Tip Jar for PHSA web & POD editors

In this issue

Learn more about plain language and the steps you can take to improve your writing.

The peanut butter and jelly sandwich lesson

The peanut butter and jelly (PB&J) sandwich lesson is a well-known tactic meant to teach children how to write descriptively and clearly. In the activity, kids write instructions for making a PB&J sandwich. Their teacher then tries to make the sandwich based on their instructions, no matter how vague or confusing they are.

The students usually write steps like:

- *"Put peanut butter on a piece of bread"*
- *"Put jelly on a piece of bread"*
- *"Put them together and cut in half"*

Those steps sound simple if you've made a PB&J sandwich before. In the activity, the teacher follows the instructions exactly. She puts the entire jar of peanut butter on a piece of bread and does the same with the jelly jar.

Technically, she followed the steps correctly but her sandwich is off to a bad start.

The kids assumed their teacher would know how to do the smaller steps in between, like opening the jar, scooping the peanut butter, using a knife, and so on.

As web authors, we may assume that readers can connect the dots and know what we're talking about without all the details. However, the result can be more significant if a patient or colleague can't complete a task because they don't have clear information.

How do we prevent this?

Writing in plain language means writing clearly and descriptively so everyone can understand.

In our last edition, we went over the basics of plain language. Here are the steps you can take to make sure your readers can put their PB&J sandwich together properly.

Plain language checklist

Use this checklist before, during and after writing your content to make sure you are using plain language.

❑ Spell out acronyms

Although acronyms like NICU, C&W, BCCH, or EOC might make sense to you and your teammates, others may not know what you mean right away. Save your readers a Google or POD search by spelling out the full meaning first, then adding the acronym after in parentheses. For example: "Read the **emergency operations centre (EOC)** guide to learn more about emergency response."

❑ Use common words

Using common words helps people scan your content quickly and understand it right away. Remember, your readers want to find information as soon as possible and don't like being slowed down by unfamiliar words.

Here are some examples of everyday words or phrases you can use instead of more complex ones.

Complex	Common
assist	help
additionally	also
commence	start
comprehend	understand
discontinue	stop
due to the fact that	because
in light of	in response to
in the absence of	without
individual	person
initiative	project
obtain	get
prior to	before
require	need

❑ Use lists

Using a bulleted list is a great way to break up text so it's clear and easy to scan. For example, instead of:

Clinics are available on a first-come, first-served basis in Surrey, Langley and Vancouver.

Write:

Clinics are available on a first-come, first-served basis in:

- *Surrey*
- *Langley*
- *Vancouver*

Repeating words at the beginning of each item makes the list harder to read. If items are similar, add a short heading above the list and remove unnecessary labels in the bullets.

For example:

- *Fact sheet – Patient safety*
- *Fact sheet – Workplace safety*
- *Fact sheet – Health and wellness*

Becomes:

Fact sheets

- *Patient safety*
- *Workplace safety*
- *Health and wellness*

❑ Remove extra words

Keep your content short by removing words that don't add meaning or improve the reader's understanding.

Use a more descriptive word to describe something instead of using "really _____" or "very _____". For example, use an adjective like "excellent" instead of "really good", or "intriguing" instead of "very interesting".

Shorten filler phrases like these:

- To be able to = to
- At a later date = later
- At this point in time = now
- In the event that = if/when
- With reference to = about

❑ Use strong verbs

Using strong and specific verbs makes your writing more descriptive and keeps the content brief.

When reviewing your writing, check if your verbs convey a precise meaning or if they rely on surrounding words to create meaning. In this example, using the verb "announced" instead of "made" shortens the sentence and makes it clearer.

Before*: "PHSA made the announcement that T4s are available."*

After*: "PHSA announced that T4s are available."*

❑ Avoid negatives

Double negatives are a common grammar mistake where two negative words like "not" or "never" cancel each other out. For example, instead of saying: "the initiative was **not unnecessary**", which is confusing, say "the initiative **was necessary**".

Scan your writing for negative words and remove them where you can.

❑ Use first or second person

Use the first person rather than the third person when referring to our organization. Instead of referring to "PHSA", use "we." Use the second person rather than the third person when referring to readers. Instead of "the patient", use "you". Avoid he/she, him/his, and her/hers.

❑ Use the active voice

The active voice uses a direct, clear tone to get your point across more efficiently. Sentences in the passive voice can be vague and unnecessarily wordy. Here's a common example in the health care setting:

Passive voice: Appointments can be made at locations across the province. This is a poor sentence and may bring up more questions for the reader.

Active voice: You can make an appointment at any location across the province. This sentence gets straight to the point. The action (making an appointment) is emphasized first.

Your action this month

Choose one or two of your pages and go through the checklist. Ask a teammate to review your content to catch any mistakes or areas to improve.

Created by the Web Strategy Team (PHSA Communications)

No longer a POD or web editor? Questions or comments? Please email webhelp@phsa.ca

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