Clarity

Number 64   November 2010

Journal of the
international association
promoting plain legal language

*Strengthening plain language:
public benefit and professional
practice*

Editor in chief:
Julie Clement

Guest editor for this issue:
Neil James

Guest editor for *Clarity* 65:
**Sandra Fisher-Martins and
James Fisher**

In this issue

4. Grounding plain language in research

Dr Karen Schriver

KSA Communication Design & Research, United States

Frances Gordon

Simplified, South Africa

Overview

Over the past few decades, plain language advocates and practitioners have become increasingly articulate about the principles of plain language. It is now widely recognised that there are benefits to grounding plain language action in research. In fact, failing to do so poses a risk of the field losing credibility. This chapter explores the state of plain language research and outlines various options for its future direction.

We characterise plain language research broadly by outlining the contributions of formal and informal research. We assume that both types of research are useful for plain language advocates and practitioners.

Currently, there is limited research conducted specifically with a plain language agenda in mind. However, there is a large corpus of studies from other disciplines that are relevant to plain language. This complex and multidisciplinary research base suffers from various problems, namely:

- being scattered and fragmented
- being biased to contexts of 'English-only' and developed countries
- lacking specificity and applicability.

Largely because of these problems, we are not yet in a position to identify the research gaps.

Recommendations

We suggest that we gather and synthesise research relevant to plain language, pointing to various options for doing so. Then we make this research available and useful to those who can benefit from it. Plain language practitioners and advocates will then be better positioned to identify those research questions that still need to be answered.

This, in turn, will allow the field to chart a course to promote new research. Two fundamental issues for promoting research are:

- finding ways to fund studies that are useful
- finding researchers interested in carrying out formal and informal studies.

We suggest that plain language advocates and practitioners investigate ways to collaborate with the academy. We conclude that a cooperative international body could play an important role in grounding plain language in research. This would serve to raise the status of the field and the credibility of its arguments.

4.1 Research and its usefulness

In thinking about research that can help to guide and support plain language activities, it is useful to distinguish formal from informal research.

Formal research

By 'formal research', we are referring to studies that explore an issue or phenomenon using either quantitative or qualitative methods in a systematic way that could be replicated by another researcher.

Formal research is distinguished by the care the researcher takes in making sure the study follows accepted professional standards for excellence in quantitative or qualitative inquiry in the domain. As such, readers expect to see a clear explication of what was done, how it was done, how many people were involved, how it was analysed, and the implications. How researchers explain their goals, methods, participant selection, along with the rigour they bring to the analysis and interpretation, are important benchmarks for a good formal study.

Readers' judgements of what constitutes 'good evidence ' in formal research are context-dependent, depending on their field. Because many in the field of plain language carry out our activities in technically and rhetorically sophisticated communities (such as law, medicine, engineering, finance, government), we need to appreciate the kinds of research that experts in those communities find persuasive. Similarly, a person trained in the humanities reading an article about writing research would bring different criteria to bear in judging quality than a person trained in human factors.

Key questions for most readers of research include, 'what have I learned?', 'how generalisable is the work?' and 'am I persuaded by the work?' If we want to use research to support our best case for plain language, we must recognise the kinds of evidence our listeners will likely embrace.

Informal research

By 'informal research' we are referring to studies that are much less stringent in how they are set up. Informal studies are generally smaller in scope (such as case studies) and more focused on getting data quickly, without the constraint of explaining how things were done. Researchers typically carry out informal studies opportunistically—seizing on any opportunity to collect data that will be meaningful to bear on the question they want to answer. Most usability studies and assessments of documents and websites are informal.

The goal of such studies is not to write about the findings or to prove anything general, but to put the data to use, such as in revising a document or a set of menu options. Of course, informal does not mean unplanned or sloppy. Often, informal studies are used to generate ideas and hypotheses for more formal studies.

Combining formal and informal research

Both formal and informal studies are useful for plain language advocates. Formal studies allow us to make educated guesses about what works and why. They allow us to make inferences about what may happen in similar contexts. Informal studies can give us rapid information about, for example, what's good or bad about a text or a website. They allow us to make quick judgements about problems of communication and serve as good starting points for a more rigorous inquiry.

Reflective practitioners in our field are eager to consume both formal and informal studies because they recognise the value of building a research basis for what they do. They want to understand how research can make their efforts in plain language more effective and credible.

4.2 The nature of plain language research

Stakeholders and uses for research

Ideally, our research agenda would be informed by the needs of the stakeholders for empirical work on plain language, with a focus on their likely uses for research. The following tables present some of the stakeholder groups and uses for plain language research.

Stakeholder groups	Uses for plain language research
Advocates, practitioners	Recognise the social benefits of plain language
Academics, students	Measure the commercial benefits of plain language
Citizens, readers, users	Examine the feasibility of plain language programs in small and large organisations
Consultants, trainers	

Stakeholder groups	Uses for plain language research
Gatekeepers, decision makers	Assess the impact of plain language laws in promoting plain language and empowering citizens
Law-makers, regulators, legal drafters	Calculate the cost/benefit and return on investment of plain language programs in business and government
Managers, finance officers	Identify the visual and verbal features that tend to make texts difficult and create confusion
Journalists, bloggers, podcasters	Characterise the visual and verbal features that tend to make texts easy to comprehend and use
Writers, translators, web designers, corporate communicators	Understand how good readers and poor readers engage with texts and graphics
	Inform a global a standard for plain language

The limited research base within plain language

On the one hand, there is a limited corpus of formal or informal studies that were designed with a plain language agenda in mind. In addition, there are few literature reviews of the formal research that contributes to the field. For some examples, see the debate over the research on readability (Redish & Selzer, 1985; Schriver, 2001; Dubay, 2004). See also Felker and his colleagues (1981), who review the early research on document design, and the US Department of Health (1984), which reviews the early research on testing health communications.

There are reviews of the informal research that can also help us to understand plain language. For some examples, see Kimble (1996) and Schriver (1993), who examine a number of case studies that illustrate the financial benefits of plain language.

A wider research base from related disciplines

On the other hand, there is a great deal of existing research from other fields that can provide empirical evidence for decision making as we create content designed to be plain. There is general consensus in our community that the research we need to draw on must come from many fields—ranging from the arts, humanities, social sciences and communications-related areas, to business, law and finance.

Indeed, the study of plain language and information design is inherently interdisciplinary and draws productively from a variety of fields and subfields, as the table overleaf shows.

The usefulness of formal and informal research from other disciplines

Current research from formal studies of language, reading, psycholinguistics, graphics, and typography, for example, can contribute significantly to our understanding of both the nature of plain language and the visual/verbal text features that tend to be plain for most people.

The existing body of informal studies can also be very helpful to plain language advocates and practitioners. For example, usability studies can help us to gain perspective on how people engage with and use paper or online texts. These types of studies can help us choose among strategies for implementing plain language revisions and can help us isolate the characteristics of particular genres that make them plain for given populations of readers.

Research from fields such as those listed above can help us to understand plain language and test our assumptions about what works (see Felker et al., 1981, and Schriver, 1989, 1997 for the multidisciplinary efforts that helped define document design). Karen Schriver is also working on a synthesis of the current empirical research on how writing, design, and typography influence how people read print and online texts (Schriver, in preparation).

Arts, humanities and social sciences	Communications	Business, law and finance
Anthropology	Advertising & branding	Administration
Applied art	Content management	Business strategy
Cultural studies	Content strategy	Customer experience
Decision making	Customer service	Employee relations
Graphic design	Document design	Finance
Discourse analysis	Experience design	Financial services
Instructional design	Information architecture	Information technology
Gerontology studies	Information graphics	Innovation
Applied linguistics	Interface design	Legal writing
Philosophy and ethics	Multi-media & animation	Public policy
Cognitive and social psychology	Marketing	
Human factors	Second language acquisition	
Psycholinguistics	Translation	
Reading comprehension	Localisation	
Rhetoric & semiotics	Publishing and editing	
Semantics	User assistance	
Sociolinguistics	Usability	
Sociology	Web design	
Typography	Writing	
Writing & literacies	Writing for the web	

Limits of what we know

Existing research will not answer all our questions about how to make written communications plain. There are many unexplored and underexplored open questions. But existing research can give us insight into the evidence (or lack of it) for relying on our current repertoire of plain language principles, techniques, tips, guidelines, and best practices (Schriver, Cheek and Mercer, 2010). With a deeper knowledge of the available formal research, practitioners will be better positioned to move beyond intuition and to make claims based on data.

4.3 Issues with the existing research base

Some problems with the existing research

Scattered and fragmented

The main problem with the existing research is that it is scattered across many fields over a wide variety of publications—including books, journal articles, technical reports, websites, and conference proceedings. Moreover, because the standards for research excellence differ from field to field, and even from publication type to publication type, it is difficult to integrate what is known about a topic and feel confident about the inferences one can draw across studies.

Put differently, it is hard to make reliable and valid comparisons across studies when the studies are driven by radically different assumptions and goals—and when few studies are replicated.

English-only

Another quite different problem with the existing research is that it has been conducted mainly in English with native English speakers. Basic and applied research needs to be conducted with populations across many languages and cultures. It may be that some

issues of plain language are unique to particular countries and/or particular languages.

Bias toward studying developed countries

Most of the studies that impinge on plain language have been conducted studying populations in the United States, Canada, Australia or Europe. Countries in which plain language is needed the most may have little research base to draw on, largely because they do not have a history of funded research in the social sciences. This puts developing countries at a distinct disadvantage, especially throughout Africa, and illustrates a large gap in current research.

Lack of specificity and applicability

A problem with some existing research is that the authors are vague in describing the work and narrow in their selection of participants. In addition, the participants are disproportionately college-aged 'good' readers carrying out reading tasks because they were told to, rather than because they needed to.

As a consequence, we find few naturalistic studies in the existing literature. For example, there are few studies of average readers, poor readers, and non-readers engaging with documents for authentic purposes. Today's researchers more readily recognise problems of bias and are working toward changing the paradigm of studying 'convenience samples'.

4.4 Synthesising existing research

One of the results of the problems outlined above is that we cannot yet identify the gaps in the research. Synthesising the existing research would help us to identify important research questions and the gaps between what we know and what we want to find out.

We do not yet have a synthesis of the existing research that integrates the findings related to issues that concern plain language practitioners and advocates. This is not a new problem. There has not been a systematic review of the interdisciplinary literature that contributes to our field in over a decade. In fact, one could argue that it has never been done with an eye toward providing ideas for plain language advocates and practitioners. That said, there have been reviews of document design and web design that can serve as useful starting points (Felker et al, 1981;

Koyani et al., 2004; Schriver, 1989, 1997; Redish, 2007).

Part of our future agenda should be to frame the crucial issues we seek answers to. Even though the task is hard (and a bit frustrating), plain language practitioners and advocates need to conduct original reviews of the interdisciplinary literature. We should take advantage of the many excellent studies that already exist. If we do not, we run the risk of reinventing the wheel.

To integrate the existing research from the perspective of a domain expert (for example, psycholinguists working on the cognition of sentences), we could take one or more of the following options:

Option 1: identify researchers to conduct literature reviews

This option would involve the following steps:

1. Identify researchers (or research organisations) whose work is relevant to our concerns.

2. Fund those researchers to carry out a literature review of their area(s), with an eye toward generating evidence-based guidelines.

3. Take that work (literature review, guidelines, and bibliography) and turn it into an easily searchable database for plain language advocates and practitioners around the world.

It is important to recognise that not just any 'literature review' will do. We need a review that is broad and deep, but also explicit in implications. To ensure the usability of the literature reviews we fund, our Request for Proposal needs to specify our requirements, such as a literature review, general findings, and evidence-based guidelines/principles. We should also set our goals on eventually funding proposals to study particular issues, such as what causes people to stop reading.

Option 2: wait for research to be published and then build on it

Alternatively, we could wait for relevant research to be published, and then build on that work ourselves. Although possible, this would be a difficult process. Clearly, we face a formidable challenge in integrating the existing research relevant to plain language.

4.5 Making research accessible and promoting new research

Making research accessible

We can make research more accessible by making it available and useful.

To make research more available, we can, for example:

- offer literature reviews available for download on the Web

- make research easily searchable—content tagging with keywords and synonyms

- enhance forums—get people who are not 'doing' plain language to discuss it

- create Wiki formats—consider new ways to draw 'everyday' people to research results

- set up conferences and networks (virtual and real)—host the best speakers on plain language to spread the word and write about plain language

- get into print publications—as often as we can and in as diverse publications as we can

- create newsletters, which could be global or local.

We can make research more useful to advocates and practitioners, many of whom do not have a background in research, by including ideas, case studies and recommendations on how practitioners and advocates can use the research in their work.

We would need a good website and a dedicated team prepared to make the research usable for the variety of plain language constituents, and a team to test the site to see if our intuitions about accessibility are on the mark.

By drawing on the talents of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) forum, the Center for Plain Language, and members of Clarity, we could pool our collective talents to become a one-stop shop for plain language advocates and practitioners.

Accessible research would pave the way to identifying research questions. Once we archive the research that has been done, we could identify the questions that practitioners still need answers to and consider ways to promote new research.

Funding new research

We can also promote more good research by funding it. Funding is a serious question that needs international collaboration. But one thing we know is that if we could fund our own studies, we would have answers to many of the questions that concern us.

We can also try to promote new research by collaborating with members of the academy. Although not many academics have been interested in carrying out plain language research up to this point, it seems likely that as government agencies put more plain language laws into effect, interest will percolate, especially if funding for plain language projects becomes available. We can be cautiously optimistic.

We could inspire interest in research by putting together a framework on how to sponsor students or offer scholarships or internships in return for doing plain language research.

4.6 Role of an international institution

An international organisation could play a role in putting in place many of the initiatives referred to in this chapter. In a general sense, it could help educate its members about how empirical observation could be useful in everyday acts of plain language. It could play a central role for many of the initiatives we have described.

In synthesising existing research, an international institution could provide a cohesive vision of the plain language research that exists. It could also offer a framework for considering the 'big picture' of research. When the institution is firmly established, it could identify 'needed research', recommend research topics, make suggestions for replication studies, and sponsor original studies.

In making research more accessible, an international institution could serve as a clearing house for plain language issues from around the globe, such as through an online database of plain language publications on research and practice. It could also offer bite-size research capsules to release to the media.

In promoting more research, an international institution could initiate and organise funding programs.

Overall, an international plain language institution could be the catalyst for changing the

shape of the field around the globe. By grounding its activity in research, it could both raise the status of the field and the credibility of its arguments.

© Dr Karen Schriver
 kschriver@earthlink.net

© Frances Gordon
 frances@simplified.co.za

References

DuBay, W.H. (2004). The principles of readability. Costa Mesa, CA: Impact information. Available from http://www.impact-information.com/.

Kimble, J. (1996). Writing for dollars. *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing.* 1996–1997.

Koyani, S. J., Bailey, R.W., Nall, J.R. (2004). Research-based web design & usability guidelines. NJ: *Computer Psychology*.

Felker, D. B., Pickering, F., Charrow, V. R., Holland, M., & Redish, J. C. (1981). *Guidelines for document designers.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

Redish, J. (2007). *Letting go of the words: Writing web content that works.* San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufmann.

Redish, J. C., & Selzer, J. (1985). The place of readability formulas in technical communication. *Technical Communication, 32*(4), 46–52.

Schriver, K. A. (1989). Document design from 1980 to 1989: Challenges that remain. *Technical Communication, 36*(4), 316–331.

Schriver, K. A. (1993). Quality in document design: Issues and controversies. *Technical Communication, 40*(2), 239–257.

Schriver, K. A. (1997). *Dynamics in document design: Creating texts for readers.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Schriver, K. A. (2001). Readability formulas: What's the use? *ACM Journal of Computer Documentation, 24*(3), 138-140.

Schriver, K. A. (in preparation). Reading online: A review of research on the impact of technology, writing, graphics, and reader characteristics (Technical Report No. 1). Pittsburgh, PA: KSA Communication Design & Research.

Schriver, K. A., Cheek, A., & Mercer, M. (2010). The research basis for plain language techniques: Implications for establishing standards. *Clarity* 63, May 2010.

US Department of Health. (1984). *Pretesting in health communications: Methods, examples, and resources for improving health messages and materials* (NIH Publication No. 84-1493). Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute.

Karen Schriver, Ph.D. *is President of KSA Communication Design and Research, a consultancy located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA). She is a former professor of rhetoric and information design at Carnegie Mellon University, where she co-directed the graduate programs in professional writing. Her book,* Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Texts for Readers—*now in its 9th printing—is regarded as an essential work in the field. Karen redesigns websites, instruction guides, educational materials, technical reports, marketing collateral, and forms. Winner of ten national awards for information design, her clients include Apple, IBM, Mitsubishi, ATT, Sprint, Hoffman-LaRoche, Fujitsu, Microsoft, and Sony.*

Frances Gordon's *career started far from the corporate environment, travelling rural South Africa to research and write educational materials for adult learning. This sparked an interest in clear, simple communications, which she began to apply in the corporate world in 1995.*

Her career includes tenures at Logical, a division of Datatec, as a communications strategist, and at London-based Siegel & Gale as a senior content strategist. Frances has worked on documents and websites for a wide range of blue-chip international companies.

Frances has written for various UK and South African publications and has spoken at conferences about the relationship between brand strategy, technology and simplification. In 2005, Frances and Candice Burt founded Simplified, a training and consultancy firm specialising in plain language.