

Why Plain Language?

Linguistic Accessibility in Inclusive Higher Education

Beth Myers
Teukie Martin
Syracuse University

Plain Language Summary

Why We Use Plain Language Summaries

What are Plain Language Summaries (PLS)?

- Plain language summaries are short summaries of research articles.
- They communicate the main ideas of the article and are easy to understand.
- PLS are also used by the government, doctors, and places like banks and utility companies. Some research journals use PLS, too.

Why are PLS important?

- Research articles can be hard to read and understand.
- PLS make research accessible to many kinds of people.
- Everyone should have access to information that impacts their lives. PLS help make that possible.

Why are PLS important for the Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (JIPE)?

- We want our work to be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible, including students with intellectual disability (ID) and all people who care about inclusive education.
- We want to show other journals how to be more accessible.
- We want to make the world a better and more accessible place.

October 13, 2020 marked the 10th anniversary of the Federal Plain Writing Act of 2010. During this important legislative anniversary, the JIPE Editorial Board was in the midst of developing our own plan towards implementing greater linguistic accessibility. We are pleased to welcome you to the April issue of JIPE, and hope that you are as excited as we are about our meaningful shift towards accessibility. This shift represents a commitment to reducing access barriers to information for our readers. Our Editorial Team focused on increasing accessibility and readability while keeping complex ideas intact.

Plain language writing is clear, succinct, and jargon-free, and is organized in a way that facilitates understanding. It is a reader-centered way of writing, with the end goal of readers being able to access, comprehend, and utilize information. Like Universal Design, plain language writing benefits all readers while ensuring crucial access for some.

Advocacy for plain language has been primarily focused on government and other service departments, such as the Internal Revenue Service or Veterans Affairs. Although the Plain Language Act of 2010 mandated plain language usage for federal agencies, compliance has been inconsistent. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the country, widespread misinformation and confusing, jargon-laden government communication made it harder for people to access necessary health, housing, and finance information (2020 Federal Plain Language Report Card, n.d.). The need for plain language access to information came into clearer focus for many.

Other fields have also begun to take on the cause of plain language. In medicine, for instance, there is a need to transmit information to a variety of stakeholders, including caregivers, patients, and non-specialist healthcare professionals. Toward this end, some medical journals have begun to provide Plain Language Summaries (PLS): brief, easy-to-read synopses of research articles designed to be readily comprehensible by a lay audience. Sometimes called “lay summaries” or “lay abstracts,” biomedical PLS ensure that patients and those who care for them have the essential, up-to-date information they need to make informed decisions about their health. Compared to traditional abstracts, PLS have been found to increase reader comprehension, understanding, and enjoyment (Bredbenner & Simon, 2019).

Education, like medicine, is a field with an array of stakeholders outside of the research community. These stakeholders - educators, administrators, paraprofessionals, students, and students’ families - bring with them a diversity of cognitive and linguistic needs that may limit their access to research relevant to their daily lives. Some disability-focused journals such as *Disability & Society* include PLS with research and should be recognized for their efforts. However, a search for PLS within broader education journals produced meager results. Plain language access is greatly needed in the field but is frequently overlooked.

Stakeholders for Inclusive Post-Secondary Education include students with Intellectual Disability (ID) who are a main focus of the field. Certainly, PLS are specifically intended to increase accessibility for those with ID. PLS are a critical access point for many readers of the *Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education*.

Best Practices

Journals providing PLS have not yet developed a central set of guidelines and best practices for writing these summaries. FitzGibbon et al. (2020) found that amongst biomedical journals there was significant variance in PLS, including length, location, and target audience. The JIPE audience includes students with ID as well as their families, peer mentors, and other Inclusive Post-Secondary Education stakeholders. We have developed JIPE guidelines by focusing on comprehension for our audience. For example,

we ask for simplified titles that clearly communicate the subject being studied, and encourage the use of subheadings and bullet points to help guide readers through the text. Sentences should be short and conversational, and should be written in the first person. Words should be short, straightforward, and jargon-free. The goal is to communicate key information in a way that is easily comprehensible to the widest audience possible.

At JIPE, values of accessibility and inclusion are central to our work, and we envision PLS as embodying those values in action. By providing PLS, we are communicating our investment in students with ID not merely as research subjects but also as valued collaborators and research community members. We believe that access to information about oneself is a human right, and that students with ID should have the opportunity to read, comprehend, and speak back to research that impacts their lives.

Why Plain Language is Important for JIPE

As a journal, JIPE is committed to advancing the conversation around inclusive postsecondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Our editorial team at JIPE feel strongly that the Journal needs to be as accessible as reasonably possible to practitioners, faculty, staff, administrators, students, advocates, and everyone. We recognize that all people can benefit from Plain Language Summaries. This is simply good practice.

For JIPE and all the journals that provide accessibility, PLS is a move towards building a more ethical research community. Plain language moves the field of inclusive postsecondary education toward increased linguistic and reader accessibility. These summaries increase the public trust in our work, and in the work of our authors. For researchers working with members of marginalized groups, plain language usage is an ethical imperative (Cheung, 2017) that signals our commitment to accessibility, transparency, and accountability. We hope that more journals, particularly those working with/among marginalized groups, will see the work of the JIPE Editorial Board as a model and a call for action.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

The commitment to accessibility is deeply personal for both authors and holds extra significance for the second author, Teukie, as this issue comes to publication almost a year since the passing of their beloved friend and fierce disability justice advocate, Stacey Park Milbern. It was from Stacey that Teukie first learned about forms of accessibility beyond ramps and curb cuts, including the use of accessible language in writing and communication. Stacey loved her people and lived to create access, build community, and advocate for justice. She understood that inaccessibility and exclusion were forms of violence that kept disabled bodyminds out of spaces where they should have found belonging. She dreamed big, fought hard, and loved with tender ferocity. For Teukie, this work has been over a decade in the making, and they are grateful for the opportunity to honor Stacey's legacy in this way.

As individuals invested in inclusion - in higher education and beyond - we all must live what we value. We must practice accessibility in every facet of our work. The JIPE Editorial Board welcomes you to join us in this practice.

References

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