

## WIN 5.2 - Developing an Inclusive Writing Style

### Lesson 4 - COCOA CAT

So when my colleague and I were putting together the textbook we wanted to boil down the essentials of clear writing, particularly for the health professions, into a number of points, and we ended up coming up with eight different points, and we wanted it to be easy to remember. So we were coming up with an acronym, and it just happened that those eight points spelled COCOA CAT - which we thought was, you know, a little bit funny so it's easy to remember and it's also pretty clear, and something that I think most people could remember and relate to.

The first C in COCOA CAT stands for **clear**, and in the health professions it's very important that all writing be clear, and clear to understand, because, you know, clear writing is important in all professions, but in the healthcare professions there can be serious consequences you know: lives can be lost if the instructions that one person writes for another person are misunderstood. If the message isn't clearly communicated then there can be mistakes made.

The first O in COCOA CAT stands for **objective**. Objective writing in the health sciences is very, very important. A lot of the students that I was teaching in the writing course were going into health professions - however all of their training in writing had been in more personal essays, subjective writing, and one of the hardest things to do was to get them to see that they really needed to stick to the facts, when they're writing for a health profession. They really need to be absolutely objective; to state what they see, what is happening, and not what they are assuming is happening. And one of the things in objective writing is to really break it down and be absolutely specific. So if you were to say somebody is 'young', what does that mean? Is 'young' five? Is 'young' 10? Is 'young' 20? Is 'young' 35? So really to be as objective and clear as possible.

**Concise** writing is very important in the health sciences because often when you are on the job you have very little time to communicate something in writing, and you might have very little space to communicate. So you might have to write something in a form, yet you have a lot of information to convey. So it's important to really break it down into the essentials and to be as concise and to the point as possible.

**Organization** is very important in professional writing because you're really telling a narrative. You're wanting to communicate what happened, what you observed, and organizing it in a logical way so that the person that you're communicating to can really follow along and understand exactly what happened by only reading it once, and not having to go back and read it again to try to figure out what happened. If your writing is clearly organized they should be able to scan it, figure out the main points, and come away with an understanding.

**Accuracy** is very important in writing in the health professions because, you know, being inaccurate with a dosage or writing down the wrong sort of medication or, you know, not accurately representing what happened or a patient's symptoms can result in tragedy. So while accuracy is important in all writing I think really in health professions it's absolutely essential.

It's important that writing be **correct** because again you are really trying to convey what happened, what is needed to happen; and having the correct information - such as the correct medication, the correct symptoms, the correct order in which things happened - can really make a huge difference.

In any kind of professional writing it's essential to consider your **audience** because you are communicating to that audience. Therefore it's important to determine who they are, what their background is, what information they need in order to do their jobs, and to communicate in such a way that they're going to understand.

It's important to be **thorough** when writing in the health professions because you have a lot of information to convey and leaving out an essential piece of information could cost a patient a life, could lead to further illness, or could result in loss of a lawsuit.