Tech Speak and Librarian-ese: Justifiable Jargon, or Junk?

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So the sub-title of my talk is: *justifiable jargon, or junk?*

- Spoiler alert! It’s not the first item on the list
- Techspeak and librarian-ese are barriers to communicating with our patrons in their search for information online. They are, in fact, junk that should be jettisoned as soon as possible
- The library’s online presence should be engaging and empowering, not confusing, overwhelming, or anxiety-inducing
- The most recent Project Information Literacy report shows that, for college freshmen, the research process alone is confusing, overwhelming, and anxiety inducing.
- They don’t know how to approach college assignments, or where to get the information from
- Yet they’re in college, and on some level feel like they should know how to do this process
- The first year, especially, they’re sort of adrift
Today: discuss two areas where technology and language intersect: website, chat reference

- Website is for the DIY patron. The patron who doesn’t want to interact with a person, and needs information now (See: Farkas)
- Chat reference is for the interactive patron. Most chat patrons at the university level ask for advice on research strategies and skills. There are also a number of researchers who use chat as a last-resort measure to keep them going during a difficult project
- Simply being aware of language cues (online, in person, on chat) will allow you to reassure the patron on their terms that they are competent and have the skills necessary for library research
- Good language choices on our part boosts morale and confidence for patrons no matter what tech they choose to use
“We are currently experiencing problems the Hyper-V Cluster which houses many significant virtual servers hosting services such as Storage, Printing, Web, Vending Machines, etc. The issue appears to be related to a NIC in the host server and is unrelated to the issue experienced earlier in the month. Our Systems Administrators are working on this problem.”

Email from Tech Support: “Intermittent issues with our Virtual Server Environment”

Techspeak is defined as “online lingo” (urbandictionary.com), “technical jargon” (wordnik.com)
This is an example from one real IT email
Whenever I read that email, I think of something that involves spaceships and aliens.

But we can really have techspeak in any field, including librarianship, and it’s just as confusing to outsiders as Hyper-V Clusters and NICs in the host servers is to me.

I call techspeak, or jargon, in the library “librarian-ese”
Librarian-ese: Anything you were taught in library school. Anything that’s on this list. Anything that’s on a site called “library terminology”

- That’s not to say you shouldn’t use these terms (we still do!) – but if you do, be prepared to explain them over and over, online and in person
- Example: accounting student doing a literature review
What happens when you use techspeak and librarian-ese on your website?
Visitors take 10 seconds to decide:

Does this suit my needs?


Users aren’t able to find what they need in a timely fashion
• In internet terms, “timely fashion” = **10 seconds** for a user to decide if what they need is on the page
Users are not *reading* when they come to your website, they are *skimming*

- They are looking for the word or phrases they associate with the action they need to do
- They don’t want background information, or extra information for later
- They skip over anything that doesn’t mean anything to them
- As they skim, they might find what they think might work, but at that point they have to stop and think about it first. They may or may not stop and think.

Regardless, this introduces ambiguity to their research process (See: Krug)
This ambiguity may lead to confusion and lack of confidence and/or a lack of trust, frustration, and sometimes, bailout
If you can’t easily change your online presence through design, consider another tenet of usability: plain language

• Speak to people using action words and ideas they recognize (“find books” instead of “use our online public access catalog”)
• Use people-first language (“you can” instead of “patrons may”)
• Reorganize using headers and lists to allow readers to skim more efficiently
• Simplify! Steve Krug writes: “Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what’s left.”
“Winter Preparedness Safety Tips: Timely preparation, including structural and non-structural mitigation measures to avoid the impacts of severe winter weather, can avert heavy personal, business and government expenditures. Experts agree that the following measures can be effective in dealing with the challenges of severe winter weather.”

Severe winter weather can be extremely dangerous. Consider these safety tips to protect your property and yourself.

Even the government is into this: see plainlanguage.gov for some great examples
• Winter preparedness document is an award winner – the “No-Gobbledygook Award”
• http://www.plainlanguage.gov/testexamples/indexExample.cfm?record=194
Some examples from library websites

- These examples are all taken from the old Winona State University Krueger Library website, and wireframes of the new website, which is rolling out in late May or early June.
- Feedback on the website is from a four-person student advisory group I convened earlier this semester.
- Instead of “Journals” and “Catalog,” studies have shown that researchers prefer the terms “Articles” and “Books” – because this is what they’re looking for.
Are you using, or thinking of using, a single-search portal? Branding it with the product name, like Summon, is not helpful to students. We know what Summon is, but they don’t. According to my student advisory group, branding it with a cool school-related name – in our case, WarriorSearch – is just as baffling. We thought: We’re the Winona State Warriors, they’ve got the Warrior Hub, they know the brand. But it really meant nothing to them. For them, SingleSearch was okay, but OneSearch was even better. “It’s boring, but it says what it is,” they said.
Think about what your patrons are doing on your website, and label your buttons accordingly. One student remarked, “If I’m going to the library website to do research, I’m going to click on the button that says research.”
Make sure links give an indication of what’s behind the click. We’re currently trying to figure out how to label the “Ask” button that goes to our LibAnswers site. “Ask the Library” has been roundly rejected for a number of reasons.

• “Is that going to lead to a form? I totally wouldn’t fill out a form.”
• “Would that give me the phone number to the front desk? I’d rather call and find out basic information I need, like the hours or whatever.”
• “If the information isn’t here, I probably wouldn’t go any further.”
• We will test out other options, like FAQ, Find Answers, or something else
Writing for the web. Rewritten WSU Borrowing page; took Jakob Nielsen’s and Steve Krug’s advice to write for the web

• Keep it simple!
• Short sentences, small words
• Use bullet points and clear headers
• Scrolling is now better than clicking, but keep in mind that “80% of users focus was above the fold”
  • Jakob Nielsen wrote in 2010: “People will look very far down a page if (a) the layout encourages scanning, and (b) the initially viewable information makes them believe that it will be worth their time to scroll.” -- http://www.nngroup.com/articles/scrolling-and-attention/
  • Realistically – considering the device proliferation and mixed-use habits of our students, there is no fold, so we must write with that in mind
  • This is what the page used to look like: Lots of repetition, long words, complex sentences
How long can I keep books and videos?

*For students, external borrowers, and courtesy card holders*
- 28 days for books and 7 days for videos.
- Interlibrary loan periods are determined by the lending library.

*For faculty and staff*
- One semester for books and 28 days for videos.
- Books can be recalled at any time after 28 days.
- Interlibrary loan periods are determined by the lending library.

Will you notify me when my items are due?

- We send due date notifications to the email address connected with your account. No paper notifications are mailed.
- Everyone is responsible for returning library materials by their due dates, regardless of whether a notice was received.
- You can check your due dates any time by logging onto My Account at the top right corner of the Library Catalog.

This is the interim edit, we’ll place these edits under clear headers
I’ve put the auto advance on at 10 seconds per section – see if you can skim like our users
How do I renew my items?

Krueger Library items
- Log onto My Account at the top right corner of the Library Catalog.
- Click on the items you want to renew, then on Renew Selected Items.
- There is no limit on renewals for WSU items, unless someone else has requested the item.

Interlibrary loan items
- Log onto My Account, then click ILL Requests in the right-hand column.
- Click on the items you want to renew, then on Renew Selected ILLs.
- The lending library decides whether or not to grant an interlibrary loan renewal, not Krueger Library.
- If the lending library grants the renewal, the status will change for that item to Renewal – Accepted. Otherwise, the status will change to Renewal – Denied. You are responsible for returning interlibrary loan materials by the due dates.
What happens if my item(s) are overdue?

For students, external borrowers, and courtesy card holders

- After three overdue notices, your library account will be blocked and a hold and charge will be placed on your University account.
- The charge will be either the value of the item or $75.00, whichever is greater.
- If you have library account blocks, you can’t check out anything from the library. University account holds may keep you from registering for classes on time.

You can remove library account blocks and university account holds by returning overdue items to the library and paying any charges at the WSU Warrior Hub. If you pay for something at the Warrior Hub that is later returned to the library, we will refund your money at our discretion.

Overdue reserve items may result in a blocked account at any time. Blocks are removed when you return the overdue library material. Interlibrary loan account holds and charges are determined by the lending library.
How did it go? I know, it still needs another edit.
It’s more conversational, explaining the policies in a very person-focused manner. “You should” “You can” “Hey, guess what? You won’t be able to register for classes if you don’t bring your books back”

I don’t have a WSU ID. Can I check out items from Krueger Library?
With a courtesy card, you can check out items from Krueger Library and use the public computers.

Community members, alumni, and retired WSU faculty and staff
Fill out an application and present a valid photo ID at the front desk.

Community members (ages 16-18)
Fill out an application, present a valid photo ID card that includes your birth date at the front desk, and have a parent or legal guardian present to co-sign the application form. Those under 16 are not eligible for courtesy cards.

Patrons with library accounts from other MnPALS libraries
You are not eligible for a courtesy card. Instead, use the card from your home library.

Current WSU students, faculty, and staff
You are not eligible for a courtesy card. Instead, use your WSU ID.
What happens when you use techspeaks and librarian-ese in chat?

- We get a sense of the emotional state of our students in real time over chat.
- These are often unstated, unspecified, possibly subconscious emotional states, especially for the new researcher.
- That's when it's really imperative that we pay attention to language.
- Just like in face-to-face communication, a chat that is full of jargon, or even just new information introduced too quickly and with no opportunity to clarify, leads to confusion, frustration, and anxiety.
- I did a study of chat reference transcripts a few years ago, modeled on the great work of Marie Radford, to find out more about how communication affects chat effectiveness.
- I was looking for evidence of face saving and what the librarians on the other end of the chat did to help the students save face, or establish library researching as part of their identity. I also wanted to see how if library anxiety could be inferred from the transcripts, and if so, how patrons and librarians alike dealt with it.

What is face and face saving?

- “Face” is an inherently social interaction. It is the expectation that you will act a certain way during a social encounter, and I will likewise act in a manner appropriate to the way I present myself. Face is constructed, extended, and received.
- “Loss of face,” and related feelings of shame or inferiority, occurs when the
construction of self is threatened in some manner, or expectations of one’s position are not met

- “Face saving” is reconstructing that solid sense of self, through positive interactions
- Asking for help at the library is inherently face-threatening. Needing assistance puts one at a disadvantage, and if the asker already feels shame that they don’t know something they think they should, it is extremely difficult to set that aside
Indications via chat that students are feeling a threat to their sense of face are, among other things, the 3-D’s: Deflection, Deference, and Self-Deprecation.

- In this study, I did find evidence of the 3-D’s. It wasn’t overt, but it was there.
- It came up in the longer chats as an undercurrent, and usually deference and deflection, along with occasional elements of self-deprecation were present to some degree or another throughout the chat.
- For more information, read Connaway & Radford, 2011; Radford, 2006.
• “Turning away” to keep from entering overwhelming situations: Polster & Polster, 1973, p. 89
• The patron does not or is not able to state their information need clearly at the start of the reference encounter because they fear negative emotions that may accompany a profession of ignorance or lack of knowledge
PATRON: Hi I am looking for an electronic copy of this article:
[ARTICLE TITLE]

LIBRARIAN: Hello

PATRON: [ARTICLE INFORMATION, including PubMed ID]

LIBRARIAN: Let me look in pubmed and medlineplus

LIBRARIAN: Oh, so you already looked in pubmed?

PATRON: Yes I did. We have the journal but not the article.
I am a 4th year pharmacy student so I am off-site

LIBRARIAN: Ok, let me see what I can find.

[Librarian explains how to find article via title search]

PATRON: Ok I tried it that way and I just found it. Thank you!

LIBRARIAN: Oh, good!
LIBRARIAN: Can I help with anything else?

PATRON: I am trying to look for articles about how to decrease the risk of stroke in patients who are undergoing coronary catheterization. Do you have any tips on other search terms I should try.

PATRON: Most things that are coming up are not related to my topic.

[Librarian suggests different keywords]

PATRON: I have looked a coronary catheterization and stroke and it just brings up a variety of things that are not specific to my case presentation. I will try yours thank!

PATRON: thank you!

- Deflection in the switch between the upper- and lower-case “I”: could this be a sort of psychological shift? See Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) for a wonderful study about capitalization in chat.
• Polite expressions, thanks, apologies, willingness to try advice (Radford, 2006)
• Communication of this type occurs on both sides of the chat as it’s inherent to polite interaction (see Mon & Janes, 2004, for a study re: politeness in chat reference)
This was from a patron that came back time after time to ask questions throughout their research process during the evening.
Deflection

Deference

Self-Deprecation

Harder to find in chat, but part of deference, usually found in humorous examples
PATRON: i am a distance education student and I've forgotten everything I was taught at orientation - would you mind going over how to search for an article with me again?

LIBRARIAN: Hello.

PATRON: Hi. I'm a bad student

PATRON: I don't remember how to get an article out of the database

LIBRARIAN: Heh.

PATRON: and I don't want to pay for it

PATRON: ‘to

LIBRARIAN: Is there a specific article you are looking for?

PATRON: I'm also a bad typist

PATRON: [ARTICLE INFORMATION]

PATRON: thanks for any help you can give

PATRON: and anything else that has to do with culturally determined food preferences...

Interaction ended with “Yay! It’s a miracle! You must love people like me.”
How can we use language to make sure we’re offering great service over chat?
• You’ve got to be aware when someone is deflecting, deferring, being self-deprecating, or in any other way trying to save face during the chat. This means that, no matter if they cop to having anxiety or not, they’re in an ambiguous state that is introducing some sort of question as to their sense of self
• This is where language gets really tricky: we only have words. No inflection, no body language
• We can’t “write for the web” here, but we can do a couple of things to defuse the situation
Plain language: don’t tell them to use the OPAC or jargon-ize things without then giving explicit instructions regarding where to click on the website.
• Don’t have to use chat-speak – and, in fact, you shouldn’t – but use contractions, emoticons, and mirroring
• Some interesting studies: Maness (2007), Westbrook (2007)
PATRON: okay and i actually was going to ask how i am going to do in text citations for these cites that have no author and usually no title

PATRON: i'm so sorry!

LIBRARIAN: no problem...one moment...

LIBRARIAN: ok, i'm back...sorry for the delay...lots of questions tonight :)

LIBRARIAN: so, i'm looking now to see what to do when authors and titles aren't listed

PATRON: no that's fine!

LIBRARIAN: sometimes citing websites can be tricky because of that, so you just have to provide as much as you can so hopefully whoever is reading your paper can visit the same places you did...
Plain language

Lower formality

Self-efface

Be self-effacing and self-deprecating
Tell the students you sometimes have trouble, too. Tell them they’re not alone in their questions or struggles.
Plain language
Lower formality
Self-efface
Reassure

Build rapport, be reassuring (Radford, 2006)
PATRON: Hi! I'm a masters student and I'm working on the edits for my thesis. I'm stumped/overwhelmed by some of the feedback.
Is there someone I can work with in the library today? Should I schedule an appointment or just come in? Thank you!

LIBRARIAN: Hi there

LIBRARIAN: It’s an overwhelming time of year :) Let me get you the contact information for our Education librarian

So important: “It’s an overwhelming time of the year.”
Anything else I can help with today?

Ask if they need anything else, if their question was answered. Not robotically, but in an appropriate way: “Anything else I can help with today?” It could be the lead-in they need to ask the question they’re really dying to ask.
• If we banish techspeak and librarian-ese from our websites and chat interactions – not to mention our library signs and our library instruction – we’ll do our part to lower library anxiety, raise patron morale, make them feel competent and confident with their knowledge about the library and library research
• Even if they’re not necessarily thoroughbreds when it comes to library research, we can help them realize that they can get over the “hurdles” of learning library research, no matter how high they seem.
Reference


