Write clearly, in Plain English

Video transcript from the ‘Effective Digital Content’ training

The first, and perhaps most important, thing to remember when writing digital content is to write clearly, in Plain English.

# Demonstrating intellectualism

It’s something that universities are often quite bad at. We are seduced into using long words and sentence structures to show that we are a well-educated and respectable institution.

However, this tends to have the opposite effect.

# Consider all users

Firstly, we need to remember that not everyone visiting the site is an academic or potential student. Parents, grandparents and other supporters of current or potential students need to find information too, and we can’t presume anything about their literacy levels.

Of course, many of these supporters will also be non-native speakers.

However, it’s very important to remember than that everyone benefits from content being as readable as possible, no matter how intelligent or educated they are.

# Writing in a simple style...

Writing in a simple style does not mean dumbing down your content.

# Write the way you talk

Write the way that you would speak. This might sound straightforward, but often means making a conscious effort to cut down on needlessly formal language, jargon and acronyms.

# Avoid needlessly formal language

For example,

* Why demonstrate something to a reader, when you can show them?
* Why are we always requesting that our audience do something, when we could just ask?
* And we never need to utilise something that we could simply use.

# Match search terms to content

Avoiding unnatural language like this not only makes your content easier to read; it makes it easier to find. Using the words that your users search for means they are much more likely to find your site.

# Just some of our University jargon

The use of acronyms and jargon is another thing we can be particularly guilty of at the University – we have an acronym for everything!

This is another area where it helps to know who your users are. A student can’t make it through to graduation without knowing what MyEd means, but a potential student is unlikely to know what you’re talking about.

Pensions staff may be familiar with terms like SBS and NEST, but a new member of teaching staff will need to have those terms explained to them.

# Happy talk must die

Avoid ‘Happy Talk’

Steve Krug, author of Don’t Make Me Think and Rocket Surgery Made Easy – two bibles of web usability – is quoted as saying ‘Happy talk must die’.

By ‘happy talk’, we mean fluffy filler that doesn’t actually give any information or answer any questions.

# Avoiding filler

A typical example is a ‘Welcome’ message on a homepage. Pieces of content like this work well in brochures, but in web content, they’re just distracting.

Instead of telling users that they’re welcome to your site, make them feel welcome, by supplying content that is easy to read and to navigate.

# Use the active voice

Write in the active voice. This means avoiding phrases like ‘applications were processed’ or ‘emails are answered’.

It normally also means you should write in the first person, normally plural – ‘We are’ rather than ‘the University is’.

**Talk directly to your audience** – ‘We are here to help you’ rather than ‘the University is here to help students’.

Again, you need to know who the ‘you’ is that you’re addressing – that takes us back to what I was saying earlier about the importance of knowing your audience and aims of your content.

# Checking tools

The Plain English campaign have lots of great resources for helping you simplify your content, including an A-Z of alternative words, and a drivel defence tool to let you check the readability of your content.

Microsoft Word also has a built-in readability checker, which scores you on things like passive sentences, and words per sentence.

You should always have 0% passive sentences, and should aim for one or two sentences per paragraph. The next section of this course explains why in more detail.