Plain Talk Writing Tip #4

Testing Your Document Shows if You've Hit Your Mark

Testing your document is a wonderful way to determine whether or not you've hit the mark with your Plain Talk efforts.

There are a number of ways you can test your document – everything from a formal lab test with recruited reviewers and video taping to simply asking a coworker who is unfamiliar with the information to read it.

Why we test
Whenever we work with a set of information day in and day out, we become blind to all the jargon in it. We understand things people on the outside don't. We arrive at conclusions without having clearly outlined the steps we used to get there.

Who should review a document
It is best to test a document with someone who is part of, or closely matches, your intended audience. If you have customers come in to your office, ask them if they'd be willing to spend a few minutes helping you improve a document. If you work with customers via email, perhaps you could send them a draft of a document and ask them to talk through it with you over the phone.

Any testing is better than none. If you are unable to get your document in front of a user, at least have a coworker who is unfamiliar with the information read through it and tell you if it made sense to them. The more you test, the better picture you will get of how easy it is for your readers to use your information.

One way to test
Once you've identified someone to test your document, ask them to read your document aloud. As they read through it, ask them to tell you any places that are confusing, incomplete, ambiguous or otherwise difficult to follow. Also, ask them to point out parts that flowed smoothly and were easy to understand.

Once the test is completed, you'll have a better understanding of what parts of your document worked and which parts need to be improved.

The state Plain Talk web site has a section on testing your document, with links to resources that clearly explain testing how-to's. For a quick, easy description of user testing, I found The User Edit Method to be helpful. Scroll down to read about the think aloud procedures and the individual mark-up approach.

Watch for another Plain Talk tip next month. And work on those contest entries.

Happy Plain Talking!