design?

According to [Ron Mace at the Center for Universal Design of North Carolina State University:](#)

Universal design is about designing anything and everything to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. It removes the need for affordances for particular readers.

The intent behind universal design is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more accessible and usable by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

[Read the history of this movement now.](#)

Cheryl's training events

Keep it simple: scientific support for plain language

ACES: The Society for Editing
January 14, 4 pm Eastern

Register: https://aces.memberclicks.net/keepitsimplelms#/

Keep it simple: the scientific support for plain language

Plain Language ACADEMY

**Plain Language
Academy Course
A4: 4 week online, self-paced**

Register for February course
https://tinyurl.com/PLScience2021

Principle 3 of Universal Design

Universal Design prefers language that is simple and works for the most people regardless of their experience, knowledge, language skills,, or current concentration level:

3a. Eliminate unnecessary complexity.

3b. Be consistent with user expectations and intuition.

3c. Accommodate a wide range of literacy and language skills.

3d. Arrange information consistent with its importance.

3e. Provide effective prompting.

Universal design has been applied to produce things that are:

⇒ accessible to nearly all potential users without modifications,

⇒ easily adapted to different needs,

⇒ standardized interfaces that can be used with available assistive technology

pushing the envelope

RESPONSE REQUIRED

Dear Reader:

My plan is to publish 10 newsletters over 12 months. I would like to hear from you about what you would like to see in the newsletter. What information would make it worth your time and money? Reach me at
email@cherylstephens.com

Cheryl Stephens