

The Webscout

Section Editor:

Karin Eichele
info@mediwiz.de



Plain language

The word 'plain' in its original sense just meant 'flat, smooth'. In the thirteenth century, it also gained the meaning 'evident'. And from the fourteenth century on, 'plain' has been used in the way we understand it in the term 'plain language': to refer to something simple, clear, and obvious without superfluous ornamentation:

<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/plain> and
<http://www.etymonline.com/index>.

Several institutions and associations dedicate themselves to the plain language initiative. These are, for example, the **Center for Plain Language**

<http://centerforplainlanguage.org/>,

Plain Language Association International

<http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/>,

and the **Plain Language Action and Information Network**

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>.

I have searched the web for online tutorials on plain language. The first one I stumbled over was **PlainTrain**, a Canadian initiative:

<http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/>.

It contains eight sections to introduce you to plain language, including some exercises to practise what you have just learned about. The NIH provides a more appealing online course, which also has an introductory level:

<http://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/login.asp>.

You can either review the contents of the training modules without receiving credit, or login and receive a certificate after completion of the course.

Dr Lynn Dicks, manager of the Conservation Evidence project at the University of Cambridge, has given a lecture on how to write about science in plain English:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mn7f5tsgjx8>.

She presents 12 simple rules to follow in order to bring clarity to your scientific writing.

And what about conveying health information to a lay readership? How can you ensure patients and people interested in health topics get your message? A webinar presentation on how to use plain language to communicate health information may help:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cU-FDPPsaeI>.

It is not solely on language but rather on the presentation of information on the web in general. The audio quality is not ideal, but it is worth watching anyway. Another useful webinar is on plain language in social media:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W756zLegQBs>.

A further web-based workshop was designed to help people create consent forms and other materials for study participants:

<http://www.iths.org/events/prism-plain-language-training-researchers>.

You have to register for this course, but it is free of charge.

Clear communication and conveying information are not only relevant in writing, but also in speech. Although we are mainly writers, I want to emphasise the importance of plain spoken communication as well. The term 'plain speech' is associated with the Quakers' 'Testimony of Simplicity':

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Testimony_of_Simplicity.

The Quakers were famous for their plain speech, which was strictly honest and direct:

<http://www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~bmaurus/plainspeech.html>.

I want to end with a quick look at modern plain spoken presentation. This blog entry gives you some idea about how the way you talk determines whether people pay attention to what you want to tell them:

<http://www.entrepreneurcountryglobal.com/index.php/united-kingdom/ecosystem-economics/item/plain-speech-is-not-the-new-rock-n-roll>.

Did this Webscout section help you or do you have any questions or suggestions? Please feel free to get in touch and share your thoughts.

Karin Eichele

Mediwiz – medical writing and support services
info@mediwiz.de