

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

# **SAY WHAT?**

## **The benefits of plain language**

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# **What is plain language?**

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Plain language is writing that ensures your readers understand your words

- quickly
- easily
- completely



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# It's a law and a movement

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## Plain Writing Act of 2010

Law that requires that federal executive agencies:

- Use plain writing in every agency document
- Train employees in plain writing
- [plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov) - great resource with examples

## “The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing”

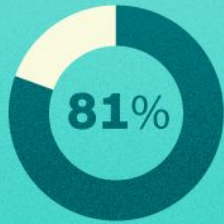
A new movement strives for simplicity

Victoria Clayton, The Atlantic, Oct 2015

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255/>

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# We don't read. We scan.



of people will only skim through content online



[killerinfographics.com/10-reasons-to-invest-in-visual-communication.html](http://killerinfographics.com/10-reasons-to-invest-in-visual-communication.html)

# W

# How much time will this take?

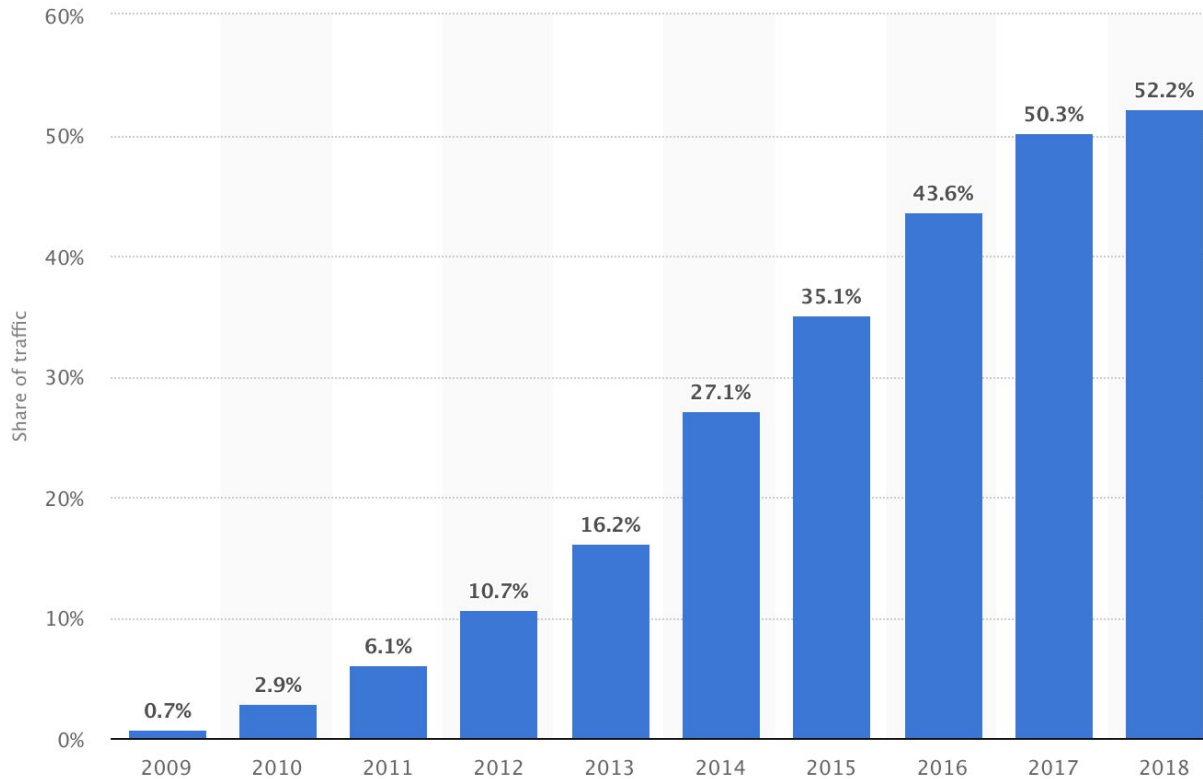
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- We're usually in a hurry
- We're multitasking
- We know we don't need to read everything
- We scan for relevant things



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# 52% of web traffic is on mobile



<https://www.statista.com/statistics/241462/global-mobile-phone-website-traffic-share/>



# Concise content = Mobile-friendly

- Writing and designing for mobile is like moving to a much smaller house.
- You can't -- and shouldn't -- take everything with you.



88.0816264 [97] © www.visualphotos.com

# W

# Cut the fat

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Get rid of half the words on each page.

Then get rid of half of what's left.

--Steve Krug, *Don't Make Me Think*







## **Less is more**

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- Reduces the noise level of the page
- Makes useful content more prominent
- Makes pages shorter, allowing users to see more of each page at a glance





# Happy talk must die

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Introductory text, welcome text telling us how great a website is, or a section that we're about to see.

Conveys no useful information

--Steve Krug, *Don't Make Me Think*



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# Instructions must die

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People won't read them, unless they've failed to muddle through a site on their own.

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# Instructions must die

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The following questionnaire is designed to provide us with information that will help us improve the site and make it more relevant to your needs. Please select your answers from the drop-down menus and radio buttons below. The questionnaire should only take you 2-3 minutes to complete.

At the bottom of the form you can choose to leave your name, address and telephone number. If you leave your name and number, you may be contacted in the future to participate in a survey to help us improve this site.

If you have comments or concerns that require a response please contact Customer Service.

## 1. How many times have you visited this site?

This is my first visit. 





# Instructions must die

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The following questionnaire is designed to provide us with information that will help us improve the site and make it more relevant to your needs.

**Introductory happy talk. We know what a survey is for.**

Please select your answers from the drop-down menus and radio buttons below.

**Most people don't need to be told how to fill a form.**

**Drop-down menus and radio buttons are too jargon-y.**

The questionnaire should only take you 2-3 minutes to complete.

**Useful.**

At the bottom of the form you can choose to leave your name, address and telephone number. If you leave your name and number, you may be contacted in the future to participate in a survey to help us improve this site.

**Not useful at this point in the survey. It belongs where contact info is being asked for, and people can choose whether or not to act on it. Here, it makes the instructions appear long and daunting.**

If you have comments or concerns that require a response please contact Customer Service.

**The fact that I shouldn't fill out this form if I want a personalized response is useful.**

**But I also need a link to the service department.**



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# Cut half the words, then another half

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Please help us improve the site by taking this 2-3 minute survey.

NOTE: If you have comments or concerns that require a response, don't use this form. Instead, please contact [Customer Service](#).

Before: 103 words

After: 33 words





# Be concise, speak plainly

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Volunteers at the University of Washington Faculty Housing Service render a useful service to new and visiting university faculty and staff requiring short or long-term housing. (27)

The University of Washington Faculty Housing Service helps new and visiting faculty and staff find housing. (16)

We help new and visiting faculty and staff find housing. (10)

New to Seattle? We'll help you find housing. (8)





# CUT REPETITION

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The annual event provides students with the opportunity to showcase the many ways they are engaging in leadership and service. Through a gallery of student projects and oral breakout sessions, students present their engagement and discuss their service and leadership experiences with other students, faculty, community partners, civic and university leaders. (52)

The annual event allows students to demonstrate their leadership and service through a gallery of projects and group discussions. (20)





# Clear = Smarter

- Forces writer to organize thoughts more coherently
- Always think about audience, higher engagement with audience
- Benefits everybody, from expert readers to international ESL speakers.
- Research shows that clear, simple words can make authors appear more intelligent.
- Easily searchable, leads to better SEO ranking. Plain copy often uses words that people enter in search engines.

Ex. “Hot laptop shuts off” vs. “Laptop thermal failure”





## From “The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing”

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“Academics, in general, don’t think about the public; they don’t think about the average person, and they don’t even think about their students when they write. ... Their intended audience is always their peers. That’s who they have to impress to get tenure.”

But research shows that clear, simple words can make authors appear more intelligent.

-- Daniel Oppenheimer, professor of psychology at Princeton

If people understand more of what you’re saying, they will likely feel that you make sense.





# Plain language is not dumbing-down

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Does not oversimplify concepts, but presents information in a way that is easier to understand and use.

“You’re not simplifying the science, you’re simplifying the expression of it.”

-- Dr. Jean-luc Doumont, physicist and communications trainer, author of English Communication for Scientists



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# Arguments and your responses

**Subject matter is abstract and complex; it can't be simplified.**

- Plain language is not simplifying the topic. It's simplifying the communication of it.
- The most successful researchers are the ones whose writings cross over to the general public.

**Scholars cannot avoid technical terms altogether. Tedious to define *transcription factor* every time it's used.**

- Define the jargon at first use and use it sparingly.
- A lot of jargon can be replaced without sacrificing accuracy.
  - Replace *murine model* with *rats and mice*.
  - Replace Latin expressions like *ceteris paribus* and *inter alia*, and write *other things being equal* and *among other things*.

**Gatekeepers of journals and university presses insist on ponderous language as proof of one's seriousness.**

- This is a myth. Editors appreciate readability.

From Steven Pinker, "Why Academics Stink at Writing," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sep 2014. Author of *The Sense of Style* (2014) and professor of psychology at Harvard University.



# What experts have in common with general public

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- Experts scan and don't read text completely.
- Experts don't like long, high-level introductions.
- Experts aren't necessarily tech savvy.
- Experts appreciate summaries and subheadings.

From "Writing Digital Copy for Domain Experts," by Hoa Loranger and Kate Meyer, Nielsen Norman Group, April 2017  
<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/writing-domain-experts/>





# What experts appreciate

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- Facts, not outlandish interpretations
- New information that they haven't considered or heard of
- Contradictory information that is contrary to their existing knowledge or beliefs
- Good storytelling



# Plain language is successful

UW News re-tells stories published in scientific journals for a larger audience.

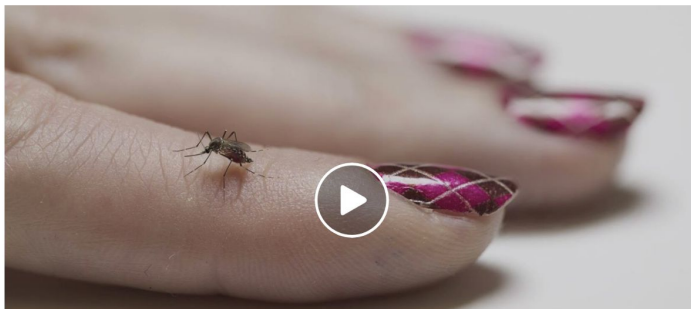
## UW NEWS

[NEWS RELEASES](#) | [RESEARCH](#) | [SCIENCE](#)

January 25, 2018

### If you swat mosquitoes, they may learn to avoid your scent

[UW News staff](#)



Mosquitoes learn to avoid hosts based on scent a...  
Posted by University of Washington News  
7,935 Views



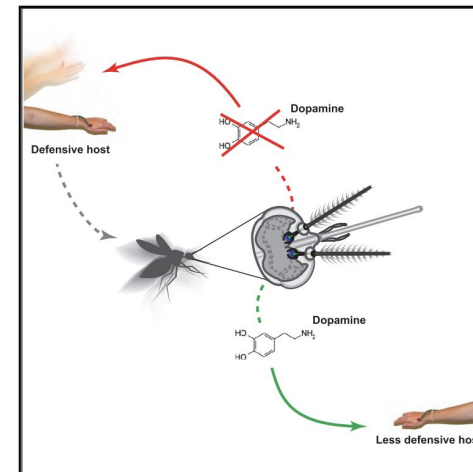
Close to 8000 video views in 6 days

Article

## Current Biology

### Modulation of Host Learning in *Aedes aegypti* Mosquitoes

Graphical Abstract



Authors

Clément Vinauger, Chloé Lahondère, Gabriella H. Wolff, ..., Omar S. Akbari, Michael H. Dickinson, Jeffrey A. Riffell

Correspondence

[jriffell@uw.edu](mailto:jriffell@uw.edu)

In Brief

Mosquitoes show an ability to avoid defensive hosts, but the mechanisms mediating these shifts in host preferences are unclear. Vinauger et al. show that *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes rapidly learn host odors and that learning is dependent on the dopamine-1 receptor. Understanding the mechanisms of learning may provide new tools for mosquito control.



# Good stories use plain language

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Most successful academics write for broader audience:

- Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist, *The Selfish Gene*
- Siddharta Mukherjee, physician, professor, *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*
- Neil deGrasse Tyson, astrophysicist, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*







# How to write in plain language

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- Put the most important information at the top in every paragraph.
- Use meaningful headings to help readers skim text and find what they are looking for.
- Use short sentences and only include the necessary information.
- Be direct and concise and go for an easy flow.
- Use active voice and speak to the reader.
- Include hyperlinks that take readers to supporting details on deeper-level pages.



# Use active voice

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## Passive voice

The lake was polluted by the company.

New regulations were proposed.

The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.

## Active voice

The company polluted the lake.

We proposed new regulations.

You must include the following information in your application.



# Before and after

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Before:

Mitigation is the cornerstone of emergency management. It's the ongoing effort to lessen the impact disasters have on people's lives and property through damage prevention and flood insurance. Through measures such as building safely within the floodplain or removing homes altogether; engineering buildings and infrastructures to withstand earthquakes; and creating and enforcing effective building codes to protect property from floods, hurricanes and other natural hazards, the impact on lives and communities is lessened.

After:

Protect your community from natural disasters.

- Build safely in the flood zone, or remove buildings altogether
- Engineer buildings and infrastructure to withstand earthquakes
- Create and enforce effective building codes



# Simplify text and re-format

## Before:

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the month if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the month if you submit your application electronically.

## After:

Submit your form:

We must receive it by:

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Electronically

25th day of month

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Snail mail

15th day of month

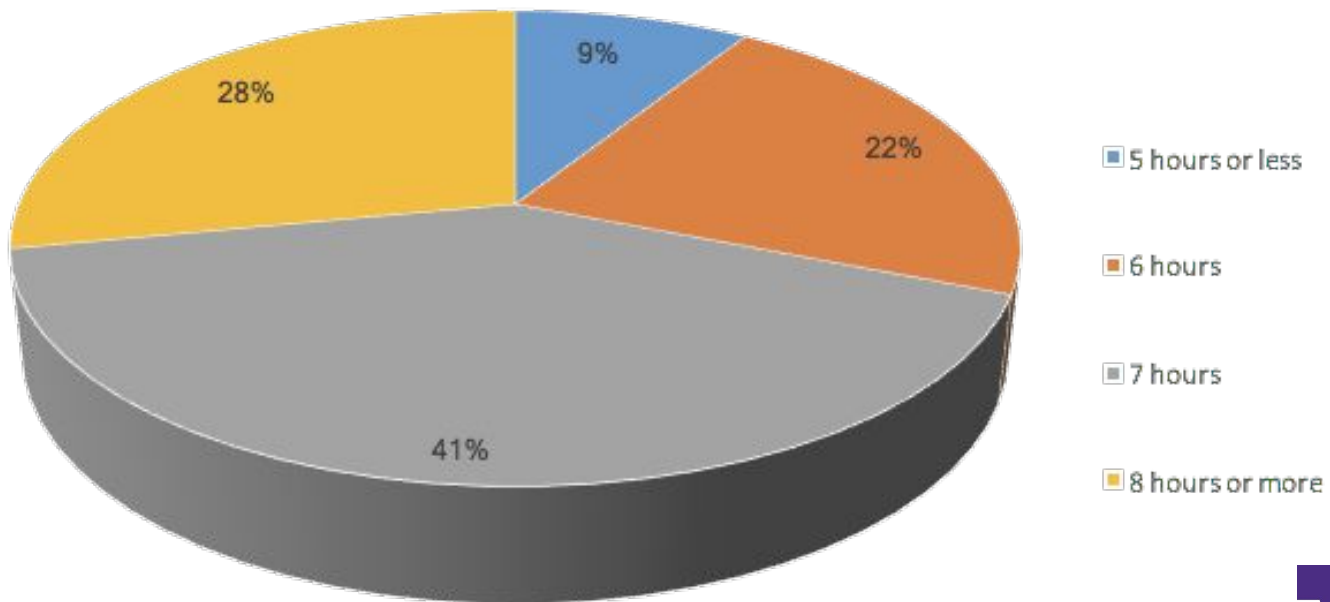
adapted from plainlanguage.gov



# Use charts effectively: Before

This chart makes people look at legend and go back to the pie chart. Colors are arbitrary.

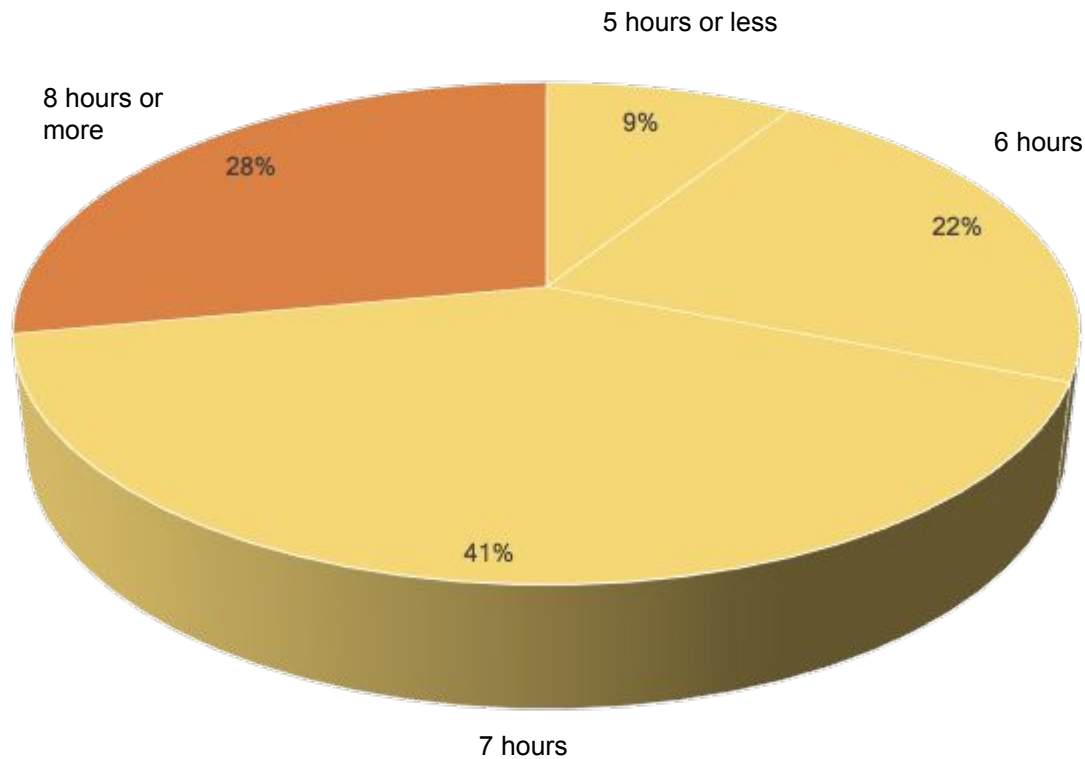
Distribution of the number of sleep hours for adults



# Use charts effectively: After

This makes a key point with the title and puts the meaning of numbers closer to the chart. Colors highlight the point.

## Only 28% of adults sleep the recommended 8 hours



adapted from *Trees, Maps and Theorems* by Jean-luc Doumont



# Co-writing with subject matter expert

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- A structured brain dump saves time later.
- Get agreement on key points, format, illustrations.
- Spend less time reviewing by getting the expert invested.
- Get authentic language, tone and register straight from the outset.
- Let the expert do the chunking to avoid error later on.

Ellen de Vries, "How to collaborate with a Subject Matter Expert,"

<https://gathercontent.com/blog/how-to-collaborate-with-a-subject-matter-expert>





# Plain language = Better for academia

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“Why should a profession that trades in words and dedicates itself to the transmission of knowledge so often turn out prose that is turgid, soggy... unpleasant to read and impossible to understand?”

-- Steven Pinker, author, psychology professor Harvard University

“No one has ever complained that a text was too easy to understand.” -- Hoa Loranger, Nielsen Norman Group





# Plain and concise is beautiful

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# References

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Victoria Clayton, “The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing, A new movement strives for simplicity,” The Atlantic, October 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255/>

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<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Academics-Writing-Stinks/148989>

Plain Language official website [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)

