**Webcast: Plain Language Strategies**

Presenter: Kelly Warmington

Host: Joann Starks

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JOANN STARKS: This is an archive recording of a live webinar with the staff of the NIDILRR-funded Transitions RTC. The staff of the Center on Knowledge Translation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research, KTDRR, felt the information about plain language strategies that was shared in the live event would be useful for fellow NIDILRR grantees and our audience at large. So we have archived this session for your use. Since the session is pre-recorded, there is no opportunity for live interaction, but we encourage you to contact us for follow-up technical assistance. You and your team may also participate in the activity at the end of the archive to practice the plain language strategies that were shared. Now let's get started.

(Slide 1) Good afternoon, everyone. I want to thank everybody for joining us today. And I am Joann Starks from the Austin, Texas, office of American Institutes for Research, or AIR, and I'll be moderating today's webcast. As Marsha said, it's Plain Language Strategies. And our presenter, Kelly Warmington, will discuss the need for using plain language and will share some tools and tips to make information more usable for your audience. And the webcast is offered through the Center on Knowledge Translation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research, or KTDRR, a sister center of the KTER center that Marsha was mentioning. Both of these are funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, or NIDILRR.

I also want to thank my colleague Ann Outlaw for her support for today's webcast as well as Dr. Marsha Ellison and the staff of the Transitions Research and Training Center based at the University of Massachusetts School of Medicine Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center. I hope I was able to get that all out correctly.

And a reminder for all participants viewing the archive of this presentation, there are some materials accompanying today's event that can be found on the web page advertising the webcast. The presentation is available as a PDF file of the slides as well as a text version. The slides on the computer screen are small, so having the actual file or printout can be helpful. If you've not downloaded the materials yet, you can go back to your confirmation email and click on the title of today's webcast and scroll down that page to “Download Materials.” And please remember, these materials are copyrighted, and you must contact our presenter to ask permission to use any of this information.

If viewers have any questions after the webcast, please feel free to send them to us at [ktdrr@air.org](mailto:ktdrr@air.org). Or you may contact [Kelly directly](mailto:kelly.warmington@sickkids.ca) at the address that will be shown in the presentation. Finally, we would appreciate your feedback today by filling out a very brief evaluation form after the webcast, and I'll remind you about this at the end of today's presentation.

Now I would like to introduce our presenter, Ms. Kelly Warmington. She's the program manager for knowledge translation at the Hospital for Sick Children, known as SickKids, in Toronto, Canada. Her work focuses on teaching scientists, clinicians, and educators about knowledge translation, implementation, and clear language communication. Kelly spends most of her time teaching and consulting across SickKids. Previously, Kelly worked in research at Saint Michael's Hospital evaluating clinical outcomes and education programs. She holds degrees in biomedical sciences, teaching, and adult education. Kelly is a member of the Ontario College of Teachers and is a certified project management professional.

Kelly, we're glad to have you with us today, and we're ready to hear what you have to say.

KELLY WARMINGTON: Thank you so much, Joann. That was a fantastic introduction. I'm truly delighted to be here, and I would just like to acknowledge the support and to thank you folks for the invitation. I would acknowledge Joann and Marsha and all of the attendees today. So thank you very much. We'll jump right into the presentation.

(Slide 2) Today we'll be talking about plain language strategies, and as Joann said, I do work at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. My role is program manager of knowledge translation. And a really, really important part of the research and the clinical work that we do is the knowledge translation piece and how we actually move evidence into care.

(Slide 3) So some learning objectives for today. We will be talking about plain language, certainly. We'll define what it is, have a little bit of a discussion about that. We'll figure out how to use the chat box and see if we can get a little bit of back and forth going. We'll look at some plain language tools that are available to you. I feel like plain language is one of the areas where you can almost get decision paralysis because there are so very many resources out there. And there are some really excellent ones and some not so excellent ones. And certain ones are far more appropriate for certain types of work than others. So we'll look at a few examples.

And I'm also going to share with you a Plain Language Writing Checklist, which I've developed, based on a number of other resources, which also integrates knowledge translation principles. So I'm excited to share that with you. And as Joann also mentioned, there will be an activity at the end of the presentation that I'll share with you that you can then facilitate either after the webinar or take back to your various teams and potentially facilitate as well. And there are some supporting slides that go along with it.

(Slide 4) So just to introduce myself. Joann was kind enough to introduce me and mention my history in research. So my background is in clinical research, focusing on joint replacement, traumatic injury, and rheumatoid arthritis. And then I've transitioned a little bit more into education as my academic path took me that way. So I've transitioned into knowledge translation, which is a fantastic pairing for me of the research piece and also the education piece. And I love getting to do training and coaching and mentoring across the organization.

And you're probably wondering what that last piece is. Well, I'm also a yoga instructor. I don't actually teach kids, but I just use that picture because I think it's truly adorable, and I work for a pediatric institution.

(Slide 5) So this is a picture of me from earlier today. You know, webinars can feel a little bit disconnected. So I just wanted to say hello. This is me this morning. We had a little bit of a snowstorm. And I'm not going to leave that up for any longer than absolutely necessary.

(Slide 6) So just a really brief background on my context. So I do a lot of teaching and consulting across the hospital. This is a picture of our Research and Learning Tower. And I do consult with a number of our researchers across the organization, whether it's clinical, basic, some are even working in the community. And it's an absolute delight for me. And I support them in developing knowledge translation plans, lay summaries, all sorts of different knowledge translation strategies such as apps, websites, paper-based education tools for patients as well as their families.

So the Hospital for Sick Children is a very large institution, over 10,000 staff, students, and volunteers. This is a little bit older data, and we'll be updating after March 31 at end of fiscal. So we have a lot of traffic through the organization, and we have a really fantastic focus that includes both learning and research in addition to the clinical care that we're known for.

So just at a really high level, I wanted to share a little bit about what plain language looks like at SickKids. And I share this because I think that some of these pieces are universal. So I wanted to share some of the data that we found in a needs assessment. And I think even hosting this webinar today speaks to the fact that there is a need and interest in plain language education, whether it supports knowledge translation activities or just research and health care and mental health care activities in general.

(Slide 7) So what we found at SickKids was that the importance of plain language was actually really quite strong. People recognize that plain language was of value, I think partially because we work with children and youth, as well as their parents. So 96% of respondents in a survey that we did hospital-wide said that they value plain language. And very importantly, they also noted that they felt it was valued at the department and hospital levels. And this didn't just include clinical staff. This also included our research teams and our clinical folks as well.

And then here's the piece that I think is probably universal is the barriers to plain language use. So I was surprised to see that 40% of people said there are no barriers. And I would be interested to dig a little deeper on that one. But some of the ones that didn't surprise me at all were the lack of time. We'll touch on some of the tools and strategies that are available to you. And I think it will become very clear that it does take time to do plain language, whether you're writing original content or editing somebody else's work and maybe adapting certain things for use in different populations or developing different types of knowledge products. So whether you're translating something from an academic publication into a lay summary and then into an academic poster and then into some web-based content.

(Slide 8) Some of the others that came up were the fact that we're really steeped in this culture of jargon. And I think that that's really, really important to notice. Regardless of our area of specialty, we all speak a different language. Whether it's health care, whether it's public health, whether it's mental health, whether it's agriculture, engineering. Everybody has this culture of jargon and terminology that we use as part of our everyday language. And it's very, very challenging, particularly in oral communication, to steer clear of that. So I would also include acronyms in that one. I don't know about you, but we are huge on acronyms.

And then another one was the fact that it can be very difficult to convey complex ideas. So when we think about issues like literacy, health literacy, new immigrants within the population, the fact that many people that we interact with may be dealing with very challenging situations. And their emotional state can also have an impact. Their mental capacity, maybe they had a bad morning. There are any number of factors that can make it additionally difficult to convey ideas that are already very complex within the health system.

And then a lot of people admitted outright that they don't really know how. They don't know how to write in plain language, to actually take very academic content or complex ideas and make them either simpler or more accessible. So really, really important based on that data is the capacity building piece. So trying to focus on education. And I won't go through every box, but I think the bottom one around taking the time to practice is really, really important. So I would encourage all of you to engage in the activity that I'll share with you at the end of the session, whether it's today or at another point. And just really have a debriefing discussion about it as well. That's where some of the really excellent learning comes out because it is a very challenging experience.

(Slide 9) So I wanted to just talk about where plain language fits in when it comes to research. And I think we can say, OK, yeah. I'm sure we can all agree that lay summaries would be one of the places we would jump to automatically. I know that in Canada we do have a number of funding agencies that will post lay summaries on their websites depending on what's funded because there is that public accountability. And those lay summaries need to be accessible enough to the public that they can understand what this particular agency, whether it's national funding agency or otherwise, has opted to put money and resources into. So there's an accountability piece there.

(Slide 10) Additionally, really, really important, the knowledge translation piece. And this is very close to my heart. So I think regardless of what kinds of knowledge products we're creating, we have to be using plain language. And we'll talk about whether or not plain language is an audience-specific definition.

And then certainly, I think, we have things like consent forms, documents where we're conveying information that absolutely has to be clear. We're asking people to sign something. We're asking them to commit to doing something. And I think oftentimes this is certainly an ethical issue. We are not necessarily getting in truly informed consent. So I think partnerships between researchers and whether it's knowledge translation specialists or plain language experts, and also partnerships with our ethics boards, can be really, really important here to ensure that we're being ethical in conveying the information and consent as well as assent forms.

And then I think posters and publications. So this is where we think of a much more academic audience. And it is actually becoming much more acceptable to use certain plain language techniques in academic writing. And I'll share a couple of examples of this later on. But I'm delighted to see that something like using the first person, for example, or a second person and talking about "we" when we talk about the research team, as opposed to talking about what was done and whatnot, saying "we" analyzed the data. And just being much, much more clear. And it's not like you're dumbing things down. It's still conveying the message. And I think that it's nice to see at the system level that our publishers are actually acknowledging this and shifting the way that things are done.

So plain language in knowledge translation. Just an extra layer here. I think when we're crafting our main messages and we think about why am I creating this website, why am I writing this one-pager, why am I creating an infographic, we have to be really clear on our main messages. And this can be a fantastic opportunity to practice plain languaging. Main messages are statements that have some level of new meaning. So it's not just our finding. It's not just our data. It's about what is meaningful to our user.

And then also important in knowledge translation is stakeholder engagement and, certainly, participatory research. So any opportunities where you are engaging stakeholders, where you are working with stakeholder groups throughout an initiative, plain language can help you build relationships, maintain relationships, and then, relatedly, communicate your findings, which is the last bubble there.

(Slide 11-12) So I am going to ask the group to use their comment boxes. And if everybody could just send me a quick note or two on how you might define plain language. So I will just take a pause and let you think about that. I would just love a couple of ideas that we could discuss.

Marsha: All right, happily we've got a comment from Joann that you can repeat while we all sort of think about what plain language is.

KELLY WARMINGTON: Absolutely. It's not always an easy answer. So thank you, Joann. We have quote, unquote, *"simple” language that's easily understood by anyone.* And Joann, I won't put you on the spot, but I think it's an interesting point that we talk about the understandability. So using simple language. And I noticed that you put it in quotes. I won't make assumptions about what you mean by that. But I think speaking to the understandability.

So it's something that people can understand, that they might be able to use. And Joann has also put "by anyone." So there's a very broad scope there in terms of audience. Any other thoughts?

TONYA: Hi, this is Tonya from the RTC. I would say that plain language is basically how you speak to a person, like how you would speak to a friend or a family member instead of like a presentation or anything like that.

KELLY WARMINGTON: OK. Thank you, Tonya. I would absolutely agree with you. I think that when we speak in plain language, I think what you're getting at is using a conversational tone. So instead of the formality that you might use in a presentation, and we often default to using a really formal tone when we write. And it can be challenging or it can seem a little bit awkward to use that conversational tone when we're writing, which is where we'll focus today. That's a great suggestion. Thank you.

So there are lots of different concepts of what plain language can mean. So I figure if I'm going to do a presentation on plain language, I might as well choose a definition, share it with you. And there are many out there. So please take this with a grain of salt. I like this one because I think it aligns with some of the knowledge translation principles as well. And you'll see when I share a resource with you at the end that this definition aligns.

So plain language is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it. Written material is in plain language if your audience can find what they need, understand what they find, and use what they find to meet their needs. So there's a couple of really integral pieces here. I've underlined "first time" because I think many of us can certainly understand an academic publication, but I would imagine that many of us have also had to read an academic publication multiple times in order to actually take away what we're supposed to be taking away.

So it's a matter of reducing the amount of emotional energy that people have to use when they interact with a document, or even when you're speaking with them. And then, importantly, thinking about the user. So the point about written material being in plain language if your audience can duh, duh, duh, duh, duh is the audience-specific piece itself. So if we're speaking with an academic audience, things can still be in plain language if it's appropriate for that audience. And recognizing that people also often need to use the information that we're giving them to do something with it.

So oftentimes we are asking them to do something with it, when we're expecting a behavior change, when we're trying to raise awareness, when we're sharing things on social media. We want people to share that information more broadly. We want them to use it to base decisions on. And so they need to be able to pull up the main messages and use them for their needs.

(Slide 13) So when to use plain language. I'm not even sure why I even have a table on here. All the time. All the time. I would advocate for that. I think the one situation where someone actually raised their hand and disputed me on that was when we're talking about legal documents. And I truly believe that the point of legal documents is to confuse people.

So other than that, I would advocate very strongly for audience-specific and appropriate use of plain language, regardless. And I've included a couple of examples on here where we don't always think about plain language being important, but one that is I think really fantastic to think about is just how we write emails. So reflecting on that, I don't know how many times I've written an email and you ask somebody five questions and you get a response back, yes. So thinking about how we're communicating our messages the same way. And this can be really, really important when it comes to stakeholder engagement.

(Slide 14) So talk about why plain language is important. I really like this quote by Einstein, "The hardest thing in the world to understand is the income tax."

And this is a Canadian example, but I would imagine that there might be similar tools in the US as well. So right off of a tax form. Take a deep breath. "Complete the application calculation below and enter the results on line 3. If you paid 5% GST, 12% or 13% HST, or if you paid 15% HST after June 30, 2010, under an agreement entered into after May 2, 2006, do the following calculation." So certainly not in plain language because I'll tell you right now, I don't know what to do with that after reading it the first time.

I think when we talk about the importance of plain language, it's really the fact that people are basing decisions on the content that we're creating and sharing with them and oftentimes making public, for example, on a website where we can't be sitting next to them to answer any clarifying questions. So another important definition that I did want to include today was literacy. And this is not specific to health literacy. That's quite different.

(Slide 15) Literacy is understanding, evaluating, using, and engaging with written text to participate in the society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. I would argue that this definition is not actually even in plain language. But I think it's an important one to consider and think about. And I wanted to share a couple of stats.

(Slide 16) Reading levels of adults in the US. So if we think about the people that we might be interacting with and creating resources for. About 44% of people are at the intermediate level, which is approximately what is required to function in an industrialized nation. And then a number of people are basic and below basic in terms of functioning. And we're looking at close to 35%, or excuse me, 45% of people. Then additionally, looking at the percentage of US adults who can't read. So that's at 14%, and if we translate that into a number, it's 32 million people. So pretty staggering.

(Slide 17) And we think about in this case the use of visuals and the importance of having a forum for people to post questions and interact with somebody because we can't make assumptions to look at anybody what their literacy or health literacy level might be. So I'll just give you a second to just read some of these headlines.

I think my favorite one is the last one, “Kids Make Nutritious Snacks.” So usually I would say, OK, what happened here? So totally ambiguous. There is no punctuation in news headlines. And we certainly have situations here are quite humorous. But it's not clear what is being said or what is meant. And so these are the kinds of things that can happen. And these are pretty extreme examples, but this happens all the time. And whether it's word use or the lack of punctuation or the choice of punctuation can make a real difference in how things are interpreted.

(Slide 18) So this is actually a photo that a colleague of mine took for me on the walk to work one day. And you'll notice that this is a parking garage. We've got, I guess, seven or eight signs that are directing people. And you've got arrows pointing in different directions. We have information that says keep left, single lane. How are people interacting with these pieces of information out in society? And the harder we make it for people, the less likely we are to actually achieve our goals.

So at the very least, they did actually apologize for the inconvenience. But to me, the inconvenience is the fact that they haven't been clear in their messaging. It's not so much that the actual parking garage is closed.

(Slide 19) So a little bit more serious example. I have a few examples of plain language in the news. So "Toni Cordell vividly remembers, she was stunned when the nurse asked, 'How are you since your hysterectomy?' I wanted to scream. I really didn't know I was surrendering a part of my body.'" And a quote later on in this particular article in the Washington Post said, "I didn't read a single word. I didn't even try because I suspected the medical jargon would make the documents too difficult to understand." And she's actually referring to the consent form here.

And we've already touched on jargon and how alienating it can be. So Toni Cordell actually went in for what she thought was a fairly routine day surgery and ended up having a hysterectomy because she couldn't read the consent form. She was married at the time. Didn't feel comfortable asking her husband to read the consent form for her. And this example, again, I think speaks to the fact that we don't know someone's literacy level to look at them. Toni Cordell graduated from high school functionally illiterate.

(Slide 20) So there are a lot of barriers out there. And the easier that we make the information for people, the better. So there is some really fantastic work that's gone on. We do have similar initiatives in Canada. Obama signed the Plain Writing Act in 2010 in October of the same year. And I have actually read this bill. And the law requires that government agencies actually use, quote, "clear government communication that the public can understand and use."

It's actually a very short and simple bill. And I think we could probably question it and say, OK, well, what does that actually look like? And they've done a fairly good job of implementing it. What it requires is that government agencies make information available to the public in an accessible format, that there's a high-level government official accountable for that, and that there's also a forum for two-way communication. So ideally, individuals that might be using the resource can communicate with folks that have created the content, say, I don't really think that this is clear. It's not accessible. I don't understand. And somebody will get back to them about it. So there is some really excellent plain language change, I would say, at the system level.

(Slide 21) So looking at an international scale. I did want to share this resource with you. PLAIN [Plain Language Association International](http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/). PLAIN has just refreshed their website to make it even more user friendly. And they provide a whole series of resources. They host a conference, I think, every two or three years. And they engage organizations across sectors, so it's really nice because it's not just specific to health care. It goes as far as legal organizations, engineering organizations. We can really learn from each other, I think, as well when we think outside the box.

So PLAIN also has a number of resources on their website. But what I like about it is that it includes a list of organizations under the membership tab that if you are partnering on a national level or you're looking for resources or you're translating any of your content into other languages, there are really fantastic opportunities to partner or benefit from different types of resources. And the website link is included there in the bottom right-hand corner.

(Slide 22) Let's dive into a couple of plain language tools. So as I said, I will share a checklist resource with you that gets into some of these pieces at the end of the session. And today we'll really be focusing on word choice and thinking about things like grammar and paragraph length and some really concrete tips that you can do to change how you're conveying your message. But first, I'm going to get up on my soapbox for one second. I won't be touching too much on design or strategy-specific resources. But I do have a lot of plain language resources for specific knowledge translation products. So if you're interested in lay summaries, if you're interested in writing for the web, et cetera, you're very welcome to contact me. My email address is at the end of the presentation.

And then to get up on my soapbox, I'm a really, really strong advocate for the use of design and formatting. And I know that we wouldn't necessarily think of this as being a strictly plain language piece. Or we wouldn't lump it in with the definition of plain language. But design, graphics, visuals all have a huge, huge impact on how people interact with information. There's actually market research to show that people get really, really uncomfortable, comes right out of the marketing and communications literature that people get really uncomfortable when there isn't enough white space, for example.

(Slide 23-24) And so I just thought I would throw in an example. This slide I showed you earlier on, it's a pretty clean slide. I've tried to align the top of the picture with the top of the text. There's a little bit of white space in terms of the background. And then there's this one. I've used about four different fonts. I haven't used our brand colors. The picture is grainy. Everything is kind of jammed up against one another. And there's no alignment.

And if you look at it, I mean, this is, again, a little bit extreme. So you probably could articulate why it makes you uncomfortable. But design should almost fade into the background. It should be something that you don't have to think about. And if you can leverage expertise within your organization, or there are even blogs for "nondesigners," quote, unquote, online, fantastic resources. Please connect with me if you're interested. It's one of my passions. And I won't belabor the point, but I think it's really important that we think about how people interact with the documents that we might be creating.

(Slide 25) So another really fantastic example of a resource that might be of use to you is [Visuwords](http://www.visuwords.com/). And again, I've included the link. This is a really nice thesaurus. And I'm going to say it's a thesaurus plus because it even goes beyond the use of just similar words. So you'll notice, if you can read the legend down the left-hand side, that it actually includes things like, is a word for, yes. So that's our thesaurus. But pertains to, is an attribute of, causes.

And I like this one because you can put in health- and mental health-related words, and it will actually spit out a very visual and interactive representation that you can then kind of think about and find words or think about other ways of rephrasing a sentence, for example. I actually typed in mental health here, and this is just a screenshot of the website. So do check that out if you're struggling to find different words to use and to simplify your content.

(Slide 26) Some really concrete tips. There are a number of tips on the plain language checklist that I'll share with you. These are the top four when it actually comes to word choice. I love this quote by Mark Twain. "I never write 'metropolis' for seven cents because I can get the same price for 'city.'" And I think this speaks to the point that Tonya made earlier about using everyday words. So using something that's a little bit more conversational.

How would you actually speak to your friend when you're on transit? How would you talk to your child? How would you explain what you do in your job to your grandmother, for example?

So just a couple of examples. And we do this all the time. We beef things up and we get really verbose. So using simple words. Due to the fact = Because. In the event of = If. Have the capability to = Can. So being as simple as possible and not feeling like you're dumbing things down. That's absolutely not what you're doing. You're making it more accessible.

(Slide 27) So just an example here. I threw in a short paragraph, and I've modified it based on that tip. So being a teenager can be stressful. Managing school, friends, family, and hobbies-- oh, sorry, hobbies and everything else. Now imagine being a teen with a chronic disease. You also need to manage medical appointments, medications, exercise, and therapies, all while you're not feeling 100%.

This actually came straight out of a draft for a script that someone was creating, a video script. So it was going to be a very short video. So just a couple of things that I've changed here or even words like "managing" can throw people off. They can be ambiguous. We might not think that, but they can. And changing it even if it needs to be a little bit longer is OK.

So you have a lot to think about like duh, duh, duh, duh, duh. Now imagine being a teenager. And so I changed it back to "teenager" even though they used "teen" earlier. One thing that I would always advocate for is consistency. If you're going to choose a word, for example, if you're talking about participants in a consent form. Say you're running an education program or some sort of conference, and you're going to be recruiting people. We can talk about attendees, we can talk about participants, we can talk about respondents in the actual paper once we've completed the work. Choose one word and be consistent throughout.

And then here I've also spelled out the word, or add an additional word related to chronic. So using "lifelong." And there's really nothing wrong with teaching people something. If people need to be familiar with the word "chronic," it's absolutely OK to use it. But making sure that people understand it, sometimes you have to add it in a full sentence to explain a word in a previous sentence, and that's absolutely fine. You're not going to do that 25 times throughout the product or whatever it is you're creating, but there's nothing wrong with people learning something new.

And then just taking out some words at the end there. And I've also tightened things up a little bit. So you'd also have to think about doctor's appointments, medications, and therapy. So instead of using medical appointments, using doctor's appointments. That's more likely what you would say in conversation.

(Slide 28) Second one, using base verbs. This is another one, and I catch myself doing this all the time. So instead of using two verbs, using only one. So example here, give a description of would be describe. So that's the base verb. Provide assistance with. Assist. And to be more conversational yet, using help. Complete the construction of. Construct or build. So again, thinking about what your verb actually is, and then is it the most conversational form that you can be using.

(Slide 29) Just an example here. Your health care providers can help you learn how to monitor your anxiety. So being more specific. Your social worker will teach you how to track your anxiety level. So instead of using both help and learn, we've switched it to teach. OK? And instead of using monitor, I've chosen to use the word "track."

Better yet, you will learn how to track your anxiety level. So speaking directly to the user instead of using second or third person, depending on the situation, you will learn how to track your anxiety level. So instead of the teaching piece and I'm being talked to, it's the fact that I myself am actually going to learn how to do it.

(Slide 30) The use of pronouns can also be really, really important. And this is something that we tend to shy away from or we don't explain ourselves well enough if we do use pronouns. So just a couple of tips. Pronouns replace nouns. And they can certainly engage the reader. So if you're speaking directly to the reader, this can be a really fantastic opportunity to engage them. It can also help you be very clear about what you want from them.

So if you're asking them to do something, you're asking them to change their behavior, you want them to start taking a medication, you want them to go to a particular website, you're telling them to do it. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with being directive. And just my point at the end there about being sure to really define who or what your pronouns are referring to. We don't want to add any ambiguity by using them.

(Slide 31-32) So this I pulled right out of consent form. Compensation will be provided upon completion of the questionnaire. We're missing a lot of information here. Who is the compensation going to be provided to, by whom, and what kind of compensation? So this is a very unclear sentence. So instead, we could use, when you finish the survey, the research coordinator will give you $10. Much clearer. Technically it's more words. Plain language doesn't always have to be shorter. But it is much shorter, your words much simpler.

(Slide 33) And then the fourth tip is using active voice. And this one, I think, we're really probably the worst at this when it comes to academic publication and academic posters. The bricks were laid by the construction workers. So we have our verb and we have the subject. And ideally, all we want is for the subject to come before the verb. Construction workers laid the bricks. And using active voice actually nine times out of 10 really tightens the sentence up and keeps things much shorter.

(Slide 34) So one thing that I did want to share with you as another resource. It's a readability calculator. Usually when I ask people about a definition of knowledge translation, I get some sort of response that talks about grade level calculation. And I think that is probably because a lot of organizations do use some sort of standard. They say at grade three level or at grade five level or at grade eight level.

So I just wanted to share with you a really quick consensus calculator. This is not the most beautiful website. However, it can be a really fantastic resource. So the content of the slide that I just had up is actually from a worksheet. It's actually from a grade six worksheet. And when you paste your content here, you say yes, I'm human. And then you click Check the Readability. And what I like about this calculator. I'm not a fan of readability calculators because they're all based on algorithms. But what I like about this one is that it does spit out seven or eight different scores.

So just be cognizant if you are going to use a readability calculator that you want to make sure you're careful about, is it a reading ease score, in which case you would want a higher number. Or is it a grade level calculator like this one, where you would want a lower number. And what I like about this particular resource is that you can actually hover over these little icons. It gives you the mathematical calculation that it's using. It tells you what it was developed for, or what types of agencies and organizations use it.

So for example, here US Department of Defense uses a reading ease test as a standard test of readability for its documents and forms. So this may or may not be an appropriate fit as a readability or reading ease score for the documents that you're creating. And then it actually shows you the ranges that you could potentially have it spit out for you and what those mean. OK? So I just wanted to share that resource. And go back to the slideshow. So this is content that is actually at a grade six reading level.

(Slide 35) One thing that I think can be a really fantastic resource when you are creating plain language content is examples. And so I've included three or four different websites that have really fantastic content, whether it's created for different audiences or uses plain language. [This one I like](http://rheuminfo.com/) because the content is broken out as being some for patients, some for physicians. And much of the content when you dig a little bit deeper is video based. And even the videos are in plain language.

(Slide 36) [The Make Your Day Harder](http://www.makeyourdayharder.com/) campaign. Dr. Mike Evans is at Saint Michael's Hospital, and he's a real innovator when it comes to communicating to the public and to patient populations. And this resource is just so accessible even in terms of the design of the website. The videos are in plain language. They're short. They're animation based. And the tone of the content on the website is very conversational.

(Slide 37) Another one here is the [Inuit Health Matters](http://inuithealthmatters.aboutkidshealth.ca/) resource. And this actually comes out of a department here at SickKids. What I like about this one is that it's very clear that stakeholders have been engaged. And this resource is for expectant parents in Inuit communities. You can see that it's available in a number of languages. And it was actually created with the input of elders from the community. So it's highly visual, and much of the content when you do dig a little bit deeper into the site is based on storytelling, a storytelling approach.

And I think that it probably would have looked so different and been much more text heavy and probably not as accessible, not as visual if those individuals hadn't been involved. So products can look very, very different when you have stakeholders involved and you do user testing, which I would always, always, always advocate for.

(Slide 38) And just a final one. The [Anxiety BC](http://www.anxietybc.com/) website. This one is really easy for people to interact with. There is youth content on here as well, and it is broken out by, as you can see under the quick links, youth, educators, there's a couple of different categories of audience types. And again, there are lots of interactive and video-based resources.

(Slide 39) I wanted to share a couple of other resources that I thought might be useful for you. There are some lay summary samples on the ResearchImpact website. This is something that's really fantastic if you're wanting to summarize or convey messages that are coming out of academic publications, for example, into a much more concise resource. I've included a lay summary toolkit and also at the source that's specific for health care communications. And it quite literally is a list of terms that we often use, very jargony, and what you might use instead. And then a really fantastic resource when you're creating information for patients and families, whether in a research setting or otherwise, through Hamilton Health Sciences.

(Slide 40) This is the Plain Language Writing Checklist, and it is available in PDF format on the website. The first page of the actual document is a simplified checklist. And you can see that a couple of the pieces we've just spoken about are listed under word choice. So using familiar words, using active voice.

(Slide 41) And if you're not sure what all of these mean or if you need a little bit of a refresher, the second and third page of the resource actually include a bullet point under each item that gives a description and/or an example. So this can be used either for writing your own original content or for reviewing content.

(Slide 42) So these are my key messages for today. Just kidding! Try to keep it a little bit more plain language.

(Slide 43-45) Plain language communication is audience specific. It's a combination of appropriate word use, design, and the strategy that you choose to use. And there are a variety of resources available to you. So whether it's writing and editing, strategy-specific tools. And please feel free to reach out to me anytime if you're interested in those types of resources. And then leveraging the expertise that are available to you.

So whether it's related to health literacy, plain language, graphic design. And they don't even have to be formal expertise. As I said, engaging users, sharing your significant other with your mom, asking people to go through and pose the questions to you and pull out those ambiguities and those things that you might not see because you're so close to the work.

And practice, practice, practice. I think that my experience with plain language, a lot of it has come through practice and opportunities to actually go through documents, work with stakeholders, and work with authors. So I would advocate, even though it takes time, to practice, practice, practice.

So I'll leave it there. And I just wanted to ask the group if there are any questions. I'm happy to hear from you if you think of something after the session as well.

JOANN STARKS: Thank you very much, Kelly, for a great presentation. I could say a very interesting and informative presentation, but I wanted to use plain language. So let's see if we have any questions now from our audience. See if anyone will type a question in the chat box over there.

We have one here from Ann Outlaw. We struggle with using too many acronyms. How can you get away from using acronyms on a website when you talk about organizations that are also acronym heavy?

KELLY WARMINGTON: Yeah, that's a really good question, Ann. I think there are best practices around web development. So certainly as we would in any resource, you would want to make sure that you use the acronym, spell it out the first time you use it. In terms of best practices on a website, you want to make sure that on any brand-new page or after any new click that people would use the acronym-- that the acronym would be spelled out again. And I know that sounds like you might be putting in the really long name of the organization a number of times, but it is really important because you have to recognize as well that people might come to a deeper link on your web page directly from a search engine. Not everybody is coming to the home page.

JOANN STARKS: OK, thank you very much.

KIMBERLY: Kelly, I have a question for you on the checklist. I'm wondering if you could take a moment to describe the SMIT and the BLAM that I think are actually critical aspects.

KELLY WARMINGTON: Absolutely, Kimberly, thank you. So if I just go back to the slide here, the SMIT and the BLAM. So I would say that 100% of the time you have to have a SMIT. And that's your Single Most Important Thing. If your user took nothing else away from the document or the website or the resource that you're creating, think about what that would be. You may or may not have a Bottom Line Actionable Message, and that's your BLAM.

And the Bottom Line Actionable Message-- if your goal is something like behavior change, practice change, et cetera, then you definitely need a BLAM. You want people to take some sort of action based on the information you're giving them. If your goal is more around awareness raising or knowledge sharing, then you may not have that actionable message. Did that help?

KIMBERLY: Yes, thank you.

KELLY WARMINGTON: You're very welcome. Are there any other questions?

JOANN STARKS: I have a question for you, Kelly. If your audience is non-English speakers or maybe it would be nonnative English speakers, how would this change what you would do using plain language?

KELLY WARMINGTON: Yeah. So one thing when it comes to plain language and different languages, plain language in one language cannot be translated into plain language in another. So just doing a translation and a back translation would not mean that the content that you've created in another language is in fact in plain language. However, and I think, Joann, that you're probably referring to resources that are still in English or in a certain set of languages and people are using those resources when that is not their first language. What I would strongly recommend would be the use of visuals.

However, I think oftentimes when we use things like icons, we want to go right to the icon and use the picture or the icon as a standalone. I would always, always, always, especially in English as a second language populations, advocate for the use of an image as well as supporting text. Images and icons, the research shows that they can be very, very ambiguous depending on cultural background, religious background, ethnicity. And so I would always have text to support it. And I would try to keep the reading level very low.

JOANN STARKS: Great. Thanks so much. We have a question from Kathleen. I sometimes feel the tension between the demands of what language is expected and wanted in academic environments versus other settings. I'm wondering if you have experience with this, first of all, and if you have a strategy about how to bridge this gap.

KELLY WARMINGTON: Thanks, Kathleen. That's a really good question as well. And it's something that always comes up in academic settings. I think people either feel like their content is being, quote, unquote, "dumbed down" or that the message they're conveying is not getting across or people won't read it or take it seriously if it's not in really heavy academic language. And I think, honestly I think this is an area where we need a bit of a culture shift. It's not something that's easy to do.

One thing that I suggest is really engaging with the stakeholders and the people that you are working with and actually having a fairly open conversation about the use of plain language. It's something that is important. It's good to have these conversations. And I've definitely experienced it myself.

I get a lot of pushback when I do plain language review. I'm glad people come to me for the review, but then I get the pushback about, no, no, no, we still need to use that really long word or whatnot. And what I would say is it always has to come down to the user. So does that really complex word or that really convoluted framing need to be there for the audience to get the most out of it? If you're looking for a policy decision, if you are sharing your information with other researchers, maybe it does in fact need to be in there, and that's absolutely fine. But otherwise I would have the conversation with them.

JOANN STARKS: Great. Thank you very much. I have an-- and I know you've already touched on this, but how can you guard against or be sure that you are not dumbing down the content of what you want to share? Like, you get lost in simplifying the language and then realize that you're actually leaving out some of the critical parts. Is there a good strategy to make sure you're not doing that?

KELLY WARMINGTON: Right. So I think that's, again, an opportunity where you have to collaborate. So I think one thing that's really, really fabulous about user testing is you can get somebody to read something and actually share back with you what they go out of it. And I mean, dumbing down. I hate that term as such. But it's OK to simplify things sometimes. We're really close to our work, and we know 100% of what we found or what we're doing. And certain audience groups sometimes maybe only need 1% of that. Maybe they only need 5% of that. And so talking to the user and getting a sense of what they're actually taking away is probably your best indicator because, if they're taking away something completely different than what you intended, or they're not taking anything away at all, or they're taking away 2% of what you actually intended, that's a really strong message to you.

JOANN STARKS: Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

KELLY WARMINGTON: You're welcome.

JOANN STARKS: Let's see. We're getting pretty close to the top of the hour here. Wondering if there's any more questions. We might be able to take one more before we end here. Marsha, any more verbal questions on your end?

MARSHA ELLISON: No, I think we can close. Thank you, Joann.

JOANN STARKS: (Slide 46) OK, well, thank you very much. We hope that all the listeners today have enjoyed the webcast. And please do feel free to follow up with any questions by sending [email to Kelly](mailto:kelly.warmington@sickkids.ca) or to [ktdrr@air.org](mailto:ktdrr@air.org). And Kelly, would you mind moving up a couple slides?

KELLY WARMINGTON: Absolutely.

JOANN STARKS: There we go. Thanks very much. We would appreciate your input about today's webcast by completing a brief [online evaluation](http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/2629404/EvaluationU5). The link is here at the end of the PowerPoint file. And everyone who registered for the webcast will receive an email with a link to this [evaluation form](http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/2629404/EvaluationU5). So once again, I want to thank Kelly Warmington for your presentation today and Marsha Ellison and the Transitions RTC team as well as Ann Outlaw and our colleagues at AIR for their support. I got quite a few acronyms right here in this last couple of sentences.

(Slide 47) We also appreciate the support from NIDILRR to carry out these webcasts and other activities. And on this final note, we'll conclude today's webcast. Look forward to your participation in our next event. Thank you, and good afternoon. And if you could please stay on the line while Kelly gives instructions for the on-site activity, that can be completed at your convenience. So Kelly, you want to take it back?

KELLY WARMINGTON: (Slide 48-53) Thanks very much, Joann. I'll just show these last couple of slides. If you would like to take part in the activity, please consider having these conversations and working through this with your teams. The instructions are here for you. And it's called Let's Make It Better. And I've actually included one slide of statistics. I suggest working in a small team and actually using plain language and the writing checklists to go through and rework the slide and really be creative about it. It's simple content, but there are a lot of numbers. There's a lot of information here.

And there are also supporting documents if you do opt to go ahead and facilitate this with your group. So there's a debrief framework that you can use to facilitate a discussion after the activity. And there are also some discussion points that I've included that I normally use myself as well as an additional slide that you might just use for yourself that goes through the discussion points in more detail. So thank you all very much for your participation and your attention today. It's been an absolute delight. And I do look forward to hearing from some of you in the future, OK? Thanks so much. And thank you, Joann.