I'm in Love with My Thesaurus

In a recent Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, Calvin said to Hobbes: I used to hate writing assignments, but now I enjoy them. I realized that the purpose of writing is to inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning and inhibit clarity. With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog! Want to see my new book report? "The Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives in Dick and Jane: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes." Academia, here I come![1]
Not long ago, I picked up a friend from the dentist' s office. She had just had the excruciating displeasure of undergoing dental surgery to have her wisdom teeth removed. Needless to say, she was not exactly clear-headed. As I was driving her home, she started to read the list of instructions that the nurse had given her: "...if frank bleeding is present fold provided gauze into a firm wad and place directly over the operative site and maintain steady pressure for 20 minutes or longer. Do not expectorate vigorously or chew the gauze." Naturally, I ignored her because I thought she was either babbling or hallucinating.

"Swelling is to be expected in certain cases often reaching its maximum in about 48 hours, then disappearing spontaneously in a further two to three days...discolouration occasionally occurs and disappears spontaneously in approximately a week." By this point, she had my undivided attention. How does something "disappear spontaneously" in two or three days? I could go on, with other examples of literary genius, but I think I should get to the point - reading should not be a chore. You should not have to reread a sentence to understand its meaning.

Unfortunately, text such as those instructions for victims of dental surgery appears far too often. Is such convoluted jargon really necessary?

Have you ever avoided reading an article or a document because it appears too technical, wordy or complex? It is easy for professionals (researchers included) to get caught up in their own jargon because they are used to writing for those in their own profession. However, by writing for "co-professionals" only, you automatically limit your reading audience.

You should always ask yourself who your readers are going to be before you begin to write. For example, if you were writing an article for FORUM, you would keep in mind that FORUM is not only for other researchers. In fact, FORUM was originally intended for the staff and management of the Correctional Service of Canada. However, its readership has expanded to include practitioners who work in the correctional field, the public, the media, individuals in the judiciary and political offices, academics and researchers. Therefore, plain language is critical.

Writing in plain language involves expressing yourself the way you speak. When you talk to someone, you make an effort to be understood.

So when you write, imagine that the reader is asking you what you mean. Always put yourself in the reader's place. If you were the reader, what is the most important thing about the research that you would like to know?

Writing in plain language means avoiding technical words or terms whenever possible. Of course, you

are not always going to be able to, or want to, avoid using a technical term. So, when you do use a complex term, explain it in the text. For example, the term "false negative" is understood by researchers, but not by most lay people. You can use a complex term, just make sure you explain it. As well, when you include examples to illustrate your point, you help the reader understand how the idea might apply in real life.

Writing in plain language means using simple, familiar words. Emily Carr once said, "Get to the point as early as you can; never use a big word if a little one will do."[2] This may mean choosing a two-syllable word over a three-syllable one, or several clear words instead of one complicated word. For example, why use "accomplish" when "do" will do? Use "find out" instead of "ascertain," or 'plan" rather than "strategize," and definitely use "use" instead of utilize.

Writing in plain language may mean cutting out unnecessary words or replacing a group of words with one word to make your writing clearer. Instead of using something wordy like "notwithstanding the fact," use "although"; "subsequent to" can be replaced by "after"; and "it is probable that" in plain language is "probably."

Acronyms should be used carefully (ASBUC). Put the acronym in parentheses the first time you use the full term. Then you can use just the acronym in the rest of the text. And remember, when in doubt, spell it out!

Be careful using figures or tables to explain information. When using graphics, you must first be sure that the images are saying something meaningful, and second, you must make sure that they mean the same thing to your reader as they do to you.

Unclear, complicated writing is not only a burden to read, it can also lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the information presented. This, in turn, can lead to a nightmare for the writer. Confucius once said, "If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant then what ought to be done remains undone.;"[3]

Editors' note: In this piece, we have relied extensively on a publication called *Plain Language Clear and Simple* which was produced by Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada and published by the Department of Supply and Services in 1991. While the examples are our own, the words of wisdom are not.

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[1]*The Calvin and Hobbes example comes from the* Ottawa Citizen*, 11 February 1993, p. E5.*
[2]*Emily Carr, quoted in Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada,* Plain Language Clear and Simple *(Ottawa: Department of Supply and Services, 1991), p. 27.*
[3]*Confucius as quoted in Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada,* Plain Language Clear and Simple*, p. 29.*