

Step 7: Negotiate throughout the writing process

As you create plain language documents or web pages with your team, you will be sharing your drafts with subject-matter experts in your organization for accuracy. In some cases, you will be running it by an attorney to make sure your plain language “translation” is legally sound.

This is where many plain language efforts run into trouble. Because you want to make absolutely sure your rewrites are correct and legal, you may find yourself accepting without question the language changes the attorney or expert makes to your draft. They may argue that your phrasing needs to match the case law or that appeal rights must always be at the top of the document. They may say that to reduce the organization’s liability, you must include the text of an entire code in the body of the letter. They may tell you that the simple word you substituted for the arcane word is inaccurate.

All of this may be perfectly true. However, it may also be true that the changes turn your draft into a confusing mess.

This is when it’s important to negotiate. If you have a mandate to create clearer documents for your customers, then you have equal status around the team’s table as the plain language expert. Consider yourself an advocate for the general public: the owner of the corner grocery store, the guardian of the foster child, the landscaper setting up a new business. If you have done your job, you know who these customers are and what tends to confuse them. They want you to speak up for them.

Revising into plain language is process of continual negotiation. If an attorney e-mails you a complex rewrite, start asking questions:

- For example, you may e-mail back: “Thanks for your comments. I notice in the third paragraph, you changed the phrase *fix the hazard* back to *abate the hazard*. Is the word **fix** inaccurate? If so, would the phrase **correct the hazard** be an alternative? I’m concerned that many employers won’t be familiar with the word **abate**.”
- Sometimes a phone call works better.

In any case, it’s important to talk it through. Sometimes the attorney or expert isn’t aware that you have a specific reason for selecting a word. **In almost all cases, I’ve found that attorneys are supportive if they understand what your mission is.**

When you are starting out, it may feel uncomfortable to challenge professionals who are so much more familiar with the field you are writing about. However, you, as a plain language writer, have expertise as well: you know how outside customers perceive the organization – and what makes sense to them. You deserve equal status at the table.

Resources

For working with health care experts:

A good introduction to writing plainly about health care issues: [Plain Language: A promising strategy for clearly communicating health information and improving health literacy](#), Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services

A helpful guide to making privacy notices clear to patients, which will inspire any type of health care writing: [Plain Language Principles and Thesaurus for Making HIPAA Privacy Notices More Readable](#), Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

Working with attorneys:

- The [plainlanguage.gov site](#) has a great listing of books and links that will show you how many in the legal profession are trying to kick the legalese habit.