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TIPS ON HOW TO INTERACT WITH LEGAL PROFESSIONALS IN YOUR PLAIN LANGUAGE PROJECTS[1]

At first, plain language principles are counter-intuitive for legal professionals (we had to plead guilty to needless over-complication years ago!). So, with humour and a little self-deprecation, here are some tips to bring plain language and legal expertise closer together.

To Clearly and Efficiently…	Try to…	So that Legal Professionals…
	Make it clear that the target audience is at the very center of the communication. It's like the sun in our solar system. Everything gravitates around it.	Don't write for themselves, thinking they are at the center of the "communication solar system". In order to thrive, communication needs sunlight. A lot of it, all the time!
Adapt the document to the target audience	Demonstrate how the target audience's reality, interests and needs go far beyond the legal implications of the situation.	See beyond the "legal matrix" and glimpse back into the "real world" where the target audience lives (which is also where legal professionals lived before law school!).
	Emphasize the importance of considering other aspects of the situation, such as the emotional, psychological and social implications.	Heat up their usual "cold" and logical approach and realize that these other aspects can greatly influence how the audience receives the message.
Define the communication goals	Highlight the different goals a document can have (inform, explain, make aware of, create interest, educate, prevent, persuade, encourage to, etc.) and demonstrate how the goal can impact the entire communication.	See beyond simply providing an accurate and complete answer to the legal question posed. (The usual goal of a legal professional).
	Differentiate the goals of the target audience regarding the subject matter, the goals of the document itself and the goals of the person or the organization that communicates the information.	Can have a global view and understanding of the communication context.

[1]This document was inspired by:
Working with lawyers on your projects, Cheryl Stephens (Clarity Journal 66, 2011, p. 11)
Joseph Kimble—No, the law does not (normally) require legalese, Iva Cheung (Editing Goes Global, 2015)

To Clearly and Efficiently…	Try to…	So that Legal Professionals…
	Explain that the document must be legally valid, but not necessarily legally exhaustive.	Can zoom out a little and adjust the level of detail to suit the target audience and the communication goals.
Define the key information	Explain how giving too much information can dilute the message and make the document harder to understand and, consequently, less useful.	Refrain from adding unessential information (exceptions, questionable details, doubtful eventualities, related but irrelevant legal concepts, etc.).
	Distinguish legal advice (i.e. specific information for a specific situation) from legal information (more general information that applies to many different situations).	Feel more comfortable providing general information without compromising legal accuracy or worrying about risking professional liability.
	Explain why the information should be presented starting with the most important and ending with the least important. Refer to the inverted pyramid of journalism ▽	Accept to deviate from their usual deductive structure, which starts with generic and introductory information and finishes with the information we're all waiting for!
Structure the information	Summarise the most important information at the beginning of the document. Refer to the 5W+2H: who, what, when, where, why, how and how much.	Will have a practical method to share their knowledge and expertise simply and concisely.
	Make sure the structure is logical for the target audience: simple and straightforward. The reader must be taken by the hand all along and should never feel like asking "Why am I reading this?".	Do not give in to their desire to reference back to different sections of the document, add definitions that refer to other definitions, force the reader to fill in the gaps between abstract notions, etc.

To Clearly and Efficiently…	Try to…	So that Legal Professionals…
	Remind that if the target audience is not legal professionals, you cannot communicate with them as if they were.	Can be consistent when they communicate. You can score points here, as consistency is an important value for lawyers.
Draft the document using principles of clear communication	Find statistics on the literacy skills of the target audience and explain the impact on the writing.	Don't believe that the target audience's level of literacy is similar to that of legal professionals and their entourage.
(simple, natural, clear, concise, concrete and direct language)	Give examples of "before and after" plain language documents that were approved by other legal professionals or departments.	Can witness that being simple and legally accurate are compatible, and that a legalistic style is not the only way to talk about the law. Lawyers are also generally competitive by nature, so it can only help to challenge them whit what their peers have accomplished!
Design the document so it is easy to read	Remind that easy to read also means faster and more enjoyable to read.	Do not write as if people were eager to read legal documents and interested in spending their week-end decoding their messages.
	Point out that the reader gets a first impression of the document in a matter of seconds.	Understand that being appealing is legitimate if you want to get your message across. Reading heavy and rigid material is not a burden everyone signed up for!

Ok. Now that the legal professionals on your projects are aware of the plain language basics, you still must deal with their personalities. And as some traits are common among legal professionals, here are some tips on how to deal with them. With affection, of course!

Legal professionals on your projects may be…	Because…	And so you may…
Ultimately convinced they are right (and convincing about it!)	They are trained to argue and be right, even when they could be wrong 😲 That is an essential trait to defend clients, even more so in precarious legal positions. They are used to working in an adversarial environment.	Be confident and believe in your own expertise. If things get a little tense, don't battle with them on their own terms. Just pick another subject and come back later. If needed, bring an intermediary to the table. A legal professional with a plain language background can help deal with legal issues. "Takes one to know one".
Skeptical about what you say	Doubt makes them question everything, which somehow brings them to certainty. Right? If you can't prove something or back it up, it's not worth much! Facts must be proven by reliable sources. This goes for plain language too.	Prepare your arguments and be ready to prove your point. Preparation is success. If you anticipate that a passage will be questioned, explain your reasoning beforehand. Show that you can understand nuances and possible problems, and suggest different solutions. If they say "No, we cannot write that", insist on them providing their reasons and the REAL WORLD consequences of writing it. You must understand the issue to find a better way to express your idea. Simply giving up shouldn't be an option.

Legal professionals on your projects may be…	Because…	And so you may…
Afraid of change	Change brings instability and their role is often to protect an organisation from any risk. That is what they are paid for and under a lot of pressure to do.	Show that the benefits of using plain language far outweigh the effort required and the real risks involved in simplification.
	Their view may be: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"	Reassure them. Plain(er) language is not that hard to achieve. With good intention and the help of professionals, they can go a long way!
		Show them other plan language projects that were successful.
Pessimistic	To be pessimistic is to be cautious. Never feeling secure forces you to be constantly vigilant.	Sorry, there is really nothing you can do…
		(perhaps don't take that behavior personally)
Comforted by structure and predictability	They don't like surprises as their job is often to make sure there are no… surprises.	Communicate with the legal department as early as possible so they know they will be consulted during the project.
	Missing a legal deadline or not anticipating something important is probably their worst fear as professionals – and the worst thing that can happen for their careers.	Plan well and set clear objectives.
		Keep them informed of your progress and show samples along the way.
		Give them time to think things through. Avoid rushing them, as the response may be negative.

Legal professionals on your projects may be…	Because…	And so you may…
Logical and pragmatic (a.k.a. "cold")	The law by its very nature leaves little room for emotions. They are rarely of use to lawyers. So, it is not their reflex to go there. Having too much emotions would sometimes make their work unbearable.	Try to get them out of their usual professional mindset and bring those colours back. Lawyers may sometimes seem like robots, but we're really not!
Profoundly attached to details and precision	They are trained to analyse and dissect situations into legal categories. Every piece of the whole must be identified and classified as a legal notion. This is necessary to build strong cases and legal arguments. When they talk about something, they don't talk about something else. They choose their words carefully and deal with issues one at a time to avoid mixing things up.	Consider lawyers to be rigorous, not paranoid. They are legally very cautious and you can use it to your advantage. Just make sure everyone understands their role in the project. Be careful with the words you use and make sure to conclude an issue before dealing with the next. They need certainty before moving on.
Quite conservative and classic in their writing.	They are trained to use a certain jargon in a many-centuries-old-style. Throughout their career, they are influenced by jurisprudence, legal doctrine, colleagues and even clients to write like that. Legal terminology gives an impression of stability and security and is easier to use for a jurist.	Joke about the fact that courts would not have to spend so much time interpreting legal terms if they were clearer! (But it's no joke!) (Very) respectfully remind them that their primary role is to make sure the content is valid, not to comment on the writing style. And stay open-minded, they usually have strong writing skills and can help a lot!