Plain, But Not Simple:

Plain Language Research with Readers, Writers, and Texts

by

Kim Garwood

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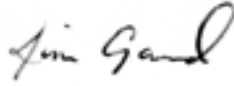thesis requirement for the degree of
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# Abstract

Plain language is defined in a variety of ways, but is generally understood to refer to language and design strategies that make texts easier for target audiences to understand and use. Research has helped demonstrate that plain language strategies work, not only to improve reader comprehension, but also to save individuals and organizations time and money. Most plain language research focuses on the outcomes of plain language texts; however, there are a variety of complex processes that happen behind the scenes as these texts are produced. To better understand the complexity of plain language work and the challenges of producing these texts, this dissertation studies plain language using rhetorical and sociolinguistic theories. This framework allows us to see how plain language produces meaning within complex social and cultural contexts. Using the rhetorical triangle as an organizing framework, this dissertation proposes three models of research for studying plain language, each emphasizing a different part of the triangle: readers, writers, and texts.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 1, 2010, customers buying software online from the video game vendor Gamestation were asked to agree with this subclause in the purchase terms and conditions:

> By placing an order via this web site on the first day of the fourth month of the year 2010 Anno Domini, you agree to grant Us a non transferable option to claim, for now and for ever more, your immortal soul. Should We wish to exercise this option, you agree to surrender your immortal soul, and any claim you may have on it, within 5 (five) working days of receiving written notification from gamesation.co.uk or one of its duly authorised minions. We reserve the right to serve such notice in 6 (six) foot high letters of fire, however we can accept no liability for any loss or damage caused by such an act. If you a) do not believe you have an immortal soul, b) have already given it to another party, or c) do not wish to grant Us such a license, please click the link below to nullify this sub-clause and proceed with your transaction.
> (qtd. in Perton, 2010, n.p.)

Demonstrating just how few people actually read the fine print in such contracts, the souls of 88 per cent of customers who bought software that day now belong to Gamestation for eternity.

Though the agreement was only an April Fools' Day joke, 365 days a year consumers ignore fine print like this because most of these agreements are so long and incomprehensible that readers are prepared to agree without reading rather than subject themselves to the frustration of trying to understand the legalese. The unnecessary complexity of language in consumer agreements is nowhere more apparent than in credit card agreements. Take, for example, this excerpt from an American bank, GTE Federal Credit Union, which was ranked number 1 in a top 10 list of the worst credit card agreements:

> Each daily balance of credit purchases is determined by adding to the outstanding unpaid balance of credit purchases at the beginning of the billing cycle any new credit purchases posted to your account and subtracting any payments as received and credits as posted to your account, but excluding any unpaid finance charges. (CreditCards.com, 2010)

It's easy to see why readers find these texts difficult to understand and why most readers give up reading credit card agreements (if they try at all). It's also easy to see why the public generally distrusts financial institutions that use incomprehensible language. But it doesn't have to be this way, argue plain language experts, who have demonstrated in a wide variety of contexts—from privacy policies to financial documents—that complex ideas and information can be communicated in accessible language. This chapter

will provide an overview of the expanding role of plain language in public discourse, including key debates in the field. The chapter will then introduce the theoretical framework that will be used to guide the dissertation research and the key research questions that will be addressed.

## Why plain language matters

At its broadest level, the plain language movement aims to improve the public's access to and ability to benefit from information they receive in text or visual form. The plain language movement also highlights the hidden barriers that jargon or convoluted language can pose for readers. Advocates have gained support for plain language practices by demonstrating that needlessly complicated language can have serious consequences, from preventing individuals from making informed decisions about their health to getting help from government services (Cameron, 1995). For some, plain language means they can understand and safely follow directions for prescription drugs; for others, it means they can agree to credit card or purchase agreements without selling their souls, so to speak.

The plain language movement, by encouraging us to consider readers' needs first, shifts our focus from the writer to the reader. It suggests that, instead of forcing readers to puzzle out what a complex text means, writers ought to take greater responsibility for meeting the needs of their readers.

## The Plain Language Movement

Though calls for clearer writing have been made at many points throughout history, the organization of plain language into a strong, unified movement began in the 1970s. The movement's development in the United States is perhaps the most well-known and best documented. One of the earliest instances of plain language use was the development of readable insurance forms by Sentry, an American life insurance company (Eagleson, 1991). The overwhelming consumer satisfaction that resulted (the company actually received compliment letters for its clear documentation) was combined with other benefits: the company received fewer false claims and had less difficulty training new staff, with significant financial savings being the end result (Eagleson, 1991).

Around the same time, plain language started to gain tentative ground in US government circles. For example, President Nixon called for the Federal Register to be written for the layperson in 1972 (Locke, 2004). Soon after, President Carter called more formally for readable government documents in a 1978 Executive Order (Bowen, Duffy, & Steinberg, 1991, p. 20). However, government departments were inconsistent in their compliance and the orders were actually rescinded by President Reagan in the 1980s (Petelin, 2010). It wasn't until the late 1990s that the US government once again took up the cause of plain language. This time, it was President Clinton who called for all federal employees to write in plain language (though it was

directed most specifically at lawyers and other policy writers) (Locke, 2004). Vice President Gore argued that clear language was a "civil right" and presented annual awards for documents that were translated from "gobbledygook" to understandable language (Locke, 2004, n.p.).

The growing recognition of the importance of plain language in US government documents culminated in the introduction of the Plain Language Act in 2010. Under the Act, the federal government is required to use "simple, easy to understand" language in public documents such as application forms, tax returns, and websites (Petelin, 2010, p. 8). The Act also requires all federal departments to appoint a senior staff person to be responsible for plain language; provide information and training to employees to ensure they comply with the Act; and post on their department websites their plans for implementing plain language practices (Rep Braley, n.d.).

Canada's plain language movement has been less centralized than that of the US. Cheryl Stephens, a prominent Canadian plain language consultant, has documented the history of plain language in Canada, highlighting the following developments: in the early 1970s, the Law Reform Commission of Canada called for reform to make statutes easier for the public to understand; in 1983, the Canadian Legal Information Centre was established to provide resources and promote change in legal communication; in 1993, Stephens and fellow Canadian Kate Harrison founded Plain Language Association International (PLAIN); and in 1995, the Clear

Language and Design public education service was established to provide resources and training (Stephens, 2012).

Since the 1990s, these and many other Canadian organizations and industries have adopted plain language approaches in areas such as insurance, health, and economic development. However, despite a number of independent initiatives, strong, unified leadership on this issue has been lacking in Canadian government. For the most part, plain language policies in Canada take the form of guidelines or sidebars in other policies, rather than being established as a stand-alone act. One exception is the government's 2003 publication, *Successful Communication Tool Kit: Literacy and You* (Communication Canada, 2003), which provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges facing public communicators as well as practical advice on communicating effectively in a range of media. In general, however, the Canadian government has provided guidelines that focus more on outcomes rather than on specific strategies to achieve them. For example, the Canadian government's official communication policy, introduced in 2006, includes the following advice about plain language: "An institution's duty to inform the public includes the obligation to communicate effectively. Information about policies, programs, services and initiatives must be clear, relevant, objective, easy to understand and useful" (Government of Canada, 2008, n.p.). What exactly terms such as "clear" and "objective" mean, and how

these goals might be achieved, is not clearly described in the document, however.

While plain language in North America has emerged with the help of government regulations and guidelines, the United Kingdom's plain English movement is considered among the strongest and most effective because of its grassroots origins. In 1979, lawyer Martin Cutts and community advocate Chrissie Maher launched the Plain English Campaign, which quickly earned broad support from the general public and from the National Consumer Council (Eagleson, 1991). The campaign, which included a theatrical demonstration of shredding "gobbledygook" government documents outside the Houses of Parliament, culminated in Margaret Thatcher demanding that government departments review and revise their documents (Graden, n.d.; Pringle, 2006).

In Australia, law firms and insurance companies have played leadership roles, adopting clear communication as a means of improving their reputations with consumers (Balmford, 2002). The movement gained significant momentum with the publication of the discussion paper by the Law Reform Commission of Victoria in Australia (mentioned above). The report included many "before and after" examples of convoluted documents being translated into everyday English. These examples, which were publicized by the media, put even greater pressure on Australian legal firms to improve their communication (Balmford, 2002).

Another turning point in the Australian movement was the adoption of plain language by the Real Estate Institute of New South Wales in the 1970s (Eagleson, 1991). In an effort to improve their public image, landlords decided to put their policies in plain language. However, the shift to clear prose made the unfairness of their policies obvious. Ultimately, they decided to change some of the policies themselves (Eagleson, 1991). Examples like this demonstrate the importance of plain language in exposing outdated or unjust laws, procedures, or practices—they also suggest one reason why organizations are reluctant to adopt plain language: it requires them to be more transparent, direct, and specific than is sometimes convenient. Once unfair consumer agreements are no longer hidden by complex language, organizations may find they have to change the agreements themselves, not just the wording used to explain them. One of the greatest motivators behind the plain language movement is consumers' perceptions that language is being used to take advantage of them, duping consumers into agreeing to things that are not in their best interests; this case demonstrates that those fears are not always unfounded.

Part of the plain language movement's evolution has been the emergence of strong national and international organizations. Among the most prominent groups are the international association, PLAIN, the US-based Center for Plain Language, the Plain Language Action and Information Network (plainlanguage.gov), Clarity, an international

organization promoting clear legal language, and the UK-based Plain English Campaign. These groups, like most plain language groups, are volunteer-based nonprofit organizations of advocates and professionals. In some cases, as with Clarity International, the focus is on a particular domain of communication (legal language). For other groups, such as the government-based plainlanguage.gov, the aim is to provide plain language resources and education for government departments and other organizations that communicate with the public. Conferences hosted by these organizations are attended by delegates from around the world and include sessions on professional practice, research, education, advocacy and the use of plain language in professional domains such as law, health, insurance, and business (e.g., Clarity, 2013; Plain Language Association International, 2013). These groups have also increased public awareness of plain language issues by developing websites and materials and by establishing recognition programs to highlight individuals and groups whose documents demonstrate plain language principles (or don't).

In 2007, several of these organizations came together with international experts to form the International Plain Language Working Group. The aim of this group is to help tackle issues common to all plain language practitioners: developing standards, establishing education programs, and strengthening the community of practice (James, 2010, p. 3). The result of their work was a working paper titled *Strengthening Plain*

*Language,* which was published as a series of articles in the *Clarity* journal in November, 2010.

The introduction of the US Plain Language Act (2010) and the Canadian government's implementation of its own clear communication guidelines (Communication Canada, 2003) have helped raise awareness about the importance and value of plain language in public documents. However, despite these achievements, there is concern among some plain language advocates about whether these regulations will be accompanied by a plan for implementation and enforcement (Center for Plain Language, 2012). Canada, which lacks a centralized source of plain language guidelines and policies, also lacks a formal system of follow-up that would help keep individuals and departments accountable for using plain language. In the US, meanwhile, all departments are responsible for meeting specific requirements of the Plain Language Act, making progress somewhat easier to measure.

To comply with the Act, US government departments have been required to appoint senior officials who will be responsible for guiding plain language activities, and each department must create a plain language plan, post a public plain language page on their websites, and train employees in plain language strategies (Center for Plain Language, 2012). Despite these requirements, though, a recent evaluation found that compliance was far from consistent. Using a report card format, the Center for Plain Language

graded and ranked the departments based on how well they had followed both the letter and the "spirit" of the plain language law. According to their evaluation, the average score for meeting basic requirements of the law was 65%. The average score for following the "spirit" of the law (including criteria such as developing a detailed implementation plan, testing documents with readers, and conducting training sessions for staff) was much lower, at 34% (Center for Plain Language, 2012). So even though progress is better measured in the US, the outcomes may not necessarily be better than those in Canada. However, without the same methods of tracking progress, it is difficult to motivate or measure compliance in Canada.

In addition to the formal evaluation methods used by the Center for Plain Language above, many plain language organizations have raised awareness by publicly ridiculing examples of bad writing. Some of the most prominent examples of these dubious honours are the Plain English Campaign's Golden Bull Awards, given for "the year's 'best' examples of gobbledygook" ("Golden Bull awards," 2013, n.p.) and the "Wondermark" awards presented by the Center for Plain Language, for "the sort of documents that make us shake our heads and say: 'We wonder what they meant. We wonder what they were thinking.'" (Center for Plain Language, 2013, n.p.). Negative publicity associated with such awards is meant to be a catalyst for change or an incentive for organizations to improve before they are targeted.

## Plain language and academia

As the summary above indicates, the development of plain language has occurred primarily in public, practical settings rather than in academic institutions. The discussion of plain language issues and strategies in professional communities is far ahead of that occurring in academic literature. This gap does not come as a real surprise; there is an uneasy fit between the aims of plain language advocates, who promote the use of everyday language for public audiences, and the aims of academics, who often rely on intricate, highly specialized language to describe their work to other experts.

Some critics argue that the specialized language of academia is a systemic barrier, not only to the public understanding and benefiting from new knowledge, but also to individuals entering the academy from non-traditional backgrounds (Lillis, 2001, p. 2). One composition theorist, Peter Elbow, describes the message that some academic language sends to readers: "I'm not interested in talking to people who are not already part of the conversation" (qtd. in Lillis, 2001 p. 98). Even critics who are aware of the potential difficulties caused by academic vocabulary and style find it hard to avoid these problems. Social psychologist and language researcher Michael Billig notes that critics in his discipline identify and deconstruct power structures embedded in language, yet they often reproduce these structures in their own writing (2008). He asks, "How can we be sure that our own use

of language is not marked, even corrupted by those ideological factors that we seek to identify in the language of others?" (Billig, 2008, p.783). Pointing to the use of technical nouns and passive structures in critical discourse analysis writing, Billig argues that critical discourse analysts should be conscious of how their language may perpetuate rather than challenge systems of power. His argument highlights how difficult it is to influence power structures when one is also subject to them.

Some critics, by contrast, see the difficulty of academic language as an intentional strategy to mystify and impress readers. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in her "Professor of Parody," describes how philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's "ponderous and obscure" writing is the product of her bringing together ideas from contradictory philosophical traditions without providing a rationale or explanation for why or how she is doing so (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 2). Butler's complex, tangled writing, argues Nussbaum, "causes the reader to expend so much effort in deciphering her prose that little energy is left for assessing the truth of the claims" (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 3). In Nussbaum's terms, the problem is not just that Butler's language obscures her argument, but that the obscurity operates to circumvent critique.

The use of complex jargon—particularly the use of scientific concepts by philosophers and critical theorists—has also drawn sharp criticism from some in the scientific community. As Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont argue in

their controversial book *Fashionable Nonsense* (1998), scientific terms and concepts have not only been misused by postmodern theorists, but this misuse is a more or less deliberate attempt to mystify rather than enlighten their audiences:

> [W]e fail to see the advantage of invoking, even metaphorically, scientific concepts that one oneself understands only shakily when addressing a readership that composed almost entirely of non-scientists. Might the goal be to pass off as profound a rather banal philosophical or sociological observation, by dressing it up in fancy scientific jargon? (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p. 11)

In their view, this kind of ambiguity not only confuses readers unnecessarily but also distorts legitimate scientific theories in the process.

In his response to Sokal and Bricmont, philosopher and post-structural theorist Jacques Derrida (who, incidentally, is not critiqued in the book) argued that Sokal and Bricmont missed an opportunity to engage in a serious debate about this issue. In his view, they have cherry-picked examples without reading deeply:

> It would have been interesting to make a scrupulous study of the so-called scientific 'metaphors'—their role, their status, their effects in the discourses that are under attack….That would have required that a certain number of difficult discourses be read seriously, in terms of

their theoretical effects and strategies. That was not done. (Derrida, 2005, p. 71).

Sokal and Bricmont argue that postmodern theorists' use of scientific metaphors is superficial and uninformed; Derrida argues that Sokal and Bricmont's critique of postmodernists' use of scientific metaphors is also superficial and uniformed.

As Sokal and Bricmont's work suggests, readers' frustration with the language of academic texts has important consequences, among them a growing public belief that academics do not speak intelligibly because they have nothing of value to say (Garber, 2009). Critical theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains: "I quite often find that people criticize me for writing in this confused way and then take *that* as a dismissal of everything I want to say" (Murray, 2003, p. 183).

As Spivak's comments indicate, attacks on academic writing have been perceived by many as symptomatic of a larger, anti-intellectual movement. In *Just Being Difficult?* (Culler & Lamb, 2003b), Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb present essays from prominent academics who respond to criticisms that academic language is "needlessly obscure" (Culler & Lamb, 2003a, p. 2). The editors explain that their aim is not to show that the criticisms of academic language are false, but to "contest the terms of the allegations" (Culler & Lamb, 2003a, p. 1). In their view, a central problem in the debate is that those accusing academics of bad writing are not obliged to provide a

specific, concrete description of what, specifically, they mean by the term "bad writing"; instead, all the responsibility rests on academia to account for its "obscure" writing practices and to answer a charge that they argue is in itself obscure and unclear (Culler & Lamb, 2003a, p. 2).

Taking a different approach to defending academic writing, scholar Rey Chow (2003) acknowledges the complexity of theoretical language, but argues that this complexity does indeed have a purpose. She explains that plain language advocates and critical theorists hold fundamentally different beliefs about language. In her view, advocates who call for clear, accessible language see language as a neutral container for communicating ideas. Critical theorists see language as anything but neutral: it reflects and reproduces social beliefs and values in ways that are far beyond the control of an individual writer.

There are two implications of this belief: first, it implies that language itself ought to be an object of study, since it can provide insight into the complex social and cultural systems; second, it implies that writers are subject to language, rather than the other way around (Chow, 2003). Speakers' ability to shape their identities and negotiate for themselves is dependent on the choices available to them in language—the choice between this word and the next, this phrase or the other. Thus, the narrower these linguistic choices become, the less control writers have over the way they

express their ideas. And plain language, she believes, threatens to narrow language in just such a way.

For critics like Chow, plain language is a trap, luring us in with its promise of clarity, but ultimately limiting what we can say and how we say it. Viewed from this perspective, the obscurity of theoretical language might even be a good thing; it operates as a security feature, making it difficult for language to be appropriated by political or economic powers (Chow, 2003). Theoretical language thus highlights a belief that language is used, not just *by* speakers, but also *on* them, as a way of establishing and maintaining systems of power. In this framework, plain language is a Trojan horse: on first appearance, it is a useful tool that promises clarity and inclusion; but its adoption strips language of its variety and complexity in a way that results in concealment and oppression. Similarly, some legal writers claim that clarity comes at the cost of accuracy; the easy-to-read legal document may not protect readers as effectively as the convoluted one (Stark, 1994). This leaves readers in a Catch-22: if a document is effective, chances are it is too complex to understand; if a document is easy to understand, chances are it isn't effective.

The argument that plain language sacrifices accuracy, specificity, and variety depends, of course, on a definition of plain language that most practitioners would dispute; in Chow's definition, plain language uses a limited vocabulary, a vocabulary that restricts variety of expression and

meaning. Plain language advocate Joseph Kimble counters that there is indeed a rich vocabulary available to writers who want to be clear, as has been demonstrated by the most celebrated writers in the English language: "Plain English is the style of Abraham Lincoln, and Mark Twain, and Justice Holmes, and George Orwell, and Winston Churchill, and E.B. White" (Kimble, 1994, p. 53).

Chow's definition also implies that plain language practitioners are naively translating ideas without being aware of the political and rhetorical implications of their work. On the contrary, however, many plain language practitioners work closely with government and industry communicators, and thus have an opportunity to intervene at points of power. Far from being ignorant of context, effective plain language professionals must be highly sensitive to it. The nature of their work often puts these professionals in close proximity to corporate and institutional interests that have the power to shape public life. The changes adopted by the Real Estate Institute of New South Wales (described above) illustrate the potential for plain language professionals to address inequalities.

## Bridging the gap between plain language and academia

To help demonstrate the complexity of plain language and, at the same time, to expand the body of research supporting plain language principles, many plain language advocates have acknowledged the need for more

research and for a more coordinated, interdisciplinary approach to research (Schriver, Cheek, & Mercer, 2010; Schriver & Gordon, 2010). Disciplines such as linguistics, rhetoric, psychology, and visual design have theoretical and empirical knowledge that can help bolster plain language's claims (Schriver & Gordon, 2010). Despite these connections, however, plain language has not yet earned a place as a focused area of academic study.

Plain language holds rich possibilities for academic study because it intersects with many of our ideas about language, society and identity. It provides a vivid example of how language use is one of the most important ways that we participate in our community. Language always reflects the ideology of its community, and we engage with those norms and beliefs when we use language. Those who cannot understand or communicate in the language of the community are therefore more likely to be shut out from the life of the community and less likely to have access to the same benefits and opportunities.

However, discussions of plain language also raise questions about whether it is indeed possible (or desirable) to intervene in language use. Sociolinguist Deborah Cameron explores this dilemma in her (1995) *Verbal Hygiene*, which examines our ongoing obsession with correctness in language use, and the persistent notion that language is in decline. As Cameron explains, language use is constantly evolving, and it is notoriously difficult to prescribe (Cameron, 1995). Though we like to believe that we are in control of

our language use, and while we certainly have a range of choices in what we say and how, our ability to change language as a whole is far more limited. It follows, then, that any study of plain language must address these social and linguistic constraints.

With this understanding in mind, this dissertation studies plain language within a framework of rhetorical and sociolinguistic theory, the combination of which provide insight into the complexity of plain language as a form of language use and as a social and cultural movement.

## Theoretical framework

In the discussion that follows, I describe the rhetorical theory and sociolinguistic approaches that will be applied in this dissertation project.

### Plain language as rhetorical exchange

Rhetorical theory studies the use of language to influence or persuade others to act, to think, to feel in certain ways. While rhetoric primarily focuses on persuasion through language in text and speeches, this theory has also been applied to persuasion in other contexts, such as visual representations and sound (Barthes, 1977; Goodale, 2011). Most western definitions of rhetoric can be traced to Aristotle, whose work *On Rhetoric*, written in the fourth century (BC), contains definitions and explanations that continue to influence our approaches to rhetorical analysis. As part of his treatise, Aristotle classifies components of rhetorical exchanges (or "oratory" in the classical

context) into three components: speaker, subject, and audience addressed (Aristotle, 2001, p. 1335). These three components are frequently described in terms of a triangle, which illustrates their interconnectedness. Theorists also emphasize that the three components are situated within and respond to a fourth element—the context of the rhetorical exchange—upon which the meaning of language depends (Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999).

For the purposes of this dissertation, the rhetorical triangle provides a relatively simple organizing framework, allowing us to examine each of the components of the rhetorical interaction in greater detail (Fig. 1.1). While recognizing that in reality none of these four elements operates independently of the others, the examination of these components is a useful way to explore how plain language operates within a rhetorical framework. Specifically, the framework will be applied to plain language components in the following way:

- Audience=Readers
- Speaker=Writers (plain language professionals)
- Message=Texts (and, more specifically, the language/linguistic strategies in the text)
- Context=where, when, and why plain language is used
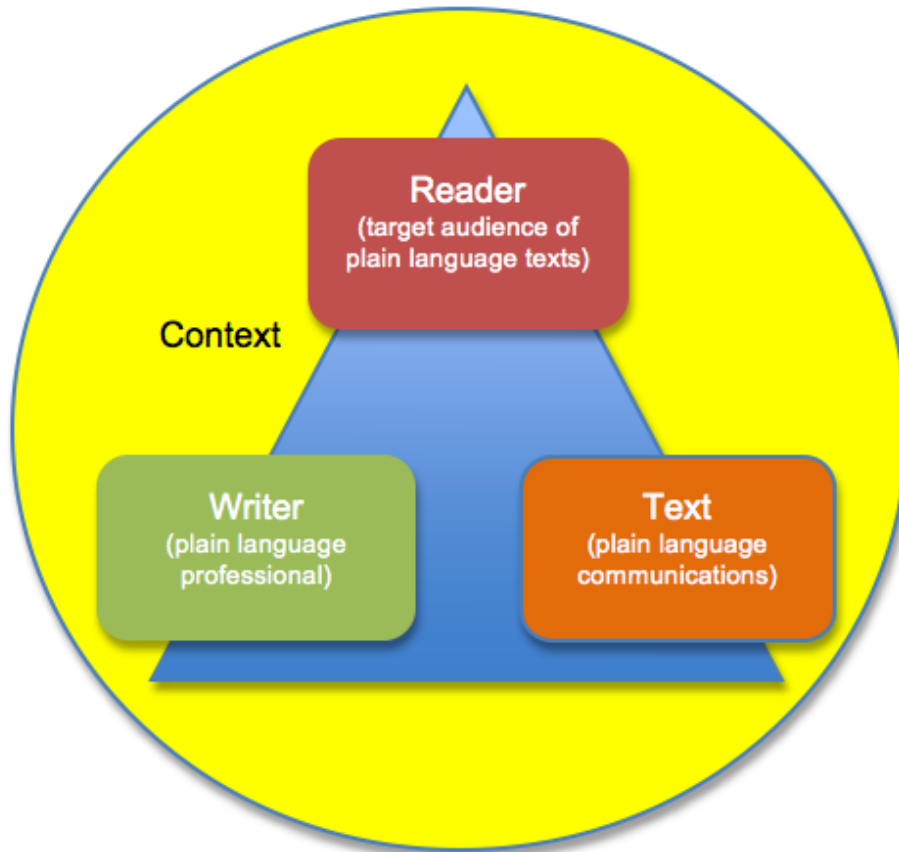
*Fig. 1.1* Rhetorical triangle applied to plain language

First, I will examine the role of the plain language reader, both by considering theories of discourse processing and by examining real readers and their responses to a text. Second, I will study writers by exploring the

role of plain language professionals and their clients in shaping plain language products. Third, I will examine plain language texts by examining how rhetorical figures can pose hidden challenges for plain language writers and readers. Using metonymy as an example, I explore how such figures may not seem "difficult" to those readers who are familiar to them. But to readers who are *not* familiar with them, metonymies can be unclear or misleading. In each of these components—readers, writers, and texts—I will examine how context is a crucial factor in the meaning-making process. It influences readers' understanding, enables or constrains plain language professionals' work, and shapes texts' meaning.

## Plain language and sociolinguistics

Because of its aims to include wider audiences and those with low literacy, plain language is often seen as somehow transcending its context: if something is "plain," it is reduced to its simplest form and should be easily digested by anyone, anywhere. However, this perspective ignores that all communication exists in context and *depends on* context to achieve meaning. It is only by looking at plain language as a situated practice that we can gain a fuller understanding of how these texts work. My discussion of these situated practices is based on theories and approaches from sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

Sociolinguistics is the study of how language reflects its social and cultural contexts. It studies the relationship, and more specifically the interaction, between language and social structures and cultural norms (Stubbs, 1983, p. 8). As prominent sociolinguistics scholar J.K. Chambers explains, language is an important way that we express ourselves as members within a particular community (1995), meaning, we use language to establish and maintain our social identities. Sociolinguistic theory suggests that an individual's shared goals, beliefs, and conventions for communicating are developed and expressed through participation in a "discourse community" (Swales, 1987, p. 2). In this way, linguistic decisions, even at the level of grammar, reflect and continually identify us as legitimate participants in specific discourse communities (Cameron, 1995). More importantly, communication requires practice, interaction—and membership. For example, one US bureaucrat describes the language practices in government:

> Those of us who live and work in Washington have our own patois, our own sort of bureaucratic cant. It is easy to use and we use it every day. Some of us even love it. This is fine, I guess, as long as the only people with whom we attempt to communicate speak in governmentese.
> (Bowen et al., 1991, p.21)

This account of specialized language use provides insight into the power of language to demonstrate shared values, knowledge, and a sense of belonging.

There is far more at stake here than the communication of a message per se; individuals continually use language as a way of fitting in and proving that they belong. As John Gumperz explains, in this way of looking at language, speech events are said to be "governed by social norms specifying such things as who can take part, what the role relationships are, what kind of content is admissible, in what order information is to be introduced, and what speech etiquette applies" (1982, p. 55). As we have all undoubtedly experienced, these social and cultural norms differ—sometimes drastically—from community to community.

In our communities, our ways of using language are "signs of wealth" and "signs of authority" (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 481). In this way, language becomes a kind of currency that gives individuals and groups greater or lesser mobility and power in a discourse economy that mirrors and reproduces social and financial hierarchies. Without the proper language, we are unlikely to even understand the conversation at hand, let alone gain entry or influence it in any way. Those who argue that plain language can be used to challenge ideological beliefs and structures see language as critical discourse theorist Norman Fairclough does, as both a tool and a product of these economic and social forces (2006). As Fairclough argues, when language is out of reach, the result is the pervasive belief that the economy and social world is in a constant state of flux and individual workers simply have to cope with this uncertainty (2006). In political terms, accessible language is a

key element in democratic participation, not only helping voters make informed decisions, but also producing legislation that is comprehensible to the average citizen, so that people understand both their rights and their responsibilities (Balmford, 2002). Plain language advocates Phil Knight, Joseph Kimble, and Christopher Balmford argue that "This ability to place or imagine oneself within the law is an important distinction between a system of justice and a regime of enforced order" (quoted in Balmford, 2002, n.p.). Impenetrable language can leave people incapable of understanding their situations, let alone doing anything about them. While many members of the public struggle with complex language, racial and linguistic minorities are more likely to be adversely affected, not least because they are already more likely to be less wealthy and socially connected than members of racial and linguistic majorities (Jensen, 2010).

Another "sign of authority" in language is the discourses that we interact with in our day-to-day activity; specifically, the emergence of new technology and increasingly specialized knowledge bring with them new forms of language (The New London Group, 1996). As Fairclough points out, "the discourses/knowledges generated by expert systems enter our everyday lives and shape the way we live them" (2006, p. 150). As a result, the everyday person is continually trying to catch up to experts who are a step ahead. Compounding this power imbalance, economic and scientific information is often presented to the public as observable, "value-free" facts

(Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 2006, p. 134). Cameron et al. argue that we can better share knowledge if we "make explicit the processes whereby knowledge acquires its authority and prestige" and "demystify 'expert knowledge' as a category" (143).[1]

The efforts of advocacy groups to influence change in language use demonstrate the belief that language is culturally constructed but also evolving, and its users can influence that evolution. As linguist Robin Lakoff explains, "we must understand the forms of language as arising out of human social and psychological needs, influenced by speakers' real world positions and in turn influencing those positions" (Lakoff, 1990). In other words, language can work *for* us as well as *on* us. Thus, sociolinguistics is also frequently concerned with exposing systems of power and inequality by examining how language expresses and reinforces social structures (Schegloff, 2006).

This connection between language and issues of power and inequality is particularly evident in the plain language community, in which experts frequently refer to their work as advocacy. Advocating for readers often involves empowering individuals and groups who face social and economic barriers such as low literacy, poverty, and poor health. These groups are in the greatest need of help and information, and yet the help they need

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[1] Interestingly, some critics argue that formal discourse is being systematically replaced by more informal structures—in their view, informal discourses are all the more difficult to penetrate (NLG 66).

remains out of reach if it is provided in language that is difficult to understand. Sociolinguistic theory can help us understand the social structures and systems that create these barriers, and this understanding can, in turn, help us challenge the systemic barriers for traditionally disadvantaged groups.

## Plain language as discourse-in-use

Often considered a subset of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis is generally understood as the study of "language in use" as it naturally occurs in everyday human interactions (Alba-Juez, 2009, p. 10). It is generally concerned with studying language, meaning, and context (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006). This analysis is conducted at the level of the sentence and above (meaning, the smallest unit of analysis would be an individual sentence or utterance and the largest unit could be as large as an entire text) (Stubbs, 1983, p. 11). Of central interest in discourse analysis is how meaning is established not from a straightforward referential use of language, in which meaning is located in words, but in the contextual knowledge and experiences that language users bring to their communication with others (Gumperz, 1982).

In the context of the current study, discourse analysis will be used to examine plain language in terms of how words and sentences as well as other non-linguistic components are used in particular ways to achieve particular

effects. This study will emphasize that language is not simply a container for messages; at every stage of the rhetorical exchange, there is the possibility for divergent or unintended meaning arising from—but not necessarily embodied in—language use. Even when a text is plain, the meaning a reader draws will depend on a host of other factors, including his or her previous experience and knowledge, where and when the text is encountered, and why the reader is reading. Discourse is, therefore, broader than a study of linguistic elements: "when analyzing discourse, researchers are not only concerned with 'purely' linguistic facts; they pay equal or more attention to language use in relation to social, political and cultural aspects" (Alba-Juez, 2009, p. 10). In the political "patois" of Washington mentioned above, the difficulty for outsiders is not in the words the speakers use, but rather in the words they leave out—the parts that have become so familiar or shared among insiders that they are assumed. Discourse analysis aims to make these invisible or implicit workings of communication exchange more visible. Making language more accessible in these situations is less about simplifying words and more about understanding the difference between the assumptions and knowledge of the insider and those of outsiders. In other words, what does an outsider need to know in order to participate in this conversation?

One discourse analysis theory that is particularly relevant to the current study is pragmatics (e.g., Austin, 1975). Pragmatics is generally understood as the study of how the meaning of utterances is dependent on

context (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006), the fourth element of the rhetorical triangle. As pragmatic theorists explain, the literal meaning of words and sentences is often quite different from speakers' intended meaning. For example, if a mother says to her daughter, "You've been on the phone for over an hour," the literal meaning is simply that the daughter has spent more than 60 minutes talking on the phone (or, even more literally, that the daughter has been physically on top of the phone). However, the intended meaning is probably something like "Would you hang up the phone already?" Pragmatic theory is useful in a study of plain language because it gives us a framework for understanding one of the most challenging parts of plain language work—making the implicit meanings of texts explicit for readers.

While the current study focuses primarily on written language, discourse analysis can extend beyond the printed word, providing a framework for understanding other systems, such as images and document design (Alba-Juez, 2009; Coupland & Jaworski, 2009). These other systems of communication are an important consideration for plain language professionals, particularly as more and more public communication occurs online or uses multiple modes of communication in combination.[2]

These theoretical approaches provide a helpful framework for understanding the challenges of plain language work, and for understanding how plain language works to achieve its aims. At the same time, applying

[2] Recognizing that plain language work also includes other modes such as visual design, some plain language professionals have begun to use the term "clear communication" to describe their work (Hampl, Joerchel, & Poetscher, 2012).

this framework demonstrates the complexity of plain language and its potential as a topic for further academic study.

## Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore possible models for studying the complex linguistic and social processes that underlie plain language work. By conducting three small-scale studies and applying the theoretical framework outlined above, I will demonstrate how this kind of research is valuable not only to plain language practitioners but also to the academic community.

## Objectives

Using the rhetorical triangle as an organizing framework, this dissertation studies plain language in terms of three components: readers, writers, and texts. Each component poses a range of potential questions for research; however, for the purposes of this project, I will limit my focus to one key research question and objective for each area. They are as follows:

1. **Readers:** What do readers bring to plain language texts and how do their pre-existing knowledge/values/attitudes influence their interaction with a text? To answer this question, I will use qualitative methods including interviews, think-aloud protocols, and focus groups.

2. **Writers:** How does the plain language professional–client relationship influence the final plain language text? To investigate this question, I

will use an online questionnaire to gather and analyze the perspectives of plain language professionals on how they work with and negotiate with their clients in the plain language process.

3. **Texts**: What lexical and syntactical elements can pose barriers to plain language work? In this section, I will use close textual analysis to examine how a rhetorical figure, metonymy, can be difficult to detect and address in the development of plain language texts.

By dividing the dissertation into these segments, I do not wish to suggest that readers, writers, and texts operate in isolation from one another. Throughout the dissertation, interrelationships between audience, text, and writers will be discussed. However, for the purpose of understanding these elements more deeply, each part of the dissertation places emphasis on one element.

## Organization

This thesis begins with a review of the literature, including the history and current debates in plain language and a review of plain language research, which evaluates previous research and identifies methods that could be applied to address each of the research questions. The three main parts of the thesis follow.

In Part 1, I examine the complexity of the reading process in theory and in practice: in theory, by examining discourse-processing theories, and in practice, by examining the individual approaches of real-life readers. To

explore these real-life readers, I use a case study approach with three older adult readers. Not only do the three readers use unique strategies to understand the text, they also take unique positions in relation to the text—positions that often challenge the role that the text has assumed for them.

Part 2 examines the role of writers, by using a questionnaire to gather feedback from plain language professionals. Specifically, this questionnaire aims to find out more about how plain language professionals negotiate with clients in the process of producing plain language products. The findings of this survey suggest that clients play an important, but often undefined role in the process. Their involvement in the process adds considerable complexity to the plain language task, requiring that writers must be as good at negotiating and advocating as they are at writing. In the end, the final product of plain language work usually represents a compromise, in particular on the part of plain language professionals, who must defer to the wishes of their clients.

Part 3 focuses specifically on the complexities posed by plain language texts, specifically, the challenge posed by the rhetorical and figurative aspects of language. To demonstrate this complexity, I examine how one common figure, metonymy, operates as a kind of shortcut for insiders, but can pose a barrier for outsiders of a language community. In order to address this barrier, writers must first be able to detect it—and detecting rhetorical figures like metonymy can be difficult, especially if the figure has been in

common use for a long time. At the same time, writers have to consider whether a rhetorical figure is actually serving a useful purpose for its audience. It is impossible, and undesirable, to eliminate all figures from our language use; instead, writers must focus on using figures that are appropriate for their specific audiences.

Each part of the dissertation provides an opportunity to explore the complex, and often hidden, processes that are involved in plain language work. I will describe how at each point of the rhetorical triangle—reader, writer, and text—different challenges have to be addressed. The primary aim of each study is to better understand these challenges. At the same time, each study tests a different research model and evaluates its potential use for future studies of plain language.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

The study of plain language is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from fields including linguistics, communications, social justice, and literacy studies. These different disciplinary approaches enrich plain language study; yet they also make it difficult to trace plain language's development in a coherent, linear fashion (Schriver & Gordon, 2010). With so many practitioners using plain language in different ways, divergent definitions and practices have emerged, posing a challenge to the unity of plain language as a movement (Schriver et al., 2010; Schriver, 1991).

One of the key aims of this dissertation is to provide a model for how plain language can be studied. Before introducing such a model, it is important to explain what "plain language" means in the context of this dissertation, as well as the key issues this project will consider. With this in mind, this review examines the literature on plain language in three ways: first, how plain language has been defined and approached; second, how plain language debates are described in the literature; third, how plain language literature relates to the three areas of focus in this dissertation—readers, writers, and texts.

Through this examination I will demonstrate the breadth and depth of plain language as a form of communication practice and establish its potential as an area for academic study.

### Defining plain language

Defining plain language has presented an important challenge for practitioners, who often work in isolation and in a variety of contexts, from law, to government, to private industry. Despite the fact that the plain language movement began more than 40 years ago, broad consensus about what the term itself actually means has been difficult to achieve. One of the most frequently cited definitions is that of Martin Cutts, a plain language advocate who was one of the first to focus public attention on the issue. He defines plain language as "the writing and setting out of information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood" (Cutts, 1995, p. 3). Often, plain language definitions are accompanied by a description of what plain language is not: an oversimplification of ideas or a patronizing, condescending approach to readers. One of the seminal works in the plain language literature, a report by the Australian Law Reform Commission of Victoria explains this point succinctly:

> Plain language is a full version of the language, using the patters of
> normal, adult English. It is not a type of basic English, or baby-talk.
> While documents that are converted to plain English may be described

as *simplified* they are simplified in the sense of being rid of entangled,

convoluted language—language that is difficult to analyze and

understand, language that submerges, confuses, and conceals its

message. (Law Reform Commission of Victoria, 1987, p. 3)

As this definition suggests, plain language is often viewed as an antidote for

jargon-heavy texts that are unnecessarily difficult. More importantly,

however, the definition argues that putting legal documents in plain

language poses no risk to the quality and effectiveness of the document.

Simplification does not mean reduction.[3]

With the growth of the plain language field and the increased

coordination and collaboration among plain language practitioners, there is

greater interest in establishing a shared definition of plain language. Having

agreement on what plain language is essential to moving forward with other

professional developments, such as standards and education. In 2010, the

International Plain Language Working Group proposed the following

definition:

A communication is in plain language if it meets the needs of its

audience—by using language, structure, and design so clearly and

effectively that the audience has the best possible chance of readily

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[3] Nevertheless, comments in the survey of professionals conducted for this dissertation suggest that describing plain language as "simplifying" texts is becoming less acceptable to those in the profession, largely because of this association between simplification and reduction.

finding what they need, understanding it, and using it. (Cheek, 2010,

p. 5)

This definition carries traces of earlier definitions such as those provided by Martin Cutts; however, it marks an important turning point for the plain language movement in several ways. First, it acknowledges that plain language has to do with "communication," which is broader than printed texts.[4] This shift enables plain language to expand its reach beyond written documents to language in other forms, such as images and spoken communication. Second, it acknowledges that readers have an important role in determining whether or not a document is plain: the true measure of a document's clarity is the audience's ability to use it effectively. This definition acknowledges that plain language is concerned not only with the material linguistic elements of texts (the elements) but also with the people and communities who interact with these texts (the outcomes).[5]

## Criticism of plain language

Opposition to plain language comes from a variety of sources, including professional communities who believe plain language could compromise the quality and effectiveness of their work and academics who see plain language

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[4] In fact, many plain language practitioners have begun to refer to their field as "clear communication" instead of plain language, recognizing the importance of elements other than text in sharing information.

[5] In Cheek's (2010) article, she explains the divergent approaches to plain language definitions: those that define plain language in terms of "inputs" (what words and sentences structures writers use, for example) as opposed to those who define it in terms of "outputs" (measurements of readability and comprehension, for example).

as a threat to creative and critical thought. Examining these objections

provides insight into how plain language is currently understood and

portrayed by some academics and professionals. These objections also point to

areas of misunderstanding or misconceptions about plain language that

further research could help address. Three of the most common criticisms are

outlined below.[6]

*Criticism #1: Plain language poses a threat to accuracy*

In the legal profession, opposition to plain language stems primarily

from the claim that it leaves legal agreements vulnerable to loopholes or

misunderstandings. This is the argument of Jack Stark, in "Should the main

Goal of Statutory Drafting be Accuracy or Clarity?" Stark suggests that the

two aims (accuracy and clarity) are "based on very different assumptions, and

selecting one rather than the other will result in very different consequences"

(Stark, 1994, p. 207). He argues that accuracy is a more important goal and

produces more beneficial results than clarity (Stark, 1994, p. 207). His

argument hinges on how he defines the aims of plain language: to achieve a

lack of ambiguity and rapid comprehension (Stark, 1994, p. 207). By this

definition, the risks of plain language are far greater than the benefits:

> If [drafters] write a statute that is rapidly comprehensible and fulfils
>
> the requester's intent, they have done well, although the rapid

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[6] Joseph Kimble (1994) provides a more detailed discussion of common criticisms of plain language in his article "Answering the Critics of Plain Language."

comprehension is only a minor addition to the statute's value. If they

write a statute that is not rapidly comprehensible but fulfils the

requester's intent, they have done their job, although they will slow

down readers, **which is a trivial consideration**. If they write a

statute that is rapidly comprehensible and does not fulfil the

requester's intent, they have failed. (Stark, 1994, p. 209) (emphasis

mine)

As Stark explains, legal drafters must write documents that achieve a

specific legal intent, while plain language writers facilitate "rapid

comprehension" (Stark, 1994, p. 208). His definition is important, because it

implies that the only stumbling block of traditional forms of legal writing is

that they merely take longer to understand. He implies that plain language is

a strategy that reduces depth of meaning to cater to a lazy and passive

reader, much like a *Coles' Notes* version of a novel would. The implication is

that we shouldn't risk the integrity of the legal process for the "trivial

consideration" of careless, impatient readers.

Similarly, Jeffrey Barnes, a lawyer and law professor, presents several

case studies to demonstrate how plain language can be the source of "doubt"

in legal decision-making (in other words, plain language techniques make the

intended meaning of a law unclear or subject to judicial debate). In each case,

he identifies the specific plain language guidelines that the drafters appear to

have followed (short sentences, avoiding jargon, and so on); he then

summarizes the "sources of doubt," including the plain language technique

that contributed to the problem. However, the examples of "plain language"

revisions on which his argument rests suggest that, like Stark, Barnes is

using a definition of plain language that differs dramatically from what most

professionals would refer to as "plain." Below is an example of an original and

"plain language" revision that Barnes provides:

*Original:*

> A planning scheme approved by the Governor in Council shall
>
> not be invalidated or affected by reason only that any omission
>
> defect failure irregularity or informality in or in relation to the
>
> preparation exhibition or submission thereof is subsequently
>
> discovered.

*Revised "plain language" version:*

> (7) An amendment which has been approved is not made invalid
>
> by any failure to comply with Division 1 or 2 or this Division or
>
> Part 8. (cited in Barnes, 2010, p. 695)

The problem, as Barnes sees it, is that the new version of the

legislation indicates what will not invalidate an amendment, but not what, if

anything, *will* invalidate it. The revision, therefore, has introduced doubt.

But the argument that this plain language version introduced doubt rests on

the rather questionable assumption that this passage is in fact written in

plain language—I doubt any reputable plain language practitioner (or any sensible person) would agree.

Barnes considers the revision to be "plain" because some plain language guidelines have been applied (shortening sentences and removing unnecessary words). However, these kinds of changes alone are rarely enough to make a complex document "plain." Furthermore, the revision ignores at least two key plain language recommendations: first, that writers ought to avoid using negatives—particularly double-negatives (e.g., "will *not in*validate"); and second, that writers avoid the overuse of cross-references (i.e., passages that refer the reader outside the passage, as the references to "Division 1 and 2" do).

To Barnes' credit, in three of the four cases he cites, he admits himself that the "plain language" techniques were not directly responsible for causing the doubt; instead, he claims that the plain language strategy meant that the doubt was not *prevented*. In short, Barnes does not, unfortunately, distinguish between the poor *application* of plain language techniques and the techniques themselves. Barnes uses this faulty evidence to argue that the goals of making legal documents intelligible to the average person are too ambitious. But he has not shown that plain language strategies and legally sound documents are incompatible. In each of the cases, a revision to the text could be made to clarify the doubt while still providing a readable message.

It's also worth pointing out that if there is doubt in legal decision-making, it is more often caused by traditional legal writing strategies: Kimble (1994) cites a study which found that 25% of 500 contract cases contained some kind of interpretation difficulty—and that many of these difficulties were caused by problems in the drafting or negotiation (p. 80).

Not all complaints about plain language versions are as flawed as these, however. In response to Martin Cutts' proposed revision to the (UK) Timeshare Act 1992, parliamentary counsel Euan Sutherland parses Cutts' revisions to show where loopholes, ambiguity, and error (both of commission and omission) have been introduced by Cutts' changes. He concludes that "there is a price to pay for [Cutts'] clarification. It consists in sacrificing the policy, or certainty or aptness to simplicity of expression" (Sutherland, 1993, p. 164). In other words, the plain language version prioritizes style over substance.

Sutherland's rebuttal, however, rests in part on his belief that to try to make legal writing understandable to the public is pointless. For example, in one counter-argument he suggests that Cutts' changes are useless since, even though they define particular terms, the concepts are far too complex and tangled for the average person to grasp:

There are a number of provisions which you [Cutts] have, for very
sound reasons, been able to clarify only partially, with the result that

the reader is still entirely in the dark as to their meaning without legal

advice (p. 169).

He argues, in essence, that there is no point attempting to clarify anything if it's not possible to clarify everything. It does not seem to occur to Sutherland that perhaps the obscurity of such practices ought themselves to be addressed. Another interesting counter-argument is his resistance to Cutts' gender-neutral language (Cutts suggests that "he" be replaced by "he or she") (qtd. in Sutherland, 1993, p. 170). He says that "the use of 'he' is a valuable form of shorthand that enables statutes to be shorter and avoids the need to go to great lengths to ensure that each proposition applies in the same way to men as it does to women. Another advantage of the conventional use of 'he' is that it covers all legal persons" (p.170). Again, Sutherland seems unaware of the troubling implication of his statement: it is too much trouble to express equality in legal documents. Further, the notion that "he" can refer to all legal persons while "she" cannot highlights the very problem that Cutts' revisions attempted to address.

*Criticism #2: There is value to the complexity that plain language ignores*

What Stark, Barnes, and Sutherland assert is the importance of leaving legal drafting to the "experts" rather than to outsiders, who, according to Stark, "not only are likely to be wedded to the plain language school but also have insufficient knowledge of the exigencies of drafting"

(Stark, 1994, p. 170). "It is time," Stark adds, "for drafters to fill the vacuum into which the academics have rushed, to take responsibility for developing their own art" (p. 213).

The idea that academics are rushing in to *oversimplify* something might seem ironic to some. As was discussed in the introduction, obscure language has become one of the hallmarks of academia, where theoretical and technical terminology is virtually unintelligible outside individual academic departments, let alone outside the institution.

In defense of "difficult texts," scholar Marjorie Garber argues that dense theoretical writing, though criticized in the popular press, can be rewarding reading: "it is possible to consider a difficult text to be worth the trouble of deciphering it, and its difficulty may in fact be *part of the experience of reading*" (Garber, 2009, p. 99) [emphasis hers]. In fact, complexity can be considered almost as an intentional rhetorical device, employed to force readers to pay closer attention to the text. "It [rescues] the style from flatness, keeping the listener alert," Garber observes (p. 101). Even Aristotle himself advocates for this approach, Garber notes, when he argues that "by deviating form the normal idiom, the language will gain distinction" (qtd. in Garber, 2009 p. 100). But, Garber concedes, "When unintelligibility crosses the line from the charming to the opaque, nonsensical, 'barbarous,' or 'meaningless,' tempers get short" (p. 105).

What Garber implies is that within discourse communities, language use is precise and purposeful; whether or not readers outside those communities understand it is a secondary concern, if it is relevant at all. Their arguments also suggest that readers should expect to have difficulty reading these documents—the complexity of the ideas requires this complexity of language. Those who are unwilling to put in the effort do not deserve to understand. Along these lines, Spivak compares the experience of reading a difficult text to working out at the gym: "Have you seen the people who are really trying at those machines—groaning, but pushing? No pain, no gain? We know that in terms of the body. Why have we forgotten that in terms of the mind?" (Murray, 2003, p. 181).

*Criticism #3: Plain language leads to the "plaining of thought"*

Part of the reason academics defend the use of complicated language is the belief that plain language will bring with it a "plaining" of thought. Even George Orwell, who is often cited by plain language advocates as a model of clear communication, argued that we should strive to be fresh and original in our phrasings, lest we fall into a "reduced state of consciousness...favorable to political conformity" (Orwell, 1946). Critical discourse theorist Norman Fairclough argues that if discourse narrows, political homogenization is the logical outcome (2006). In his view, without diversity of discourse, the public is presented with a false choice between options that are essentially the

same. He argues that language should nurture democracy by enabling individuals and cultural groups to express differences positively, ensuring that a variety of voices are heard.

Plain language advocates respond to such criticism by arguing that plain language does not imply a limited vocabulary (Kimble, 1994). In fact, plain language does not dictate what words to use; instead, it urges writers to make strategic choices about what words will best fit their audiences. These decisions will differ from case to case, and plain language organizations can provide guidance, but not definitive rules, about how to make these decisions.

Opposition to plain language, while perhaps frustrating to plain language practitioners, is useful in focusing attention on areas where further research may be needed. The problems identified in this section can be converted into research questions for further study. For instance, does plain language oversimplify? Is there value in difficult texts? Does plain language lead to the "plaining of thought"?

## Studying plain language from the perspective of readers, writers, and texts

As the plain language movement has become more organized, it has made good progress in its efforts to share information and build a community of practice. To strengthen the movement, many in the field believe it is necessary to ground plain language work and approaches in research. First,

however, the plain language community needs to decide what questions it hopes to answer with this research. As Schriver and Gordon point out, research from a variety of fields could be of use to plain language practitioners. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have chosen to focus on challenges in three key areas: readers, writers, and texts. In the section that follows, I define each of these areas within the context of the current study; however, as will be the case in this review and throughout the dissertation, these three elements are deeply interconnected, each influencing the others. Emphasizing one element, such as writers, over the others can distort our understanding of how the writers and readers communicate with one another through text (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). Thus, in this study, I attempt to examine plain language using these three elements as an organizing framework, while recognizing the impossibility of understanding any one element in isolation from the others.

*Readers: Understanding and meeting diverse needs*

One of the greatest drivers of plain language as a movement is the large proportion of the public who have difficulty reading and understanding everyday documents. According to the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (2003), approximately 40% of Canadians function at a level below that needed to understand "increasingly difficult texts and tasks that characterize the emerging knowledge society and information economy" (Statistics Canada

and OECD, 2005, p. 35). In a survey of Canadians with low literacy, researchers asked what readers thought was "most important" in a written document. Of the respondents, the largest proportion (36%) indicated that it was most important that the document be written in plain language (Communication Canada, 2003, p. 2). This was followed by information being "easy to find" (28%) and providing "step-by-step" instructions (15%) (Communication Canada, 2003, p. 2).

In addition to the low level of literacy, plain language writers must also account for the diversity of readers in terms of their linguistic, cultural, and personal backgrounds, which inevitably shape their reading preferences and habits. As plain language and document design expert Karen Schriver explains, this diversity can have an important effect on how readers interact with and draw meaning from what they read: "readers' interpretations of content may be deeply entangled with their personal conditions and social position (with either their actual situation or the one they presume the speaker wants them to take on)" (Schriver, 1994, p. 188). This view is also consistent with literacy research, which has demonstrated that literacy rates are tied to a number of socio-demographic factors, including education, gender, age,[7]4 wealth, geography (urban/rural), and household size (Burnett & EFA Global Monitoring Report Team, 2006, p. 175).

Another consideration of reader-focused document development is how readers go about making sense of what they read. In one study of a federal

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[7] The relevance of age to literacy will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

regulation, Flower, Hayes, and Swartz (1983) found that when readers were asked to make suggestions or revisions, they frequently introduced "scenarios," presenting human agents completing an action that helped demonstrate the function of the document. Flower et al. concluded that the human element was a central part of helping readers comprehend and apply the information in a document. This finding suggests that a part of making a document reader-focused is to include elements that help readers see themselves in the text. Related strategies include addressing readers directly, as "you," and using "we" to identify the writer in more human terms. These strategies are consistent with audience theories that suggest audiences (readers) "fictionalize" themselves by taking on the roles that writers create for them (Ong, 1975). Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1984) recommend a modification to this view: rather than seeing the writer as the creator and the reader as following a fixed script, they see the relationship as more reciprocal. In speaking to the audience, the writer suggests or "invokes" the audience that it wants to speak to. At the same time, readers recognize these signals and, reciprocally, develop an impression of the writer addressing them. As Ede and Lunsford explain, in the process of reading and writing, "writers create readers and readers create writers" (1984, p. 169).

Perhaps the most important consideration plain language practitioners must keep in mind when considering readers is that readers are always situated in broader social and cultural systems. Where are readers when they

encounter the text? How much does the reader need to know in order to understand the text? How motivated is the reader likely to be to pay attention to the text? Is the reader likely to be receptive to this information, or resistant? These considerations can have an important impact on how readers interact with texts and what they get out of them.

*Writers: The uncertain role and identity of plain language professionals*
The past two decades have seen a proliferation of plain language efforts, and in the past five years, these individuals and organizations have begun to place increasing emphasis on unifying their approaches and practices. However, the scattered and isolated nature of most plain language practitioners poses a significant challenge in achieving this unity; individual plain language organizations often operate in isolation from one another and have their own established standards of practice (Harris, Kleimann, & Mowat, 2010). In addition, plain language, as a global movement, encompasses a wide variety of countries with their own laws, cultures, and languages. These countries are at various stages in adopting plain language practices, some with institutional or government support, others with less established programs. As a result, plain language professionals range in their autonomy, credibility, and professional roles from place to place, making it difficult to articulate a clear definition of their roles and professional

identities. Identifying common features or themes in professionals'

experiences, beliefs, and practices is an important first step in this process,

and the current study aims to contribute to this step.

As the plain language community evolves from a collection of isolated

individuals to a more cohesive community of practice, the need for shared

standards has also grown. These standards could potentially be used to

govern the quality of plain language texts and the qualifications of plain

language practitioners. As with the development of a plain language

definition, there is debate in the plain language community about whether

such standards should be based on elements (focusing on what goes into a

document, such as word choice, sentence length, and layout), outcomes

(results of reader testing, for example), or some combination of these two

(Harris et al., 2010). At the same time, there is also debate about how to

formalize plain language training and how to establish professional

standards that help ensure that people who do plain language work adhere to

shared standards (Harris et al., 2010). The hope is that by establishing these

standards, the plain language community could establish a stronger shared

identity. These standards would also pave the way to plain language

education and certification programs.

Also key to standardizing plain language practices and policies is

providing consistent training to support these best practices. Recognizing this

gap, the International Consortium for Clear Communication (IC Clear) was

established in 2011 with funding from the European Union. Its aim is to "develop, pilot and implement a postgraduate course in clear communication to respond to the increase in demand for clear, easy-to-understand information and the lack of well-trained clear communication professionals" (International Consortium for Clear Communication, 2011). As part of their work, they conducted a survey of clear communication professionals, asking about the skills and expertise they use in their work in order to identify common elements that should be included in the curriculum. The study findings indicated that clear communication work is interdisciplinary, including expertise beyond the fields of writing and editing: psychology, information design, usability, and project management were all named as areas that experts felt were relevant to this work (Hampl, Joerchel, & Poetscher, 2012).

In order for plain language to progress in achieving its aims, the movement must be supported by a community of qualified, competent practitioners. Organizations, conferences and publications have helped foster the development of a stronger network of plain language experts, and this network has already begun to take further steps to establish the credibility of plain language as a field of study. Still, the responses of plain language practitioners to the 2011 IC Clear Survey suggest that these professionals have not yet achieved the professional status they are striving for. Rigorous academic research can support the aims of plain language, but first, we need

to understand the current status of this client–professional relationship. Identifying where plain language practitioners lack authority or credibility is important in addressing these gaps. Thus, the second research question asks the following: what is the nature of the client-to-plain language professional relationship, and how do plain language practitioners negotiate within this relationship to produce plain language texts?

*Texts: The complexity of texts and how they produce multiple meanings*

Focusing on plain language texts provides an opportunity to consider what elements and features are considered "plain." It is also an opportunity to explore how a single text, even one that is written in plain language, can mean more than one thing from reader to reader and context to context.

To help those who are new to writing in plain language, guidebooks provide advice about word choice, sentence structure, and document design. A wide variety of checklists and guidelines have been established to identify the characteristics and features of plain language documents and help writers incorporate them (e.g., Cutts, 1995; Dumas & Redish, 1999; Felker, Pickering, Charrow, Holland, & Redish, 1981; Schriver, 1994; Williams, 1991). These recommendations frequently appear in bulleted lists like the following:

- Break up long sentences

- Don't put too much information before or between the main

  subject, verb and object

- Prefer active voice (Kimble, 1996, p. 7)

The wide accessibility of such guidelines has meant that the creation of

plain language documents is not restricted to professional writers, but is open

to a wider group of individuals who may be experts translating information

for their customers, patients, clients, or other stakeholders. In areas such as

law, health, and insurance, the use of such guidelines has helped not only

improve individual documents but also raised awareness and support for

accessible language and consumer rights more generally (Kimble, 1994).

 Most plain language professionals agree, however, that guidelines for

plain language texts have some important limitations. First, they argue, the

belief that documents can simply be "translated" into plain language, and

that comprehension problems are solely the result of poor lexical and

syntactic choices reflects an oversimplified understanding of language.

Rather than a system of one-to-one representation between words and

meaning, language is a far more complex, variable system in which meaning

is relative and subject to interpretation.

A second potentially problematic implication of the guideline approach is

that it interprets the skill and authority of the writer as the determining

factor in ensuring that readers understand. The presumed authority of the

author is apparent in many guidelines and checklists, such as the US *Federal*

*Plain Language Guidelines*, which counsels writers to "Start out by thinking about what your audience knows about the situation now. Then, think about how to guide them from their current knowledge to what you need them to know" (Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2011, p. 2). Urging writers to think about their readers is vital to the plain language process, to be sure. However, making writers *responsible for* readers' understanding potentially sets up the writer and reader in a hierarchy in which the author is entrusted to think for the audience, make assumptions about what they know and don't know, and decide how best to teach them what they need to know. Writers are identified as both the problem and its solution—leaving them once again in powerful positions that often, even if unintentionally, exclude readers.

Perhaps most importantly, guidelines and checklists risk reducing language and communication to a formula which, when strictly followed, is guaranteed to produce a particular kind of document. There is a great deal of evidence to show that writing "to formula" produces dubious results at best (Hochhauser, 1997; Redish & Selzer, 1985; Sand-Jecklin, 2007); and even the best guidelines do not always produce the results they promise. For example, Huckin, Curtin and Graham (1991) argued that effective writers often use practices that contradict plain language guidelines, calling into question the value of such instructions. Taking on one of the seminal handbooks, *Guidelines for Document Designers* (Felker et al., 1981), Huckin et al.

criticize the handbook's blanket advice to writers to "avoid 'whiz-deletions'" (the deletion of words like "which is" or "that are" which typically introduce and are intended to help clarify subordinate clauses) (p. 69). They showed that not only was there no convincing linguistic evidence for such a recommendation but there was much evidence from actual writers that whiz-deletions are a common—and effective—practice.

The criticism above is not to say that checklists and guidelines should not be used; these tools have raised awareness of plain language issues and helped writers improve their overall approaches. However, the failure of guidelines and checklists *alone* to adequately account for the process of writing plain language documents demonstrates that there are many other processes taking place behind the scenes when plain language writers translate documents for readers. Plain language professionals are clearly going beyond following rote lexical and syntactical guidelines.

As the above examples suggest, wording and sentence structure alone rarely account for the readability (or lack thereof) of documents. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, the complexity of documents can just as often be caused by what is left off the page; writers' beliefs, knowledge, and values (and their assumptions about readers' beliefs, knowledge, and values) influence what they decide is or isn't necessary to include in a text. While most people think of plain language as a matter of elements such as word choice and sentence

structure, these material features of language are only a part of the complex

process of developing plain language texts.

## Conclusion

As the variety of plain language literature demonstrates, plain language is a well-established movement that taps into diverse disciplines and professions. It draws from literature on language use and grammar to demonstrate how the structure of sentences and choice of words can greatly affect how easy or difficult a text is to read and understand. It builds on knowledge about literacy and the socio-economic factors that can influence literacy to help demonstrate the value of plain language not just for individuals, but for entire communities that are at risk. It uses knowledge from cognitive science and discourse processing to develop guidelines and suggestions that help steer writers towards practices that have been shown to improve readers' ability to understand texts. And it recognizes the importance of politics and policies in promoting plain language goals. Plain language experts have been able to organize themselves, advocate for clearer communication, and make their voices heard at the highest levels of government.

Despite its wide applicability in these fields, however, to date plain language as a practice and an area of study has been largely overlooked or rejected by academia. To bridge the theory and research of the academic community with the practical aims of plain language, this dissertation applies a theoretical framework and empirical research methods to a study of

this field. Using the rhetorical triangle as an organizing principle, the dissertation addresses questions about readers, writers, texts and the relationships between them. This approach not only provides insight into the challenges faced by the plain language movement, it also suggests possibilities for addressing these challenges through research and study in an academic context. In each area of the triangle, a method of studying plain language is proposed and tested, not only to learn more about how plain language works, but also to provide a model for future academic research in the field of plain language. Studying plain language using these frameworks also provides new insight into the frameworks themselves, broadening our understanding of the ways that language use has the power to include or exclude, and challenging public communicators, including members of the academic community, to reconsider what language they use, how they use it, and why.

# Chapter 3: A Review of Plain Language Research & Research Methodologies

As the previous chapter indicates, there are several key challenges facing plain language practitioners and the movement as a whole. Though plain language does not yet have a strong research tradition of its own, advocates in the field recognize the importance of establishing a grounding for plain language in research (Schriver & Gordon, 2010), and decades of research have been conducted to demonstrate the value of plain language strategies. Through formal and informal studies, practitioners are establishing best practices and a shared understanding of what it means to work in this field (Schriver & Gordon, 2010). However, as Schriver and Gordon point out in their (2010) assessment of plain language research, most plain language studies are conducted in isolation, and few studies are replicated. They note that lack of consistency in methods and measures makes it difficult to draw useful conclusions across studies or to see trends over time. A stronger research tradition could help foster progress in the development of and support for plain language activities.

In this chapter, I will review plain language research that has been conducted in the past, focusing on the kinds of research methods that have been used in these studies, and commenting on the strengths and weaknesses

of these methods. In the second part of the chapter, I will comment on the potential use of these methods to address the three areas identified in this project (readers, writers, and texts).

## Plain Language Research Methods

### 1. Quantitative methods

Many researchers and plain language advocates have tried to quantify the value and effectiveness of plain language documents. This kind of evidence is appealing because it is easy to explain to outsiders and because it is considered (rightly or wrongly) to provide a more objective evaluation of a phenomenon. These methods also tend to provide approaches that are easier to replicate, which adds to their perceived reliability and credibility. Three main quantitative methods that have been applied in plain language research are described below: readability formulas, which are based on counting lexical and syntactic elements; cost/benefit analyses, which involve evaluating whether plain language documents save time and money; and pre/post tests, which compare before and after documents using comprehension scores.

a) Readability formulas

Readability formulas are perhaps the best known—but also most controversial—kind of research approach used in evaluating texts. This approach is based on counting instances of text features, such as word,

sentence, and paragraph length and numbers of syllables, and using these to generate an overall readability score (usually associated with a school grade). Among the best-known readability formulas are the Flesch Reading Ease Scale, the Gunning Fog Index and the Dale-Chall readability formula. Readability formulas give writers a standard that is easy to understand and to measure their writing with. By applying these tests, they can get immediate, if not constructive, feedback on their writing. Most word processors have readability checkers, making it possible for writers, by trial and error, to "write to" a desired grade level, simply by shortening sentences and choosing simpler words.

The problem with readability formulas, as many plain language and other language experts have pointed out, is that they focus on only a few factors in the text, when in fact a much wider variety of elements can influence how easy or difficult a text may be to read (Redish & Seltzer, 1985). For example, the length of words and sentences have been shown by numerous studies not to predict how easily readers will understand a text (Schriver, 2000). Part of the problem, argues Thomas Duffy, is that readability formulas are not developed using real-life reading contexts: "the task being predicted, that is the task being used in the development in the form, is grossly different than the practical tasks for which texts and documents are used" (Duffy, 1985, p. 118).

Critics have also pointed out that readability formulas ignore research

about how people actually read (Redish & Selzer, 1985, p. 49). As Redish and Selzer explain, formulas assume readers gather meaning piece by piece, adding one word to another (in a "bottom-to-top" approach). However, research has shown that most readers tend to read "top-to-bottom": they look for the broad themes of the text or recognizable patterns, and then they use that framework to interpret individual words and sentences (Redish & Selzer, 1985, p. 49).

As Yellowlees Douglas puts it, readability formulas approach writing as an "iceberg": "word and sentence lengths are only the top-most, visible layer of a considerable process that remains beneath the surface" (Douglas, n.d., p. 9). A vital part of this iceberg isn't on the page at all: the unique exchange between the reader and the text. Every time they read a text, readers must make assumptions about the purpose of the text and how it is supposed to apply to themselves as readers. As Redish and Selzer's explanation suggests, to understand texts, readers draw from what they already know, and they learn to recognize recurring patterns and situations. Readability formulas do not account for the variety in readers and contexts—and therefore they should be used with extreme caution, if at all (Redish & Selzer, 1985).

Perhaps readability formulas, in generating such fierce debate, are most useful for having spurred critics to consider more carefully what elements should be considered in evaluating documents. Rather than relying on simplistic formulas, researchers must find ways to account for the rhetorical

and cognitive complexities of plain language. As linguist John Gumperz explains, language is more than its linguistic parts: it is not the signs alone that determine meaning but how the signs are interwoven with social knowledge (Gumperz, 1982).

b) Cost/benefit analyses

To demonstrate the difference that plain language can make, advocates have frequently used before-and-after examples, comparing the outcomes of original (non-plain) documents with plain language versions. These studies report that the use of revised documents increased productivity (Kimble, 1996) and client satisfaction (Balmford, 2002) and a reduction in errors (Kimble, 1996). Joseph Kimble's (1996) "Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please," provides a particularly useful summary of 25 studies that show the benefits of plain language in areas ranging from law, health, computers, communications, and government. He divides his summary into two parts: research studying cost benefits for companies and research showing the benefits for readers themselves. Projects included the rewriting of regulations for CB radio operators (regulations that previously generated enough questions to keep five staff members occupied) (Kimble, 1996, p. 7) and the improvement of form letters from Veteran's Affairs, which reduced the number of follow-up calls from recipients from 1,128 per year to 192 (Kimble, 1996, p. 7). Another study described how the rewriting of computer manuals

led to a reduction in calls to a help centre from 50 a day to 2 per month (Kimble, 1996, p. 7). He also describes a number of form revisions that saved days of staff time in processing and correcting errors (Kimble, 1996, p. 7).

Cost/benefit analyses are particularly important in swaying public opinion about plain language, and in convincing organizational leaders that such strategies are worth the investment in time and money. However, while these studies can show overall trends, they do not necessarily pinpoint the specific changes that led to improvements. They are also rarely possible to replicate because of the idiosyncratic nature of their contexts and documents. As a result, their conclusions operate as vivid exemplars rather than generalizable findings.

c) Pre/post testing

To gauge whether texts are easy to understand and use, another common method is to test readers' knowledge directly (rather than examining outcomes from their understanding or lack thereof). One such study is Maria Mindlin's (2005) quantitative readability study of plain language court forms. In her study, she asked 60 participants (citizens on a jury panel) to complete a questionnaire that compared their understanding of traditional forms to their understanding of plain language versions (Mindlin, 2005, p. 55). The questionnaires asked questions such as "What do you think this document is for?" and "What does this form tell you to do exactly?" (Mindlin, 2005, p. 55).

She found that, for readers who were encountering the forms for the first time, comprehension was much greater with the plain language versions than with the originals (Mindlin, 2005, p. 55). Interestingly, however, Mindlin points out that habituated readers (readers who are already familiar with the documents or use them on a regular basis) might not show improved comprehension or processing time with revised versions. Changes to the documents might slow these readers down, at least at first (Mindlin, 2005).

Other pre/post studies involve testing original and revised versions by asking participants to perform tasks, such as completing forms (Duckworth & Mills, 1996) or using computers (Schriver, 1994). Participants may be observed or timed during these tests to find out whether the revisions improve the ease with which these tasks are completed. In Swaney, Janik, Bond, and Hayes' (1991) study, the researchers compared readers' responses to three versions of a document: 1) the original, 2) a revision by editors without reader feedback, and 3) a revision by editors with reader feedback from think-aloud protocols. In the experiments, participants were asked to read a document aloud and comment as they went, and then they were asked to complete a questionnaire (which evaluated their comprehension of the document). Based on these comprehension scores, the researchers concluded that revisions made with reader feedback were more effective than those without. The researchers also noted, moreover, that revisions made by editors

without reader feedback actually *reduced* the readability of the document in one case.

Pre/post studies, moreso than cost/benefit analyses, allow researchers to pinpoint more closely what changes make a difference to readers. One important challenge with this approach, as with most plain language studies, is to find representative readers to participate. In the study by Swaney et al., researchers recruited participants at laundromats, reasoning that these customers would be more representative of the population than participants drawn from the usual college student pool. Adding to the challenge, in their study, several versions of the document were tested, and new participants had to be recruited each time.

2. Qualitative Research Approaches

Rather than applying standard guidelines or gathering statistics, qualitative approaches to plain language research seek to understand the reader's experience in greater detail. To achieve this, methods such as observations, focus groups, and interviews are used.

a) Paraphrasing

Using a less structured method than quizzes, Charrow and Charrow's (1979) study of jury instructions used a paraphrasing exercise to assess readers' comprehension of the text. They asked participants to paraphrase jury

instructions in order to evaluate how thoroughly they comprehended the instructions and to identify where they had difficulty. Both the instructions and the paraphrases were given orally rather than in writing in order to more closely simulate the courtroom process. This method allowed the researchers to gather very explicit evidence of what readers understood (and retained) from the instructions. In addition, where readers did appear to have difficulty, the researchers used the paraphrases to identify what features (grammar, word choice, sentence structure, etc.) most commonly contributed to these barriers (Charrow & Charrow, 1979).

A paraphrasing strategy can also be applied to written documents, providing an evaluation of what readers understand from texts. One important consideration is that this kind of research is fairly labour- and time-intensive, particularly compared with standard comprehension tests or gathering cost/benefit data after the fact.

b) Think-Aloud Protocols

Studies that require readers to report after reading can have many potential pitfalls, since readers' memories tend to be inaccurate if time passes between their reading of a document and their reporting of it (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). To avoid this delay between reading and reporting, researchers have found that asking people to say what they are thinking during the reading process to be a more effective strategy. Known as a think-

aloud protocol, this method is considered the most direct way to study thinking processes and decision-making (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

The insights provided by readers during think-aloud protocols have proven enormously useful to researchers and practitioners, particularly those who are interested in producing readable documents for a target audience. In plain language research specifically, protocol analysis has been used as a way of targeting areas of a text for revision (Swaney, Janik, Bond, & Hayes, 1991) and of helping writers better understand their audience's needs (Schriver, 1991).  Prominent plain language advocate Karen Schriver demonstrated the value of think-aloud protocols in her 1991 study, in which users attempted to navigate a manual on computer-aided design. Based on her findings, she developed a process model of protocol-aided revision, which comprised defining the task (or purpose of the document), identifying problematic parts of the text, identifying the cause of those problems, and developing strategies to address them (Schriver, 1991). While it is impossible to account for all the factors that may affect a reader's interpretation, Schriver's approach has been to encourage writers to respond to their readers' needs through the use of behaviour and read-aloud protocols (Schriver, 1991). She demonstrated that using reader-focused techniques such as protocol testing (asking readers to "think aloud" as they read a text) can help writers learn to anticipate reader needs in their planning and development of texts (Schriver, 1991).

Despite their numerous benefits, there are, however, some drawbacks to think-aloud and behaviour protocols as a research tool for plain language. First, protocols can be time-consuming to conduct, transcribe, and analyze. While protocols may give an immediate indication of where problems in the text lie, they may not always fill in the blanks as far as why problems occur or how to solve them (Schriver, 1989). In addition, the protocols do not provide a definitive evaluation of a document's quality, although in an iterative process they may allow researchers to identify if the problems in one version of a document have been resolved in a newer version (De Jong & Schellens, 1997, p. 407).

c) Plus-Minus Method

Often suggested as an alternative to the think-aloud method, the plus-minus method involves asking readers to review a text and mark passages with a "+" or "-" wherever they have positive or negative reading experiences, respectively (Schellens & De Jong, 1997). For example, a "+" in the margin might indicate where a reader enjoyed or thoroughly understood a passage; a "-" might indicate something the reader found difficult or offensive. Afterwards, participants are interviewed about their markings and asked to explain why they made each mark. Some researchers have argued that this method is better for conducting text-evaluation research than user protocols, since the latter are limited to use in "task"-oriented documents, focusing the

reader's attention and commentary in a more limited way (Schellens & De Jong, 1997; Sienot, 1997).

While the plus-minus method helps identify problematic passages and provides an opportunity to find out why readers found them problematic, it does not always guarantee that addressing these problems will make the text problem-free. De Jong & Rijnks (2006) note that testing and revising texts is a much different proposition than testing and improving tools or technology. In usability testing, problems should decline: problems are identified by users, fixed by developers, and the tool is retested. However, with text problems and changes, the results are not so predictable. De Jong and Rijnks found that even after a text had undergone a first round of feedback and careful revision, readers identified new problems or different kinds of problems that were either introduced during the revision or were made more visible as a result. In addition, they found that not all problems were problems of understanding—many related to acceptance (the persuasiveness of the text) or completeness (they felt something was missing). Thus, the plus-minus method can cast a wide net in terms of the problems it captures, making the revision process more challenging.

d) Interviews

In general, interviewing is used in combination with other methods of studying plain language. For example, interviewing was used as a follow-up

in a plus-minus study by De Jong & Rijnks (2006) to find out why participants made a particular mark at a particular point in the text. This strategy helped researchers better understand which points in the text posed serious problems, helping them decide whether or not to act on the comment to make a change or correction. Interviews were also used in a study conducted by Anne Kjaergaard (2012), in which she studied two municipal workers' use of plain language training in their business writing tasks. Neither of the research subjects had incorporated plain language techniques into their documents, despite having been trained. The interviews Kjaergaard conducted with the subjects shed important light on how the two writers felt that the plain language training was irrelevant to their work, and that they were being required to take the training by higher-ups who did not understand what front-line workers did or what experience they had. In short, they felt the plain language training was one more example of administrators butting in where their help was not needed.

As these examples suggest, interviews provide a more intimate, personal perspective on a research topic. As Perakyla (2005) explains, interviews are more likely than other kinds of methods to draw out details and broader experiences. This information can help provide a fuller context to the data gathered from a participant. Schriver (1989) notes that this approach also allows plain language researchers to ask follow-up questions to

gather a deeper understanding of how and why a reader reacted a certain way to the text.

While interviews enable more in-depth reflection, they also engage readers outside of the usual context in which they would encounter the text, and this could, therefore, generate responses that are less authentic. For this reason, interviews alone are likely less reliable than in combination with "in the moment" strategies such as protocols and plus-minus exercises.

e) Focus Groups

Focus groups gather ideas and opinions from a small group of people in a facilitated discussion. One of the most important advantages of focus groups is that they enable a researcher to gather a variety of perspectives in a relatively short span of time. With this method, plain language researchers also get a chance to see individuals interact and discuss the text, which helps provide insight into common attitudes and beliefs (Eagleson, Jones, & Hassall, 1990). However, unlike interviews, which encourage individuals to share personalized, contextualized detail, focus groups may end up capturing dominant attitudes and muting less popular views (Fern, 2001). In terms of text analysis specifically, Schellens and De Jong (1997) also argue that in the focus group setting, it can be difficult to keep participants focused on the specific features of the text (discussion is more likely to branch out into other types of topics). For this reason, they recommend focus group methods as

effective as a way of evaluating a document for its acceptance (which entails a discussion of attitudes and values), rather than for its readability.

f) Case Studies

Case studies involve the examination of individual examples (as opposed to large samples) as a way of studying a phenomenon in its unique context (Stake, 2013). Case studies can be particularly useful in language studies because of the wide variation between speakers in how they use language and for what purpose. As (Coupland & Jaworski, 2009) note:

> The importance of studying individual cases lies in the fact that language use is always subject to so many local contingencies, as well as wider social forces, that we inevitably miss some of the explanatory detail when we generalize. (p. 12)

The "local contingencies" referred to here are particularly important in the domain of law, where word choice and sentence structure can be the focus of intense scrutiny in making legal decisions. In his article, described in detail in Chapter 2, Jeffrey Barnes, a lawyer and law professor, presents four cases to demonstrate where plain language can be the source of "doubt" (in other words, plain language techniques make the intended meaning of a law unclear or subject to judicial debate). In each case, he identifies the specific plain language guidelines that the drafters appear to have followed (short sentences, avoiding jargon, and so on); he then summarizes the case and the

decision-making problem; and then describes the "sources of doubt," including the plain language technique that contributed to the problem. In three of the four cases, he admits himself that the plain language techniques were not directly responsible for causing the doubt; instead, he claims that the plain language strategy meant that the doubt was not *prevented*. Barnes' study thus provides an example of how a researcher's bias can have an important impact on the interpretation of case study data.

In addition to making a case for or against plain language, case studies can provide insight into the importance of the broader context of documents, from creation to reception. Mills and Duckworth, in *The Gains from Clarity*, describe research based on three case studies: a family court divorce application, an insurance form, and a city council building application. They aimed to study the three organizations both before and after the introduction of plain language forms in order to understand the impact of the new forms (Mills & Duckworth, 1996). To study these organizational changes, they placed a research assistant in the organizational environment in order to observe day-to-day activities; they conducted both qualitative and quantitative questionnaires; and they collected data on costs associated with implementing the new forms (as well as the costs of not implementing new forms). Like Mindlin, they found that new users have the most to gain from improved forms, so updating forms is most valuable when members of the

public will be using the forms (always first-time users) or when there is a high turnover of staff (Mills & Duckworth, 1996).

In the case of the divorce forms, the plain language forms resulted in higher completion rates, improving from 52 to 67% (Mills & Duckworth, 1996, p. 26). In addition, the incidence of errors declined from 30 to 7% (p. 31). The changes in insurance documents resulted in a significant increase in the number of applications immediately accepted, rising from 60 to 81% (p. 46). They note that savings arose from this improvement, since fewer further inquiries were needed. They divided outcomes into direct and indirect effects: direct, being improved processing times, and indirect, including improvements in product quality, design, structure, processing and administration.

Kjaergaard's (2012) case study (noted above) included both a qualitative analysis based on interviews and a quantitative assessment based on a text analysis of letters by two municipal employees who had taken plain language training. The text analysis measured the occurrence of certain text features. She concluded that neither employee had incorporated many of the plain language strategies in their writing; more importantly, however, the case study approach enabled her to explore why this was so, by looking at the contextual factors that potentially influenced their approach to using (or not using) the new strategies they had learned. Despite the training they received, the employees held powerful assumptions and attitudes about their

roles, and felt that their experience and knowledge about how to do their jobs should override advice from outsiders who, they felt, knew little about their work (Kjaergaard, 2012). The structure of their work also made the implementation of standardized approaches difficult since the employees wrote independently of one another without oversight or advice, and no follow-up to the training was provided to ensure that employees were using what they had learned (Kjaergaard, 2012, p. 20). Kjaergaard's work demonstrates the importance of considering the cultural and personal context of plain language documents as these unseen factors can determine the success or failure of a document to reach its audience.

Both Kjaergaard's and Mills and Duckworth's research demonstrates the importance of examining plain language documents within the context of relationships and processes. Both studies focus primarily on document creation rather than reception. However, their success in elucidating attitudes and beliefs using this method bodes well for the use of a similar approach studying the recipients of plain language texts. Both studies also address the notion of resistance to change among organizations. For example, even when original forms are poorly written or designed, it can be difficult to convince users to adopt a change (Mills & Duckworth, 1996, p. 69). This point links in with Mindlin's remark that habituated users have less to gain from a change in forms. Similarly, in the case of the municipal government staff, resistance appears to be based on writers' feelings that as experienced

employees, they "know best" when it comes to reaching their target audience. This response demonstrates the challenge that plain language practitioners face when they enter organizations as outsiders to the culture and practices of an organization.

What none of these plain language case studies does, however, is examine *readers*. The most useful example of this type of examination is literacy research by Deborah Brandt. In her (2001) *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt interviews several different individuals and asks them to share their personal histories, drawing specifically on the ways in which their access to literacy (via education, family context, and local community) has affected their development as people and their progress in socio-economic terms (their career paths). Her analysis shows how greatly a person's individual life chances can be influenced by these contextual factors. Her approach provides a useful model for exploring plain language documents from the perspective of readers—understanding a reader's approach to a document within a broader context of his or her reading experience and preferences.

A review of plain language methodologies demonstrates the range of possibilities for studying this topic. The variety of methodologies is in response to the wide range of questions that can be asked about plain language practices. In the chapters that follow, I will explore three different models for studying plain language, with each study focused on one area of

the rhetorical triangle. To study `readers`, I will use a case study model that incorporates data from interviews, read-aloud protocols, and a focus group. To study `writers` (plain language professionals), I will use questionnaire data analyzed and coded using grounded theory. Finally, to study `texts`, I will conduct a text analysis based on discourse analysis and sociolinguistics.

By conducting three different studies, I hope to generate new knowledge about plain language; I also hope to provide insight into possible research models that could be used to conduct further plain language research.

# PART I: READERS

## Chapter 4: Plain Language & Reading Processes

When we talk about rhetorical strategies and processes, we tend to think of them in terms of choices that writers make when trying to persuade their audiences. When viewed from this perspective, readers are relatively passive, their only action being either to accept or reject the writer's persuasive attempts. However, viewing these rhetorical processes from the reader's perspective instead of the writer's provides an opportunity to examine how readers are themselves contributors to the persuasive process. In his *Reading as Rhetorical Invention*, Doug Brent argues that reading is a fundamental part of rhetorical invention and demonstrates that writer, reader, text, and context, interact to influence the production of knowledge through reading (1992). Drawing from literary theory and cognitive discourse processing theories and situating both of these in a rhetorical framework, Brent presents readers as active partners in a rhetorical exchange. As he explains, readers bring their own unique experiences and knowledge to the text; they evaluate and interpret the text; and they decide whether and how to assimilate the information into their existing "repertoire" of knowledge (Brent, 1992, p. 39).

What is emphasized in this framework is that meaning does not reside in the text, waiting to be discovered; it is up to the reader to interpret the text to derive this meaning for him or herself—and no two readers will do this in the same way (Brent, 1992). Understanding how readers participate in this

transaction is thus important to understanding the full rhetorical picture of reader-writer-text.

## Reading and plain language

The rhetorical role of the reader has been relatively unexamined in the literature on plain language, and yet we know that this role is significant. We also know that rhetorical processes are closely intertwined with cognitive processes: rhetoric gives us the conventions and patterns that help us interpret and respond to the world around us. With this in mind, it would be impossible to talk about the role of the reader in plain language without examining the cognitive processes of reading. While I am not going to be able to address all questions about reader comprehension here, I will examine some important cognitive theories of reading to show how these frameworks are relevant to plain language practices. I will also show how the existing cognitive research on reading supports what plain language practitioners have been promoting.

## What happens when readers encounter texts?

While plain language tends to focus on the text and the outcomes of readers' engagement with texts, cognitive science gives us an opportunity to look more closely at what readers are doing *during* the reading process. At its most basic level, reading encompasses a series of cognitive operations that

allow readers to interpret individual words on a page, connect them to form

larger idea units, and ultimately develop mental models to represent the

meaning of the text (Underwood and Batt, 1996). Plain language approaches

reflect a belief that text comprehension is a type of problem solving, but for

experienced readers, the task is often less intentional; perception might be a

more accurate term (Kintsch, 2005). The elements of the reading process that

are considered deliberate and conscious, such as strategic reading based on

goals, are typically referred to as "top-down" or explanatory processes (Van

Den Broek et al., 2005, p. 301). But many theorists argue that the process is

in large part automatic or "bottom-up" (McKoon & Ratcliff, 1998).[8]

It is precisely because of the automatic or unconscious nature of this

perception that it is difficult to investigate what actually happens when

people read. However, it is clear that the reader is engaged in a number of

complex processes; far from being passive vessels that receive input, readers

interact with the texts they read on a number of levels. At the centre of the

reader's task is the construction of a mental model. In this chapter, I examine

how plain language strategies support the development of this model;

specifically, plain language strategies anticipate readers' goals, help readers

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[8] There is considerable debate between theorists who believe text processing to be
primarily "top down" (based on a strategic "search for meaning" structured by the
reader's schematic memories and goals) and those who believe it to be "bottom up"
(based on a passive process activated by perception) (Van Den Broek, 2005).
However, a growing number of theorists argue that the best model of comprehension
integrates both these approaches (e.g., Kintsch, 2005; Van Den Broek, 2005).

make inferences, support readers' memory processes, and supplement readers' existing knowledge.

*Mental models*

Honeck and Hoffman (1980) explain that linguistic meaning, rather than being located in language, exists in the relation between the text and the reader. To negotiate this relationship, readers draw from the text to develop "mental models." According to Underwood and Batt (1996), readers are constantly engaged in forming models and building on them. Reading is understood as a process in which the brain recognizes written symbols and combines them to form larger idea units and further developing meaning by combining and interpreting these units (Underwood and Batt, 1996).

One common belief among researchers in this area is that the models we develop are more than the sum of their text parts--beyond the words on the page and even beyond the units of meaning that these words form. One way to think about these models is in terms of recalling information from a text. After reading a passage or definition, readers may not remember the exact wording, but they remember the "gist" of what was said. This internalized understanding is the readers' mental model of the text—what the text means to them. Elements of perception, cognition, and problem solving all contribute to shaping mental models (Kintsch, 1998).

Perhaps the most authoritative theorist on this topic is Walter Kintsch, who developed the construction-integration (CI) model to describe

the process of text comprehension (1998). This model sees comprehension as a combination of top-down and bottom-up processing in which readers come to a text with experiences, knowledge, and schemas that must be adapted flexibly to accommodate the new information perceived in the text. In this model, readers first develop a "textbase" from the information given on the page. The textbase is the assembly of smaller word and idea units presented in the language and grammar of the text. This stage is an important entry point for plain language guidelines since, as Nassanji (2002) explains, the written text provides the foundation for the reader to begin constructing meaning:

> It is the quality of the shared arguments and embedded propositions, as well as the strength of their association, that determines the creation of a coherent textbase. If the reading passage lacks these necessary properties. . .these connections will not be appropriately established and the construction process will be seriously impaired. (p. 463)

Consistent with this finding, one recommendation of plain language writers is to avoid problems such as dangling or misplaced modifiers (which put describing words and phrases too far from their targets), passive voice (which can bury or eliminate agents in sentences) and subject-verb disagreement (Pringle, 2006). Shorter, less wordy sentences, and the use concrete rather than abstract terms are also recommended (Williams, 1986/1991).

These features may seem simple or even trivial, but research has demonstrated that "surface features—the readability variables—with all their limitations have remained the best predictors of text difficulty as measured by comprehension tests" (DuBay, 2004). The written text may not be all, but it provides the essential foundation that structures the comprehension process. In this way, plain language advice dovetails nicely with existing beliefs about text processing techniques.

The CI model has four important implications for plain language theory. First, it suggests that a text must tap into readers' goals and expectations to engage readers. Second, this model emphasizes the active role that readers play in making inferences to fill gaps in the text. Third, the model helps us understand the importance of triggering memories and associations, which allow readers to contextualize new information. Without this knowledge readers may have great difficulty in integrating this information in a way that allows them to understand and benefit from it. Fourth, this model emphasizes the importance of a reader's prior knowledge in the comprehension and meaning-making process. In the section that follows I explore each of these four concepts in greater detail.

*Goals*

In the reading of any text, readers have expectations and goals that direct their attention (Long, 2005), and these are shaped in large part by the context of the reading, meaning, where, when, and why a reader is

encountering the text. The nature of readers' goals in a given context also influences how they process the text (Van Den Broek et al., 2005), leading them to narrow their focus to particular elements or ideas in the text (Gerrig and O'Brien, 2005).

In addition to goals, readers approach texts with expectations about the nature of text they are reading. These expectations are formed through their previous knowledge about and experiences with similar texts. Typical forms of communication, or "speech genres" structure virtually all our communication, from everyday greetings to more formal addresses (Bakhtin, 1986/2008, p. 99). They not only assist us in framing our utterances, but they also direct us as to how to respond to other speakers. Thus, our expectations of certain communication contexts or genres have a powerful influence on how we interpret what we read (Van Den Broek et al., 2005). As Kintsch (2005) notes, "What we see is in part determined by what we expect to see" (p. 217).

The idea that readers approach texts with their own goals and expectations—and that these can vary from reader to reader—is particularly relevant to a study of plain language. In general, plain language advocates recommend that writers "consider the needs of their audience" (Kimble, 1995-1996, p.5), emphasizing that the text (and specifically the writer) should accommodate the reader. But as accessible as a writer can make a text, it still remains for the reader to engage with it and derive meaning. Cognitive

literature suggests that readers have a much greater role in constructing meaning; for some, they are considered "partners" in the process, with as much to contribute as writers themselves (Kucer, 1985). The reader's goals can thus have an important impact on the shape of the textbase and, in turn, on their growing understanding of the text.

*Inferences*

In language, we find a system of symbols that allows us to construct models that help us understand the world (Kellogg, 1994). However, these symbols never fully capture what it is we want to say. As Honeck and Hoffman (1980) argue, "to attribute meaning to words is to overestimate the equivocality of language" (p.92). Exploring the structure and function of language provides insight into how language always operates as an approximation of meaning, requiring readers to fill in the blanks using their own background knowledge and beliefs. If language alone cannot account for the formation of meaning, how do readers understand the texts they read?

According to theorists such as Lakoff (1988), the structure of human experience (at both a physical, bodily level and in terms of our ability to use abstract concepts) provides the foundation for how we interpret language and texts. In other words, humans' experiences may be diverse, but the structure of these experiences is likely to be similar from person to person. This shared structure is a constraining factor that keeps the frame of possible meanings

narrow enough for us to be able to "guess" at meaning when there is more than one possibility.

In order to fully understand a text, readers must be able to link the text units together and fill in any "gaps" in the text. In order to do this, readers make inferences as they read. Two categories of inferences are important in this process: bridging (or "necessary") inferences, which enable us to understand sentences and make the links between them, and elaborative inferences, which enable us to connect the text information to previous knowledge or experiences (Singer and Remillard, 2004). Singer and Remillard provide a helpful example to explain the difference between these two kinds:

> Valerie left early for the birthday party. She spent an
>
> hour shopping at the mall. (p.1223)

A *bridging* inference that a reader would probably make in this instance is that Valerie went to the mall *before* going to the party, even though this is not explicitly stated. This inference explains the connection between the two sentences and makes the text coherent. An *elaborative* inference the reader might make would be that Valerie was taking a present to the party. This kind of inference allows the reader to paint a fuller picture of what is going on in a given text.

Both bridging inferences and elaborative inferences can occur automatically, through the process of "spreading activation." Underwood and

Batt (1996) describe spreading activation as "facilitation-without-inhibition,"

in which "one word will permeate an associative network of words. When one

word is recognized, all associated words will become partially activated" (p.

81). While these processes may be unconscious, the goals of the reader play

an important role in directing readers to weed out unnecessary inferences

and focusing on those that are relevant to the situation at hand (Gerrig and

O'Brien, 2005; Kintsch, 2005). If the goals of the reader are not met by these

initial inferences, the reader will engage in a more conscious kind of

inferencing. For example, if the reader is unable to make sense of the text at

first pass, a secondary process of "searching for meaning" is employed to

search deeper long-term memory stores for information that may help

construct understanding (Gerrig and O'Brien, 2005). In this way, the reader's

goals help confirm (or reject) inferences in a cyclical process, until the goals

are satisfied.

Without the reader's inferences, texts remain unassembled pieces. If

inferences are not supported, or the wrong inferences are triggered, the result

can be inefficiency in comprehension at best and derailment of understanding

at worst (Sanford and Garrod, 2005). Plain language can assist readers in

both kinds of inferencing processes. In bridging inferences particularly, the

advice of readability experts is particularly relevant. Armbruster (cited in

DuBay, 2004) recommends using "highlighting" to help readers make

connections between words and sentences. These include strategies such as

the regular use of pronouns to remind readers of previous nouns; resumptive modifiers—words that refer back to a previously mentioned concept (e.g., *Skating* is the most popular winter *activity* in Canada. *This sport* combines speed, grace, and balance.); and conjunctions, such as and, but, so, or, nor, yet, for, which help signal connections and relationships between ideas (p. 34).

Writers must also be conscious of the myriad ways readers may make unexpected connections or associations. As Sandford (2005) notes, "The important thing in designing utterances is to avoid unwanted effects creeping into the interpretations we make" (p.214). For this reason, plain language advocates such as Kimble (1996-1997) recommend that writers use language that their readers will recognize: "Use familiar words—the ones that are simple and direct and human" (p. 7). From a cognitive science perspective, familiar words are words that readers are more likely to have associations with, and are therefore more likely to recognize and interpret. Klare (1968), in reviewing the research on word frequency, concluded that the use of familiar words was an important factor in readability, noting that some words are used more often than others and are thus more easy for readers to recognize and interpret (qtd. in DuBay, 2004, p. 16). This finding is consistent with plain language philosophies that emphasize the importance of starting where the reader is and building on that knowledge and experience with new information (Stephens, 2000).

Another strategy of plain language is to address readers directly as "you" and "we" or by framing information in terms of questions that readers might have (Pringle, 2006). Direct address is important in inference making because it gives the reader information about where they are situated in relation to the text, and what, if any, action they are expected to take. The importance of these strategies to reading comprehension is demonstrated by the headings in Fig. 4.1. It's difficult to infer from the "Before" version what the reader might expect to find in each section. The "After" version helps support these inferences in two key ways: first, by providing more simple words, and second, by placing the reader in the text, making it clearer how the information might apply to them. These two strategies help the reader understand the information and see what their role is within it.

The consideration of inferencing processes and the importance of language use within these processes is powerful support for plain language approaches. Not only do word choice and structure allow a reader to recognize written texts, but these elements also trigger a complex series of interpretations and associations that help readers fully grasp the meaning of the text.

**Before:**

95.455 Authorized frequencies

95.457 Policy governing the availability of frequencies.

95.437 Limitations on antenna structures.

95.511 Transmitter service and maintenance.

95.613 Transmitter power.

95.509 External radio frequency power amplifiers prohibited.

**After:**

95.407 On what channels may I operate?

95.408 How high may I put my antenna?

95.409 What equipment may I use at my CB station?

95.410 How much power may I use?

95.411 May I use power amplifiers?

*Figure 4.1* Before and after text from FCC Regulations for CB operators. Text adapted from "Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please," by J. Kimble, 1996, *Scribes J. Leg. Writing, 6*, p. 8.

*Memory processes*

Memory processes are essential to readers' ability to make inferences and build on them. These processes tend to occur automatically, without reader even being conscious of what they are doing (Van Den Broek et al., 2005). Two types of memory are particularly relevant to making inferences: working memory, which allows the individual to develop a growing understanding of text and long-term memory, which allows readers to draw on their existing knowledge and previous experiences (Sandford & Garrod, 2005).

Working memory is important in that it enables readers to make connections between different parts of the text at the same time as they continue to take in new information. As they encounter words and concepts, readers' memory of information or concepts from earlier parts of the text is triggered (Van den Broek et al., 2005). At the same time, as the reader encounters text, previous associations and meanings (established prior to the reading of the text) are unconsciously activated from the reader's long-term memory, in the process of spreading activation described above.

Previous associations between ideas exist largely in the form of schemata and scripts. Schemata are groupings of related associations that centre on a particular concept (Kintsch, 2005). For example, the concept of "dog" has related words and associations like "best friend," "bark," "loyal," "leash," "bone," "walk." Depending on the person, "dog" might hold more

specific associations, like "golden retriever" or "Max." Not all the associations

that are activated are necessarily directly relevant to the situation; they are

unconsciously raised or "primed" in case they are needed (Sanford and

Garrod, 2005 p. 233). As Kintsch (2005) explains,

> Once established, a schema is a powerful determinant of how
>
> additional sentences are interpreted: Material that fits the schema is
>
> definitely at an advantage and material that is ambiguous would, at
>
> least initially, be interpreted in a schema-conforming way. (p. 127)

Research has shown that the repetition of features across a text speeds up

this reactivation process, such that the more elements that are shared, and

the closeness of these earlier and later references, the more easily a reader

recognizes and reactivates earlier concepts (Van den Broek et al., 2005). This

is particularly relevant to plain language development, since text design can

have an important impact on how readers recognize, recall, and interpret

information. Repetition of keywords and summarizing transitions are well-

known strategies to skilled writers, but understanding *why* these elements

matter from a cognitive perspective provides greater insight into the

complexity of this process and the interaction between the reader and text.

Once the textbase has been established, the reader then sets about

integrating this understanding into his or her broader existing knowledge.

Here, the reader's long-term memory comes into play. Some theorists

describe this process as "mapping" (Nassanji, 2002, p.444 ) because ideas

from the text are mapped onto the reader's existing schematic knowledge. In

other words, during mapping readers are engaged in a process of deciding

how a text fits within what they already know or are familiar with. This

process helps the reader develop a "situation model," a mental representation

that follows the development of the textbase (Van Dijk, Kintsch, & Van Dijk,

1983). The textbase consists of the grammatical and coherence features of the

text, and the situation model builds on this with the reader's prior knowledge

of similar texts and situations (McNamara, Kintsch, Songer, & Kintsch,

1996). As Van Dijk, Kintsch, and Van Dijk explain, the situation model is

"the cognitive representation of the events, actions, persons, and in general

the situation, a text is about" (1983, p. 12). In essence, the situation model

mediates between the textbase and the wider discourse in which the reader is

situated (Sandford & Garrod, 2005).


*Existing knowledge*

As has been explained above, the information from the text "activates"

the reader's existing understanding of context and expectations, and in turn

these operate as selective mechanisms that help highlight relevant meanings

from the text (Nassaji, 2002). The reader looks for a place to "fit" the text

information most appropriately within their existing beliefs, knowledge, and

expectations. Consistent with this theory, Cook and Guéraud (2005) argue

that general world knowledge has an important role in text comprehension.

They explain that it can influence how readers interpret ambiguous words, make associations between concepts, and understand events as part of larger scenarios. Knowledge built up through experience and familiarity also contributes to faster processing. Callies et al. (2002) showed how knowledge factors into both the order of processing and the length of time it takes by comparing beginner, intermediate, and advanced readers. Advanced and intermediate readers were more likely to read texts more quickly and more accurately than beginners, likely because, they suggest, advanced and intermediate readers have existing memory that allows them to rapidly retrieve information without having to rely on textual coherence. Callies et al. explain that beginning readers, on the other hand, rely more heavily on the surface text, searching the text in a more systematic fashion to see how one sentence leads into the next.

These theories imply that the more experienced the reader, the greater the proportion of meaning making comes from the reader's existing knowledge. Thus, the text becomes a trigger or a reference point that the reader checks his or her knowledge and assumptions against to add to what he or she already knows. Beginner or general readers, on the other hand, are far more reliant on the text to provide complete meaning. Unlike advanced readers, they cannot rely on their own experience to fill in gaps in the text. For these readers, explicit, coherent texts are vital to successfully assembling meaning (Callies et al., 2002).

Existing knowledge helps readers retrieve information, and it also helps them retain it longer. Research has demonstrated that students with existing knowledge about topics such as baseball or spiders remembered more about episodes about those topics than other participants did, and they better anticipated the outcomes of the stories (Du Bay, 2004). Based on a number of experiments with college-level readers, Kim and Van Dusen (1998) argue that textbook authors and lecturers in particular should consider supplementing readers' prior knowledge by providing elaborations that help readers establish a well-developed model of the information. Clearly, low-literacy readers are not the only ones who can benefit from plain language texts; even college level graduates learn and remember information better when they have a broader understanding of the meaning. This is particularly important for novices in a field, who are learning to take on academic voices within a particular discipline.

Cognitive science presents a complex picture of readers, engaged in both active and unconscious processes. The text triggers responses in readers in a variety of ways that writers can recognize and build on. These theories are consistent with the notion that readers are active in the rhetorical exchange. Taking this a step further, if we think of the reader as a responsive partner, then plain language strategies are not only working at a literal, informational level, but also at a more conceptual, cognitive level. Plain language incorporates strategies such as providing clear textual clues to help

readers form clear expectations of the text genre; structuring texts to provide

"cues" to direct readers' activation of specific schemata and scripts; and

paying attention to the prior knowledge of readers and providing elaborative

information where necessary.

Though there is still much to be learned about how we read and

understand, what we know so far suggests that plain language texts help

support these processes, making it easier for readers to read, understand,

and engage with the texts they encounter. Through a variety of strategies,

plain language texts help readers develop mental models, using rhetorical,

linguistic, and design techniques that help scaffold the reader's existing

goals, inferences, memory, and prior knowledge.


## Do difficult texts have cognitive benefits?

In the previous section, I described how readers process texts and some of the

strategies and features that plain language writers use to support these

processes. It seems logical to suggest that writers should use these strategies

to make the comprehension process easier for readers. However, as discussed

in Chapter 2, some critics have suggested that "difficult texts" can have

cognitive benefits, in terms of understanding and retaining information

(Culler & Lamb, 2003b; Garber, 2009; Murray, 2003). For example, theorist

Marjorie Garber (2009) argues that dense theoretical writing can be

rewarding for readers: "it is possible to consider a difficult text to be worth the trouble of deciphering it, and its difficulty may in fact be *part of the experience of reading*" (p. 99) [emphasis hers]. In Garber's view, complexity can be considered almost as an intentional rhetorical device, employed to force readers to pay closer attention to the text. Along these lines, McNamara et al. (1996) suggest that gaps in texts are not necessarily a bad thing. They also observed that readers tended to engage in more "active processing" when faced with poorly written texts (p. 24). They had to fill in gaps and draw on pre-existing knowledge to understand the text, and this led to greater overall learning. Rather than suggesting that plain language is unnecessary, these arguments emphasize that plain language may not need to account for every ambiguity; in fact, perhaps it shouldn't, if the text hopes to stimulate thinking and retention in certain groups of readers:

> Coherence is of crucial importance for understanding, but deeper understanding results when readers make their own bridging inferences and derive their own macrostructure. (McNamara et al., 1996, p. 6)

The researchers point out, however, that this active processing was only possible for those who had prior knowledge about the topic in the text; those who had no prior knowledge required a text that was fully coherent and explicit (McNamara et al., 1996, p. 31). This issue of "prior knowledge" is one of the key stumbling blocks in developing readable documents; as described

earlier, discourse communities develop shared ways of knowing that become tacit within their fields, resulting in an "insider" language. As Pringle (2006) explains,

> We all know what we mean when we talk about medical jargon, engineering jargon or any other kind of jargon. It is specialized vocabulary used by an "in" group and it excludes others, albeit perhaps not intentionally. A doctor may talk jargon to another doctor, but when the patient is included, doctors should try to avoid jargon, so that the patient understands as well. (p.14)

The point here is, once again, that writers must consider their audiences when developing texts. This point isn't necessarily inconsistent with the argument of Garber and McNamara et al., who suggest that the best texts do not think for their readers, but make it possible for them to participate and engage with the text. Plain language has a key role to play in ensuring that a wide range of readers is able to do so—so long as authors also make the effort to understand for whom they are writing, and so long as they shape their texts accordingly, completing this dynamic and interactive rhetorical triangle.

## Conclusion

Both cognitive science and plain language are emerging fields that draw from a variety of disciplines, and both can help us develop new ways of

understanding and producing texts. While cognitive science gives us a model for understanding how readers comprehend texts, plain language helps us design texts that help make it easier for readers to succeed in this comprehension process. No theory yet can fully account for the reading and comprehension process (Nassaji, 2002); nevertheless, what we understand so far about this process suggests that plain language texts are very compatible with and supportive of the reading process. As plain language experts look for research and evidence to provide support for their methods, cognitive science could be an important source of this information.

The findings from cognitive science and the practices of plain language can also be usefully situated within the broader framework of rhetorical theory. Rhetorical theory emphasizes the importance of context and interaction in the exchange of meaning. The cognitive research summarized here confirms that these rhetorical concepts are more than aesthetic or conventional; they are central to how our brains perceive and process information. Similarly, the rhetorical strategies that plain language texts employ to anticipate and persuade readers are also tapping into cognitive processes. Exploring this rhetoric-cognition connection in a plain language context, the next research challenge might be articulating more specifically and explicitly how certain strategies and patterns in text trigger particular reader thought processes. But even without this level of precision, showing how plain language strategies map onto cognitive processes is a powerful way

to build on evidence-based approaches. For plain language professionals, these processes and principles can be useful not only in planning and writing plain language texts but also in supporting and justifying their approaches to external audiences.

In the two studies that follow this chapter, I am not "measuring" cognitive comprehension of plain language texts. However, I will continue to draw on these concepts to analyze and describe how texts are put together by writers and understood by readers. Terminology from cognitive science is also a useful way to frame and understand the ways readers and writers describe their experiences. With this in mind, the dissertation now shifts to focus on gathering information directly from individuals in two areas of the rhetorical triangle: readers and writers. In the two chapters that follow, I examine their reading and writing processes using a variety of qualitative research methods.

# Chapter 5: Reading Between the Lines: Case Studies of Three Older Adult Readers

## Introduction

As discussed in the research review, the bulk of plain language research focuses on the inputs of plain language (the linguistic and design features of texts) or the outcomes (whether certain aims are achieved, such as comprehension or satisfaction). What few studies explore is what happens *between* the inputs and outcomes: specifically, what happens as readers interact with the text. Even rarer are plain language studies that explore in depth the readers themselves, examining the experiences, knowledge, and attitudes they bring to a text. To widen the scope of plain language research from input and outcome models, this study was designed to engage directly with readers, seeking to understand how they interact with a sample text and how that interaction might be influenced by their personal characteristics as readers.

Another key factor that emerged from previous plain language research was the limited population focus of most studies. For the most part, plain language studies have focused on young, college-aged adults, largely for convenience sake (Schriver & Gordon, 2010). As Schriver and Gordon have

pointed out, more research is needed to understand the impact of plain language with other populations. Groups such as older adults or other vulnerable groups, such as those with low literacy or low income, are particularly important to consider in plain language studies since communicating clearly may have a particularly important effect on their ability to access services and benefits that they need. For this reason, this dissertation focuses on older adults[9] (aged 65+), a population of growing size and significance that has not been considered extensively in plain language research.

*Older adults and plain language*

There are several reasons why older adults are an important population to consider in plain language research. First, as mentioned above, research with traditionally understudied populations will add diversity to the plain language literature. More importantly, however, it will add to research that considers the input of those who may need plain language the most: marginalized populations with less education or independence. Older adults provide an important example of such a population, particularly because of the low literacy levels that have been reported in this group.

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[9]A variety of terms are used to refer to adults 65 and older: "older adults," "seniors," "elderly," "aged." In the data collection process, I used the term "senior," following the RCMP's guide. However, in consultation with researchers at the Schlegel-University of Waterloo Research Institute for Aging, I learned that the term "older adult" is more widely used in literature and is generally preferred by members of this population. With this in mind, I have used the term "older adult" in my discussion of this research, unless I am quoting what another speaker has said.

In Canada, older adults are the fastest growing portion of the population; the number of older adults is expected to double from 4.2 million (13.2%) in 2005 to 9.8 million (24.5%) in 2036 (Turcotte & Schellenberg, 2006, p. 12). According to ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, it is estimated that 80% of Canadian older adults' literacy skills are considered "low" and these inadequate literacy skills pose a barrier in their day-to-day living and work (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2005, n.p.). This is a staggering statistic, especially when compared to the population of adults aged 18-64, of whom 40% demonstrate low literacy (still a staggering number in itself) (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2005, n.p.).

Statistics like this no doubt contribute to what Coupland et al. describe as the "deficit tradition" that has emerged in communications research regarding older adults, meaning, research frequently assumes that aging is synonymous with decline (Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991, p. 13). As Williams and Coupland (1998) observe, even when researchers' intentions are good, studying aging and communication can be fraught with dangerous assumptions (Williams & Coupland, 1998, p. 141). They point out, for example, the problem that there are no established guidelines or even basic agreement on what constitutes appropriate age groupings within the older adult population: when is someone "elderly" or "old"? How do researchers identify and study the language use of these groups without reinforcing the very stereotypes they hope to critique? Usability researchers Dana Chisnell

and Ginny Redish note that "By viewing older adults as one homogeneous group, we are missing important elements of diversity that probably would influence information design and content development quite heavily" (Chisnell & Redish, 2005, p. 11).

For Williams and Coupland, the answer to this problem lies in a thoughtful examination of how communication constructs and reinforces stereotypical identities. Rather than assuming these patterns to be expressions of aging that are "natural" or "individual," we ought to observe how language imposes these identities on individuals and groups:

> From this point of view, communication and aging could be the study of the discursive constitution of aging. The applied agenda might be to expose conservative forces and voices which continue to assert restrictive norms for what is achievable and "appropriate" in old age. (Williams & Coupland, 1998, p. 143)

Coupland et al. (1991) use discourse analysis to examine how the identity of the elderly as declining is constructed through language, and they show how the elderly themselves adopt these identities with potentially negative results. From a usability perspective, Chisnell and Redish propose that, along with age, designers should also consider ability (the person's level of physical and cognitive skill), aptitude (the expertise a person may have with a particular tool or task), and attitude (a person's interest in a particular task or confidence in being able to perform that task) (2005, p. 12).

Thus, older adults form an understudied group that is complex and diverse. It is my hope that by studying plain language with this population, I can not only expand the populations studied in plain language literature, but also uncover a wider range of communication issues that have not yet been considered by plain language research.

The topic of plain language has as a central concern the empowerment of individuals and groups whose life chances depend to a greater or lesser degree on their ability to understand the written and verbal communication. This concern is also central to social research with older adults, who are more likely to face marginalization on the basis of age. While it is not the purpose of this study to critique in depth the construction of older adult identity, it is within the scope of this research to explore how the text constructs the reader (in this case, an older adult) and how these readers, in turn, respond to this construction. The same approach could be usefully applied to plain language with other marginalized groups: being aware of how texts construct readers is important to ensuring that research opens new possibilities rather than reinforcing old stereotypes.

## Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore how individual beliefs, values, and knowledge influence the approaches and interpretations of three older adult readers as they interact with a public document. This knowledge could

help expand what we know about readers and the reading process, particularly as it relates to plain language. A secondary purpose of the study is to identify parts of the text that posed unexpected barriers to readers. Even after the rules of plain language have been followed, texts may still contain assumptions and ambiguities that can be difficult to detect until real readers interact with them. With this in mind, the objectives of this plain language study are to:

1) Develop a better understanding of how three older adult readers interact with a text.

2) Explore how readers' experience, knowledge, and attitudes may influence their interactions with a text, the barriers they encounter, and the strategies they use to overcome them.

## Methods

To accomplish these aims, I used a case study approach, in which an individual case (in this situation, a person) is used to explore a phenomenon in context (Byrne, 2009). Case studies can serve a variety of purposes, from exploring new areas of study, to developing models or theories, to testing existing theories (Byrne, 2009). In this project, a multi-case study approach was used, in which a researcher examines individual cases for their unique patterns and themes, and then analyzes the cases in relation to one another to gather cross-case findings (Stake, 2013). This approach enabled me to

explore what experiences, beliefs, and knowledge each reader brought to a sample plain language text and how they interacted with the text to construct meaning. This approach took me beyond a study of the text's surface features to an examination of the complex factors—both inside and outside the text—that influence readers.

Another important consideration, as mentioned earlier, was ensuring that this research engaged participants rather than objectifying them. As psychology researcher Elliott G. Mischler explains, "Case-based models are designed for this task of restoring agency to individuals in our research and our theories. They grant them unity and coherence through time, respecting them as subjects with both histories and intentions" (Mischler, 1996, p. 80).

The case study model I used is based on Deborah Brandt's case study research in *Literacy and American Lives* (2009). As described earlier, her landmark book traces the literacy development and practice of everyday Americans, analyzing how their personal experiences, including their upbringing, geographical location, and socioeconomic position, have influenced their development as writers and readers. For her study, she conducted 80 research interviews with a detailed script, including questions about how the individuals learned to read, what they read now, and the kind of reading they do or did on the job. From these interviews, she selected cases to analyze how literacy and economics are intertwined, such that a person's socio-economic status can have a dramatic impact on his or her literacy skills,

and in turn on life chances.[10] Using a similar framework on a much smaller

scale, the current study involved in-depth interviews with 10 older adults.

Drawing from Brandt's interview script, I asked older adults about how they

learned to read and their earliest memories of the reading going on around

them. I also updated the script with questions about computer use after this

emerged as an important theme in a pilot interview.

Brandt explores how individuals acquire literacy as a way of

understanding how unequal access to literacy learning perpetuates

inequalities between dominant and marginalized groups. The purpose of the

current study, by contrast, was to explore first, how readers are shaped by

their unique histories with reading, and second, how these differences might

influence their reading and understanding of a plain language document. To

emphasize the individuality of the subjects as opposed to their shared

characteristics, I chose to organize the data as three distinct, but related,

case studies.

I combined three data collection methods to develop the cases: semi-

structured interviews, protocol analysis, and a focus group. This approach

allowed me to confirm that certain themes and patterns recurred consistently

across the data and it helped ensure that as many themes as possible were

brought to light (and that data analysis reached a point of saturation, where

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[10] One of Brandt's key observations is that individuals encounter "sponsors" of
literacy, who, in a variety of ways, enable or hinder an individual's access to literacy.
These sponsors could be people or more abstract systems, but the common element is
that they in some way mediate a person's literacy learning (2009, p. 29).

no new themes or textual features were emerging).

*Population*

Ten older adults, including 8 females and 2 males were recruited for the study. Participants came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, though all participants now lived in the same middle-class neighbourhood in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario. Interviews were conducted between March 30-June 10, 2012, and participants were visited in their homes for the interview and reading exercise; the focus group was conducted in a room in a church that was central to all the participants.

*The Text*

The document I used for my study is *A Senior's Guidebook to Safety and Security* (2008), published by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and available on its website.[11] The aim of the document to is to help older adults educate themselves about crime and how to avoid it. As the authors note, "Education and awareness of preventive techniques can help you recognize a potential crime situation and show you how to reduce or remove the risk" (p. 1). The 26-page booklet includes advice, checklists, and photos describing common safety risks for older adults, for example, break-ins and theft, road safety, and fraud. The audience of the document is identified as both older

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[11] Available at: http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/ccaps-spcca/seniors-aines-eng.htm

adults themselves as well as older adults' caregivers and the wider community.

The document was chosen because it is typical of public information documents: it is tailored to a specific audience; it addresses the reader directly; it uses headings and images to make the text appealing and readable. The purpose of the protocol exercise was not to find fault with the text, but to explore how readers approach the text and the kinds of elements they respond to.

*Procedures*

Readers' interactions with the sample text were examined in three ways: 1) semi-structured interviews 2) protocol analysis and 3) a focus group.

1) Semi-structured interviews

To develop an understanding of each reader as an individual, I conducted 30-minute interviews, using closed and open-ended questions to find out more about participants' a) family background and how they learned to read; b) experiences reading and writing on the job (if applicable); and c) current reading habits and preferences. The interview questions were adapted from Brandt's (2009) *Literacy and American Lives* (see Appendix). Typical questions included "How did you learn to read?" and "What kind of reading do you do now?"

2) Protocol analysis

As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, the challenge in addressing barriers in texts lies in first detecting them—a task that is often difficult for writers who are insiders of a particular discourse. Getting feedback from actual readers can help make problematic features more visible. Protocol analysis or "think-aloud" protocols involve asking participants to verbalize their thinking as they complete an assigned task (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995), in this case, reading key excerpts of the *Guidebook.* This kind of analysis can be used not just to understand the *outcomes* of reading but also to understand how readers *approach* documents and interact with them, including how they adapt their strategies depending on the difficulties they encounter. The protocols were audiotaped in order to capture what participants said as they read.

To ensure that participants had an opportunity to clarify their ideas and control their information, I provided them with transcripts of their recorded interviews and protocols. I invited them to review their transcripts and return them to me with any additions, deletions, or changes they wished to make. Approximately half of the group returned the transcripts, most with minimal changes, primarily to demographic information. None of the participants made changes to the read-aloud portion of the transcripts. Changes were incorporated into the transcripts before data analysis.

3) Focus group

The focus group provided another perspective on the interactions of readers and the text. In the individual interviews and protocol exercises, it was possible that participants might be influenced to shape their responses in particular ways because they were being "studied" by an academic researcher. Their responses might have been more formal or guarded than usual. The focus group discussion allowed me to take a less directive role, providing minimal prompts and encouraging informal conversation among participants (Wray & Bloomer, 2006). I drew from their interviews and protocol transcripts to ask questions such as "Who do you picture reading this text?" and "I thought people might find the word 'pigeon drop' hard to understand. I'm not quite sure what it means myself. What do you think it means?"

*Analysis*

Data from the protocols, interviews, and focus group were analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2011). An iterative process was used to analyze and code data for recurring themes. In addition, this analysis included a closer discourse analysis of the textual and social elements of the transcripts (Gill, 2000). This analysis explored not just what readers talked about, but also how they talked about it, and how their language reflected who they were as individual readers (Gill, 2000).

A similar approach was used for the focus group data, except that the codes and analysis from the previous stages were applied to this data. In this way, I was able to identify themes and patterns that occurred across the data as well as any new themes and patterns that emerged. I used this three-part data collection to enable me to construct a "thick" description (Geertz, 1973, p. 10) of the plain language text, readers, and the interaction between the two.

## Results

Of the 10 older adults who participated in the study, one was excluded from the data set because she was unable to read in English. The other nine interviews were transcribed. These transcripts were analyzed and coded for emerging themes. From these, three were selected for more in-depth analysis and discussion as case studies. These were selected based on differences in age, gender, education, language, and ethnic backgrounds. Cases were also selected from those older adults who provided more detailed answers that produced a range of emerging themes in the analysis. I was also interested in cases that contrasted one another in style and content.

In the following three case studies, I provide a detailed personal history of each participant, highlighting his or her experiences and attitudes related to reading. I then describe their readings of the sample text, exploring how, in each case, the interpretation might be influenced by their individual

backgrounds as readers. I also identify and attempt to classify various strategies the readers use as they attempt to gather meaning from the text. Similarities and emerging themes across the cases are noted, but the differences among the three older adults are emphasized. Even when the cases share common themes, the manner in which these themes develop varies considerably.

## Case 1. Storytelling and sidestepping: Judy

Plain language aims to empower readers to take greater control in the information that affects them, with the end result being a more engaged, informed, and self-confident reader. But what if the reader who approaches the text is already engaged, informed, and self-confident? In this first case, we encounter a female older adult, Judy,[*] who is an active community member and a leader in a charitable organization. Her experience has shaped her as a reader who is self-assured and who has well-developed strategies for gathering information and making meaning, whether independently or with input from others in her social network. Examining her personal history, and in particular her experiences as a reader and writer, provides insight into the kinds of strategies Judy later uses in her reading of the sample text, the *Senior's Guide to Safety and Security.*

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[*] All names have been changed

Born in 1938, Judy is a 74 year-old woman who was born and raised in Toronto and now lives outside the city in a large suburb. She is from a family of eight, and is the oldest of six children. Judy is talkative and outgoing; she exudes confidence and independence. When she graduated from high school, she worked in a clerical job for an oil company. She was married shortly after to a man she first met in high school. They reconnected when they met by chance at her workplace; he had come to provide technical support for one of the computers. After marrying, Judy left her job and was a stay-at-home mom for 16 years. She then returned to work, taking a job at a department store in the accounts payable department. Because she did not drive, her husband drove her to work each day on the way to his office. When the department she worked for moved to a downtown location in 1989, it was no longer convenient for her to get to work this way and she left her job. Since then, she has done volunteer work, most significantly as the president of the board of a regional branch of a national charity organization raising funds in support of Alzheimer's research, treatment, and support. She and her husband decided to get involved in the organization after both of Judy's parents were affected by dementia-related diseases.

Judy's volunteer role has required her to engage with a wide variety of administrative and government texts. She frequently reads administrative and policy documents, and she is often asked to sign her approval:

Some of it I don't understand, and I trust our board, and our CEO,

of course, knows everything. But I do read most things, because I'm

signing a lot of things. I'm signing cheques for $50,000 and up, you

know, so I need to know where this money's going.

The collaborative nature of the reading and writing Judy does in this role is

evident when she talks about having worked on many of the organization's

documents with her husband, who was himself president of the board before

he died:

anything we had to write up, to ask for money and things like that,

we'd do it together. You know, you write something and you think,

"Oh, no, I'd word it differently."

A different, slightly more formal, collaboration occurs now between Judy and

the CEO of the organization. She describes, for example, speechwriting:

Sometimes I get Martin to write my speeches. Martin is the CEO.

And if we're talking about statistics and things like that, he'll get

the statistics for me, and he'll write it for me, and then I'll change

it to fit me, because we're different. Coming from me is different

than coming from him. So he'll give me what he thinks I should

say, and all I'll do is a little tweaking.

Here, as elsewhere, Judy demonstrates a high level of literacy; she has keen

awareness of the power of language not only to convey information, but also

to project a public persona. Moreover, she feels confident in her ability to "tweak" language to write in her own voice.

As a reader, Judy is similarly able to patch together information from other "expert" readers to develop her own understanding of a text. Here, she describes her strategy for dealing with complex legal language in her volunteer role:

> I get a contract from the LHIN [Local Health Integration Network], which I have to sign…some of the wording…is a guess. But a lot of times, your guess is right. If I don't understand something, I'll ask Martin to explain it to me because I don't want to sign something I don't understand.

While she acknowledges here that she does not always understand the language she encounters in her role, she also describes two key strategies that she uses: the first is making an educated "guess"; the second is asking an expert for a translation of sorts to fill in the gaps. Both situations suggest a potential loss of self-efficacy, but Judy does not seem to see it this way, possibly because she retains, throughout this process, the power to "sign off" on these documents. She is not a passive recipient of information, and she does not appear intimidated by the task of reading complex contractual or governmental documents.

Unlike most of the other older adults in the study, Judy is relatively confident in her ability to use a computer for personal and professional

purposes, including her own banking. By her own description, she developed this confidence from her relationship with her husband, who worked for a computer company for his entire career. Though she relied on his expertise throughout their marriage, she developed, out of necessity, her own skills after he died:

> He had just bought a new computer three months before he died. So then, that's when I…I'm sitting there with this computer, and he's gone. Guess what? (laughs) Well, I don't drive. I take care of my mother's finances, of course, I'm the oldest, and that was my job. And, I do all my banking on computer.

A proficient computer user, she sends and receives a relatively high volume of email. She was the only study participant who reported using email for professional as well as personal purposes.

From the interview, we gain a sense of the unique combination of experiences and knowledge that Judy has developed as a reader. In the reading exercise, her experience and knowledge are evident on two important levels: first, through the strategies she uses in an effort to draw meaning from the texts and, second, through her attitudes towards the text. Four dominant themes are evident across these two levels: reconciling new information with existing knowledge; sidestepping complexity; storytelling; and helpseeking.

## Reconciling new information with existing knowledge

In the text, Judy encounters many passages that confirm her existing

knowledge and beliefs. However, in some cases, she encounters passages that

conflict with what she knows or believes to be true. In these cases, her

relative confidence with computer-related tasks may pose a bit of a barrier to

her as a reader of this text, which presents terms that she has heard before

and has pre-conceived notions about. When she reaches a passage about

spyware and adware, for example, it is obvious that Judy has heard these

terms before. She believes that these are useful software tools used to protect

a computer from outside threats; however, the book describes them as

"malicious":

> Malicious software comes in different forms such as viruses,
>
> worms, Trojan horse programs, spyware and adware and can be
>
> transmitted by opening e-mail, by accessing a website, by using
>
> infected media or by downloading infected programs such as
>
> games. (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2008, p. 14)

This explanation gives Judy pause as she struggles to fit this information

with what she already knows (or believes to be true) about spyware and

adware. (Note: grey, italicized text indicates that the participant is reading

from the sample document):

> I know that spyware and adware…can… *be transmitted by*
>
> *opening e-mal…malicious software*…Spyware and adware, no,

those are things you have on there, to get rid of it [malicious

software]…right?

Because no specific definition is given for these terms, Judy is unable to find

out what makes them "malicious." She rationalizes that perhaps some *kinds*

of spyware and adware might be bad:

a lot of these are free, and maybe some of them are not good. Okay,

that's what they're trying to tell me. Okay. Now I understand.

Because I know that those things, if you've got the right company

or whatever, those things are good.

This explanation allows Judy to keep her understanding of the concepts

intact while still allowing for the text to be correct. Her reading provides a

glimpse of how readers come to a text with their own knowledge and values,

some of which may be incorrect. Here, Judy's pre-existing understanding is

faulty: spyware and adware are not meant to protect computers. But she

chooses to reconcile the conflicting information as an "exception."

## Sidestepping complexity

Judy is confident in her ability to discern information and meaning from

what she reads, even if some of the terminology is unknown to her. For

example, she hesitates when she comes across the term "DNS" but attempts

to reason through it:

"DNS" I don't know, but I can…I'm not confused by it, okay, I can

understand what they're saying. But the fact that they called this

"DNS poisoning" which is the same as pharming…And pharming

is…phishing is when they're fishing for your stuff. They want you

to put stuff in, and pharming…it's the same thing. But

they're…trying to come in. Okay.

Satisfied with her definition, Judy moves on. However, there are some

important differences between the two terms that have been conflated in her

version. In the above explanation, Judy begins by saying that DNS poisoning

is the same as pharming, which is technically correct; DNS poisoning is

another name for pharming and the text says this. But her next comments

indicate that while she understands the two terms are equivalent, she doesn't

know the meaning of either term; she is forced to shift her focus mid-sentence

from pharming to the previously mentioned concept, phishing: "And

pharming is…phishing is when they're fishing for your stuff. They want you

to put stuff in…" She then concludes that pharming is "the same thing" as

phishing, "but they want to come in."

These approximate definitions demonstrate Judy's attempt to take

what she can from the text, and though they do not give enough detail to act

as adequate paraphrases for the original passages, they do provide insight

into the most salient parts of the text for her. In other words, Judy's

distillation of the definitions of phishing and pharming point to a difference

based on the user's positioning: either the user is being conned into entering

information into a fake website—"putting stuff in"—(phishing) or the user's computer is being broken into by a hacker who is "trying to come in"—(pharming).

This practice of readers reframing or simplifying the original text was coded "sidestepping complexity," and appeared in many of the participants' transcripts. This code was applied to stretches of transcript in which the speaker's restatement of the text's meaning substantially reduced the complexity or detail of the original. There are several potential purposes of this strategy: first, it allows the reader to process what they have read and reframe it without being hampered by details they don't understand; second, it allows the reader to "save face" in front of an observer, who in this case is a stranger recording them for an official purpose.

These capsule definitions are also useful to a plain language researcher in that they provide insight into how fully or deeply a reader understands the text. If the rephrased definition is too shallow, it may indicate that the text is too complicated or detailed for readers to fully grasp and may therefore require either rewording or more explanation. This approach was validated by a seminal plain language study by (Charrow & Charrow, 1979), in which the researchers asked subjects to paraphrase jury instructions. Their approach was based on the belief that participants would paraphrase only what they understood and believed to be most important, and would skip over what they didn't understand. Using this approach, they were able to draw

conclusions about what was perceived as difficult to understand and make appropriate edits to the text.

In Judy's case, what are omitted are the details about the purpose of phishing and pharming: to lure users to corrupt websites in order to gather personal and financial information from unsuspecting users. Both scams take the user to corrupt websites; the difference is that phishing comes in the form of a link provided in an email, and pharming is embedded in a website address itself, so that anyone attempting to go to the legitimate website is automatically redirected to the fake website. Also omitted in Judy's paraphrase is what kind of information is being sought—personal identification that could be used to gain access to financial records. Using Charrow and Charrow's framework, we could infer that Judy understands the outcomes of phishing and pharming, but less so the details about how and why it these schemes are used.

## Storytelling

Another important strategy that Judy uses in interpreting the text is storytelling. In a number of places, she pauses reading the text to provide an anecdote from her experience, explaining how the text relates to her personal experience. Flower, Hayes, and Swartz describe this as a strategy based on the "scenario principle"; they observed that readers frequently described the meaning of a text by presenting it as a "human-focused" situation or story

(Flower et al., 1983, p. 52). They use this observation to suggest to writers that documents be written in scenarios in the first place, to make them easier to understand. But these reader rephrasings are useful at an earlier stage of document revision, providing insight into the depth of a reader's understanding as well as his or her ability to apply this information in daily life.

After Judy reads the passage about fraud protection, she adds her own elaboration:

> *Be wary of "something-for-nothing"* because there is nothing. There is nothing free or "get-rich-quick" schemes. You know, even when they call, and they—offer you a vacation, they want to sell you something. You know? And I've had them call and say "You've won something." And I say, "Okay, what are you selling?" "Oh, I'm not selling anything."

Here, Judy effectively applies the concept of "something-for-nothing" to the common example of the phoney free vacation offer, which is used as a trick to lure gullible consumers into paying bogus registration fees. This example demonstrates not only that Judy understands the text on a conceptual level, but that she is also able to see its practical application to her own experience.

In terms of analyzing the readability of the text, these instances allow a plain language practitioner to examine how a reader might relate to the text, and the kinds of associations the reader might make. It also gives a

glimpse of whether or not the reader has grasped the meaning of the text as it was intended. In this case, Judy's "story" seems to "fit" the definition given by the text. However, in a later passage, an anecdote she provides about phishing seems less consistent with the text:

> *They are electronic messages that will mislead people into providing personal information. . .* There is one that we've talked about. Um…Norma told us all about it, because she worked for the Bell. They call you, and leave a message, or something, and they tell you to press \*2 or whatever. And she says, "don't ever do it" because they can get information about…so you have to be very careful. You have to initiate whatever it is.

Judy's anecdote diverges from the original passage in that her story is about a phone scam, not a deceptive email. She groups these two phenomena together based on their similar outcomes: both activities gather personal information for nefarious purposes. On one level, her analysis could be classified as incorrect; we could conclude that she does not understand that phishing is an online phenomenon. But on another, more practical, level, her interpretation "works" in that she demonstrates an understanding that con artists are attempting, in a variety of ways (phone, website, email), to trick innocent older adults into providing personal information. Indeed, this is perhaps the most important message of the passage: don't give out personal information unless you know with whom you are dealing. Judy clearly

demonstrates that she understands this point as she concludes the anecdote with the advice "You have to initiate whatever it is," meaning, do not accept offers or services unless you are the person contacting the business.

## Help-seeking

Passages were coded "help-seeking" if the participant explicitly asked the interviewer for input to understand the text. In Judy's case, the help-seeking also referred to help she planned to seek elsewhere (outside the interview setting). This approach was consistent with her earlier description of seeking input and clarification from colleagues, friends, and relatives in a variety of situations.

In the personal interview, Judy describes her regular habit of asking for help to clarify the meaning of complicated texts. She uses this strategy in the reading exercise when she encounters the passage about malicious software, which conflicts with her understanding of spyware and adware. Speaking to the interviewer directly, she says, "um…find out about that will you? Because I…think those [spyware and adware] are things…that are on there to keep those things [malicious software] out." Later, when she is still uncertain about this section, she comments that she might ask her nephew, whom she has contacted in the past with her computer questions: "I think I understand that pretty well. . . .But maybe I—I'm going to ask my nephew."

Judy is a motivated reader who is interested in finding out the "right" answer, and she has access to a source of information and clarification. She

provides a good example of how elements that are external to the text—a reader's interests, motivation, and social support—can influence the meaning a text holds for the reader. For some readers, an unclear definition might mark the end point of their understanding. However, for Judy, this lack of clarity becomes a potential jumping-off point, from which she will seek more information outside the text.

## Summary

Judy's case provides insight into how a reader's ability to comprehend a text can be shaped by a variety of different factors. In Judy's case, her personal and professional experiences, pre-existing knowledge and beliefs, and access to social support are all evident in her approach to the text. Interestingly, not all of these elements are helpful to her, however. For example, in her reading of spyware and adware, her prior knowledge interferes with her understanding, preventing her from fully grasping the text. She has to correct one or the other: her prior knowledge or the text itself. But the level of detail available (in both her prior knowledge and in the text) is not enough to solve the dilemma, so it is not possible for her to fully resolve the issue. Similarly, her beliefs about herself and her knowledge also influence her reactions to difficult portions of the text. Rather than simply admitting "I don't know," she makes several moves that enable her to negotiate this difficulty. For example, she clarifies that while she isn't familiar with the term "DNS" she is "not confused by it." She also develops

approximate paraphrases that encapsulate the meaning of passages, such as her paraphrase of phishing as "putting stuff in" and pharming as "trying to get in." Her paraphrases might be seen as oversimplifications, but they do, for the most part, successfully make abstract complex terms concrete in a way that she can use and remember. The level of detail in these paraphrases is also useful in understanding how much of a given text a reader understands and to what depth. It also provides insight into what details are lost or passed over by readers.

Perhaps most importantly, Judy's reading suggests that readers do not always take texts at face value; in bringing their expertise and experience, readers may challenge the messages they encounter in the text and they may seek further input before making a decision about whether or how to use the information. For plain language practitioners, this is important to keep in mind: texts must do more than inform or explain, they must also establish their credibility, potentially overcoming misconceptions or beliefs that precede them.

### Case 2. Hypothetical examples and help-seeking: Joseph

"My father was always with the newspaper. Like, nobody bother him, he had to read the whole damn paper," remembers Joseph. He shakes his head at the memory. Joseph is 66 years old, divorced, and lives on his own. Born in Greece, he grew up there with one brother and five sisters. His father was a

farmer and fisherman, as were his parents and grandparents on his father's side. His mother's side was in commercial industry; he describes his grandfather as a salesman. His mother was sophisticated and had more education than his father; before marrying, she worked as a midwife. Her side of the family Joseph describes as "all high-class people." He adds, "My mother wanted me to be somebody someday."

Joseph immigrated to Canada by himself at 23, and his background as an immigrant and English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) speaker is particularly relevant to his approach as a reader of a public Canadian document written in English. Despite having lived in Canada for more than 40 years, his English is still heavily accented and he admits he is not always at ease with reading.

For Joseph, coming to Canada was an impulsive act of rebellion. Before this point, his upbringing had involved a strict adherence to rules and routines, including supervised homework sessions in which he and his siblings were required to complete their assignments in separate rooms and submit them to their mother to be checked.

> We never studied all together. But sometimes my sister would come and she would say, "that's wrong there, and mom is going to give it to you." And I would say "what's wrong? Let me fix it," and she would tell me, "that's it," and then she would run, because my mother, she didn't want anybody fixing it for you, she wanted you

to find what was wrong and fix it yourself. And if you can't, then you had to deal with Mom.

Nevertheless, he credits his mother for having instilled in him a sense of discipline and a value for knowledge and learning. He still prides himself on his aptitude for geometry and mathematics as a young student: "Nobody could beat me at mathematics," he recalls matter-of-factly. "Now, I'm a little bit slow. I don't know what happened."

When Joseph was a young man, his father died, precipitating a shift in family dynamics. His brother swiftly took over the position of family "head," and Joseph felt suffocated by the new family order. He left home, first for the army, and then, more drastically, for Canada.

Once here, Joseph learned to adapt quickly to find work. Though trained as a draftsman, he worked for a cabinet maker when he first arrived. Eventually, his employer noticed Joseph's drawing skills and his ability to produce detailed sketches of home interiors. Joseph was asked to do these drawings as part of his job—creating sketches to show what cabinets would look like. "I didn't know cabinet making, but…my experience, sort of like, I knew from school how to draw….houses, like how they are inside, from the top. What you see inside. You take the roof from the house and you see this is the living room….And from the front of the door, what you see inside the house."

Instead of continuing on this path, however, his career took a different

turn because of developments in his personal life. When he found out his girlfriend was pregnant, the two decided to marry. For Joseph, this decision was a matter of principle and reputation, rather than a genuine desire to get married; he admits he proposed in order to protect his girlfriend's reputation and to provide for the child. His marriage, which he kept secret from his family in Greece, marked what would be a final separation between himself and his home country. If he had any thoughts of returning to Greece, they were abandoned.

Joseph's marriage might seem unconnected to his reading of an older adult's document 40 years later. But his marriage in fact had a significant influence on his development as an English-speaker and professional person. He married into what he describes as a traditional Jewish family, which entailed significant support for his education. His in-laws asked him, "What do you want to do?" and offered not only to pay for his education but also to support the couple while Joseph was not working. He was interested in a career as a psychologist, so he went to the Casa Loma School (an adult learning centre in Toronto) and spent three years upgrading his English and working towards a Canadian high school diploma that would allow him to advance. Even after three years at school, however, he was told he still needed to continue for a further two years in order to complete his diploma. To pursue a career in psychology, he faced years of additional education after that. Disillusioned by the long years of schooling he still faced, he decided to

leave school and find work.

He started at Simpson's department store as an interior decorator and worked there until he was pressured by his wife and her family to find a government job with greater security. He took a position with Canada Post as a clerk in 1977, a job he held for the next 34 years. The role could not have been more different from the creative work of interior decoration: he was responsible for monitoring machinery and double-checking address information. "All these years," he laments, "the same thing over and over. I'm so tired."

Through this work, he encountered a variety of technology, including machinery brought in to make the sorting task easier and more efficient. Joseph felt it was actually less effective than hand-sorting, however, since unlike the old system it did not allow workers to filter out wrong-size packages and avert processing problems. He tried to make this case to his supervisors without success. "I kept telling them, but nobody listened. They wanted technology. Yeah, okay." His negative experiences with technology have coloured his present-day perceptions of computers, which he now avoids altogether: "I just give up. After all those years, I had enough."

He also generally distrusts those in power, particularly politicians, whom he perceives as "phoney." This distrust has turned him off newspapers and has made him suspicious of news media generally: "Although it's nice to read sometimes to find out what's happening today, most of the time I get it

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on the TV. So then I watch the news, and then I get angry sometimes, because they don't say the truth. You get the book—so who say the truth? The book or the TV? So, to heck with it."

Joseph's dislike for reading also extends to the reading exercise. He declares openly that he "hated reading in front of someone," a dislike that appears to stem from his lack of confidence in his English-language skills, though he never says so explicitly; he only refers to his frustration at not being able to read "properly."

Whatever his feelings about his reading abilities, during the reading exercise and the focus group, Joseph takes the stance of an experienced, streetwise reader for whom it is easy to detect suspicious behaviour or criminal activity.

## Help-seeking

In Joseph's case, help-seeking queries relate to two elements of the text: vocabularly and visual layout.

### Vocabulary

More than the other participants in the study, Joseph explicitly asked for input at several points to understand the language in the handbook. Most of his questions related to unfamiliar English words; words that he could understand orally seemed difficult for him to recognize in printed form.

Joseph: *Often, people will be redirected to a*

*fraudulent…*fraudulent?

Interviewer: Fraudulent?

Joseph: Oh, fraudulent.

In some cases, however, the words were not recognizable to him even when
spoken aloud:

Joseph: *Notifications through e-mail which would lead you to…*

*believe that he/she must pay a series of bogus*…bogus? *bogus taxes.*

I don't understand "bogus taxes." What does that mean, "bogus"?

Interviewer: "Bogus" would be, like, fake.

Joseph: Oh, okay. Lots of money or something? Okay. *Bogus taxes*

*or fees in order to collect their prize.* Oh yes, I know that one.

These examples demonstrate the difficulty that seemingly familiar words can
pose for language users who are not native speakers. Even after many
decades as an English speaker, Joseph has not seen these words often enough
to recognize them in print.

*Visual layout*

In her landmark book, *Dynamics in Document Design*, Karen Schriver argues
that perception and understanding of written documents are complex
processes based on the interaction between reader and text (1994). She
explains how the way in which objects within a text are juxtaposed can have
an important impact on perception. In particular, she notes that readers
respond to "typographic cues" such as layout, font, and illustrations

(Schriver, 1994, p. 326) that help them develop and confirm hypotheses about the meaning of a text.

The influence of typographic cues is demonstrated in the reading exercise by Joseph's difficulty interpreting the roman numerals used in the headings of the booklet. In the section titled "Fraud Protection," a subsection is labeled "I," meaning the numeral "1" (see Fig. 5.1). But Joseph is unsure whether to read it as a number or a letter.

> Joseph: Is that one [number one] or what? [referring to the roman numeral "I"] Icon. I dot con. Is it? *I dot con games and "sweet talk crimes".* I-con. Icon. Maybe it's "icon." Is it?
>
> Interviewer: What do you think?
>
> Joseph: I think it's "icon games and sweet talk crimes."



Figure 5.1 Screenshot of *Senior's Guidebook*, showing use of Roman numeral in heading. Reprinted from *A Senior's Guidebook to Safety and Security*, by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2008, p. 6. © 2008 HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN as represented by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Reproduced with the permission of the RCMP.

After analyzing the page, Joseph determines that the roman numeral "I" was the letter "I," and he reads it as contiguous with "Con," to make the word "icon." In looking at the figure, it is surprising, yet possible, to see how a reader might draw this conclusion, partly because the size of the numeral is the same as the text that follows. Joseph does not get an opportunity to correct this misreading of the title because neither "Con Games" nor "Sweet-Talk Crimes" is explicitly defined by the authors, likely because they considered the terms self-explanatory. Joseph's reaction suggests that for some readers these terms are perhaps not so commonplace.

## Storytelling

As in Judy's case, Joseph frequently pauses in his reading to suggest a scenario that exemplified a concept described in the handbook. However, Judy's storytelling is generally tied to specific incidents she herself has experienced or heard about from people she knows. Joseph does provide some examples that were based on personal experience, too; however, he more often bases his stories on hypothetical situations that he constructs himself. The scenarios he described were coded "personal anecdote" if they related to a real-life experience or "hypothetical example" if they described an imaginary situation. Nonetheless, both his personal anecdotes and hypothetical examples provide insight into how he interprets the text; they also provide insight into the depth and accuracy of his understanding.

*Personal anecdotes*

Returning to the example of bogus taxes mentioned above, Joseph draws on the following example to explain his understanding of this term:

> Oh yes, I know that one [bogus taxes]. Many times I hear that one. "You won a prize." Yep. By the meantime, you have to get registered. It's $300 to register to receive your prize. And I say, "Well, send me the money first, and then from the money you send me, I'll give you the $300." And I never hear from them again. They're just crooks.

Joseph thoroughly grasps the meaning of the passage, but he goes further than that: he describes his own retaliatory strategy of "playing along" with the swindlers by suggesting that they send him the money first, which he knows they will never do. In this way, his "reading" is at once a comprehension of and response to the text.

*Hypothetical examples*

In the following excerpt coded "hypothetical example," Joseph reads and interprets the concept of the "pigeon drop," in which con artists approach older adults and offer them a large amount of cash and require a comparatively small deposit or fee (termed "good faith" money) in advance of this money being delivered to them:

*You are asked to withdraw "good faith" money from your bank. The swindlers take the "good faith" money and give you a phoney address where you are to collect your share of the found money. You never see them again.* Okay, I get that. Sweet talkers come and say "Oh, I need money" or whatever or they claim like "I'm your nephew," and the old people they don't think straight and right away they send the money before they realize that's not my grandson or whatever. It's too late. The money's gone. Oh well.

In this case, Joseph's interpretation of the concept is a misinterpretation of the text's definition. A key aspect of the pigeon drop as it is described in the *Guidebook* is that older adults are *offered* cash and asked for a payment of some kind for the delivery of this money. However, in Joseph's example, the swindlers are simply asking for money—the premise of the con game (that swindlers offer a windfall of money) is omitted. In addition, his example describes a con that involved preying on older adults' emotions in order to extort money; this is a different kind of con game altogether.

Even though Joseph has heard of con games involving the offer of a "gift" that requires a phoney registration fee (as demonstrated earlier in his personal anecdote), he does not appear to recognize that a similar set of circumstances is at work in this case.

In addition to providing insight into how a reader might draw conclusions from the text based on their previous knowledge and experiences,

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Joseph's use of storytelling constructs him as an empowered person who speaks back to the text. He frequently highlights his ability to detect fraudsters and avoid being taken in by the criminal activities. He thus positions himself in relation to the text as a confident, streetwise person who is not intimidated by criminals, whom he characterizes as "just crooks." In this way he resists, to a certain degree, the typical older adult reader who is constructed by the text—the vulnerable, somewhat gullible individual who is likely to be targeted by opportunistic criminals.

*Paraphrasing*

Joseph's use of paraphrasing provides insight into both how he understands the text and how he arrives at that understanding. In the focus group, he describes his understanding of "phishing" from both the perspective of the perpetrator (the person doing the "fishing") and the victim (the person being "hooked"):

> Back home, we'd say "It was so easy [to catch] that fish. I just throw down the hook with no worm and I caught it." …. They throw you some kind of stupidness without any background, and you fall for it. So that was easy fishing. He was hungry, that fish, to get something, and he didn't see that only the hook was there.

This paraphrase, which explains the analogy of phishing, demonstrates that Joseph understands the underlying principle of the crime: that a user is

fooled by a promise that they will receive a free gift, which ends up being false. Whether or not he understands the technological principle of phishing, however, is less clear.

Joseph's paraphrasing provides confirmation of his understanding in another instance, where an idiomatic turn of phrase, "turning over your money" initially poses difficulty:

> *After turning over…after turning over your money, you never hear* *from the inspector again.* I don't get that. "After turning over your money." Okay, you give him the money and you never hear from him again. Okay.

The phrase "turning over your money" is understood by most native English speakers to mean "give" or "hand over." But to a non-native speaker, the literal meaning of the phrase "turn over"—as in to turn an item upside down (turn over your flower beds, turn over in bed) is likely far more familiar and is, therefore, more likely to come to mind first. In this case, Joseph is ultimately able to discern the meaning, as demonstrated by his paraphrase. His initial difficulty with this passage, however, provides further evidence that commonplace phrases that operate metaphorically may aid some readers while impeding others. It is not always easy, without observing real readers, to predict or identify where these problems might arise.

Interestingly, in another passage, Joseph introduces a colloquial phrase himself when paraphrasing the concept of "faked e-commerce websites":

*These E-commerce Web sites will try to sell you something and the offer will seem too good to be true. Set up to capture your personal information, they will operate for a few weeks and then disappear.*

That's right. They grab your money and say "Goodbye Charlie." The expression "goodbye Charlie," which alludes to the 1964 film by the same name, is used to refer to a disingenuous person who disappears as quickly as he or she came, in this case, a fraudster who sets up a temporary subterfuge in order to gather information.[12] This allusion, which Joseph casually includes, would likely be inaccessible (or at the very least sound a bit old-fashioned) to anyone who is not familiar with its origins. Its use here demonstrates the pervasiveness of expressions, both in texts and among readers themselves, which operate both to connect language users within communities and to exclude (unintentionally or not) those outside. His reading also demonstrates that figurative language use is ubiquitous; thus, figurative language use in a text is not, in itself, problematic. Rather it is the appropriateness of an expression for a given audience that is key. The associations one reader brings to a text may be quite different from those another would bring. This fit between figurative language and audience will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 7.

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[12] In fact, Joseph's reference to this film is apt, since *Goodbye Charlie* is in fact about using a "false" identity to con others. The film depicts a womanizer who is reincarnated as a woman and uses his assumed identity to continue his debauchery.

## Sidestepping complexity

*Opting out*

This code was used to identify points where readers decided the text did not

apply to them personally. Passages coded in this way were considered a

subset of "sidestepping complexity," since these statements allowed users to

avoid commenting on the *difficulty* of the text by commenting instead on its

*applicability*. This code was applied to comments about applicability that

followed stretches of text where readers paused or struggled. For example,

following the definition of adware, Joseph indicates that a particular passage

doesn't apply to him:

> *Spyware and ad*—what? *Adware…and can be transmitted by*
>
> *opening e-mail, by accessing a website, by using infected media or*
>
> *by downloading infected programs such as games.* Yeah, I don't
>
> play any games.

Though he is clearly not familiar with the term "adware" and pauses after

reading it, Joseph does not say that he doesn't understand it. Instead, he

notes only that he doesn't "play any games" without addressing the other

parts of the description, including the common tasks of email and website

visiting. His comment suggests two possibilities: first, that Joseph is simply

not that interested or concerned about this threat, and is ready to move on in

his reading; or, alternatively, that the structure of this sentence, which

includes a list of potentially unfamiliar terms and concepts, is difficult to read

and, as a result, Joseph processes only the last item because this is where the emphasis of the sentence falls. Rather than addressing each of the items individually, he refers only to the last item, which he recognizes does not apply to him.

## Deferring to the text

Joseph's energy is focused on reading the text "correctly." He asks on more than one occasion "Did I get it right?"; and, at times when he struggles to understand the text, he apologizes for not understanding the text or for repeating himself. At the end of the exercise, when asked how difficult he thought the text was, he says, "[I]t's [the text is] very easy. But I'm nervous now, and I didn't read it the proper way."

Considering the number of pauses and difficulties Joseph encounters (he pauses more than 10 times to re-read parts of the text and explicitly asked for clarification at least three times on each page), it is perhaps surprising that he would say he found the text "easy." Just as interesting is the fact that, despite the difficulties he encounters, Joseph never once feels his difficulties might be caused, even in part, by the text itself. He uniformly attributes his difficulties to his own abilities and to his feelings of nervousness about being "tested" (not unlike the way his mother used to do). Joseph's response raises an important point about the authority that texts carry by virtue of their binding and publication, and about the presumed authority of the researcher

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in an interview setting.

## Summary

Joseph's case emphasizes the unexpected ways that readers can interpret texts. In some cases, his difficulties with unusual words and turns of phrase are consistent with the kinds of difficulties other additional-language speakers might be expected to have. However, there are several surprises in his reading, such as his reading of the heading "I. Con games," which he reads as "icon games." His misreading of the typeface is compounded by his unfamiliarity with the term "con game," and without additional information to help clarify this error, his misunderstanding goes uncorrected. This is the kind of problem that would be difficult for most plain language writers and editors to anticipate, and it demonstrates the value of having a real reader's (or multiple readers') perspectives when possible.

One of the hallmarks of plain language, according to plain language advocate Martin Cutts, is that readers be able to understand a text "on first reading" (Cutts, 1995, p. 3). This was not the case for Joseph. In this particular exercise, Joseph spent considerable time examining and re-reading parts of the text in order to make sure he understood. In a real-life setting, it is impossible to guarantee that readers will spend so much time decoding texts, particularly if they did not believe the text was applicable to their situation and experience.

Joseph's case, like Judy's, emphasizes that readers' approaches to a text and their interpretations are not based solely on literacy level or reading ability. In both cases, the participants bring unique beliefs, knowledge, and experiences that have an important influence on the meanings they draw. Concepts, words, or allusions can call to mind entirely different associations in different readers' minds, depending on the reader's familiarity (or lack thereof) with these references. So, while we generally think of texts as presenting meaning in a straightforward, direct way, Joseph's reading in particular demonstrates the divergent paths that texts can open for readers.

## Case 3. Identifying with the text: Sarah

"I remember my mother buying me my first book. And that was *Little Women*," recalls Sarah. She adds:

> it was almost magical that I had this book. I couldn't read it very well…I could pick out the odd word, but I couldn't read it for about three years, I think. But I loved the book. I used to look at that book all the time. I wanted to read it.

Sarah, a retired customer service representative, is 70 years old and lives on her own. She was raised in Montreal and Toronto, though her family has its roots in Newfoundland; her grandparents and great-grandparents included shopkeepers, teachers, farmers, fishermen, and whalers. Though her father left school after Grade 2, he and Sarah's mother, who completed secondary

school and had nursing training, read to Sarah every day. Her father's own reading included, in addition to the newspaper, books on history and geography. Sarah also remembers a map he had on the wall where he would point out different places to Sarah and her younger brother. Before Sarah could read herself, she spent much of her time flipping through books and looking at pictures, imagining what they might mean.

Though her parents did not attend church themselves, they sent Sarah and her brother to a Baptist church for Sunday school with neighbours down the street. "And I used to always have those little, the Sunday school papers, with the little picture on the front, and I remember those, but that's just because of where I was taken."

Today, Sarah is an avid fiction and newspaper reader, and she is a regular at the library and a daily subscriber to *Toronto Star.* "Sometimes I read three books at once," she admits with a laugh. She claims not to do much writing, but says she is regularly at the post office, sending notes and cards to friends and relatives. She also keeps a journal in addition to her daytimer. "I'd be lost without my planner," she confesses. "I have to write things down. I never used to have to, but now I have to write things down or I might forget."

Sarah learned to read a little in kindergarten and more substantially in Grade 1. But it is her memory of learning to write that is most vivid for her: she recalls having her knuckles rapped with a ruler for writing with her left

hand. She had to write with her right hand when the teachers were watching, and then she shifted to her left when she was out of their sight. This changed when her family moved to Toronto; at her new school, she was relieved to find it was a non-issue.

She completed Grade 13 and then began work, first as a secretary and then as a service representative at Bell Canada, where she worked until she retired. In that role, she handed 30-40 calls per day, dealing with sales, collections, and complaints. "If you were calling Bell about anything, it went through us," she explains. She moved steadily through the ranks, but views her progress as typical for the era: "You had your job and…you started with one job, then they sent you for training for something, and you moved up the ranks, you know."

In her extensive experience with Bell, she had an opportunity to witness and participate in the company's shift from a paper-based to a computer-based system. She describes the shift as "interesting" yet "traumatic" for the 150 staff in the office, none of whom had previous computer training. She remembers that one of the most significant changes was the increased surveillance and scrutiny to which their work was subjected. "[E]verything was timed and monitored…how many calls you had, the length of time you had, the length of time you put a customer on hold, and then of course everything was in the computer." She also recalls that the shift to computers made the workers much more sedentary than in the paper-based system. In

the paper-based system, she explains, "Everything was on paper and on files in the middle of the office, you had to look up a customer's files, you had to walk down the office, you were running around all day….With the computer, you sat. So that was a bit of a transition."

In both the paper- and computer-based systems, Sarah's on-the-job writing was primarily focused on record-keeping, recording tallies of phone calls and noting details so that if customers called with complaints they could be traced to the service representative who handled the call. Even with the arrival of computers, Sarah reports that most of the staff—and, occasionally, management—still relied on paper:

> There still was just as much paper to be shredded as before because we still were, even though we were using the computer, we still relied on paper. And training came through to us on paper… a lot of it was on the computer, but we'd photocopy it so that we had a paper copy. We didn't trust it [the computer].

This feeling of "not trusting" the computer is apparent in Sarah's more recent experience with her personal computer, which she says she uses only "sporadically." She had not, at the time of the interview, turned it on in three months. When talking about her lack of ease with her home computer she refers to her lack of "training" on things like email or online shopping. Though she adapted successfully to computers in the workplace, she notes that there was extensive training for that transition; she explains why she

feels she needs to take a similar training course to use her home computer:

It sounds funny coming from a person who used a massive system, but just to get the basics for finding your way around email and the internet. I feel that I'm too nervous to use it because I don't know if I'm going to be creating a virus, and I don't think I'd ever…people are shopping there all the time now, but I don't think I'd—I think I'd be afraid to buy something over the internet.

Sarah believes that her fears about using her home computer (and specifically the internet) could be alleviated with more knowledge, but her uneasiness about the risks of the internet is reinforced, not allayed, by the information she finds in the booklet, such as when she reads the section on "Malicious software." She comments that, "this [information] really deters me, as an older person, from using the computer."

Instead, she prefers the tactile nature of printed materials. "I still like to have a book. I like to be able to put the book down and pick it up. Go to the library and make a selection. I have not transitioned well to computers."

Sarah's reading of the text differs from the other cases in her frequent use of a strategy that has been coded as a kind of storytelling, named here "identifying with the text." This code was applied to stretches of text that contained a comment about the value of the text to her or other potential readers. The themes of "sidestepping complexity," and "paraphrasing" were also prominent.

## Storytelling

Sarah, like Judy and Joseph, frequently uses a storytelling strategy when interpreting the text. In her case, her storytelling strategies take two forms: identifying with the text and personal anecdotes.

### Identifying with the text

At the beginning of a new section, or upon completing a section, Sarah often pauses to add a comment about the usefulness or applicability of the information provided in the booklet. She identifies with the text, commenting on how the "elderly identity" projected by the text fits with her own self perceptions as an older adult. One example of this occurs as Sarah reads the introduction of the page titled "Fraud Protection":

> *Criminals often regard the elderly as easy targets for many kinds of crimes. Every elderly person should be aware of these crimes and know how to prevent them.* And I think that's very good because it is true. And we are, as we get older, we are more vulnerable. We're more accepting of people. We're not looking for—we're not looking for someone to be harmful towards us. We're more…because of our experience, and we're at a time in life when we're, um, you're just not expecting it. You don't want to believe that people are out to get you. Anyway.

Sarah comments on the value of the text for the target population, and at the

same time she provides a broader perspective on the issues she and other older adults share. For example, she explains how older adults might respond the text's advice about scams that sound too good to be true: "I think they're all good, uh, good tips. Because it's easy to rush into something that you hear is really good. And somebody could say that 'Oh, I got…I'm involved in this,' and it's somebody that you trust, and it could be another senior that's saying it, so you really need to think about it." Her tone is self-assured and thoughtful, suggesting that she is at ease with the text and has grasped the concepts it describes. Her commentary also operates similarly to a paraphrase in that it provides a translation or reframing that provides insight into what she understands the text to mean and how well it reflects her own experience and beliefs.

*Personal Anecdotes*

As in Joseph's reading, personal anecdotes are woven throughout Sarah's transcript. Her examples are different from his in two key ways, however: first, they tend to be more detailed and descriptive (here, she has an advantage in terms of vocabulary and style, in that she is a native English speaker); second, her anecdotes are generally more consistent with the concept as it is introduced in the text. In the following example, she describes her experience with a phone scam after she reads a passage about fraud protection:

There's one [scam] going on right now where….[they say] your

computer is creating a problem for their company and they need to

know your identification number. And one guy, and I actually kept

him on the phone for 15 minutes because I didn't have a computer

or anything, and I was just interested. And finally I said, "I think

this is a fraudulent…" and he said "Oh, no, no, no—just give me

your identification number," and I said, "Well, you give me your

identification number that you want me to match it up to" and he

went on for about 15 minutes. But I guess, if he keeps talking, he

could maybe wear somebody down. But I knew it was totally a

fraud call.

On a basic level, Sarah's anecdote suggests that the text resonates with her

prior experience, suggesting that the text is recognizable and realistic to her.

The anecdote also demonstrates that Sarah understands the concept well

enough to be able to effectively apply the definition in a way that further

elaborates the concept. It also provides insight into her sense of self-efficacy

in dealing with these kinds of threats. Like Joseph, she tries to tackle these

situations by confronting criminals and refusing to be "taken in." This is not a

behaviour that is advocated in the booklet, which generally encourages a

defensive, at times passive, approach to safety. The best defense, according to

the booklet, is to avoid such situations altogether, not seek vigilante justice.

The fact that two very different readers shared this instinct to confront criminals is an indication that this attitude may not be rare, even though it doesn't seem to have been anticipated by the text.

Another example of personal anecdote was observed following the text's advice about door-to-door sales. Her anecdote provides a different perspective on the issue than the one offered by the booklet:

> *Ask the sales person to leave as soon as you feel threatened or intimidated.* [Sighs]. That. Hopefully it doesn't even get to that point. Because. But, it happens, because they can be very pushy….And people are generous, because I've collected for the heart fund and for cancer, and people will open their door to you, and they'll give you something. I mean I've always had a tag and that, but I don't think people really pay attention if you're canvassing for cancer.

What is particularly interesting here is that Sarah applies the concept of door-to-door sales to an experience in which she is in the role, not of vulnerable older adult, but of the door-to-door canvasser, of whom older adults should be wary. Her experience in this regard has made her more cautious about her own response to these solicitations. She adds after this anecdote that "anybody can go to your door." Sarah's response, as in her earlier anecdote, challenges the subtext of the booklet by suggesting that older adults are not necessarily the passive and vulnerable ones in these

scenarios.

## Paraphrasing

Along with identifying with the text and sharing personal anecdotes, Sarah occasionally provides paraphrases of the text. As in Joseph's and Judy's reading exercises, Sarah's paraphrases provide insight into what she understands the text to mean as well as the depth of that understanding. One such example occurs in her reading of the section titled "Online Scams/Internet Fraud":

> *These E-commerce Web sites will try to sell you something and the offer will seem too good to be true. Set up to capture your personal information, they will operate for a few weeks and then disappear.*
> In other words they're looking for your information, whether they're going to sell it or they're going to use it later.

Her paraphrase sounds self-assured, and it seems to capture the essence (or at least the aim) of fraudulent e-commerce websites. However, during the focus group, Sarah reports that she does not, in fact, know what "e-commerce" means. When the group is asked for their impressions of the term, Sarah suggests it might mean "a fake website." Her definition frames e-commerce as an object or location, rather its intended meaning, the concept of buying and selling items online. Her use of the word "fake" also attaches negative connotations to e-commerce. As the conversation continues and the

group muses over the word's possible meanings, Sarah comments that "to me it looks like something that perhaps it has to do with the bank…[laughs] who knows?" In trying to make a link to something familiar, Sarah identifies "commerce" as a term associated with banking; it's quite a reasonable guess, since the word "commerce" is often used in bank names. Finally, however, she concludes that "I don't think it [e-commerce] would mean much to seniors. It would perhaps to working people." This comment suggests that she feels her lack of understanding might have to do with being "out of the loop" with workplace language now that she is retired. In other words, it is possible (and reasonable) to her that there is a group of people for whom this term is commonplace.

This discrepancy between Sarah's initial response to the term "e-commerce" in the reading exercise and her later response during the focus group raises an interesting question: Why did Sarah appear to understand the term during the reading exercise if she actually, by her own admission in the focus group, did not know what the word meant? Two plausible explanations might be offered: either she didn't understand the term during the reading exercise, but did not feel comfortable saying so, or, alternatively, she didn't *need* to understand the term at the time because she did not have to interpret or explain it. She was able to draw a conclusion from the surrounding text without understanding all of the words in the passage. In fact, she may not have even realized herself that she didn't understand the

term. In effect, knowing the meaning of this specific term was not important until the spotlight was shone on it specifically in the focus group setting.

### Sidestepping Complexity

*Opting out*

Sarah's lack of confidence and self-assurance with computer use is evident in her comments on the section of the booklet titled "Online Scams/Internet Fraud." As she explained earlier in our interview, she's "not using her computer that much," and this is her first comment after reading the title of this section. The text that follows does little to ease her fears or build her confidence; in fact, the effect seems to be the opposite. For example, in the section titled "DNS Poisoning," she does not remark on whether or not she found the passage complex or whether she has understood the text. The only indication that the text may have posed difficulty is in her brief pause (which occurred at no other time in the interview or reading exercise):

> *Also known as DNS poisoning, pharming is caused by a corruption of the DNS that direct the user of the computer to the requested website. Therefore, it allows the hacker to redirect a legitimate website's traffic to a corrupt website.* [pause] I've heard of that…but um, myself, I don't open up strange emails, be they right or wrong.

It's not clear what Sarah is referring to precisely when she comments that

she has heard of "that": is it DNS poisoning? Being redirected to fraudulent website? But her next comment, about "strange emails," provides insight into how she has conceptualized the concept. Even though there is no mention of emails in this definition, she has interpreted DNS poisoning as an attempt to lure computer users, via an email message, to a fraudulent website. If DNS poisoning only occurred via email, this would be an adequate response; however, though it hasn't been explained specifically in the text, clicking on website ads or other links on websites can lead to a similar problem. In this way, her remark, which operates as a kind of dismissal or sidestepping, in fact reveals important insight into what she has gleaned from the text and how it might differ from the intended meaning. This example is also useful in the sense that it suggests how the text leaves gaps that readers fill based on their own knowledge, experience, and assumptions. While it is impossible to block all paths to misinterpretation, a reader's feedback could be used to identify the most common paths readers follow when they do go off track.

In the section titled "Malicious Software," Sarah sidesteps the specific details of the text by making a general comment about her feeling of uneasiness with the topic. "And that's one thing that really bothers me…I really appreciate what is on the computer and a lot of the games….But this really deters me, as an older person, from using the computer." Sarah's comments here reflect the fact that the text, while providing enough information to indicate risks and dangers, does not—at least in the case of

computer crimes—provide her with information to make her feel confident about avoiding them. This is perhaps impossible to do in all cases, but it is worth noting that in Sarah's case the text has the effect of discouraging computer use altogether.

## Sarah's suggestions for the text

*Word choice*

During the focus group, Sarah points out that the difficulty with following some of the advice in the booklet is that it assumes that it is possible to tell criminals and well-meaning people apart. The text assumes, she explains, that you know a swindler the moment you see one. She recommends the text use a different term:

> **Sarah:** I wonder if you don't say "swindlers." *The swindlers claim to have found a large sum of money.* You don't know they're swindlers till after. Somebody approaches you…you don't know they're a swindler. Usually you have a vision in your mind of what a swindler looks like. This is someone that approaches you. If someone approaches you, you're more apt to understand, to follow….
>
> **Facilitator:** You're right, because they don't always look like…
>
> **Sarah:** That's right. Because what does a swindler look like? A person approaches you…you don't know.

Sarah's discussion closely matches the process that Kintsch (2005) describes readers performing when words in texts trigger associations that are connected part of a "schema" (p. 127). In this case, the word "swindler" activates a particular kind of image—and that, ironically, is the problem. Most seniors are drawn into con games precisely because the criminal doesn't match the image of a swindler, but instead looks like an ordinary person. In Sarah's view, seniors should be warned not to assume that criminals will be easy to recognize on sight.

Sarah points out a similar problem of logic in the "Online Scams/Internet Fraud" section, which makes reference to "fraudulent" websites, without explaining how to recognize these sites or differentiate them from legitimate ones. She explains the problem and provides a more specific alternative: "It's too much gobbledygook here. Like 'redirected to a fraudulent copy of a legitimate website…' It's another website…in the end it's not legitimate, but just don't go to any website that you're redirected [to]." Sarah has gathered from the text that a site can be fraudulent while appearing to look legitimate, but hasn't found information that describes how to make such a distinction. Without the ability to differentiate between legitimate and fraudulent websites, the prospect of searching online seems very risky to her. However, in her astute reading of the text she has isolated the concept of being "redirected" as a possible flag that alerts users to fraudulent sites.

*Images*

Sarah offers a number of suggestions to improve the images in the booklet, for example, on the page titled "Bank Inspector Fraud" (Fig. 5.2), she suggests the photo be replaced with something that emphasizes what the individual's *response* should be to such a situation:

> Rather than showing the money or the door, would it maybe not be better if they stressed…contacting the police to report this incident? Because it happens to a lot of people and they don't report it. I mean, a lot of us are aware of this, and we may have even been approached, and we hang up our phone and we're glad we didn't get stuck, but we don't let the police know. I think if they stressed that they should be reporting it, not just saying "Oh yes, I was smarter than the caller."

Similar to her comments in the section on online scams, Sarah's recommendations here focus on her interest in the text providing more practical advice about what to do or how to respond (as opposed to simply showing a static photo of an open door). Alternatively, she suggests that instead of an open door, which is more neutral or passive in its meaning, the image ought to show something that intimates the danger of the situation and the precautions a older adult should take against such threats: "Better to have a picture of a door with a whole bunch of locks on it.  And a person behind it. [laughs] Like a whole bunch…" At the same time, Sarah highlights what is a common theme in the responses to the text: the idea that there is

some satisfaction to be had from being "smarter" than a would-be criminal or, by contrast, that there is shame in being taken in by such scams. Many of



## BANK INSPECTOR FRAUD

The phoney bank inspector contacts you and asks for your help in catching a dishonest bank employee. You are asked to withdraw a specified amount of cash from your account so that the inspector may check the serial numbers. After turning over your money, you never hear from the inspector again.

### SUGGESTIONS

1 DO NOT give out financial or personal information over the telephone or internet.

2 Hang up the telephone. Immediately dial *69 on your touch-tone telephone, or 1169 on your rotary telephone. This will give you the information on who just called you. Be sure to write it down.

**DOOR-TO-DOOR SALES**

Many door-to-door sales are not legitimate. Provincial laws protect you against quick sales at your door.

### SUGGESTIONS

1 Ask to see the salesperson's identification and licence or registration. Take note of their name as well as the name and address of the company.

2 Before purchasing a product or service, call local stores who sell the same merchandise and compare prices.

Fig. 5.2 Screenshot from *A Senior's Guidebook*, showing image of open door. Reprinted from *A Senior's Guidebook to Safety and Security* by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2008, p. 8. © 2008 HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN as represented by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Reproduced with the permission of the RCMP

Sarah's comments indicate that she is measuring herself against the text; she looks to confirm that she is aware of the common schemes that older adults my be prey to and to confirm that she has acted appropriately in such situations herself.

## Summary

Sarah's commentary on the text and her suggestions during the focus group differ from others in that they tend to be more specific and analytical, such as her discussion of the words "swindler" and "fraudulent." In her breakdown of these terms and their possible connotations, she anticipates how a range of other older adults might read the text and the conclusions they might draw. Her analysis and commentary go beyond simply evaluating the *comprehensibility* of the text to exploring its *influence* on readers' beliefs and behaviours. She provides insight into how a text can produce not only a range of meanings but also motivate a range of subsequent decisions based on those perceived meanings. For example, a reader who believes there is no way to distinguish fraudulent websites from legitimate ones is more likely to feel fearful about using the internet and is therefore less likely to use it to communicate, shop, or play games.

Sarah also makes visible some of the assumptions that the text makes about readers, for example the notion that swindlers are recognizable on sight, or that older adults are passive and unassuming rather than on the

offensive in dealing with suspicious individuals. The text also assumes, as Sarah's reading highlights, that older adults are relatively unaware of the risks of internet use and need to be apprised of some of the frightening possibilities that await the naïve older adult user. Sarah is proof that some older adults are already very wary of the internet and crave explanations to help them understand both the risks involved and practical ways to manage these risks.

## Conclusion

All three of the cases described here illustrate the important role that a reader's unique background plays in the reading process. Throughout the reading exercises, the participants drew on personal knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values to help them make meaning from the text. This meant that each of the three readers produced a somewhat different reading of the text, despite using some of the same strategies and producing similar conclusions.

The findings in this study reflect what Brandt describes, which is that readers are shaped by their circumstances, including a range of social and economic factors. Her research demonstrates how "unequal conditions of literacy sponsorship" perpetuate inequalities between classes, despite institutionalized education (Brandt, 2009, p. 29). The promise of plain language is that it may, to some extent, address these inequalities, putting

the objects of literacy within reach of those who might not otherwise be able to grasp them. This study provides an opportunity to test this theory, examining how diverse readers within a target audience respond to the same document. Cases, by their very nature, are more focused and specific than findings from a large population would be. This in-depth study allows us to learn about these readers in greater depth than we would in a broad, cross-sectional study and observe them in the reading and comprehension process.

## Observing discourse processing

The cases also provided an opportunity to observe many of the discourse processing activities described in Chapter 4. For example, in Judy's exercise, there were several instances where she attempted to map the new knowledge from the text onto her existing knowledge. This process is demonstrated when she reads about spyware and adware:

I know that spyware and adware…can… *be transmitted by opening e-mal…malicious software*…Spyware and adware, no, those are things you have on there, to get rid of it [malicious software]…right?

There isn't an easy fit between the text and her existing knowledge, and as a result, Judy has trouble fully comprehending the information.

Similar problems arose when readers encountered words and phrases that were unfamiliar to them. For example, the phrase "e-commerce" puzzled

most of the readers, so they drew instead on their associations with the word "commerce" (which were also somewhat vague). Their guesses at the term illustrate how readers' existing associations with words can lead to unintentional meanings interfering with comprehension (Sanford, 2005). In Sarah's mind, the term e-commerce means banking, so she thinks the word might have something to do with banking. She also speculates that e-commerce might be a fake website. Even though the term e-commerce isn't necessarily good or bad in this context, Sarah interprets the word in light of the other concepts highlighted in the booklet, most of which have turned out to be dishonest schemes or criminal activities. In this way, her pre-existing associations with the word and associations prompted by the text combine to throw her off track. This example demonstrates the importance of using familiar terms whose associated concepts are consistent with the idea being described. In this case, "commerce" is already somewhat unfamiliar and vague; coupled with its unfamiliar use as "e-commerce," the term is even less recognizable.

## Diverse readers and interpretations

The cases provide a vivid portrayal, not just of the reading process or of the clarity of the text, but of the diversity of readers and the multiple interpretations they produce. Three themes in particular emerged through

the cases: first, that reading is a negotiation process; second, that readers are both "addressed" and "invoked" by the text; and third, that one text produces multiple meanings. None of these ideas is new; however, the cases give us an opportunity to observe them in a more dynamic, personal way and to explore their implications for plain language practice.

*Reading is negotiation*

For Judy, the text poses a challenge to her existing knowledge, requiring her to revisit what she knows and potentially change her mind. Her problem-solving is not only a cognitive process, but also a rhetorical one. As Doug Brent explains, readers must continually decide whether or not to integrate new knowledge from a text or reject it: "The meaning of a text must not only be interpreted, but evaluated for the power of its persuasive claims; the reader must decide not only what the text says, but if and to what degree what it says is worth believing" (p. 21). True to this definition, Judy embodies a reader who is an active participant in a rhetorical exchange, weighing the information in the text against what she knows already. The reading exercise provides a window through which to observe this process of judging, weighing, and incorporating information from a text.

For Joseph, the negotiation with the text is shaped by his own perceived inadequacy as a reader. Joseph's approach reflects his feeling the text is authoritative or "right" by virtue of its published form. Joseph assumes that any difficulties he experiences are his fault, not the text's. Many of the

difficulties he experiences can be traced to his experience as an EAL speaker, and would potentially pose problems for other EAL speakers. However, he never suggests that the text could be improved to help readers like him. His response to these difficulties—self-deprecating comments and apologies—provides insight into how the text influenced Joseph's perceptions about himself and his reading ability.

Whether they were convinced by the text or not, the readers made very few suggestions about how the text could be changed or improved (and when they did, it was usually after being prompted to do so). This reluctance was perhaps due in part to the authority with which the readers viewed the text; it might also be due to the context of the reading activity—being observed by a researcher perhaps made them focus less on evaluating the text and more on being evaluated themselves. It is possible that they felt pressure to read, as Joseph puts it, "properly." In the reading protocols, I gave general instructions at the start, but stayed silent throughout the reading process. Even though I instructed readers to tell me if they found anything difficult to understand, it is likely that they perceived their role as primarily that of a reader, not editor or critic. However, in the focus group, the participants appeared to be more comfortable making suggestions. It is possible that they felt more comfortable voicing their opinions when they realized that others observed the same things or had the same questions.

*Is the audience "addressed" or "invoked?"*

As discussed in Chapter 2, a useful model for understanding the role of readers in the rhetorical exchange is that of audience addressed/audience invoked (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). The cases described here provide insight into the interplay between these two kinds of audiences. The text states explicitly that it is "directed towards the community and, more specifically, seniors and their care givers in recognizing elder abuse, frauds and scams" (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2008, p. 1). This is the audience that the text sets out to address. However, the audience that is invoked—the role that readers believe they are expected to take in relation to the text—is interpreted differently by each reader. At points, all three readers distance themselves from the text by suggesting that they are not the target readers of the text. For example, during the focus group discussion, Sarah distinguishes between the group present and "other" older adults: "*We* know that [not to open the door to strangers], but there a lot of people, even in our area, who live alone, and don't have many visitors, and *they* are very vulnerable when somebody…" (italics mine). Similarly, when asked whom the document is "for," Judy suggests a new Canadian, someone who is unfamiliar with English and therefore more easily duped. As she explains in the focus group, the use of the word "phoney" is problematic for this reason:

> If you're learning a new language, you don't really get all of that, if
>
> you're going to school to learn a new language, phoney is not a word that

you're going to learn. Phoney, phoney…what do you mean "phoney"?

The telephone? Phone? Because I'll phone you. You're going to confuse

phoney with phone. I bet you anything. So phoney is not a good

word…for new Canadians.

As discussed above, Joseph, too, resists the role the text articulates for

readers by describing himself as someone who is a "step ahead" of criminals

and is not in need of being warned the way that other, more unsuspecting

older adults would be. His language difficulties aside, he rejects the identity

of an older adult who is helpless or vulnerable. Where the text relates

scenarios of older adults being duped, he sees himself as street-wise and able

to anticipate criminals' schemes. His proactive responses and anecdotes

stand in contrast to the booklet's general recommendation to readers to be

vigilant and avoid potentially risky interactions (financial or otherwise). In

this way, his response is different from the one invoked by the text. He does

not, as Walter Ong puts it, "play the role in which the author has cast him"

(Ong, 1975, p. 12). Instead, as Ede and Lunsford suggest, the roles of writers

and readers are much more intertwined and even at times interchangeable:

A fully elaborated view of audience, then, must balance the creativity

of the writer with the different, but equally important, creativity of the

reader. It must account for a wide and shifting range of roles for both

addressed and invoked audiences. (Ede & Lunsford, 1984, p. 169)

The creativity of readers is particularly evident in Joseph's reading of the text: while the "invoked" audience needs to be warned not to fall for scheming criminals, Joseph demonstrates in his reading that has already successfully outwitted them.

*One text—multiple meanings*

These readers' approaches to the text help us better understand the possible outcomes of a text, which are ultimately what institutions and writers are most concerned with: how effective documents are in prompting readers to act in specific ways, whether it is to fill in a form, consent to a procedure, agree to terms with a financial institution, open (or not) a door to a salesperson. Plain language documents are effective when readers are able to understand and act on them. Responses like those here help us understand how readers arrive at these understandings and actions. How do readers interact with the text? How does the text fit (or not) with what they are already know or have experienced? How do they decide how to act (or not act) as a result? Exploring readers' responses in this way is an opportunity to evaluate more fully the effectiveness of a document, not just in terms of how well it fosters a reader's understanding, but also in terms of the kind of outcomes that can result from this understanding.

Recognizing the impossibility of ever establishing a text that consistently produces the same interpretation in all its readers is not a cause

for alarm or despair; it is a humbling reminder that while writers can improve the odds of readers understanding a text in a desired way, they can never guarantee it. The plain language professional's best hope is to understand and anticipate a range of possible reader interpretations in the planning and production of texts. At the same time as gathering interpretations from a variety of readers, it is important to understand their interpretations in the context of their unique backgrounds and experiences. This holistic approach helps us learn more, not just about *what* readers take a text to mean, but also about *how* they arrive at that meaning—it is a journey that begins long before they begin to read the text.

# Chapter 6: "You Never Work Alone With a Text": Plain Language Professionals' Perceptions of Client Involvement

Studying the readers in Chapter 5 provided insight into the wide variety in individual readers and their interpretations of a single text. This research helps us better understand the unique experiences that readers bring to a text, and it also highlights the complex and difficult task that plain language writers face when trying to meet these needs. In this chapter, I focus on plain language professionals' perspectives to learn more about how they deal with these challenges.

One challenge in studying plain language professionals is that, as with readers, there is an enormous variety in their experiences, education, goals, and approaches. Better understanding the role and professional identity of plain language professionals is seen as an important step in the progress of the plain language, and this gap has been identified as an important area for further research (Hjalmarsson & Nicolay, 2010). To better understand this community of practice, I analyzed pre-existing questionnaire data, and then collected further data by conducting my own questionnaire.

The pre-existing survey data was generously shared by the International Consortium for Clear Communication (IC Clear). This group conducted the survey in 2012 to gather a range of information from the

international plain language community (Hampl et al., 2012).[13] In particular, the findings showed that plain language professionals tend to be relatively isolated in their work, even though many of them noted that communication with others was an important part of their day-to-day work. Consistent with much of the other research and advice about plain language writing, plain language professionals who responded to the survey noted the importance of putting readers' needs first and involving readers in the text production process. In addition, many respondents described themselves as playing a larger advocacy role, encouraging the clients and organizations they work for to see the benefits of plain language and adopt these strategies more widely. As one practitioner explained, the role of the practitioner is to "spread the 'reader-perspective gospel'" (Hampl et al., 2012, p. 31).

The 2012 survey results also suggest, however, that plain language professionals are ultimately accountable to their clients and must write and edit to meet their approval. In this way, their work is often highly collaborative; as one respondent put it, "You never work alone with a text" (p. 32). Furthermore, as many of the IC Clear survey responses suggest, the plain language professional–client relationship is collaborative, but it is not necessarily equal. In terms of decision-making, clients clearly hold the balance of power. As a result, plain language professionals have to use their ability to negotiate in order to achieve their goals. Says one respondent: "I

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[13] I would like to thank the IC Clear Advisory Group for sharing the findings of their survey with me. I am especially grateful to Karine Nicolay for her generous help in this process.

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think it is vital to persuade, rather than dictate, how to communicate clearly"
(p. 30). As a result, plain language professionals spend time, not only writing
and editing, but also convincing clients to accept their changes and
understand their value. In the end, plain language writers and editors must
often compromise on the final text. As one respondent explains, it is
important for a practitioner "to be a good negotiator" and "to understand the
need for compromise while always moving the plain language goals forward"
(p. 30).

The notion that clients are intermediaries in the communication
between plain language professionals and target readers adds further
complexity to the rhetorical triangle of plain language: we cannot consider
plain language writers without also considering their clients and how they
influence the choices these writers make. With this in mind, the current
study asks the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the interaction between plain language
professionals and clients during the development of a plain language text,
and how does this interaction shape the final product of plain language work?

2. How do plain language professionals view the influence of clients,
and to what extent are they able to reach compromises with clients without
compromising their plain language goals?

## Objectives

- To conduct a questionnaire with plain language professionals to gather their perspectives about working with clients.

- To identify themes and patterns in questionnaire responses that provide insight into plain language professionals' shared beliefs, values, and strategies.

## Methods

A link to a 10-question survey was distributed to plain language practitioners via email, Twitter, and several online plain language forums May 9-June 2, 2013.[14] Individuals who do plain language work including writing, editing, advocacy, or teaching were eligible to participate. Participants were not screened, but instead were asked to self-identify according to these guidelines.

The questionnaire included Likert-scale and short-answer questions; all Likert-scale questions also provided space for text comments, to allow participants to clarify their answers (see Appendix). Questions focused on the plain language professional's experience working with clients to produce plain language texts. For example, respondents were asked:

- What motivates clients to seek plain language assistance?

- What level of knowledge do clients have about plain language?

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[14] The study received formal ethics approval from the University of Waterloo's Office of Research Ethics.

- How are clients involved in the text production process?

- How much control do you have over the final product?

The questionnaire was conducted using Survey Monkey™, a web-based survey tool that collected and formatted responses. These responses were then analyzed and coded for emerging themes using NVivo 10™, qualitative research software. Scale-based questions were tallied to calculate averages.

## Results & Discussion

Sixty-two responses were collected. These included both male and female participants, as well as participants from across age ranges and geographic locations (for example, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, South Africa, and New Zealand). Participants reported serving a range of clients, with most doing work for more than one type of client. Figure 6.1 shows the types of clients as well as the number of participants who reported working for each type of client. In addition, two participants (3%) described themselves as working "in-house" as opposed to being independent consultants.

The data were coded in three stages. First, the responses were coded question by question, to identify themes across participants within individual questions. This process allowed me to identify similarities and differences across the respondents on each issue, and it also allowed me to identify prominent themes that could be revisited more broadly across all questions.

In the second stage, I used "matrix queries" to search the data to see if coded ideas or themes were linked; for example, I examined passages coded "diplomacy" to see if they also contained material coded "compromise." Third, I revisited the preliminary coding structure and looked for themes that appeared in more than one answer. For example, "compromise" was a theme in both negotiation strategies and in general advice. I combined these codes and examined them for broader themes that cut across the questions and responses.

In the discussion that follows, I provide an explanation of prominent themes that emerged from the coding and analysis process. These themes can

**Client types**

NGOs — 4
Government — 23
Individuals — 13
Non-profit — 30
For-profit — 32
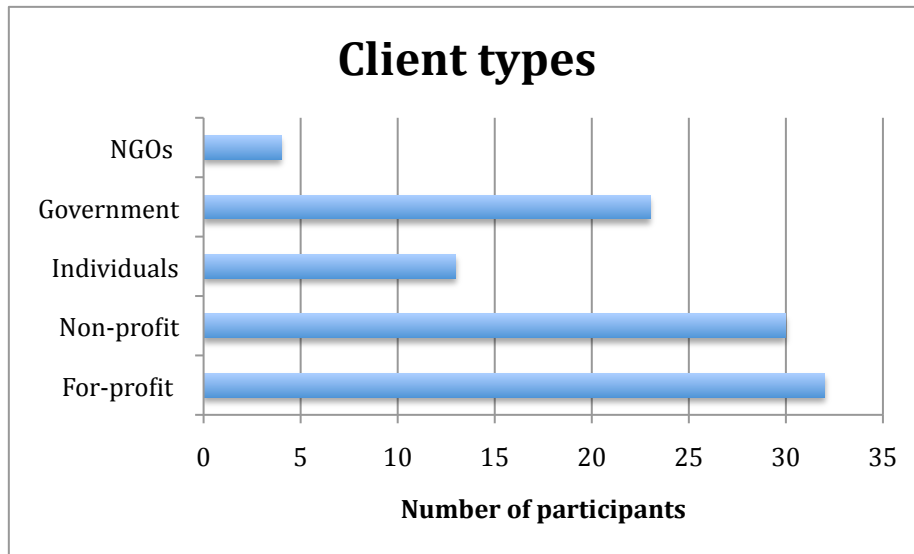
**Number of participants** (0 to 35)

*Figure 6.1.* Client types as reported by questionnaire participants. Note: Participants were asked to select all categories that applied.

be usefully grouped into two main areas of focus: first, the professional–client relationship (as perceived by the plain language professional) and second,

negotiation—what plain language professionals negotiate for and the strategies they use to accomplish their aims. Each of these areas of focus is further subdivided into a range of themes and subthemes.

## I. The Plain Language Professional–Client Relationship

In order to understand how plain language professionals work with clients to produce plain language products, the questionnaire asked plain language professionals for their perceptions of clients and for their perceptions about how clients are involved in the text production process. The findings are further grouped into five themes: 1) perceptions of clients, 2) control over the final product, 3) client buy-in, 4) client involvement, and 5) division of labour.

### 1) Perceptions of clients

In order to understand how plain language professionals work with clients, it is important to understand who clients are and how they are perceived by plain language professionals. To find this out, the questionnaire asked questions about client knowledge and motivation. When asked to rate clients' knowledge about plain language, the greatest proportion of respondents, 48% [$n$=30], indicated that their clients had a general understanding of the principles of plain language. However, the comments accompanying this question suggest that the level of knowledge varied considerably from client to client; therefore, some respondents commented that they chose "general

understanding" since it was the median response (3 on a 5-point scale). As one participant explained, "Some get it; others think it means 'dumbing down' their precious prose. There's a real divide between those who do and those who don't [get it]." Also, comments also suggested that clients who were knowledgeable had an understanding of what plain language was at a theoretical level, but were less certain about the specific strategies involved or how to implement them.[15] Because of the variability of responses, it was not possible to determine whether a lack of knowledge on clients' part led to more time negotiating on the plain language professional's part.

Another area of exploration was clients' motivation for seeking plain language. It is reasonable to expect that if clients are interested in plain language for its intrinsic benefits, they will be more likely to be open to suggestions than if they are motivated by legal or administrative regulations. With this in mind, the questionnaire asked what motivated clients (in the plain language professional's view) to hire a plain language professional. The responses to this question indicated that clients hire plain language experts for a variety of reasons, ranging from legal requirements to a desire to improve some aspect of communication or client relations. The most common reason, stated by 23 participants (37%), was the desire to reach a specific target audience. As one plain language professional explained, "They [clients]

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[15] Some respondents pointed out that misconceptions about plain language were at times apparent among practitioners themselves: "Most [clients] mistakenly believe that it is a superficial type of editing (a misunderstanding that is shared by some practitioners)."

feel the need to communicate more clearly with their customers, clients, etc.,

but they don't have the skills or time to do this, or they don't know enough

about the people they want to communicate with, and think we do." By

contrast, few responses [$n$=3, 5%] described clients being motivated by ethical

concerns, such as a desire to ensure informed consent. For example, one

respondent described clients as realizing that using plain language was "the

right thing to do." While some respondents indicated that their clients were

knowledgeable and proactive about seeking plain language help, others

indicated that their clients were less likely to "ask for" plain language advice

specifically. Comments by three participants were coded "plain language by

stealth," since they described plain language expertise as something that the

plain language practitioner "slipped in" without the client asking for it. For

example, one respondent put it this way: "I try to 'sneak it in' whenever

possible, even if I don't label what I'm doing 'plain language.'" Comments like

this suggest that some plain language professionals feel that client attitudes

or beliefs about plain language can be a barrier to doing this work, though

this was not specifically stated. Another respondent stated a connection

between client motivation and their understanding: "Clients who try to do

plain language only because of legal requirements have no understanding or

incorrect understanding. Clients who try to do plain language because they see

a business benefit generally have a good understanding."

The responses suggest that there is an enormous range in the types of clients, their level of knowledge, and their motivation for seeking plain language help. It seems likely that the variety of clients more so than any single shared trait requires plain language professionals to adapt and negotiate. Some plain language professionals adapt by "sneaking" plain language in; others adapt by selling clients on the idea that improving the quality and accessibility of communications will pay off in greater profits. On a regular basis, plain language professionals must navigate personalities and priorities that can vary considerably from project to project.

*2) Control over the final product*

Based on the responses from the IC Clear survey, it is clear that many plain language professionals, particularly those who work as independent consultants, lack formal decision-making authority. As one person noted above, plain language professionals must *persuade* others to see their point of view, rather than *dictate* to them to do so. To find out more about whether control was indeed an issue for plain language professionals, the questionnaire asked how much control professionals had over the final product and how satisfied they were with that level of control. I anticipated that the majority of respondents would report having little or some control, and that few would have a great deal of control.

The highest proportion of respondents (48%) reported having some control (Fig. 6.2); however, a much higher proportion of respondents than I expected (37.5%) reported having a great deal of control. At the same time, a much smaller proportion than I expected (12.6%) reported having either very little control or no control. Once again, comments on this question provided further insight into these responses. Several respondents noted that the level of control they had over the final product varied considerably from client to client and project to project. One respondent, who responded 3-Some control, commented:

> I have a wide spectrum of clients. Sometimes, I've had some control.
>
> Other times, I've cringed and walked away hoping for the best.
>
> Actually, control itself is probably an illusion.

However, other respondents indicated that control over the final product was a function of the plain language consultant's ability to satisfy client needs:

> We are outside consultants providing advice and recommendations and
>
> have no control over the final product. That does not mean that the
>
> final products deviate wildly from what we have suggested. Our
>
> clients' respect for the quality of our work is what keeps us in business.

These two responses indicate that not only a variety in control, but also a variety in the response or feelings about that control. One "cringes" at the thought of what the client will change, while the other believes that control

over the final product is largely a function of the quality of—and the client's respect for—his or her work.

Satisfaction with the degree of control was also higher than expected: the majority (56.4%) reported being either very satisfied or satisfied with the level of control they had over the final product; 23% reported that they were somewhat satisfied; 19.7% reported that they were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied. Once again, the comments indicated, however, that the level of satisfaction varied considerably from client to client and project to project. Comments based on this question provided further insight into why many professionals are satisfied with the level of control they have: first, they have become accustomed to client attitudes and to their own roles in the project; second, they see their work as part of a broader cultural shift that must happen gradually. As a result, they are okay with incremental changes, including having limited control over the final product. As one practitioner explained:

> we accept that the plain English movement is an ongoing 'thing.' Small steps are good. For many writers, it's a huge shift in thinking and in the way they work. Status is invested in the way people write and the language they use, and giving it away is hard for some.
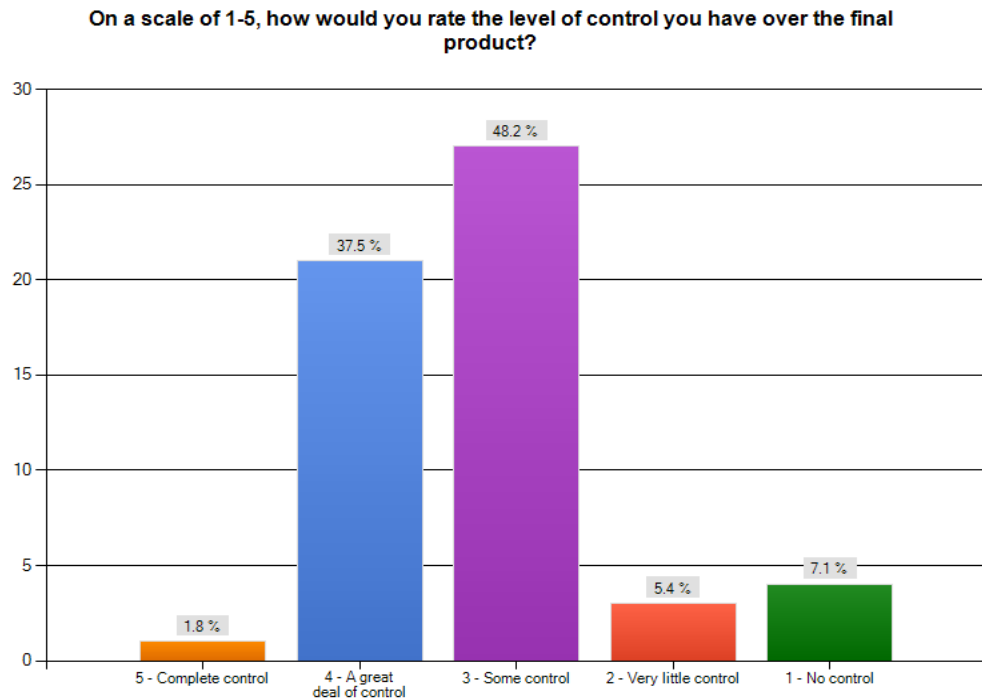
*Figure 6.2.* Plain language professionals' perceived control over the final product

A follow up question invited respondents who were unsatisfied to elaborate on what they would like to change. Respondents said they would like to see greater acceptance of plain language in organizations, more trust and respect in their roles, and more user testing in the plain language process.

*3) Getting "buy-in" from clients*

As the above comments indicate, another important element of persuading clients to accept plain language professionals' advice is the buy-in of clients. In the plain language literature, professionals often describe the importance of having the support of organizational leaders or establishing influential

"champions" in order for plain language projects to succeed (Brockman, 2004). Consistent with this advice, several respondents [*n*=9] made comments about the importance of having support from the organization's leadership or other influential members of the organization. One respondent explains bluntly, "It matters tremendously whether or not plain language has support at the top of the organization." Another respondent is even more specific: "It even matters who introduced you. It should be at least a VP. Yes, that matters!" Even though plain language professionals are often not part of the organizational chart of the clients they work for, these comments demonstrate their awareness (and acceptance) of the importance of workplace leadership and politics.

*4) Client involvement*

To understand how plain language professionals and clients interact, it is also important to examine how clients are actually involved in the plain language process, meaning, what they actually do. Ninety-two percent of respondents [*n*=57] indicated that clients were involved in the production of plain language texts. Client involvement was categorized into five types:

- Drafting the original content (27%)

- Providing legal advice (6%)

- Editing drafts (15%)

- Providing content expertise (16%)

- Approval only (8%)

Each participant's discussion of client involvement was coded positive, negative, both positive and negative, or neutral about client involvement. As Figure 6.3 shows, twice as many participants characterized the involvement in positive terms [$n$=25] as those who characterized it in negative terms [$n$=14]:

25 respondents made positive comments

14 respondents made comments that were coded negative

6 respondents made both negative and positive comments

2 participants made comments that were coded "neutral"

The most positive aspect of client involvement was the content expertise clients provided [$n$=15], as this ensured accuracy and appropriate messaging. Respondents also indicated that client involvement could have positive outcomes in terms of building relationships [$n$=3] and providing another perspective or "fresh eyes" on the text [$n$=7].

Negative comments included 11 respondents reporting that client involvement was perceived as interference; five commented that the lack of plain language expertise of clients often led to problems. A smaller number [$n$=2] of negative comments described client involvement as unhelpful but unavoidable.
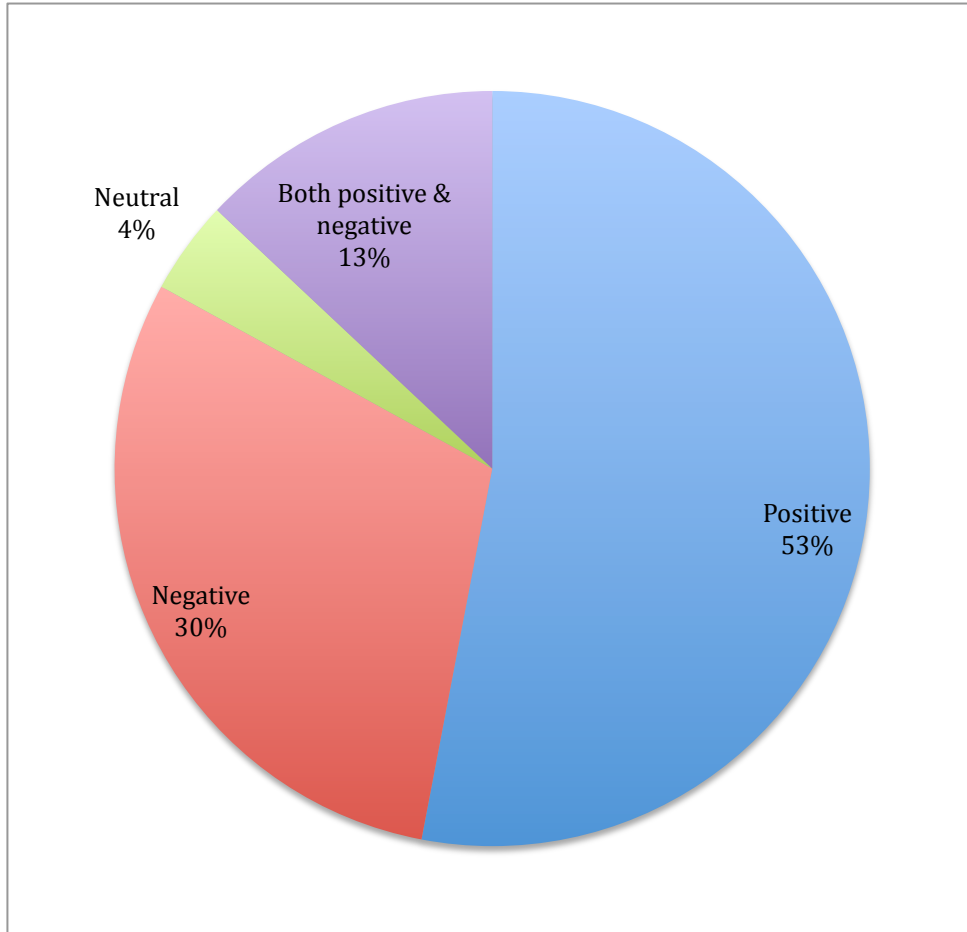
*Figure 6.3.* Proportion of clients making positive and negative comments

*5) Division of labour*

Many of the positive and negative attitudes about client involvement had to do with a perceived division of labour between clients and plain language professionals. Many respondents saw a clear separation between content knowledge (possessed by the client) and writing and editing expertise (possessed by plain language professionals). Comments about client involvement tended to be positive if this division of labour was maintained.

In 15 comments, respondents described the content knowledge of clients using positive language, such as "helpful," "essential," and "insight." One respondent explains: "They [clients] are the experts, so their knowledge is essential to write any of the texts I work on." Another respondent noted, "We try to involve the client at different editing stages both as a means to educate and as a quality check on our work." These comments suggest that plain language professionals are comfortable with not being subject matter experts; they are generally eager to defer to clients in this regard.[16]

By contrast, many of the negative comments about client involvement related to what might be considered "violations" of the division of labour between content and writing. For example, one respondent indicated that problems could arise if clients veered into writing territory: "They often think they're editing for content, but they're simply editing for style—away from plain language and back to the status quo (because it's comfortable)." As this comment suggests, part of the problem with clients entering into writing territory is their lack of expertise related to writing (and to plain language writing more specifically). Five respondents indicated that this lack of expertise was a problem. Equally problematic was clients not recognizing or

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[16] Comments like this suggest that the plain language expert and the client often work separately on the shared document, "taking turns" with the material. The client provides the initial draft content, the plain language professional puts this into a plain language draft for review, and the client and the plain language professional go back and forth to finalize the draft. Thus, the client and plain language professional are not necessarily working together, even though they may both contribute to the document and respond to one another's feedback.

respecting the expertise of the plain language expert. One respondent explained the feeling of frustration this way: "When you hire a surgeon to remove your cancer, he doesn't negotiate with you about how to do his job. He's the expert. My clients never has [sic] best practices or evidence on their side—never." Perhaps the most vivid explanation of the violation of the division of labour was from one respondent who described the futility of the relationship this way:

> The sequence goes like this: 1. The client will accuse you of using ungrammatical or wrong English. You will point out multiple sources that prove you are right—and, by implication, that your accuser is wrong. 3. After several rounds of this, your accuser—the one who was calling you stupid—will conclude that you are calling him or her stupid. 4. You will be removed from the project.

This comment was by far the most negative of those on this topic; however, it does illustrate a pattern confirmed by several other respondents hinted at: that clients hold the formal power in this exchange, and plain language practitioners must achieve their aims without having this kind of control.

## II. "You never work alone with a text": Plain Language Professionals' Negotiation Strategies

In addition to understanding how plain language professionals perceive clients and client involvement, the questionnaire also aimed to find out more

about how plain language professionals negotiated with clients in the text production process. When asked whether negotiation was important, the respondents confirmed and elaborated the findings of the IC Clear survey: 76% [*n*=47] respondents indicated that they did some kind of negotiation, and 48% [*n*=30] indicated that it was "very important" or "essential" to their work. Only 6% [*n*=4] responded that this skill was not relevant to their work or was unimportant. Responses to this question also provided insight into what kinds of things plain language professionals negotiate about and the strategies they use.

*Aims of negotiation*

Responses related to the aims of negotiating were grouped into three main categories: specific details in the text (e.g., word choice and sentence structure) [*n*=14], greater simplicity or clarity in the document in general [*n*=4], and project parameters (salary, timelines, and scope) [*n*=6]. Underlying many responses here and elsewhere in the questionnaire was the plain language professional's commitment to representing readers. In particular, responses indicated that plain language professionals see a difference between themselves and clients when it comes to awareness of and respect for the needs of readers. The importance of reader testing was one example of this perceived division. When asked if readers were involved in the drafting and editing of plain language texts, only 11% of respondents

[*n*=7] indicated that testing with readers was a regular part of the drafting process. A key barrier to user testing was clients, who either did not feel the testing was important or did not want to pay for the testing. As one respondent explained, "When I can sell the idea of user testing, they [readers] are [involved]. Many clients won't pay the price to test documents on their clients."

Similarly, when asked for their advice for new plain language practitioners, eight participants (13%) made direct comments about the importance of putting the reader first. Many of these comments suggested that plain language professionals have come to anticipate resistance from clients on this point. One respondent advised, "think of your reader first and foremost; you are the reader's chief advocate. Be tactful, but hold your ground when you know you're right." Another respondent commented, in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way, that the idea of prioritizing readers needs might seem "radical" to some clients: "Talk incessantly about The Reader, and about how you're advocating on their behalf: this will sound radical and new to some of them. Some of them may even buy in." In this way, plain language practitioners are often mediators, negotiating between the clients who pay them and the readers who will, in the end, receive the document.

*Strategies*

Strategies for negotiation that respondents identified were categorized into five types: 1) compromise, 2) diplomacy, 3) justification, 4) education, and 5) professional ethos.

1) Compromise

Strategies were coded "compromise" if the respondent used this word specifically in comments on negotiation, or if they described having to give up something or provide alternatives in order to reach agreement. Thirteen comments were coded this way. For example, one respondent explained:

> For us, it is all about teasing out the issues behind comments and positions so that we can think up alternatives that will address one stakeholder's objections/requirements with as little harm (and sometimes actually greater benefit) to other stakeholders.

Here, the practitioner suggests that there may be value to the back-and-forth of negotiation; the process may raise issues or questions that lead to a higher quality product.

Another motivation to compromise was an awareness of the importance of knowing how and when to push for changes: "You have to pick your fights—get them to change their headings, but in return they get to keep their favourite sentence, even if few readers will understand it." In this instance, and in several other comments, practitioners described the final document as a "middle ground" that represented some but not all of the

practitioner's changes and recommendations. The variance in the answers in the earlier question about "control" suggests that this middle ground can look very different from client to client and project to project.

2) Diplomacy

Diplomacy was a common theme across the comments about negotiation and appeared in 14 instances. Passages were coded "diplomacy" if respondents either used this word specifically or described negotiating in terms of interpersonal skills, tact, or relationship building. One practitioner advised "walking a fine line" between being a helpful expert and an irritating critic:

> We have a unique skill that clients usually lack in house. Walk the fine line between improving the copy and seeming to criticize it. Diplomacy and good judgment are key to building strong client relationships.

Another respondent noted that

> [Clients] have a great deal of pride wrapped up in their ownership of that information and this must be tactfully dealt with in order to ensure a quality product.

Both these comments show a keen awareness of the human element in the document development process; on both sides of the client and plain language professional relationship feelings are involved. Emotional intelligence is an important skill in moving projects and professional relationships forward. A good relationship, in turn, will provide more opportunities for the plain

language practitioner to influence change in the organization's communication.

3) Justification

Passages were coded "justification" [$n$=8] if this term was used specifically by respondents to describe negotiation or if respondents described the need to explain to clients the reasoning or evidence supporting their writing decisions. Most often, justification involved describing the logic behind choices or the decision-making process; however, some respondents also reported providing some third-party support, in the form of research or academic articles, to support their approaches.

There was also some overlap between justification and compromise, as this comment suggests: "Essentially, as with any editorial endeavour, it's important to be able to justify your approach and be willing to explain it to your clients. It's also important to know how and when to compromise." The mention of compromise in conjunction with justification is important; as many of the respondents suggested, not all disagreements can be settled on the basis of explanation or rationale. The plain language professional has to judge how far he or she will get by arguing the case and decide if it is better to give up some ground in one area order to gain some in another.

4) Education

An extension of "justification" was the category "education," which was defined as teaching clients or others about plain language as a way of building understanding about and thereby support for the plain language professional's point of view. There were six instances of this code. One respondent suggested that providing a broader context about plain language could be important, not just for clients, but also for their supervisors:

> There are often "political" realities—interference from higher ups—
> that have to be taken into consideration. Work with your client to
> educate senior bureaucrats. Off [sic] senior staff special half-day or
> one-hour workshops on the importance of plain language.

In this case, education is a stepping stone towards getting institutional leaders to support plain language changes. The importance of getting buy-in was a theme that emerged elsewhere in the data, suggesting that the negotiation process might be influenced not just by the stakeholders directly involved, but by the broader culture of the organization.

5) Professional ethos

In most consulting-based fields, a professional's credentials and reputation as an "expert" are key to success. In the questionnaire responses, comments reflect that reputation is important, both in attracting and retaining clients and in earning their respect and trust during the plain language project. In terms of negotiation specifically, however, few

respondents seemed to play the "expert" card to garner acceptance for their suggestions. One respondent did comment that clients generally deferred to her expertise: "I explain certain problems to the client and negotiate a solution, and they always agree (they say I am the professional, so whatever I suggest, they go along with unless there is a legal reason not to make my changes)." This level of confidence and leverage in negotiating was noteworthy, primarily because it was so rare in the responses. Most participants, while confident in their abilities, were less confident in clients' recognition of them.[17] Others point out the importance of being collegial, emphasizing a "teamwork" approach and advising plain language professionals to "Never condescend to your client because you are a 'writing expert.'" These comments suggest the plain language professional's expertise should be managed wisely—used to persuade and educate rather than to dominate or overrule.

The types of negotiation strategies that plain language practitioners use provide insight into how the task of developing a plain language document is complex, not just at the level of writing and organization of a text, but also in terms of working with clients to establish a shared sense of what the final product should look like. In many cases, this negotiation process requires practitioners to sacrifice some of their own ideas and preferences in order to reach an agreement that is acceptable to both sides.

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[17] For example, one respondent noted, "The gratefulness curve is short and steep. Don't work ahead of your retainer."

Even though this might imply a "loss" on the part of the practitioner, many do not see it that way, since a positive outcome paves the way for future growth and education of the client.

## Conclusion

This study shows the complexity of the relationships between plain language professionals and their clients and shows that, for plain language professionals, communication and interpersonal skills can be just as important as technical writing and editing skills. Part of the reason for this is that plain language is still in the process of earning public understanding and support, and professionals in this field accept (some more patiently than others) that it will take time for plain language to establish widespread acceptance. They recognize that they are part of a long-term process of education and negotiation. Ultimately, plain language professionals are at the intersection of a variety of pressures, including, but not limited to, clients' expectations, the requirements and standards of plain language work, the lack of public understanding about plain language or what plain language professionals do, and the needs of readers who will interact with the final product. Negotiating these competing priorities requires professionals to draw on a range of strategies.

The questionnaire responses also provide insight into the development of the profession into a cohesive community. Respondents agree, in large part, on the purpose and value of plain language and on the key challenges facing the plain language profession. However, there is still great diversity in how plain language professionals actually define plain language and put these strategies into practice. This diversity could in some senses be viewed as a strength, in that it demonstrates an openness in the community to different points of view and approaches. In other ways, the diversity is a challenge in terms of establishing and maintaining standards of practice and measures of quality.

Perhaps because of the lack of a centralized certification body and because of the isolated and scattered nature of plain language professionals, it falls to professionals themselves to police the profession. The concern about people inappropriately "claiming" to be plain language professionals is explained by one respondent:

> Far too many people believe they are plain-language professionals when they're not. Those who are doing this work need to belong to the main organizations and spend a lot of time listening to the established experts (and reading their work). Ideally someone new to the field will find a mentor....it's all about practicing (in a situation where someone can stop you before you cause harm).

In fact, a poor plain language professional could cause a range of harms: a

poor outcome for clients and readers, a damaged reputation for the plain language professional him or herself, and damage to the credibility of the plain language profession and its legitimate members.

## Limitations

One key limitation to the study is that only one form of data collection was used. An additional method, such as follow-up interviews, would be an opportunity to gather greater context and detail about responses. For example, many responses to questions of control and satisfaction indicated that plain language professionals see an enormous variety in their client relationships, with greater control and satisfaction in some client relationships than in others. Interviews could help uncover more about how these differences play out and how professionals cope in less than ideal situations.

Second, the study focuses on the perceptions of plain language professionals about their relationships with clients. The next step would be to survey the *clients* who hire plain language professionals to gather their perspectives on their roles and relationships with plain language professionals. Not only would this provide deeper insight into professional–client relationships, but it would also be an opportunity to compare the perceptions of the two groups to see where there are commonalities or potential misunderstandings between how they see one another. Both of

these limitations are key opportunities for further research.

As the variety and depth of the responses to this small-scale questionnaire demonstrate, the community has a rich collective experience from which to draw. Just as importantly, the community is generous and thoughtful with its feedback. Though these professionals may not agree on all the principles and practices of plain language, they do share a common aim: to make communication more accessible and to promote the growth and success of the profession. As the plain language profession continues to grow and become more formalized in its education, accreditation, and professionalization practices, it is important that individual plain language professionals continue to have a voice in how those practices take shape.

# Chapter 7: Shortcuts and Detours:

# Metonymy and Plain Language[18]

In July 2013, a new style guide was published on UK.gov, a website

that provides information about the United Kingdom's national government

departments and services. While it is becoming very common for government

style guides to require plain language, the UK.gov style guide stands out

because it is more sweeping and directive than most when it comes to telling

writers what words and phrases to avoid. Some of the guidelines it provides

are relatively unsurprising: "Use 'buy' instead of 'purchase,' 'help' instead of

'assist,' 'about' instead of 'approximately,' and 'like' instead of 'such as'" ("GDS

design principles," n.d.). However, the site also instructs writers to avoid

some "government 'buzzwords'" that might seem commonplace: "agenda

(unless it is for a meeting)," "deliver (pizzas, post and services are delivered –

not abstract concepts like 'improvements' or 'priorities')," and "key (unless it

unlocks something. A subject/thing isn't 'key' – it's probably 'important')."

What is interesting here is that none of these words is particularly

long or unfamiliar. But government officials have used them in unfamiliar

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[18] A version of this chapter was previously published as "Metonymy and Plain Language," *J. Writing and Technical Communication* Vol. 43(2) 163-178, 2013 and has been reproduced with permission. Copyright is held by 2013, Baywood Publishing Co., Inc. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.2190/TW.43.2.d http://baywood.com

ways: agenda, to mean future goals or plans; deliver, to mean produce or bring about results; and key, to mean important or central. This kind of language is of the kind referred to in Chapter 2 by the Washington bureaucrat who described the language of government as "our own patois, our own sort of bureaucratic cant" (Bowen et al., 1991, p. 21).

The style guide suggests that clear communication is a matter of word choice and sentence style—in short, that plain language is about what's on the page. Though the style guide suggests alternatives for each of the words in the list, most politicians are likely to find that the process of clarifying their messages will be more complex than one-to-one substitution. As the first two studies in this dissertation demonstrate, plain language is much more difficult to achieve than it might appear. In a way, plain language is a paradox of sorts: to achieve clarity and transparency, writers must engage in a complex task to address social and linguistic factors that are often unseen. This chapter explores how difficult it can be to detect some barriers, let alone address them, in plain language texts.

## Making writers responsible for their readers

Traditionally, plain language approaches place the responsibility for the reader's comprehension on the text (and, by extension, on the writer), as with the style guide above. From this perspective, translating complex documents into plain language requires putting readers first and writing

with their needs and goals in mind. As plain language expert Joseph Kimble notes,

> Plain language lays bare the ambiguities and uncertainties and conflicts that traditional style tends to hide. At the same time, the process of revising into plain language will often reveal all kinds of unnecessary detail. In short, you are bound to improve the substance— even difficult substance—if you give it to someone who is devoted to being intelligible. (Kimble, 1994, p. 55)

To address these problems in a sensible, easy-to-follow fashion, many experts have developed checklists or guidelines to help writers test their documents and make adjustments to their style of writing (Balmford, 2002; Felker et al., 1981; Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2011; Williams, 1991). In one plain language handbook, *Guidelines for Document Designers*, the authors offer suggestions such as "use informative headings," (Felker et al., 1981, p. 17) "use highlighting techniques but don't overuse them," (p. 73) and "avoid lines of type that are too long or too short" (p. 79). Other experts, like Joseph Williams, advise writers to express crucial action using verbs; put participants in the subject position; and arrange sentences moving from known information to new (1991, p. 61).

As has already been discussed, these text-based approaches to improving readability reflect our beliefs about more than just "good writing" per se; they demonstrate our persistent faith in language's representative

function. As Michael Reddy argues, the default understanding of language operation is the conduit metaphor—a message is put into words and transported to the receiver who extracts the same message at the other end (Reddy, 1978). In this folk-theoretic framework, speakers have thorough control over the message, both in its encoding and decoding phases. To revisit a classic understanding of plain language, Erwin Steinberg's explanation of the transferability of plain language is particularly useful. For him as for many plain language advocates, the skill and authority of the writer is predominant in ensuring that a text will be understood by a reader:

> [A]lthough plain language problems may be different from one country and from one language community to another, the principles involved in solving them are the same: training writers to be sensitive to the needs of their readers, and giving writers the skills to satisfy those needs (Steinberg, 1991, p. 8).

Emphasizing that it is up to writers to make texts more readable is, of course, very important; after all, they're the ones who are choosing the words and arranging them on the page. The problem is not with the writer; the problem is with the *words*. Many writing approaches make a key assumption: that meaning is tied directly to words. The words on the page stand alone, conveying a complete, coherent message directly from the writer to the reader. But even with the clearest possible text, this ideal is rarely, if ever, achieved. In fact, the meanings we draw from language are shaped by a

variety of other factors, such as our sense of context, community, and timing (Lennenberg, 1972; Schank & Kass, 1988; Vygotsky, 1972). These influences are pervasive but unstated, making literal meanings in texts unstable. Thus, the message the sender communicates is always different (to a greater or lesser degree) from what the receiver understands, no matter how plain the words (Cameron, 1995).

The instability of literal meaning, and the reliance on unstated contextual factors to shape meaning, is even greater when writers require readers to make inferences beyond the words on the page. For example, Roger Schank and Alex Kass note that language is often indirect and elliptical, prompting readers to fill in the gaps (1988). One of the most common ways language operates indirectly is through the use of figurative language such as metaphor and metonymy. Though they are most often associated with literary style, rhetorical figures are common features of everyday language, helping us express ourselves and understand others (Fauconnier & Turner, 1999; Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

Metaphor is the most recognized form of figurative language, allowing us to understand one thing in terms of another. But Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner argue that metonymy, too, is engaged with conceptual integration processes (1999). In conceptual terms, metonymy involves representing an object or idea by selecting one of its recognizable features (Fauconnier & Turner, 1999). The feature is not chosen randomly, but for the

purposes of highlighting something particularly relevant about the thing in question (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). For example, the phrase "the Blue Jays' bats are heating up" uses "bats" as a metonym to represent baseball players who are on a hitting streak. The "bat" is highlighted as a key element of hitting. As this example illustrates, metonymic features or elements are chosen based on established relationships between concepts and their related components. In his *Institutio Oratoria* (AD 95), Quintilian classifies metonymic relationships as "possessor/possessed" or "inventor/invention" (XIII 6.25). In the above example, players (possessor) are referred to by their bats (possession). Similarly, Joseph-Ignace Guillotin (inventor) has become the name by which we refer to the guillotine (invention).

Taking a different view, Kenneth Burke (1941) sees metonymy as a means of putting abstract concepts into tangible terms. For example, when we talk about emotions, we identify these using physical terms like "sweaty palms" to represent nervousness or "tears" to represent sadness. For Burke, metonymy is best understood as a reduction, since it condenses a variety of characteristics and ideas into a single representative—and material—form.

For metonymic representations and reductions to work, however, readers must *already be* familiar with these associations. The metonymic element chosen must not only be recognizable, it must be specific enough to the object in question that readers can easily make the connection between the metonym and its referent. For example, the relationship between

nervousness and sweaty palms is widely known and understood. As Hugh Bredin explains, "metaphor *creates* the relation between its objects, while metonymy *presupposes* that relation" (Bredin, 1984, p. 57).

The presupposed relationship between a metonym and its referent is focus of the current chapter. Specifically, I am interested in how pervasive—and frequently unconscious—metonymy is in our everyday language use, and how potentially problematic metonymies can be for those who do not share the same experiences and knowledge as the writer. Helping readers recognize and deal with metonymies—what is omitted, alluded to, or assumed—makes the plain language process more complex than we might be tempted to think.

## The role of metonymy in text comprehension

Part of what enables some readers to comprehend texts in spite of omissions is readers' familiarity with the situation to which the text relates. Building on the philosophical work of Mikhail Bakhtin (2006) and Pierre Bourdieu (2006), among others, writing theorists have persuasively argued that the context of writing has a pervasive influence on the development and comprehension of texts. For example, Carolyn Miller suggests that repeated patterns and rules in language use arise from the actions we are trying to perform in a given context, and the recurrent use of such patterns ultimately establishes a cultural meaning that contributes to our understanding of the

words in a text (Miller, 1984). These same patterns also influence language users in choosing what to *leave out* of the text.

Within a given context, writers omit information that they assume the reader already knows or can piece together. Instead of including a long explanation, the author might use a keyword or phrase to allude to a larger meaning. This strategy can be understood as a kind of metonymy—the process of representing a concept with an associated element or feature. For these metonymies to be successful, however, readers must be able to recognize and compensate for the omissions. The repeated patterns that Miller describes help make this recognition possible. Hugh Bredin explains that "metonymy neither states nor implies the connection between objects that are involved in it. For this reason it relies wholly upon those relations that are habitually and conventionally known and accepted" (Bredin, 1984).

Take, for instance, an unexceptional sentence like "The White House denied involvement." The White House cannot, of course, literally deny or affirm anything. It is a building. But the building is the physical base of an institution whose agents can deny or affirm, and we name them by it. The association, and the metonymy, is so common and well known that the figure passes unnoticed. It passes as literal. But in specialized areas of knowledge, the scope of familiarity narrows, and the community that shares crucial associations shrinks. Thus, metonymical references—and the "habitual and

conventional relations" upon which they rely—become increasingly opaque to outsiders of specific discourse communities.

The *Senior's Guide* discussed in Chapter 5 also provides several examples of metonymies that are familiar to insiders but less recognizable to outsiders. For example, the phrase "sweet talk crimes" is used to describe a form of fraud that involves drawing in victims by promising them a financial reward (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2008, p. 7). The sweet talk is not the crime itself; it is an associated feature that precedes the crime. In this case, "sweet talk" (possessed) is the bait used by fraudsters (possessors) to commit fraud. The metonymy allows the writers to encapsulate the crime in specific terms, highlighting a salient common feature. For those *inside* the law enforcement community, this metonymy allows them to recognize and distinguish this crime from other forms of fraud. However, for those *outside* this community, who may not have the same familiarity with this crime, the terminology is more likely to cause confusion, as it did with the older adult readers in Chapter 5.

Similarly, the text's explanation of "identity theft" uses "identity" as a metonym for its associated elements, such as name, address, and other personal information:

> Identity theft involves stealing, misrepresenting or hijacking the
> identity of another person or business and provides effective means to
> commit other crimes. (p. 9)

The thief is not actually stealing the person's identity, per se, but things typically associated with identifying individuals. But using the term "identity" allows writers to group a wide variety of elements by highlighting their shared function. The risk of this shortcut, however, is that some readers will not be able to make the leap from the term identity to the more specific elements it entails. The term "theft" adds further complexity, since it operates metaphorically: identity thieves are not committing theft in the traditional sense of the term; they are gathering and using information to impersonate individuals or groups.

These examples demonstrate how metonymy can operate at cross purposes, serving a useful conceptual and rhetorical purpose on the one hand, and producing omissions that create or reinforce barriers to general readers on the other. In specialized texts, reading difficulties for the unspecialized audience come as no surprise; indeed, not every text is written (nor should be written) for a general audience. However, even when a text is directed to the layperson, its hidden complexities can remain. In many cases, metonymy is the cause of such complexity. In the sections that follow, I will describe how metonymy can interfere with efforts to produce texts for general readers in three important ways: first, metonymy prompts the reader to infer information that is not provided in the text; second, it constrains meaning to a circle of possibilities instead of directly specifying it; and third, it requires a

reader to possess the insider knowledge and values of a particular discourse community.

## Prompting readers to make inferences

Metonymy operates by prompting readers to look outside the text to complete their understanding of a concept, word, or phrase. This exercise is completed so seamlessly and so often that we are rarely conscious of the process. Raymond Gibbs argues, for instance, that even when readers are given only a small part of a story, they routinely and effortlessly infer a full chain of events (Gibbs, 1999). Take this simple exchange (p. 66):

A: How did you get to the airport?

B: I waved down a taxi.

Of course, B did more than that. She left her house, walked out to the street, sat in the back of the taxi, and so on. But A, and anybody who knows the domain of urban life, has no trouble understanding how one action, waving down a taxi, implicates a chain of events that result in B getting to the airport. Waving down the taxi metonymically stands for the chain (Gibbs, 1999).[19] Readers make inferences any time the text does not appear to supply a complete picture, or anytime conventional meanings do not seem to apply. H.P. Grice's maxims are particularly helpful in understanding this process.

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[19] In a fuller rhetorical theory of figuration, of course, waving down a taxi represents the chain *synecdochally* (as a part for the whole). For the purposes of this essay, I follow Lakoff and Johnson, Gibbs, and others in the cognitivist tradition, in treating synecdoche as a subtype of metonymy.

Grice describes conversation as a cooperative effort in which the participants have general expectations of one another in conversations in terms of the amount (tell us enough, but not too much), truth (don't lie), relevance (give information that is useful), and delivery (be orderly and clear) (Grice, 2006). With these maxims in mind, participants assume that other speakers are fully engaged and sincere; any contribution a speaker makes is interpreted in terms of these assumptions. As Eco explains:

> [I]f somebody who is  speaking violates all these maxims, and does so in such a way as not to be suspect of stupidity or awkwardness, an implicature must click in the reader's mind: Evidently, that speaker meant something else. (Eco & Paci, 1983, p. 219)

 In the case of metonymy, speakers violate expectations by leaving out information, prompting speakers to assume the omission is deliberate, and cueing them to fill in the missing information. While Grice developed his maxims with conversation in mind, they apply to virtually all kinds of communication.

As discussed in Chapter 4, we rely on repeated patterns in text and language, also known as schemas and scripts to connect ideas in the text and to fill in missing or implied information (Eco & Violi, 1994). Schemas are broad concepts that have multiple associations grouped around them; when a speaker or writer names that concept, many other associations are activated in the hearer's or reader's mind (Underwood and Batt, 1996). Similarly,

scripts are concepts that have a related set of associations that occur in a typical order. Taking a taxi, to re-use our previous example, involves a script in which a taxi is hailed (by phone or in person, by prospective rider or agent), the rider gets in, gives a destination, rides until it is reached, pays the fare, with or without a tip, and gets out. These schemas and scripts allow us to invoke a cluster of related meanings and ideas without explicitly stating all of them. Simply referring to a prominent related part can be enough to activate the schema in the hearer's mind.

At a more specific level, schemas and scripts give rise to "presuppositions" in text that suggest a mutual agreement between the writer and reader about what is already known (Eco & Violi, 1994, p. 68). This agreement forms the basis of a "textual frame" that tells the reader how to contextualize the information in a sentence (Eco & Violi, 1994, p. 227). As Eco and Violi explain, "In order to make sense of a text, that is, to understand it, the reader has to 'fill' the text with a number of textual inferences, connected to a large set of presuppositions defined by a given context" (p. 260). When B tells A she waved down a cab, A presupposes all the generic elements of the above script, for instance, but also that B had some means of payment, hailed the taxi with sufficient time to get to the airport; indeed, that she was wearing clothes and has opposable thumbs.

Metonymies often signal for readers to make these inferences, but what happens if they are unable to do so? In Figure 7.1, a letter alerts a car

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owner of a dangerous mechanical defect. In the original version, two words are central to the message: "defect" and "fail." Both words are used to refer to the problem in the car without specifically naming, locating or explaining the actual problem. This usage presupposes that the reader knows what it would mean for the part to properly operate in the first place. In the plain language version, the metonymical impulse remains, as the terms "defect" and "fail" remain largely intact, with minor revisions. The author makes "defect" an adjective with "defective part" in hopes of making the text more specific, and changes "failure" from a noun to a verb with "if the part fails" (Williams, 1991, p. 61). The shift in lexical categories subtly shifts how those terms represent the story. The author has used the plain language strategies to their fullest extent; that the metonymies remain is an indication of how persistent these concepts can be in texts.

## Constraining meaning by narrowing the field

Because metonymies do not explicitly state meaning, they operate by limiting possible meanings to a narrower group of concepts. This range of "constituent concepts" has been referred to by Albert Henry (1971) as a "semic field" (cited in Bredin, 1984, p. 51). From this field, a writer may select a concept to represent the whole. In this framework, metonymy is used to highlight salient features of an object or idea. The reference to "identity theft" mentioned earlier illustrates this process. In Figure 7.2, the original version

uses the metonymy of "identity theft" (abstract, de-humanized) to allude to a variety of crimes. The revised version shifts the emphasis to the "thieves" (more familiar, humanized). Thus, metonymy can make a text more accessible by shifting the focus from one associated feature to another (Croft, 2006).

| Original | Revised |
|---|---|
| **Identity theft** involves stealing, misrepresenting or hijacking the identity of **another person or business** and provides effective means to commit other crimes. | **Thieves** can use **your** personal information, such as **your** name, address, and account numbers to make purchases with **your** credit cards or steal money from **your** bank accounts. |

*Figure 7.2* Identity theft explanation, original and revised versions. Original text from *A Senior's Guide to Safety and Security* by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2008, p.6.

Metonymy is a useful move in both the complex and plain language versions of this document, allowing the author to shift the focus from a less familiar concept to a more familiar one. However, the use of this strategy to constrain meaning without actually specifying it carries an inherent ambiguity: as Bredin explains, it may be difficult to know with any degree of certainty what semic field a concept belongs to (Bredin, 1984). Ultimately, language users must choose between multiple meanings. As a result, it is possible in some contexts that an author could trigger an unintended

association in the reader's mind, thus distracting the reader from the author's intended meaning, as in the following example, taken from a list of "bad headlines":

> Lingerie shipment hijacked--Thief gives police the slip ("Bad
> headlines," n.d.)

The word "slip" is meant to be situated in the semic field of crime journalism, as a term that means "escaping the grasp of the police." But "slip" also carries meaning as an article of clothing, belonging to the semic field of "lingerie." Because the clothing association comes first in this headline, the domain of women's undergarments is dominant in the readers' minds. Thus, there is a high probability that they will locate the word "slip" in the former semic field (as an item of lingerie) rather than the latter (a means of escape).

Another example of this potential misunderstanding is in the misleading metaphors of "pharming" and "phishing" in Chapter 5; the terms evoke associations of farming and fishing respectively, and as we observed with more than one of the readers, these pre-existing associations can interfere with readers grasping the intending meaning of the text at hand.

## Metonymies and discourse communities

As was demonstrated in the case studies with older adult readers in Chapter 5, the ability of readers to make implicit associations and recognize meanings within constraints depends on their prior knowledge and experience—and

specifically the knowledge and experience they share with the writer. This shared understanding forms the basis of what Swales refers to as a "discourse community" (Swales, 1987). Swales points out that simply speaking the same language or having things in common does not in itself constitute a discourse community; it is the combination of shared goals, beliefs, and ways of communicating that bind these communities together. This concept is particularly relevant to the discussion of plain language because specialized language is a frequent offshoot of discourse communities. As a community develops, members establish assumptions and beliefs about what is known and acceptable; these beliefs are at the heart of communicative exchanges in which participants tailor their language to meet the expectations of others. These expectations support and even encourage metonymical language use such as short-forms or allusions. In the cyber-safety warning below, for example, there is clear evidence that the writer is speaking to a discourse community that is familiar with computer technology and its potential risks:

> The vulnerability exists in how the protocol handles session renegotiation, exposes users to a potential man-in-the-middle attack and could manipulate data and information. (Public Safety Canada, 2010, n.p.)

Terms like "vulnerability" and "protocol" and "man-in-the-middle attack" operate metonymically to refer to larger concepts that, for computer experts,

would require no further explanation. ("Man-in-the-middle attack" is, of course, metaphoric at root. The example is particularly interesting because of the way it illustrates how figures can compound.) The problem here, however, is that the forum is *not* the discourse community of computer experts, but a website addressed to the general public. Because of these metonymic allusions, the detailed meaning of the warning is likely to be lost on most general readers.

Metonymic language depends on a discourse community, but it can also *define* that community. When writers allude to concepts outside the text, they necessarily exclude readers who do not have access to that information. Systemic figural or rhetorical omissions rely on a recurrent pattern of usage to contextualize individual metonymies (Papafragou, 1995). The exclusion becomes self-reinforcing as these terms become habitual and normalized. This kind of shorthand is particularly noteworthy in communication about sporting events, like baseball. Here, for example, sports broadcaster Buck Martinez explains "slugging percentage" to a fan who has submitted a question. Metonymical terms are bolded:

> The calculation is a simple one: divide the total **`bases`** of all safe **`hits`** by the total times **`at bat`**. "Safe hits" do not include **`walks,`** **`sacrifices, hit by pitcher`** or times awarded **`first`** by **`interference`** or **`obstruction`**. (Martinez, 2010, n.p.)

The short-forms allow the commentator to convey an enormous amount of information in a short space of time. But no one could perform the "calculation" Martinez describes without knowing what all of these metonymies refer to (or without then being able to translate them into another metonymy as a statistic). It's unlikely that Martinez is aware of the potential that his reader may not know what some (or all) of these terms refer to; as Anna Papafragou explains, once a metonymy is in frequent use, it is less likely to be recognized as a figure at all:

> After being extensively used, a metonymic expression that has originated as a product of successful naming may begin to lose its former descriptive content. . . . What the speakers initially did not endorse as a truthful description of a referent becomes the proper descriptive meaning of the expression and is registered in the lexicon. The empirical consequence of this is an increasing the accessibility of the referent, since the latter does not have to be computed anymore but merely retrieved from memory. (1995, p. 25).

Thus, metonymies take on a certain "invisibility" once they have been in frequent use—remember our "White House" example—or, perhaps more accurately, metonymies become invisible to those who frequently use them.

An example from law makes this point more clearly. Figure 7.3 shows a before and after excerpt from jury instructions (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.). Here, the key metonymy centers on the word

"evidence." "Evidence" in this context is used metonymically in two senses: first, it represents a crime that has occurred; second, it is associated with legally permissible proof in a courtroom. (Notice, too, that in the legal context physical evidence functions much like metonymy; that is, it is one aspect of an event that represents, or indicates a theory in which it represents, the entire event.) In the original version, the text presumes a reader with a knowledge of legal vocabulary, using phrases such as "Circumstantial evidence is evidence that, if found to be true, proves a fact from which an inference of the existence of another fact may be drawn" (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.). Rather than explaining what

| Original | Plain language version |
|---|---|
| Circumstantial evidence is evidence that, if found to be true, proves a fact from which an inference of the existence of another fact may be drawn. A factual inference is a deduction that may logically and reasonably be drawn from one or more facts established by the evidence. | Some evidence proves a fact directly, such as testimony of a witness who saw a jet plane flying across the sky. Some evidence proves a fact indirectly, such as testimony of a witness who saw only the white trail that jet planes often leave. This indirect evidence is sometimes referred to as "circumstantial evidence." In either instance, the witness's testimony is evidence that a jet plane flew across the sky. |

Figure 7.3 Instructions to jurors (original and revised versions). *Note:* Information in figure from Plain language and Jury Instructions, by the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN), n.d. Retrieved from: http://www.plainlanguage.gov.

"evidence" means, the writer presumes this knowledge on the part of the reader and focuses instead on its implications. In the plain language version, the text also incorporates the word "evidence," but here, the term is couched

in an explanation including an example: "Some evidence proves a fact directly, such as testimony of a witness who saw a jet plane flying across the sky" (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.). It is interesting to note here that the explanation of circumstantial evidence relies on another kind of metonymy, suggesting that the "white trail" is representative of the presence of a jet plane. Clearly, it is not metonymy itself that is problematic; it is the appropriateness of a given metonymy for a particular audience. As Donald Bryant notes of rhetoric more generally, "the rhetorical function is the function of adjusting ideas to people and of people to ideas" (Bryant, 1953, p. 413). This is particularly true of figures of association.

## Conclusion

If metonymy is a central factor in the complexity of a text, it is reasonable to assume that making a text more accessible requires eliminating or explaining metonymies. Interestingly, however, the review of a cross-section of plain language translations here shows that often metonymies remain relatively intact. Rather than eliminating metonymies, most plain language versions of texts address them by changing the form (from noun to verb, for example), shifting the focus, or supplementing them with additional information. These strategies or "work-arounds" demonstrate how difficult it is to detect our own implicit assumptions. Even when we are

consciously writing for a general audience, it can be difficult to "see" how language shuts out readers.

The persistence of metonymies might, alternatively, suggest that these figures serve a purpose for readers and are thus intentionally preserved. This view is consistent with that of Jeanne Fahnestock, who compared original research reports with versions adapted for non-specialist audiences (Fahnestock, 2004). In the original texts, figures often encapsulated the core argument and these were frequently carried over to the adapted versions, suggesting that figures are an important way of structuring arguments and that this strategy in itself does not impede understanding: "the persistence of figured core arguments also suggests the inherent accessibility of scientific arguments. They are not a distinct breed but are instead inevitably based on common forms of argument that should be familiar to anyone who can use a language" (Fahnestock, 2004, p. 24). Fahnestock suggests here that if scientific arguments are inaccessible, it is an acquired trait, "a failure of will or of art" rather than a necessity because of the complexity of the content (Fahnestock, 2004, p. 24). Gabriella Rundblad also studied metonymy in scientific writing and found that metonymy is, like passive voice, a central strategy in medical research publications. In this field, it is used not just to de-emphasize authorship (and thereby emphasize objectivity), but also to suggest that their methods and findings are representative and generalizable (Rundblad, 2007). Rundblad's study suggests that complexity might not

always be mistaken or a failure of will; it can also help a writer establish scientific ethos. If it is a failure, it is not one the *writer* is punished for.

The usefulness and persistence of metonymies should not deter us from questioning their appropriateness in particular contexts, however. In fact, metonymies can help us detect where assumptions lie in text and where, as a result, readers might have difficulty. This is particularly important when texts serve an ideological function. For, while metonymies can provide "referential cost-efficiency" (Papafragou, 1995, p. 25) by making it easier for in-group readers to automatically process ideas, they may exact a different cost on readers outside that group. And, as discourse analyst Michael Billig notes, convenience might not be the only motivator in the process—demonstrating status and belonging are important factors: "We are ready to formulate labels and acronyms, not just as convenient shorthands, but as tools that can be used to promote our work as scientifically significant" (Billig, 2008a, p. 840). The labels Billig describes are frequently metonymic ("beaker," for instance, labels a glass vessel on the basis of one attribute, the small, triangular projection on its lip), and acronyms are necessarily metonymic at root (each letter represents all the letters of the relevant word). Beyond representing things they refer to, metonymies can become a kind of card-carrying practice individuals use to assert their identities. This kind of insider language is an important reason that, as Swales explains, discourse

communities operate with "centrifugal force," separating constituent groups and highlighting the differences between them (Swales, 1987, p. 3).

The study of metonymy and other rhetorical figures is another means for plain language practitioners to examine how readers interact with texts. This study also provides another example of the variety and complexity of plain language work. Writers must account not only for problems in the text, but also for problems caused by what is left out. Addressing these features requires addressing two kinds of barriers at once: first, the barrier that prevents lay readers from understanding what metonymies allude to; and second, the barrier that prevents insiders from recognizing that an allusion has even been made. What is opaque for one is invisible to the other. Studying these kinds of challenges provides us with an opportunity to further our advocacy for plain language while at the same time enabling us to explore the intricacies of human language and what individual readers bring to it.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion

One of the main purposes of this dissertation was to explore research approaches to studying plain language. A key priority of those who work in plain language as a profession is to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of their work, and research has played a key role in providing this evidence. However, beyond evaluating effectiveness of plain language, research can also help demonstrate the rhetorical complexity of plain language and show how those engaged in this work are clearly engaged in a task that is more complex than its name suggests.

The three focal points of this dissertation, readers, writers, and texts, provide a framework for exploring the complexity of plain language from three different perspectives. In each area, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of what goes into the plain language process. To achieve its aims, plain language must meet readers' complex cognitive and rhetorical expectations; at the same time, it must serve clients by maintaining the clarity and detail of their message; and it must communicate a stable message using the unstable medium of language. Exploring these challenges using a variety of research methods provides new insights into plain language and demonstrates the depth of plain language as a potential field of further academic study.

**Collecting reader input—and *how* you collect it—matters**

As a movement, plain language encourages us to think more deeply about what it means to be a reader, beyond the usual rhetorical assumptions we make about the concept of audience. When advocates of plain language urge us to put readers first, they mean real readers, not static constructs that we invent (or that have been invented for us). This shift to authentic engagement with readers has important consequences for both how we think about readers and how we use this information to produce reader-friendly texts.

One of the key findings of this dissertation is that the experience of readers prior to reading a plain language text can have an important influence on how they approach and benefit from a text. This finding complements existing research on discourse processing, which has demonstrated that readers' purposes and goals for reading can have an important impact on their approaches to texts and the meanings they draw (e.g., Long, 2005). As the case studies here demonstrate, readers bring a host of knowledge, experiences, and values to the texts they read, and this unique combination can shape readers' interpretations and understandings in dramatically different ways. For one participant, personal experiences contributed to self-confidence and a dialogue with the text; for another, personal experiences shaped a more self-conscious reader who was less inclined to question the text.

While the research described here does not provide a one-size-fits-all solution for how to deal with diverse readers, it does highlight the importance of testing our assumptions about readers and resisting the temptation to consider the audience a single, unified collective. If anything, the case studies provide further support for what plain language professionals already advocate: testing documents with target readers whenever possible. More than one respondent to the questionnaire noted that, without user testing, even the most experienced plain language writer is guessing to a certain extent about readers' needs. And, as one plain language professional pointed out, second-hand feedback about target audiences is not enough: "A good customer service rep can give helpful feedback, but they're always stunned when they hear feedback from actual users."

## Clients are important ghostwriters in the plain language process

This dissertation also contributes to our understanding of plain language text production by exploring plain language from the perspective of the professionals who do this work. These professionals must on a daily basis balance client satisfaction with plain language principles and goals. In some cases these aims are quite compatible, as the high number of positive comments about client relationships demonstrates. Yet it is clear from the comments and patterns in the data that plain language professionals spend a great deal of time and energy negotiating in order to establish everything

from the parameters of the project to the placement of punctuation. As one respondent to the 2012 IC Clear survey indicated,

> Clear communicators must be able to "talk" what they do. They need to be able to connect to the clients and be persuasive when they suggest changes, being able to cite research, the impact on the reader, and being able to do this without sounding pedantic. (Hampl et al., 2012, p. 30)

As this comment indicates, a great deal of important rhetorical work goes into the plain language process—even before it comes to putting text on a page. The comments of professionals provide deeper insight into the work that happens behind the scenes and the challenge that these professionals face when trying to help clients reach their goals. The final version of a plain language document may not be entirely consistent with the plain language professional's beliefs and recommendations; in fact, based on the responses to the questionnaire conducted for this dissertation, it often is not. Yet, for many professionals, as long as the outcome is a document that is more readable or demonstrates some, if not all, plain language principles, the project can be considered a success.

These responses provide insight, not only into the context of text development and professional-to-client relationships, but also into the wider cultural context in which plain language operates. Most professionals recognize that plain language still has a way to go to achieve public

acceptance, and as a result, there are some limitations to what is possible to achieve within these constraints. Rather than being deterred by these barriers, however, plain language professionals set realistic goals and aim for gradual gains in trust and respect.

Part of gaining this trust is educating clients about how plain language works and why it matters. In some professions, such as law, this education is being introduced within academic and workplace training programs, enabling the professionals themselves to take greater responsibility for their own skills as writers. This is part of the argument of critics like Jack Stark (1994), who argues that "it is time for drafters to fill the vacuum into which the academics have rushed, to take responsibility for developing their own art" (p. 213). Whether collaborating alongside clients or helping train them, plain language professionals fill a variety of roles that continue to raise awareness about the importance of clear communication.

## Language is not entirely in the plain language writer's control

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that, contrary to popular understandings, plain language work involves much more than word substitution and sentence structure changes. Close textual analysis highlights a number of rhetorical and sociolinguistic challenges that plain language professionals regularly encounter. Plain language as a movement presupposes a certain control over language use: word choice, sentence

structure, sentence length, rhetorical strategies and logic are used in particular ways to ensure particular results. And while it is certainly true that writers have choices and strategies at their disposal, the notion that language operates a neutral container for our thoughts is a persistent but inadequate metaphor (Reddy, 1978). In fact, the relationship between the words we use and the meanings they carry is constantly changing, influenced by the context of the text, the reader, and the wider social and cultural systems. Textual analysis of the rhetorical figure of metonymy provides vivid examples of just how tenuous the words-to-meaning connection can be. Yet, eliminating rhetorical and figurative language is not the solution, either, since these figures are a fundamental part of how we process information and understand the world around us (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

Thus, this research helps highlight how plain language experts must be able to select appropriate metaphors, metonymies, and other rhetorical figures that will be accessible to their readers, and they must provide alternatives or "safety net" language that helps clarify potentially complex ideas when these figures could be hard for some readers to understand. In this way, textual analysis is a way to challenge our assumptions about language and remind ourselves that what is transparent for us may not always be so for others.

One of the most important findings of this dissertation is that texts are always more than the sum of their grammatical and syntactical parts. This

conclusion was demonstrated in the case studies of older adult readers, whose experiences extended the meaning of the text far beyond the printed page; it was repeatedly articulated by plain language professionals, who described the complexity of the process that underlies the finished plain language text; and it was also shown in the discussion of the instability of meaning caused by the use of figurative language such as metonymy. No matter how plain the text, no matter how many guidelines are applied, no matter how expert the writer, it is impossible to know if the text will be effective until we see how the audience reacts. This conclusion has implications, not just for plain language professionals, but also for anyone who is learning or teaching writing. Writing is an iterative process, and reader feedback is an essential part of these iterations.

## More research is needed—as well as more research approaches

As the range of strategies and purposes of plain language research shows, there is great diversity in the questions the plain language community is asking as it develops its identity as a profession. Early research focused primarily on demonstrating that plain language gets "results," whether in the form of money, reader comprehension, or customer satisfaction. With many positive findings confirming the value of plain language, the focus has shifted to providing a more detailed understanding of *how* and *why* specific linguistic and visual strategies are successful, or, if they are not, what potential

barriers might have caused the failure. In other words, research has begun to focus less on *if* plain language works and more on *how* it works.

Along these lines, the current study provides insight into some of the important contextual factors that must be considered in plain language research. Several recommendations can be made on the basis of this dissertation. First, the research projects conducted here point to the importance of engaging different subject groups (and a range of individuals within these groups) in plain language research. As plain language expert Annetta Cheek (2010), has discussed, a plain language document is successful if it meets readers' needs, and these needs will vary from group to group and situation to situation. So, testing a document designed for older adults with a group of college-aged subjects is not a good way to ensure its effectiveness. There are two points here: one is that plain language is not based on one single, static set of strategies—it is based on tailoring language and structure to a specific audience; the other is that the only way to know if the text has been successful is to test it with the specific audience for whom it is intended—preferably before it is published.

Furthermore, this dissertation argues that the best methods for testing are those that engage target users and invite their unique responses, as opposed to methods based on rote comprehension tests. Allowing users to respond in a more open-ended way increases the opportunity to capture unexpected responses; this strategy also treats research subjects as

individuals and values their perspectives. In the case study portion of this dissertation, the initial data from respondents was returned to them for their edits and additions; this gave participants an opportunity to control their contributions to the study and helped ensure the accuracy of the data. Similarly, the questionnaire chapter, which built on questionnaire findings from the IC Clear Committee, was shared with this group for their feedback.

A second recommendation is to continue plain language research in the area of discourse processing. Research in cognitive science could enable the plain language community to demonstrate how its recommendations are consistent with the cognitive processes behind comprehension. As we learn more about how the brain processes information, plain language professionals will be able to further refine their approaches to anticipate readers' needs and build texts strategically to support their reading processes. The current study findings are an example of how evidence from discourse processing research supports strategies commonly used by plain language professionals, specifically, strategies that help readers with top-down and bottom-up processing. Among these strategies, plain language guidelines encourage writers to use headings to help signal to readers the purpose of texts and use familiar keywords and transitions to help readers recognize connections throughout the text.

As these first two recommendations indicate, there is a need for research that engages readers directly and seeks to understand them as individuals.

There is also a need to provide a scientific basis for writing and evaluating plain language. Thus, a third recommendation is for plain language research to continue using both qualitative and quantitative methods. We tend to privilege quantitative methods as more objective and specific. However, our ways of understanding texts and acting on them are inherently subjective. There is no way to quantify the subtle connections that readers make between texts and their personal experiences, and these connections can be vital in determining what a reader takes from the text. Qualitative approaches, which explore and elaborate on these influences, can help us understand how readers draw meanings the way they do, and how texts can help influence this process.

Finally, what this research shows is that it is more important that the plain language community agrees on shared values and principles than on specific techniques. Every situation will call for a different approach and not all plain language professionals will address readers' needs in the same way. The professional community can benefit from some agreed-upon principles, but if these principles become too specific or restrictive, they may risk becoming simplistic or inflexible.

As an examination of the development of plain language indicates, the movement is at once tied to issues of consumerism, politics, and social justice. The Center for Plain Language asserts on its website that "plain language is a civil right," and indeed this belief (or a variation of it) is at the heart of

most plain language advocacy. However, individuals and groups rarely adopt plain language practices for purely altruistic reasons. As the comments by plain language professionals indicate, organizations are generally motivated by improved profits or increased consumer satisfaction. Even with these promised benefits, the barriers to adopting plain language can be challenging to overcome. For many organizations, patterns and habits of communication have become so entrenched that they are difficult to break; even those who hire plain language professionals often have a hard time accepting their advice. Part of the difficulty of changing communication patterns is that it may require that organizations rethink how they relate to the public. If policies are laid bare for readers, consumers will be able to see more clearly when they are being treated unfairly. As a result, shifting to plain language may require a wider shift in consumer practices that some organizations are not prepared to make.

Even when an organization embraces plain language, it can also be difficult to encourage individual employees to adopt these practices. As Kjaergaard (2012) found, employees who receive orders or training without having a sense of context or buy-in may see plain language guidelines as unhelpful interference. In Kjaergaard's research, employees held powerful assumptions and attitudes about their roles, and they felt that their experience and knowledge about how to do their jobs should override advice from outsiders who, they felt, knew little about their work. What these

findings demonstrate is that top-down writing instructions do not work if leaders do not also engage their employees in understanding the rationale for plain language changes.

Even when plain language advocates are able to show conclusively that communicating in more accessible language gets better results, the process of changing attitudes can take time. Many plain language professionals commented on the importance of being patient with this process, with one noting, "Small steps are good. For many writers, it's a huge shift in thinking and in the way they work." Comments such as this illustrate the power of organizational culture in shaping communication strategies. As has been discussed in this dissertation, language is impossible to separate from its social and cultural contexts. Changing language use is impossible without also changing the social and cultural contexts in which that language is used. As each of the studies in this dissertation demonstrate, plain language involves far more than changing words and grammar; it requires that writers make a radical shift in their thinking about readers, writers, and texts. Instead of thinking only about what they want to tell readers, writers also need to engage readers, find out what they need, and shape their communications to meet those needs.

Perhaps most importantly, this dissertation demonstrates that the instruction to "put readers first" is a simple statement that belies a much more complex task. In fact, it is a task that is never complete; putting readers

first requires that writers continue to research and reflect on readers'

changing needs. It also demands that professionals in this field continue to

advocate for information that is accessible, particularly when issues of

democracy, health, and justice are at stake.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### Script for Session 1: Interview & Protocol Analysis

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. This study will focus on how seniors approach and interpret a document that is written for them. The document is meant to be "easy to read." I would like to find out if the document is effective in getting its message across.

There are no "right answers" to any of the questions I'll be asking.

In today's session, I will interview you about your experiences with reading (e.g., your memories of reading as a child, your use of reading in personal and professional contexts). I will then ask you to read and comment on a brief document.

The interview and reading exercise will be audiotaped. I am the only person who will hear the tapes. I will type up what you have said, and then the original tapes will be destroyed.

You will have an opportunity to review the transcripts and make changes to any of your answers or comments.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

The following questions will help me understand more about you as an individual reader. Your answers will remain confidential. Remember, you can decline to answer any of the questions, and if you would like to stop the interview at any time, just let me know.

## 1. Interview Script[20]

*Demographic Questions*
   1.  When were you born?

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[20] Adapted from (Brandt, 2001)

2. Where were you born?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. How long have you been in Canada?
5. Is English your first language?
6. Do you speak other languages?
7. Could you describe your family growing up (did you live with both parents? Any brothers/sisters?)
8. Could you describe your current household?
9. What were your great-grandparents' schooling and occupations, if known?
10. What were your grandparents' schooling and occupations, if known?
11. What were your parents'/guardians' schooling and occupations, if known?
12. What schools did you attend?
13. What degrees, diplomas, and certificates have you earned? (and dates)
14. Do you have any other training?
15. What occupations have you held, and/or do you currently hold?

*Early Childhood Memories*
1. What are your earliest memories of seeing other people writing/reading?
2. What are your earliest memories of yourself writing/reading?
3. What are your earliest memories of direct or indirect instruction? (Do you remember anything specific about learning to read and write?)

*Writing and Reading with Peers*
What memories do you have of writing and reading to/with friends (e.g., letter-writing, journals, stories)?

*Self-Initiated Writing or Reading*
1. What memories do you have of reading and writing on the job?
2. Can you think of any big shifts in your reading or writing habits related to your job (e.g., changes in your responsibilities or in the technology being used)?
3. Do you have a computer at home? If yes, how often do you use it? What do you use it for?

*Purposes for Writing and Reading & Overall Values*
1. How important would you say writing and reading are to you, compared with other people?
2. What kind of writing and reading have you been doing lately?

## 2. Reading Exercise

In this next part of the interview, I am going to ask you to ask you about a document that is written for seniors. The goal of this task is to understand how readers read this document and whether it is effective in getting its message across.

I'm going to ask you to read a section aloud. As you read, tell me what goes through your mind. Please tell me if you find something confusing, interesting, or strange, or if the document makes you think of other memories or experiences. Please feel free to share whatever comes to mind. Do not worry about what you say, but do keep talking.

I want to emphasize that I am not testing how well you read. I am not testing your knowledge or opinions of the subject matter. I am testing what effects the text has on a reader with background knowledge and experience such as you have.

I am going to try to stay silent during this process, since I don't want to interfere with your reading. I am interested in what **you** find difficult or what **you** think the text means.

Please remember to speak loud enough so that your voice will be recorded. If you fall silent, I will ask you to "please say what you are thinking right now."

After the session, I will transcribe what you have said. I will book a time with you to show you a copy of the transcript. You can make changes, additions, or corrections to the transcript.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

# Appendix 2

## Script for Session 2: Focus Group

Thank you for coming today. I really enjoyed meeting with all of you in the interviews, and the information I've collected so far has been really, really helpful. I am learning so much from this process, and I am very grateful to you for your participation. You have all made my research project possible, and I can't thank you enough.

So, today's focus group discussion will take about an hour. I'm recording this, but your names will not be mentioned in the transcript or other research notes.

The questions are related to the document you read in the first part of the study, in particular the areas that were commonly mentioned as hard to understand. I have brought some copies of the document for you to look at to help refresh your memory.

The idea of this discussion is to find out more about what you all think of the document. There were some parts that seemed to me to be a bit tricky, and I'd like to find out if I understood your comments about the document correctly.

I'm going to provide a few questions, but I am mostly interested in hearing your thoughts about the document, so I will try to interrupt as little as possible. Maybe we can just treat it as a conversation. I may comment to clarify information or to make sure everyone has a chance to contribute, but I'll try to keep quiet for the most part.

One important note before we start: During the discussion, it's possible that participants might share some personal information. I'll ask you all to keep personal details of this discussion within our group today and not discuss the personal information of others outside the group.

Do you have any questions before we start?
- To get started, I thought we could revisit the document briefly, and talk about your impressions of the document. Please take a moment to look at it.

- The document is supposed to be written for seniors. Did you feel you could personally relate to the document? Why? Why not?


- There were a few places where I got the feeling that readers found some of the words or explanations a bit "odd" or hard to understand.

  - On page 7 (Con Games)
    - What does this mean? How would you paraphrase this? (If you were going to explain this to a friend of yours, what might you say?)
  - *Sweet-talk crimes: The swindlers claim to have found a large sum of money and offer to share it with you. You are asked to withdraw "good faith" money from your bank. The swindlers take the "good faith" money and give you a phoney address where you are to collect your share of the found money. You never see them again.*
    - I thought people might find the word "pigeon drop" hard to understand. I'm not quite sure what it means myself. What do you think it means?
    - Have you heard of the word "confidence games"?
    - I hadn't seen the term "good faith" money before. What did you think of that?
    - What do you think of the picture in the middle? How do you think it relates to the text? Did you notice it before?

  - On page 8 (Bank Inspector)
    - I was wondering if anyone noticed the photo here and what you think it might mean.
    - What is happening in the phoney bank inspector scenario?
  - *The phoney bank inspector contacts you and asks for your help in catching a dishonest bank employee. You are asked to withdraw a specified amount of cash from your account so that the inspector may check the serial numbers. After turning over your money, you never hear from the inspector again.*
    - It kind of seemed like the term "phoney bank inspector" might not have been clear. What did you think it meant?
    - I found the sentence "many door-to-door sales are not legitimate" a bit unclear. What do you think it means?

  - Page 13-14 (Computer Scams)
    - I got the feeling that the headings on these pages didn't always catch your eye. Is that right?

- What does this mean? How would you paraphrase this?
  - *PHISHING: They are electronic messages that will mislead people into providing personal information. Often, people will be redirected to a fraudulent copy of a legitimate website and will be told that they are at risk of being victim of identity theft if they do not follow the provided link.*
    - What did you think of the words "phishing" and "pharming"? If you were explaining these to your friends, what would you say? (Was it helpful to know the terms?)
    - Some readers might find "e-commerce" hard to understand. What did you think it meant?
    - Some of you mentioned that you felt intimidated about going on the computer—and I got the feeling that reading about these crimes seemed to make that worse. Is that true? Why was that?

- Would you recommend this document to friends and relatives? Why/why not?
- Who do you picture writing this document? Is it another senior?
- Thank you again for coming today. Your comments will be very helpful to my research project. Just a final reminder to please respect the privacy of participants by not discussing personal information shared today outside the focus group.
- I will be sending an update to those of you who have requested more information about the findings when the research is completed.

# Appendix 3

## Questionnaire for Plain Language Professionals

This brief questionnaire aims to find out more about the relationship between clear communications/plain language professionals and clients, and to find out if and how this relationship affects the final products of clear communications work.

The questionnaire will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

If you are a plain language/clear communications practitioner, you are eligible to participate in this research project.

### Informed consent:
I agree to participate in a study being conducted by Kim Garwood, a PhD student in the University of Waterloo's Department of English, who is working under the supervision of Dr. Jay Dolmage.

As a participant in this study, I am aware that I may decline to answer any question that I prefer not to answer by leaving it blank. I am also aware that I may exit the questionnaire at any time without submitting my answers.
I will not be identified in any of the data or the dissertation, but anonymous quotations may be used.

This survey uses Survey Monkey(TM) which is a United States of America company. Consequently, USA authorities under provisions of the Patriot Act may access this survey data. If you prefer not to submit your data through Survey Monkey(TM), please contact Kim Garwood (kcgarwoo@uwaterloo.ca) so you can participate using an alternative method (such as through an email or paper-based questionnaire).  The alternate method may decrease anonymity but confidentiality will be maintained.

I am aware that this study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo and that I may contact ORE Director, Dr. Maureen Nummelin, maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca if I have any concerns or comments resulting from my participation in this study.

**I agree to participate (continue to questionnaire)/I do not want to participate (exit questionnaire now)**

1.  How would you describe your clients? (e.g., large private companies; non-profit organizations; individuals; etc.)

2.  What typically motivates clients to seek your help (or to seek plain language/clear communication services in general)?

3.  On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your **clients' understanding** of the principles of clear communication/plain language?

4.  Are clients and/or target readers involved in the drafting and editing of texts? If yes, please describe who is involved and what they do.

5.  Is this input/involvement helpful? Why or why not?

6.  On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the **level of control** you have over the final product (1 being very little control, 5 being complete control)?

7.  On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your **satisfaction** with the level of control you have over the final product?

8.  In a recent survey conducted by IC Clear, many participants reported that it was important for clear communication professionals to have good negotiation skills. Is this true in your experience? If yes, what kinds of things do you negotiate for or about?

9.  What advice would you give new plain language/clear communications professionals about how to work with clients?

10. Additional comments: Is there anything else you think is important for us to know about how clear communications professionals work with clients?

# Appendix 4

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December 5, 2013

Kim Garwood
Writing Services
Learning & Curriculum Support Team
McLaughlin Library
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## I. CON GAMES AND "SWEET TALK" CRIMES

**PIGEON DROP**

This scheme accounts for more than half of the confidence games reported to the police. The swindlers claim to have found a large sum of money and offer to share it with you. You are asked to withdraw "good faith" money from

SUGGESTIONS

1 Avoid rushing into something involving your money or property.

2 Be wary of "something-for-nothing" or "get-rich-quick" schemes.

## BANK INSPECTOR FRAUD

The phoney bank inspector contacts you and asks for your help in catching a dishonest bank employee. You are asked to withdraw a specified amount of cash from your account so that the inspector may check the serial numbers. After turning over your money, you never hear from the inspector again.

SUGGESTIONS

1 DO NOT give out financial or personal information over the telephone or internet.

2 Hang up the telephone. Immediately dial *69 on your touch-tone telephone, or 1169 on your rotary telephone. This will give you the information on who just called you. Be sure to write it down.

**DOOR-TO-DOOR SALES**

Many door-to-door sales are not legitimate. Provincial laws protect you against quick sales at your door.

SUGGESTIONS

1 Ask to see the salesperson's identification and licence or registration. Take note of their name as well as the name and address of the company.

2 Before purchasing a product or service, call local stores who sell the same merchandise and compare prices.

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