

## Episode 4: Jamila Savoy

**Jamila Savoy** Each and every public servant has a responsibility to be communicating in a clear, direct, and easy-to-understand way. And doing that by writing in plain language actually doesn't cost anything. It's just — I never say this so bluntly — but it's just doing your job. It's just doing your job right.

**Bob Milstein** Hello and welcome to Top of Their Game, the show where we speak with the people making communications clearer, fairer, and just plain better. I'm your host, Bob Milstein, a lawyer and plain language trainer, practitioner, and advocate. Today I'm excited to speak with an emerging leader in the field of plain language advocacy, Jamila Savoy. Jamila is co-founder of Plain Language Matters. For nearly 20 years, she has helped organizations communicate clearly and accessibly, whether it's rewriting dense policy, shaping public health messages, or coaching teams to write with confidence and purpose. In today's episode, we will talk about how Jamila first developed a passion for plain language, how she managed to persuade government — in her case, the government of Victoria, Australia — that plain language was something worth investing in, and lessons she's learned as a leading plain language advocate. And now, Jamila Savoy.

Jamila, thank you for joining us.

**Jamila** Fantastic to be here, Bob.

**Bob** Now, like a good interviewer, I've done my due diligence and I took a look at your LinkedIn and I see that you describe yourself as an accessible-communications enthusiast.

**Jamila** Yeah.

**Bob** But you also say there that plain language is your superpower. So I wanted to start with a double-barreled question if I can, which is a shocking thing for an interviewer to do, but here we go. Plain English, plain language, accessible communications. What's the difference? Where's the overlap? And I'm interested to know how and when you got into either of those worlds and why.

**Jamila** Yeah. Brilliant question. Thanks, Bob.

**Bob** That's why they pay me the big bucks.

**Jamila** I guess I probably entered the accessible-communications world first through a role that I had at Vision Australia, who are a national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision. So we knew really clearly that we had to provide information in an accessible way for people who are blind or have low vision. And so what that often meant at Vision Australia was around accessible formats. So making sure that our information was, first of all, accessible online in digital formats, but was also provided in braille, in audio, maybe in large print for people who have low vision. But delving more into plain language came about a little bit after my understanding of alternate formats, when I came across a definition from the University of Oxford which defined accessible communications. And it talks about, first of all, that the information is provided in a clear, direct, and easy-to-understand way. Now, ting ting ting, that's plain language, plain English. And then provide it in a format that's suitable for the intended audience. And that for me is where the alternate format section kind of comes in. So all of a sudden, under this accessible communications banner, I could see there were kind of two pillars. There's first the words and what you're doing with those words from a structure—formatting perspective and then it's the format that you're delivering it to the audience. And, in that Vision

Australia example, going back to the maybe it's Braille, maybe it's audio, maybe it's just online, maybe it is in print format, but making sure that you're doing that for your intended audience.

**Bob** Right. And before your work with Vision Australia, what were you doing?

**Jamila** My background is in communications. So my undergraduate study was in communications, majoring in journalism and public relations, and I always thought I would be a journalist. In fact, I really wanted to be on radio, which I kind of realized that journalism was just a touch too fast paced for me. The idea of having to write something, get it out the door that day, and not ever being able to go back to it even the next day was not for me. So I ended up in the communications route and I've worked in lots of different industries. I worked on a construction project in a regional town in WA, which really was fantastic to learn about how important communication is with regards to community engagement. I've worked for members of Parliament, which was also very interesting. And I also did a lot of media relations as a subset of communications. So that's how I still manage to keep that journalism interest, but from the media relations perspective.

**Bob** So was the light bulb moment for you when it comes to plain language, something that happened in your Vision Australia time?

**Jamila** A little bit of both. I think I've always had a personal style of writing that I never was able to maybe label. And it was when I was working at the Victorian government, looking at an accessible communications policy, that I stumbled across this term *plain language* or *plain English*. And I read into it more thoroughly and it coincided with the ISO Standard about to come out and all of a sudden everything kind of just clicked into place for me. I said, "Oh, I have actually a label for the way that I do things. I just didn't realize that it existed and that there had been this whole world that had been working on it for decades prior." And when the standard came out, I thought, "This is the perfect time, because we've got a internationally recognized standard that shows people how we should do it." And it's not just kind of little old Jamila parroting "Hey, why don't you think about changing this word? Or why don't you think about putting some headings in or restructuring this document?" It actually kind of legitimized plain language, which is fantastic.

**Bob** In the interviews I've done so far, I've spoken to some leading lights in the fields of advocacy, academia, training. But what I've not yet done, and what I'm really keen to explore with you, is the experience of someone who's actually been within an institutional environment and driven a policy. So I'd be really interested — and I suspect our listeners will also be keen — to learn more about what you did, how it worked, and what the challenges were.

**Jamila** Yeah. So I feel very lucky to have had the role that I did. And the title that I had was Principal Advisor, Accessible Communication in the Victorian Government at the Department of Premier and Cabinet, specifically. And this role came about acknowledging the very tough times that Victoria went through, not only through COVID, but also from bushfires and floods that happened around 2019, 2020, and 2021. And the government themselves, through reviews and reports, recognized that the communication wasn't so accessible to everyone that it needed to go to. So they found some funding, they created my role, they created another role, and part of my role was to create a whole of government policy around accessible communication. And—

**Bob** So not just for the Department of Premier and Cabinet, but the whole of Victorian government.

**Jamila** For the whole of Victorian government. And having never worked in the public service, I was a smidge naive going into that. Of course, I understand that governments are big, but I just didn't realize how truly enormous when it comes to trying to develop a policy that works for not only the departments but the agencies and the organizations and the subsidiaries that sit under all those departments. Had to really think about "is what I'm writing going to be relevant" or "Will the hospitals, will Victoria Police all be required to meet this policy?" So there was, first of all, a little bit of kind of governance, I guess, to unpack this policy that I'm writing. Who is really going to use it?

**Bob** How did you go about addressing those challenges?

**Jamila** I had to speak to people much wiser than me and the Victorian Public Service Commission were a really great entity for me to engage with. They really understood the differences in the Public Administration Act, which is where a lot of this is governed with regards to the difference between a department and a special body within the Victorian government. I made very sure never to become an expert in this space though, Bob. I wanted to just engage with the people who understood, who could give me advice on who the policy should be written for. And essentially it is written for department and special bodies. So it's not a requirement that hospitals, as an example, meet the policy. But the reason why I wanted to have it and make sure that it was public as well is that, just because someone might not be required to follow the policy, it's a really good place to go and understand what you could be doing to ensure your communication is accessible to as many people as possible.

**Bob** So it's a resource there for Victorian bureaucrats to use, but there's no stick and there's limited carrots? Or are there carrots?

**Jamila** So there is no stick, which I would say is one of the challenges in developing a policy like this and was a challenge in the time that I was doing it — was trying to figure out what kind of mechanisms could we put in place to ensure people are following the policy. In all honesty, there's not a lot. That is why, along with the policy, my work was around awareness and engagement, especially with leadership, but also with the rest of the public service. So that piece of work that I did, while it was fantastic that it's been published recently and so anyone can go and access it and look at it, it was only one part. It's those other parts, that raising awareness, that education — I did lots and lots of training with public servants across Victoria — and I think it's a little bit of both. It's having the policy so that, for the people who might be getting a little bit of pushback with approvers, it's something they can go to and say "You may not be aware we have this policy. This policy says that we need to adhere to the international standard on plain language and that's why this piece of information has been done in a particular way."

**Bob** You mentioned pushback. How frequently did you encounter what I loosely call the "yeah but" phenomenon? You know, "This is all well and good, but yet, but for us, we're special. We're complex. We're different. This is not going to work."

**Jamila** Yeah. Daily? No, that's probably a bit unfair. There was definitely some talking points I had to have up my sleeve when it came to that commentary that I got very often. The other piece of commentary I got a lot was around the cost associated. And I would always go back to "Each and every public servant has a responsibility to be communicating in a clear, direct, and easy-to-understand way." And doing that by writing in plain language actually doesn't cost anything. It's just — I never say this so bluntly — but it's just doing your job, just doing your job right.

**Bob** There is, I guess, one cost — and I sometimes refer to it as the dirty little secret of plain language writing — that if it doesn't come naturally to someone, and if you want to commit to getting better at it, it costs time.

**Jamila** Time. Yes, yes, it does. And that's why I wanted to make sure that there was always training available for people. That was part of the bigger accessible communication project, of which the policy and the training and the awareness-raising was all a part of. I think people would often also say when I was talking about the policy, "Oh, but, you know, policy is not just going to fix the problem." Of course not. It's about all of those different things and it will also take time. Cultural change like this — which is what I branded it at the beginning when I really sat down and thought, "What are we trying to achieve in a couple of years with an accessible communications policy?" — is we're trying to embed a culture of plain language and a culture of accessible communications. And that takes time, most likely generational kind of change. It's gonna take a long time. So what are the small bits every day we can each do that contribute to that change over time?

**Bob** How important was it in your experience, Jamila, to identify, within sectors, plain language or accessibility champions?

**Jamila** Incredibly important. It felt at the beginning a little bit lonely and I networked furiously to find all my champions, all the people that are already doing this fabulous work. I am absolutely not about reinventing the wheel. People have been doing fabulous work around accessible communications and writing in plain language for years and years and, once I identified them, we actually kind of brought everyone together into a community of practice. So it was, first of all, a space where people who have been working in this space can engage with like-minded individuals and we can learn from each other. And then it was also a space where people who were interested but weren't really sure how to get started or where to go, they were also able to come and join the community of practice, have resources there, and it still is a fantastic place to share ideas, learn from each other. I said before the Victorian government's very big. It can feel that you're the only person struggling with the challenge that you're struggling with and communities of practice like the plain language one is a great opportunity to be able to feel a little bit less alone.

**Bob** And when you tried to get this up and running, were there any models you were able to look at — either in the rest of Australia or internationally — that you sought to draw from?

**Jamila** Well, we were very lucky. The Victorian government has a platform that already exists around communities of practice, but we did do quite a bit of research around what we wanted this community of practice to achieve and making sure it aligned to, I guess, the overall objective of the Accessible Communications project and that want to ensure that government information is easier to understand and easier to access. When it comes to actual plain language communities of practice, I really didn't do too much research and I don't think I really saw any to draw from, but my instinct is that the success we were having in the Victorian government could be absolutely extended to outside the Victorian government and to general public, if not starting with plain language enthusiasts or plain language professionals currently.

**Bob** So perhaps Victoria will be the exemplar.

**Jamila** Could be. We had so many people who would want to join and we'd say "I'm so sorry. You can't. You have to be a public servant, a Victorian public servant, to join."

**Bob** You mentioned that the framework incorporates the International Plain Language Standard. That standard's got a lot of moving parts. It's got a lot of content, a lot of very good content, but there's a lot of it. Does your initiative seek to capture all of that content?

**Jamila** It does, it does. The reference in the policy is to adhere to the standard and I chose to do that for a couple of reasons, but mostly because of the legitimacy around international standards. Also, because I love the way that the standard is set out with regards to what I like to call, like, the "top and tail" of the principles being understanding your audience, understanding your reader, and then that evaluation part. I'm really conscious that people can just think about kind of the middle two — the doing, the what it might be around my words or shorten your sentences, which I talk about *ad nauseam* — but I really wanted to make sure that it captured the essence of what plain language is, which is understanding your reader. But how do you know you've done a good job unless you're then evaluating?

**Bob** That does bring me quite neatly to this question. Does the policy or, independent of it, does Victorian government take steps on a consistent, regular basis to evaluate, to monitor?

**Jamila** Sometimes. I think in the digital base, which is the beauty of digital platforms, you get that evaluation and that monitoring built in. And I know that there are many, many websites out there that kind of even use just a simple, you know, "Was this website helpful for you? Thumbs up, thumbs down." I think the tough part about producing a piece of communication that you feel is for the entire Victorian community is how you evaluate whether it met the needs of every subsection within that community. So I don't have the answer, but I always want to make sure that it's a consideration.

**Bob** Because, of course, there's very significant literacy challenges out there in the community—

**Jamila** Incredible—

**Bob** —including legal literacy.

**Jamila** Incredible literacy challenges. Multicultural communities, especially in Victoria, are highly represented and we love that — it makes Victoria what it is — but we need to think about English-language literacy within multicultural and multi-faith communities. People living with disability, ageing population, and the intersectionality between getting older and being from a multicultural, multi-faith community where English maybe isn't your first language. There's all of these considerations within what someone might brand kind of the Victorian community. There's so many elements to really think about.

**Bob** I imagine that sometimes when there's a bit of thinking about those challenges, the response is that you know what, a document's not the way to go here.

**Jamila** Yeah, absolutely. We should, I think in my personal opinion, be providing information in so many different formats and more and more audio. Audio is a really good way to provide information. I know personally as someone who's learning other languages, it's much easier for me to understand an audio conversation than a block of text. One of the languages I'm learning is Persian. In Persian, it's a bit kind of confronting to be presented with this dialogue on a page in Persian, in the language that is not my first language and one that I'm still learning. However, that same conversation in audio, often I can pick up words quite easily and I get the gist of the conversation. So I personally think audio is a fantastic medium that we don't use enough. I think sometimes we get a little bit focused on video and visuals — and visuals absolutely

have a part to play — but people should always be thinking about what is the best way that this information can be provided to my reader or my audience?

**Bob** Jamila, I wanted to take you back for a second to some of the obstacles, I guess, you face in socializing certain departmental officials to this way of communicating. What do you say to people who say to you — and I might be thinking of lawyers here, but I wouldn't say that — who say that this is a matter of irreducible complexity and accessible communication — plain language communication — not only runs the risk, but guarantees a dangerous dumbing down of this important communication.

**Jamila** The dumbing-down myth. Oh, it's incredible, isn't it? I often go back to the research that was done — I think by Nielsen Norman — about how experts prefer information in plain language as well. If I feel that the person that I'm talking to, that's going to resonate with them ... I think the one thing even before the arguments I might place or rebut that person, I have to also acknowledge it's a long game. I don't have to win every little battle on the way to winning the war because I know in the end we will get there. So picking and choosing my battles was always a big, big thing, but one of the things I leaned back on was that stat around experts preferring plain language. Sometimes, depending on where that information was going to go, I might say things like “Oh, so you don't want 20% of the population to understand this? That's cool. No worries. That's fine. That's on you.”

**Bob** Love a bit of passive aggressive. Well played.

**Jamila** Put that put it back on the person writing it. I mean, there has to be a level of ownership around the piece of information that you're crafting and that you're writing. And if you are educated with all the facts and you still wish to progress, then that is also again on you. But one of the things that I just made sure I did as best as I could is I just role modeled in every single piece of communication that I wrote, down to my Teams messages. Implementing the principles of plain language, so that when I had the opportunity to provide some of my more senior executives who maybe weren't on the same page with me, when I had the opportunity to write them a brief or submit even the policy, along with the brief, to go to a group to be endorsed, I made sure it was the best example of plain language in a brief people had ever seen. And they may not have realized that, but slowly, slowly, when the feedback comes back as “fantastic brief,” gives me another way to kind of engage and have that conversation.

**Bob** So, to use the brief as an example, what were the specific flourishes, gestures that you conscientiously invoked for the purposes of making it a “you beaut, Ridgely Didge” model?

**Jamila** So one of the things I noticed quite a bit is we did have a very good briefing template, but people got a little bit confused with maybe what a heading was supposed to be. Often their headings were a sentence and often that sentence was the only sentence they actually needed in that entire paragraph underneath what they thought was their heading. So I was very particular to make sure that my headings were short, clear, and accurate. I was very clear to have my structure down pat, that my genuine, most important piece of information was right at the top. I used to say this in my training: It's very naive to think someone's going to get to the bottom of your document unless they're paid to do so. And in these instances, they were paid to do so, but I wasn't going to rest on that. So I really wanted to make sure the structure of my document was just tip-top and then my headings or how I signposted the rest of the document was also very good.

**Bob** What do you mean by signposting?

**Jamila** Making sure that when they're scanning that document, which everyone does when they're reading, they know the sections that they really want to interrogate.

**Bob** We have a view on signposting between sentences and I'm going to raise the frequent flyer issue of starting a sentence with an *and* or a *but* or a *so* or a *because*. Where do you sit on that?

**Jamila** I like it.

**Bob** Me too.

**Jamila** What I love most about it, I think, Bob, is the fact that it was so clearly taught to us in school not to do it. I remember it vividly. "You can't start a sentence with *and*, you can't start a sentence with *but*." So there's a chance I love it because I feel like I'm going against my teachers from high school — there's a bit of that — but I just think make your information easy to glide through and if that means that you're starting a sentence with a *so* or a *but*, so be it.

**Bob** I know you run training through your business, Plain Language Matters. Do you encounter pushback from participants, as we do in our training, that they'll say, "Well, that's just not grammatical or, even if it's arguably grammatical, that's not the way professionals communicate"?

**Jamila** Yes. Usually that question is framed around tone. You know, can I really use plain language and still have a professional formal tone? Yes, of course you can. I just always come back to this is about your reader. This is about the person that you are writing this information for. It's not about you. So if you want to get all hung up on it, fine, we can debate it. But when it comes to writing for a purpose of providing information to someone or a group of people, you need to do it the way that they want to receive it.

**Bob** One objection that's put to me when they cave in a bit on the first couple is that "Fair enough, I accept what you say. But were I to write this way, my supervisor would never, ever permit this to go out." And I guess this goes to a bigger cultural issue.

**Jamila** Yeah, this is exactly it. You need to make sure that — to use a term that I only ever heard in government and I find myself using outside of government and shivering when I do it. We talk about "authorizing environments," as in like the chain of people that have to approve something before it can be made public. If only one person in that chain is writing from the plain language playbook, it's going to be very hard for that piece to be in that way when it goes out. So part of the work is that cultural piece or making sure, at least within teams, everyone is writing from the same plain language playbook. So that when I write something and I send it to you as my manager — say we've done the same training, say we've at least had a conversation as a team, made a commitment, a sticking to our style guide. I mean, there are many different ways that you can ensure that you're all on the same page, but unless you actually have specifically and intentionally made that decision, when I send it to you, you're going to do whatever you want with it. And then when you send it to the next person in the chain above you, they're going to say, "Oh no, this looks nothing like I want it to look like." And they're going to change it again.

**Bob** And the poor junior person who diligently—

**Jamila** —did the right thing.

**Bob** —invoked best practice principles, it's just a morale buster.

**Jamila** Absolutely, absolutely. I heard this anecdotally a lot in the Victorian government and it was one of the things that I fed into my strategy around ... We can do some training with the people that want to do the right thing, we have some policy there that gives us some governance, and then there is a significant leadership part there to make sure that everyone is on the same page.

**Bob** I know you have a marketing background, so maybe you can comment on this one. I've always thought that the phrase "plain language" or "plain English" is in some ways and some times its own worst enemy because it sets you up for antagonism, because the naysayers will say "Well, plain is bad and plain is cookie-cutter, vanilla-flavored, lowest-common-denominator –based, simplistic writing." But it's, of course, not plain. It's about clear. It's about reader focus.

**Jamila** Absolutely.

**Bob** It's about flow. So I think we need the marketing department to get on to that.

**Jamila** Yeah. Unfortunately, Bob, we might be a little bit too far gone.

**Bob** Yeah, I think so.

**Jamila** But it is. On that same thread, I always make sure when I'm talking about plain language — and specifically, say, around words — I don't ever say "use simple words." I say use everyday words because this isn't about simplicity. This is about using the words and the phrases, again, that your reader uses. So if you are writing for a group of doctors and their everyday words in a professional sense are not my everyday words, so they will be different. But there's nothing necessarily "simple" that's part of that. It's really just grounding yourself in writing for your reader or your audience.

**Bob** There's reader-appropriate jargon and there's reader-inappropriate jargon.

**Jamila** Absolutely, absolutely.

**Bob** So when it comes to the training messages you deliver, what are the key tips that you want to reinforce for people you trained about how to make their writing accessible and in plain language?

**Jamila** Everything that I talk about with regards to accessible communications and plain language is always about putting your reader at the heart of it. And ... It's quite funny. We've been talking for a little while now but the word *empathy* hasn't actually come up. But essentially it's all grounded in having some empathy for your reader when they're reading this piece of information, whatever that might be. That might be circumstances, if they're in the middle of a crisis. It might just be one of those areas we touched on before, someone who might be from a multicultural, multi-faith background or someone who might be living with disability. It's just always about bringing the person who's reading your information right to the center of what you're doing and actually thinking about that person. And even in an internal context, even thinking about "I need to send something to my manager. My manager is really busy. I can see that. I see that every day. They're dealing with a variety of different things, complex things, things I might not even know that they're dealing with because — I don't know — it's confidential, it doesn't need me to be involved. How am I going to make sure when I send my manager this email, because they need to receive it, that they're going to receive it and I'm respecting their time and their energy that they're going to have to use in reading it." So everything that I'm trying to do is really about grounding the reader. And then, of course, we talk about ways that you can do that in your writing. And what I also just really want people to feel when they finish our training is that they can go away,

immediately implement something, because that's the other underlying part of it. You don't have to leave something being an expert in it, but if you leave at least committing to doing one thing differently—

**Bob** Exactly. Because—

**Jamila** —that one thing turned into another thing and very soon becomes part of your habit. But you've got to start somewhere.

**Bob** I'm not a big jargon person, but I think in training jargon that's called the transition from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence. But—

**Jamila** You're exactly right.

**Bob**—and yet you really don't want to overwhelm yourself after attending a training. Just pick one or two and commit.

**Jamila** Just one thing. Yep.

**Bob** Is there a common myth about writing you wish most people would challenge?

**Jamila** There's two things that come to mind here. First one really is around that plain language is dumbing something down and really everyone can appreciate when something is written well, when it's clear, direct, and easy to understand. There's a former colleague of mine — who I'm sure stole it from someone else, may have even been you, Bob, I'm not sure — but she says often “No one's ever complained that something was too easy to read.” Like, that is the essence of what we're trying to do. We're just trying to make things easier for people.

**Bob** I don't think I own that sentence, but I've certainly uttered very similar things.

**Jamila** You can pretend to own it if you like, Bob.

**Bob** All right, I do. How dare you use my intellectual property.

**Jamila** And not quote you? And then I think there's something for people who are already maybe in this space in really backing yourself and trusting your gut. If you know that you're doing something right and you've written something — you've done it in a particular way — talk about it. Say why. So that it's not just left up to someone else to read and approve it in their way, that you're actually backing yourself with how you've written something because you've had your reader at the center of what you've written.

**Bob** That can be sometimes a very challenging matter, just from the simple power dynamics that are at play.

**Jamila** Very, very. If you are coming from a place of doing your best with your reader at heart, then at least at the end of it you can feel confident that you did your part the best you could.

**Bob** Now we're coming towards the end of our time, Jamila, but I did have a couple of other questions for you.

**Jamila** Let's do it.

**Bob** Okay. Who or what has inspired you the most in your accessibility and plain language career?

**Jamila** I bet that when you asked this, you are thinking someone who was maybe in the plain language or accessible-communications industry, but—

**Bob** I just read the questions. I have no idea what they mean.

**Jamila** But when you ask that, I think about my many colleagues and now friends that I worked with at Vision Australia and it was one of the things that it had as a part of its organizational KPIs was the percentage of people employed with lived experience. And so when I think about it, I think it's those colleagues and those friends of mine. I could see on the day-to-day how important making sure a piece of communication was accessible. We would engage so many consultants and the number of times they'd send a PowerPoint back and I'd say, "I can't take this to my board. I can't take this to my leadership team, because at least 20 to 30% of them are blind. So can we look at this and make sure that they can read it as well as everyone else?"

**Bob** My next question definitely is around plain language. Are there any resources, books, podcasts, or indeed are there any leaders in communications that you would recommend to someone who's wanting to grow in this area?

**Jamila** There are so many, aren't there?

**Bob** Got any favorites?

**Jamila** Who are my favorites? You, Bob? Can I say you?

**Bob** Oh, that is the correct answer. But if you've got any more?

**Jamila** Right, it is about you. For me, one of the first people in the plain language world I connected with is someone that you're very familiar with, Bob: Christopher Bamford. And he's been fantastic at helping me understand the history of plain language and where it came from and where it could go and how Australia sits internationally.

**Bob** And he had a very prominent role in the International Plain Language Standard as well.

**Jamila** Absolutely, absolutely. And, as I said, that was something that, when I saw was coming and when it was released, really clicked a lot of things into place for me with regards to how we can bring that into government. Who else? Annetta Cheek is someone that I definitely look to as how we might get legislation in our state or our federal government in Australia, because sometimes, in a government context, the only thing that creates change is legislation. And we have to just acknowledge that.

**Bob** I mean, it's interesting, because of course New Zealand has legislation, but even if there is a legislative model, there's going to be a fair bit of negotiation as to what, if any, teeth the legislation ought have.

**Jamila** That is an important conversation to have, but definitely a challenge.

**Bob** Where do you see the whole plain language movement — if I can call it — that heading? And what role do you think technology — I'm thinking generative AI, chatbots, agentic AI or whatever comes next — what role do you think it's going to play?

**Jamila** On the first part of the question, I really do feel like we're at a moment in time where accessible communications and plain language will really start to become more of the norm. I say that based on one of the recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission, which was around having a national accessible communications framework or plan. I think people are starting to become more aware that there are different communities that require information in different ways. I really do feel like we're nearly at this point where it will become a lot more mainstream, a lot more popular. And I do think also social media has helped a little bit in

that space where we have news outlets like The Daily Aus, who actually say “We offer young Australians a digestible and engaging way to access the news” and it's done thinking about their audience. Like they've named who they're talking to in their purpose. So I think it's coming. It's coming.

**Bob** Sorry to interrupt. It's certainly been our observation in Words and Beyond — and we do training for lawyers and others — that there is absolutely an in-principle embrace of plain language. That's not really a debate any longer. And people say “Yeah, it's a good thing and we do it,” but we say “Do you, do you really? And is it more than just word substitution?” So there's the first step of willingness and there's the next step of, I guess, capacity building.

**Jamila** Yes, yes. And also maybe an overlay there that when you have a really in-depth understanding of plain language, you may want to see it done, say, quote unquote “perfectly.” But actually, let's not let perfection get in the way of the good and build on where people are at and, like you said, it's been accepted. Harness that and build it to the place where we might be able to get it to some sort of perfection. But knowledge that that good is a good start.

**Bob** Yeah. Now, the second part of my double barrel was about technology.

**Jamila** Yeah, I am a big fan of gen AI. I think that potentially it can help us make writing in a clear, direct, and easy-to-understand way slightly more mainstream, by there being another tool for people to use kind of in their toolbox when they communicate. But it has its limitations and it will always need a human to be reviewing and assessing anything that AI produces. And when it comes to looking at plain language in the way, say, the standard looks at it ... Sure, maybe gen AI can help you shorten a sentence or two or make sure you only have one idea in a sentence. But there are still things that only humans can do and only a human can empathize with the person who's standing next to their house and there's a bushfire coming their way and what information that person is going to need to receive at that very moment. And only a human can evaluate, in my opinion, whether that information hit the mark at the end of your plain language cycle. So I think it's fantastic as another tool in the toolbox, but it's not to be used on its own.

**Bob** Jamila, your reference to empathy, which is not the first time you've used that expression, really should be the moment where I end this interview because that would be a beautiful circuit close-up. But I am just going to ask a couple of fast and furious questions about you as a person.

**Jamila** Okay, I'll try to answer them fast and furiously.

**Bob** Take your time. What's your favorite novel?

**Jamila** Oh, I'm a big fan of James Patterson. I like really easy-to-read detective novels, so I'm going to choose a series: the Women's Murder Club series by James Patterson.

**Bob** Dog person or cat person?

**Jamila** Dog.

**Bob** That was fast.

**Jamila** That was easy.

**Bob** Yeah. Me too. Have you got any favorite podcasts? Not necessarily language stuff, but whatever floats your boat.

**Jamila** Similar to my reading tastes, I like really easy-to-listen-to podcasts. So I have been listening to Good Hang with Amy Poehler from *Parks and Recreation* and *Saturday Night Live*. First of all, very funny, but I love at the end of every podcast she asks her guest what's making them laugh lately and that's how she ends. And it's just a really nice, awesome listening. And then when I'm looking for something that maybe actually I want to get my brain thinking a bit — 'cause, you know, I do — I listen to Work Life, which is a podcast by Adam Grant — who's an American organizational psychologist — and he has some really interesting guests. But I really like listening to him and thinking about embedding plain language as a culture. You know, how do we need to think about organizational psychology with regards to plain language in organizations?

**Bob** For journalism, where do you go for it?

**Jamila** I'm going to say The Daily Aus, which I mentioned just before. I may not be necessarily the young Australian that they're talking to, but I appreciate the stories that they're covering, the way that they make it digestible, and how they deliver it to me on social media.

**Bob** Right, now, final question: Outside of your professional life, what's a hobby or interest that people might find surprising?

**Jamila** Oh, I'm a big fan of reality TV. Not all of it, but I quite enjoy the relaxing nature of watching some *Geordie Shore* or some *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, which are technically all probably all done now, but that's maybe not a surprise.

**Bob** That's maybe a bit of a holiday.

**Jamila** That's really all I'm looking for when watching TV.

**Bob** Fair enough.

**Jamila** What a way to end.

**Bob** Well, I know. On that televisual note, can I thank you, Jamila, for your time? That was terrific speaking with you.

**Jamila** Thank you, Bob.

**Bob** And I'm sure we'll catch up again.

**Jamila** I hope so.

**Bob** All the best.

**Jamila** Thanks. Thanks, Bob.

**Bob** It was great to hear Jamila reminding us that writing in a way that is clear, direct, and easy to understand is not just the nice thing to do, it's actually everyone's job. To learn more about Jamila's work, be sure to check out our show notes. Top of Their Game has been brought to you by In-Game Learning: The most fun you'll ever learn. Visit [ingamelearning.com](http://ingamelearning.com) and see just how fun online plain language training can be. If you enjoyed today's episode, share it with a colleague, leave us a review, or, better yet, rewrite something terrible and send it to us. We'll love you forever and so might your target readers. I'm Bob Milstein and until next time, go forth and clarify.