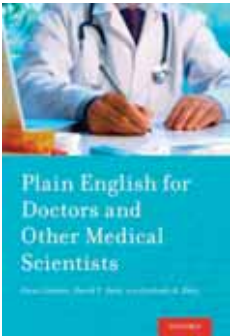


In the Bookstores



Plain English for Doctors and Other Medical Scientists

By Oscar Linares, David T. Daly, and Gertrude A. Daly
Oxford University Press, 2017
ISBN 978-0-19-065484-9 (paperback)
£29.99. 232 pages.

In an ideal world, the deluge of information that comes our way from the tax office, insurance companies, lawyers, computer software companies, and suchlike would be written in plain English. Sadly, the reader is often left with the impression either that the author does not want us to understand the text, or that the author does not understand the concepts and, therefore, cannot explain them to anyone else. The main reason for using plain English in medical writing is so that any reasonable person can understand our written language and gather from it the messages we intend to convey.

The authors of *Plain English for Doctors and Other Medical Scientists* are a diverse team comprising a medical doctor who is not a native English speaker, a lawyer, and an English graduate. Thus they bring an educated and broad perspective to the subject. They tell us that, “Respecting a colleague’s time, by writing as clearly and as concisely as possible, is always the most professional way to write.” According to the authors, the target audience for this book is doctors who are not native English speakers but who read and write journal articles in English. However, the principles of writing in plain English may be applied widely, including to regulatory submission documents and writing for the public.

This is a self-study book that makes a worthwhile attempt to create a set of rules for writing in plain English. The authors have taken examples of written text from published journals, analysed the sentence structure, grouped their findings, and provided suggestions on how to make improvements.

The book is structured around three concepts: ease of reading, vivid language, and flow of logic. Each concept is subdivided into chapters that include related tips. The authors give instructions on how to

apply each tip and provide exercises to enable the reader to practise applying them. The book is more than an attempt to teach writing in plain English; it is a guide on how to write scientific English well.

The first concept in the book is “Take Charge of Your Reading Ease Score”. Here the authors introduce us to WSEG scores, which are a composite of the number of words (W), average sentence length (S), Flesch Reading Ease score (E), and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (G). The authors use WSEG scores to track changes in reading ease throughout the book. Not surprisingly, therefore, the chapters in the first concept focus on reducing sentence and word length and omitting any needless words.

The second concept, “Use Vivid Language”, includes some familiar suggestions such as using the active voice and avoiding nominalisation. However, there are also new ideas and constructive suggestions for bringing the language of medicine into the real world. The third concept, “Present Logical Reasoning Clearly,” provides some useful tips for organising the narrative to provide a clear and logical pathway for the reader.

Examples of each concept are given, but once the concept has been introduced the reader is then presented with a set of exercises without further assistance. It is not always clear what you are supposed to do. The suggested solution to each exercise is in a lengthy appendix, so the reader has to find the solution, then see how it has been applied to the exercise. There are also a lot of exercises, with the result that about a third of the book comprises suggested revisions.

Although practical exercises are worthwhile, with such a large proportion of the book dedicated to this type of learning, more guidance from the authors or worked examples could have been provided. In my opinion, at a minimum it would have been

This is a worthwhile book for anyone who would like to take a structured approach to improving their plain English writing skills.

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more helpful if the authors had provided a solution to the first exercise for each tip before presenting the student with the full set of exercises.

Non-native English speakers should bear in mind that the authors of the book are American and some of the tips do not translate well into British English. For example, the authors suggest that the word *that* is unnecessary in the sentence, “The test confirmed that Natalia was pregnant.” As a native speaker of British English, I disagree.

I should also like to add a health warning about the humour. The authors introduce the term *medicus incomprehensibilis* to indicate impenetrable medical language. It is funny the first time you read it, but is overused.

The main criticism that I have of this book is that all of the conclusions are based on readability scores, rather than on readability testing. There is some impressive statistical analysis supporting the conclusion that the text has been improved, but no evidence that it was clearer or more easily understood by readers.

In conclusion, this is a worthwhile book for anyone who would like to take a structured approach to improving their plain English writing skills. However, it should be considered as a collection of good ideas rather than as a set of rules. Indeed, the authors themselves tell us to use our judgement. It is important to remember that language is living and fluid.

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