

Plain English Proposal

Brittnee Alford
PRWR 621
Dr. Lillywhite
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Introduction

Explanation of Issue

I understand that you, as the Towson University Director of Freshman Writing, will create next year's syllabus for all freshmen composition courses. So, I wrote this report to address your question about the best type of writing class to teach freshmen. Freshmen can benefit from learning how to write papers in plain English, also known as plain language, because students learn how to explain their ideas in the most simple, straightforward way possible.

In this report, I will explain plain English and outline the benefits of teaching this writing style to freshmen. I will also address your concerns about whether plain English will properly prepare first-year students for their entire academic careers.

Once you understand the key components of plain English, you can create an effective freshmen composition course syllabus. Also, you can tailor the plain English syllabus to other college courses and professors' expectations.

Proposal's Organization

This proposal is organized to answer these five questions:

1. What is plain English?
2. Why should freshmen learn plain English?
3. How will plain English help students in their college courses?
4. How will plain English help students in their careers?
5. What is my final recommendation?

What is plain English?

Plain English Definition

Plain English "is a world-wide campaign for clear, informative, easy-to-use business documents" (Lillywhite and Dungey Ch. 6, p. 2). The first push for plain English started in the U.S. around the 1970s (Tiersma). Proponents of plain English argued that many legal documents were too difficult for the average person to understand or use (Tiersma).

Plain English Key Components

Plain English is writing "readers can use and easily understand" (Lillywhite and Dungey Ch. 6, p. 2). Since plain English depends heavily on the intended readers, the writing must allow them to do three key things:

1. "find what they need"
2. "understand what they find," and
3. "act appropriately on that understanding" (*CenterforPlainLanguage.org*).

Why should freshmen learn plain English?

Plain English Teaches Writers to Focus on Readers' Needs

Teaching plain English in freshmen composition courses will show students how to write for their readers: professors, peers, the general public, etc. They will learn to focus on their readers' needs and goals in their essays, research papers, blogs, or any other writing assignment. To create these useful documents students will learn how to perform several key skills:

- identify and research audience
- write in active voice
- choose words carefully
- cut out wordiness
- write clearer sentences
- format for high visual impact
- use proper section headings
- put the main point upfront
- organize content logically for reader
- group related content, and
- include graphics, tables, and figures (*CenterforPlainLanguage.org*; Lillywhite and Dungey, Ch. 6).

How will plain English help students in their college courses?

Professors Can Spend More Time on Content

As students progress in their academic careers, content becomes more important. However, the content will only be effective if students have gained adequate writing skills. If students learn the key skills of plain English in their freshmen composition courses, professors can spend less time teaching writing skills and spend more time on course content.

Students Waste Less Time Resubmitting Papers

As a Graduate Assistant (GA) in the Towson Writing Center, I know that one of professors' most common complaints relates to students' poor writing skills. Professors often require students to resubmit poor writing because of glaring issues. Students seem to struggle with large issues like focus, organization, and clarity.

You can see from the list of skills in the previous section that students who learn plain English will develop stronger writing. Students will practice tightening all areas of their writing because plain English must cater to the reader's (professor's) needs. Professors *need* focused, organized, and clear writing.

How will plain English help students in their careers?

Plain English is the Law

Did you know that the federal government has regulations for plain English writing. President Obama signed the *Plain Writing Act* in 2010 (*PlainLanguage.gov*). This law requires that agencies use “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use” (*PlainLanguage.gov*).

Many students may pursue careers in law, government, business, or the nonprofit sector. Towson students who work in these fields will need to know plain English to communicate effectively with the public. When serving the public, organizations like the Center for Plain Language believe that “Plain language is a civil right” (*CenterforPlainLanguage.org*).

Plain English Saves Money

Research has shown that businesses often lose money because of poorly worded documents, as employees waste time trying to problem solve (Lillywhite and Dungey, Ch. 6, p. 2). If students learn effective word choice from plain English, they can save their companies time and money.

Students’ plain English skills will also help save money because readers’ comprehension increases (Lillywhite and Dungey, Ch. 6, p. 2). When customers understand the documents they read, businesses save money on answering help center calls, emails, and letters. Employers like saving money, so students with plain English skills will be in high demand.

What is my final recommendation?

I highly recommend that you create a freshmen composition syllabus for plain English. This type of writing class will benefit students in all Towson departments and majors. Beyond college, students will be better prepared for communicating ideas effectively in the workplace.

Appendix A

Works Cited

CenterforPlainLanguage.org. Center for Plain Language, 2013. Web. 20 November 2013.

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