Episode #5: Ginny Redish (LCL Audio)

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Laurel Sutton: Hello, and welcome to another Linguistics Careercast, the podcast devoted to exploring careers for linguists outside academia. I'm your host, Laurel Sutton. This episode is an audio version of a virtual panel held at the Linguistics Career Launch in the summer of 2021. The moderator is Nancy Frishberg. Our guest is Ginny Redish, who has had an exciting and fulfilling career applying her love of linguistics to making written materials easy for the people who must use them. Over the decades since she finished her PhD, Ginny has led teams turning government regulations into question-and-answer conversations, revolutionizing user manuals to be task-oriented and user-oriented, and giving website visitors what they need in well organized, plain language. She has also written numerous peer-reviewed papers and book chapters, as well as three books, which are linked in the show notes. Topics for today include document design, non-profits, job titles, content strategy, and UX writing. And now, here’s our interview.

Nancy Frishberg: This is the session of the Linguistics Career Launch called “Linguists Know About Words.” I'm Nancy Frishberg, your moderator or host for the session, and Marcus Robinson is our Zoom producer today and he's going to provide technical assistance. So I'm going to not take a long time to introduce our guest today, Ginny Redish, but I want to definitely mention that she has been extremely influential in the world of document design, like I think creating the topic and the name for that field. And she's going to tell us about that, as well as a number of other ways linguists might know about words and how you can put that knowledge into a career in writing for the web. Ginny, and I think we met first in like 1973 or 1972 or around then in Washington, D.C., when Robbin Battison, who is also on the call, brought me to meet her and her husband in their home in Washington, D.C., and that was even before we knew there were careers about writing for the web, because the web hadn't been invited invented yet. But I've been following her and I am continually amazed at how she keeps updating and refreshing herself and her material. And here you get the latest version of it today. Ginny, take it away.

Ginny Redish: Thank you so much, Nancy, and thanks to everybody who is with us. We're going to be together for about 45 minutes today, and I'm going to talk about two major topics. First, a little bit about my own career journey, not only to introduce myself to you, but to make several general points about career journeys. And then, as Nancy said, my topic is “Linguists Know About Words”, but we're particularly focusing on words in the web, so careers in writing for the web. So let me start by telling you a little bit about myself. I actually have been interested in linguistics since I was in high school, when we had to do some interviews for careers we might be interested in. I interviewed a journalist and a linguistics professor, and I then went on to college at Bryn Mawr, majoring in Russian. It's probably not as popular a language today, but in those days it was the language we were worried about because of the Cold War situation. But I actually did it in part for the literature because I wanted to read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in the original. And there wasn't very much linguistics at Bryn Mawr, but I did have an opportunity for a summer internship one year at the Harvard Computer Center, a little bit of computational linguistics, machine translation. And if you don't recognize that picture, it's an IBM punch card, which is how you wrote instructions. Robbin is smiling because that takes us back, right? That's how you wrote instructions for the computer in those days. And actually, it was a nice place to spend the summer because those big mainframes had to be kept cool, and it was one of the few air- conditioned places on campus. I went on in Slavic linguistics, having the opportunity to spend a year in Amsterdam. And if you asked me why Amsterdam, not Moscow, to study Slavic linguistics, I can only tell you that not only were there good professors there, but it was a much better place to spend a year than Moscow would have been, especially in the time. And I went on and did a Ph.D. in a very esoteric subject that I had a passion for, historical Indo-European, and it's still a fabulous topic. But my first point about life journeys is, I assumed I'd become an academic, and I didn't. Life doesn't always go the way you plan it. You think about it. There are different stages in your life. And in my case, I met and married a MIT grad student who wanted to be a professor of physics, and indeed, he finished a year before I did and did get the academic job and in fact has just gone to emeritus status after 50-plus years as a professor of physics. And we actually then very quickly had two small children. And so my message to you is, you can take time out. You can work part time, which is what I did, combine family and career, but that's a stage. And then there are other stages in your life. And when I was ready to work part-time, I went looking for a non-academic job as a linguist, and I started my non-academic linguistics career at the Center for Applied Linguistics, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C. And if you're not familiar with CAL, you might want to look it up. It's not the path that I'm going to end up talking about, writing for the web, but it is a place for non-academic linguists, primarily focusing on language policy. And if you can ask, “How did you go from being an Indo-European linguist to an expert in language policy?” Another one of my points about career journeys is that your actual knowledge that you specialized in may no longer be relevant, but your skills are likely to still be relevant. And so it was because I knew how to do research, I knew how to listen and observe and interview people with respect, I knew how to analyze and synthesize, think deeply, connect ideas, organize a coherent story, and very much I knew how to write clearly. And I went on from Cal to other small non-profits, always project to project, being an expert in language policy for several years until I was ready to work full-time. And I ended up at AIR, the American Institute for Research, originally on a project to evaluate language policy in education. But I was in the right place at the right time. And there's another one of my messages. Serendipity happens, and take advantage of the opportunities of serendipity. So I'd been at AIR about a year when a group at the Department of Education decided that they should fund — and fund very well — a three-year project that they named the Document Design Project. And the major questions were, “Why do so many people have problems with government documents?” and “How can we do a better job?” And there were linguists on the team at the Department of Education, and they thought a linguist should lead this new document design project. Well, I was the only linguist at AIR at the time because it was and is primarily a social science, psychology, psychometrics instructional design firm. And so I got to be the person who directed this new project. We did win the proposal, and the project had three components. Go out and find research in all kinds of fields — linguistics, psychology, whatever else would have relevance — and where there was no research, go do it; apply what you learn in technical assistance projects primarily with government agencies; and create new academic curricula, so make new, better academic linguists who could do non-academic work. And we partnered with Carnegie Mellon University for that. And what I did very first was go out and hire two other linguists as my deputy directors Veda Charrow, who had done her doctoral work on jury instructions and who had been the proposed linguist on the people who came in second in the competition — so basically, I stole the person who didn't get the director job to be my deputy director — and the other was Robin, Robbin Battison, who's on the call with us, and whom you're going to hear from on Friday morning, and I urge you to. And Robbin's background had been in American Sign Language — yes, Robbin. And here we came along to together do document design, and we did a lot of work, produced many technical reports, new academic programs. In fact, if you do have a graduate program in technical writing, document design, usability, it very likely started out of the document design project. One of our books, *Guidelines for Document Designers*, was probably the first research-based book of guidelines for linguists know about words. The American Medical Writers Association, about five years ago I guess, agreed to redo this so it was available online as an online publication, asked me to write a new introduction to it. So there's another possible career. Someone just wrote, “I still have my copy of *Guidelines for Document Designers*.” Thank you. It is now online, freely available. But I did want to mention that medical writing, writing in health literacy, is another wonderful possible career for linguists who want to work outside of academia. And one of the things that we said we would do that I think helped AIR be the people to do the document design project was that we would create a Document Design Center and look for work outside of the original project. Which turned out to be a good thing, because here's another reality of career journeys: not only does your life change and you go through different stages, but the world outside of you goes through different stages. And in the U.S. government at least, we have the situation that we have an administration that really cares about people and wants them to be able to understand government documents, and that can be replaced by an administration — it was replaced by an administration — that didn't care about people, didn't want government, and very early in the administration canceled all the work on plain language in government. So what were we supposed to do with a Document Design Center? Well, serendipity again. Veda got a project to worry about why lawyers don't learn to write in plain language, which resulted in a textbook, Clear and Effective Legal Writing, which still today, decades later in a fifth edition, I think, is the latest one, is still being used to teach young law students plain language. And Robbin took a different tack, because just as we were worrying about what would we do, the personal computer appeared. So here again is the world happening when you don't expect it. And suddenly, we became the people to revolutionize computer documentation. And Veda went off to have eventually, to have a long career in government. Robbin went off eventually to be stolen by IBM, right? Because we're — our first foray into computer documents was, in fact, for IBM. I stayed at AIR, where we ended up working not only for IBM, but HP, Sony, lots and lots of private companies. And what were we doing? Well, the theme of the second part of what I'm going to talk about this morning is how everything we write is a conversation. And what we did was turn nominal writing into conversation. So we would have a manual that had been written by the programmers to say something like “Issuance of a TOP command results in a line zero condition.” Yuck. And we would write, “To go to the beginning of your file, type TOP and press Enter.” So linguists know about words, linguists know about conversation. And the other thing that I did was to introduce usability. And again, this was actually serendipity. IBM wanted an outside vendor to do usability testing of their manuals. And my psychology colleague Joe Dumas and I wrote the first book on how to do usability testing. And then again, serendipity. I left AIR because I got tired of just putting out fires and worrying about budgets, and I began just consulting outside. And then along came the internet and the web. So for like the last 20 years, my work has been almost entirely on websites, which led to my current book called *Letting Go of the Words*.

And let me sum that up, and advice for my career journey to yours. First, realize that life goes in stages. When I was home with two preschoolers and climbing the walls because I thought, “I have a PhD, and I'm never going to have a career,” someone told me, “Enjoy it now. There will be time later.” So that's one of my advice to you: find the work-life balance that works for you in each of the stages. My other advice, which you can see: be flexible, expect the unexpected. The career you have 20 years from now may be something that doesn't exist today. That has happened to me over and over and over again. Think about your skills that transfer. Again, your specific knowledge that you worked on in your linguistic academic career may not be the knowledge that you want in another career, but your skills transfer. Take advantage of serendipity and never stop learning. If you're really interested in career journeys, I actually have a book to recommend to you. It's called *The UX Careers Handbook* by Cory Lebson. And UX, of course, is about usability and user experience, but there's an awful lot in here that's really about careers and career journeys. And in fact, of the 11 or 12 specific careers that Cory had people write about, including I wrote one of them, several are actually about writing and content.

So let me go on to the second part. Linguists know about words. Websites have words. Therefore, there are careers for linguists in writing for the web. Here's where I want you to join me. If you were to go to a website, to put on your hat as a web user, of an information-rich or an e-commerce website — not an entertainment site, not a gaming site — what do website visitors want? Why do they go to websites? Let me see some answers in the chat box. So people are saying information. They come for the content. And so if you think about it, navigation and search, which is really the field of information architecture, is very important. If people can’t find it. it might as well not be there. And design is really important in all aspects. So interaction design, visual design, graphic design is really critical, but the technology has to work. But what do we have here? We have three legs of a stool. They don't even stand up by themselves. They are all there to support the content, because it's the content that people come for. So we, who can deal with the content, are really an important part of a successful website. My other point that I said before when I was talking about revolutionizing computer instructions, but it's really true: everything we write is part of a conversation. And this holds not only for the web. I still do a lot of work in legal writing: letters, notices, reports. And it's not a synchronous conversation. It's an asynchronous conversation, which means you have to really pay attention, perhaps even more, to who you're having this conversation with, what the conversation is all about, so that I want you to think about the fact that, in fact, everything we write in the workplace is really replacing the telephone. And I know that there is a course that some of you may be taking in chatbots and voice, which is about conversation, but I really want to make the point that that's not the only conversation. Everything we do as a writer is a conversation. And what conversation are we involved in on the web? If people come in to satisfy their goals, their goals, and that is usually to get an answer or to do a task. So if we think about that, what I just said about everything being a conversation is really true, but there is one huge difference between print and online, and that is that in paper you start the conversation. So think about it as the user again. Your mail comes, and you perform triage on it, right? “That's junk. That's an ad. Oh, I better look at that one. Who is it from? What's it about?” But online, your website visitor starts the conversation. The web doesn't exist until somebody comes to it, and they come to it with their conversation and their mind. So that means you must focus first on what your visitors want to know, and therefore you have to know a lot about them. So, audience understanding is a critical part of writing for the web. The other thing to think about, which you probably know, is that writing anything is a process, and it's a process that doesn't start with writing. It starts with planning. And don't… We have to think about planning at various levels. So when I talk about what jobs there are, what careers could you have in writing for the web, I want to mention these: Content strategists, content designer, content writer, content editor, UX writer. I'm going to very briefly talk about the first two. We're going to spend our 10 minutes talking about writer/editor, and I'm going to introduce UX writer very briefly at the end.

One of the things I want to say is these are all titles, and there are probably lots more titles you may come across if you're looking for a job in the web. But, most important, read job descriptions carefully because these titles are not separate. They overlap. You'll see great inconsistency in what people think they mean. For example, from a job site, one job site drawing from many companies looking for people, here's a job for a content strategist: “Use a combination of data analysis, user research, benchmarking, and content audits to make content decisions and orchestrate proactive content development.” Well, I think that's a good definition because it's a strategy. But right under it from a different company looking for a content strategist, they want someone to “Draft clear, actionable support content.” To me, that's a content writer, but because content strategist has become a title today, you're going to see a lot of jobs that are called “content strategist” that aren't really strategy jobs. So what is a content strategist? It's the person who plans, in the big picture, for what the content in an entire — it could be a website, it could be part of a website, it could be all the channels that are relevant, whatever. I'm not going to spend more time on it because I really do want to spend my time on content writer. But I do have other talks, and you can actually see a whole webinar at my website. Now, another title, excuse me, that has become very popular is “content designer,” mostly in the UK and Australia. And if you read this definition, you'll see that it is just a generic title for people dealing with content. And I really think that what has happened is, “Everything is being called design. Let's call the content person a content designer so the design people will think more highly, and it isn't just writing stuff to put in at the end, getting a seat at the table by being called content designers.” But I want to really think that the careers we're talking about as linguists writing for the web: content writer, content editor. And to me, the distinction is whether or not you're the person who does the first draft, perhaps getting material from subject matter experts or other people, or whether you're editing somebody else's draft.

But whichever of those roles you are, I want to talk about seven points that I think are very different in academic writing and non-academic writing, and that is: Put the key message first. Think bite, snack, meal. Break up your writing. Use lots of meaningful headings. Write the conversation, use pronouns. Prefer the active voice. Put the action in the verbs. And I guess that was the last one.

Let me move on to going through these. Put the key message first. If we think about it, we've all been successful academically in school, but if you had to write a report in school, what was your purpose? And if you're honest, you'll tell me it was to get a good grade. And if I ask “Who was the audience?” and you're honest, it was your teacher or your thesis committee. And if you think about whether or not you were teaching people things they didn't already know, well, for a master's or doctoral thesis, you are expected to come up with some new stuff. But by the time you write your thesis, you really have to not only tell what you learn, you have to prove you know everything that was done beforehand. And so academic writing is typically in the narrative style where, yes, you have to announce your topic, but you also have to give the history, the background of everything that's been known about it before you, and then the story of what you did. And where is the great result? At the end. Well, that's actually literally backwards from the best way to write in the workplace, because in the workplace you have very busy users. Remember, that person coming to your website is only focused on “What is my need today? Where is the answer to today's question? How do I do this task right now?” The web is a tool for getting things done to meet a goal that's outside of the web. And so this is called inverted pyramid, and I'll show you a picture of that on the next slide. But basically it is, put your key message first. And the interesting thing is, that starts a conversation, because then people can ask, “How do you know that? How do I do that? What's the detail?” So you're, after that, answering people's questions, even if you don't write question headings. Why is this called inverted pyramid? It actually comes from journalism, because journalists know more people read the headline, and basically you lose readers. And the picture here from the work of Jakob Nielsen and Kara Pernice is to show you in a heatmap from eye tracking how many people read the very beginning — that's the red — and jumped down to the bullet list and didn't read much else. So, key message first.

Another way to think about key message that a lot of people find really useful is the concept “bite, snack, meal,” which comes from another plain language guru, Leslie O'Flahavan, and with her permission, I used it in my training, too. And the point is that some people only want a little bit. Some people want a little bit more. And yes, a few people want the whole thing. If you think about it like an academic journal, it's people… The title of your article is a decision point. It draws people in, or they say, “It's not what I want.” The abstract is perhaps a little snack. It's again, a decision point. “Is this enough for me?” Let me show you an example, a good example in my mind, of bite, snack, meal on the web. So here is rei.com, and on the homepage, “Who we are.” And a little key message about who we are. And notice the link is “Read our story.” It's not “Read more,” which is a really important accessibility point that the links be meaningful. But if you click on that, you get to a page — and here's another important point about writing for the web — the heading on the page matches the heading that you thought you were going to get. And again, a nice little snack. And if you notice, please, how short the sentences are, how short the paragraphs are. Another point I'm going to make next. And if we go down again, you get the rest, the meal, with headings and again, very short pieces. And therefore, my addition to Leslie's bite, snack, meal: even the whole meal should be easy to digest. So that second point: bite, snack, meal.

Third point. Again, if we go back to our academic lives, if we wrote things with one-sentence paragraphs, we probably wouldn't have gotten a good grade. But one-sentence paragraph on the web is good. In fact, no paragraphs. Because if you think about it, people don't come to read, and they don't come for paragraphs. They come for information. That's what you told me a few slides ago. So if the information is best delivered fragments, list, tables, links, pictures, videos, that's good. If we are talking about a conversation — and we are — then we need pronouns. And in fact, if you had — remember, we are talking about the telephone. Web is telephone. This is a little piece from the physical exercise that you just looked at. “Don't kid yourself. If you've always hated to climb stairs, step aerobics probably isn't for you.” Conversational style. And even in the little bits of microcopy — and that's going to take us to the UX writer. That's what UX writers are doing, writing these little pieces in the interface. Like instead of “Search,” “How may we help you?” In fact, if you were taught in your academic career that you have to write in the passive with no pronouns, that is an ancient myth. In fact, one of the most important articles of the 20th century, Watson & Crick, published in Nature, one of the top journals, starts out, “We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of DNA.” They weren't afraid to take credit for their work and write “we.” In fact, most academic journals today, if you read their guidelines for authors, want active sentences and personal pronouns. Prefer the active voice. I don't have to go over this with you folks. When I teach non-linguists, this is an important point to get them to understand active and passive and to write in the active voice.

Okay, I want to finish up quickly, so we have 10 minutes for some questions. UX writer is the newest career in writing for the web. And again, you will find job descriptions for UX writer, which basically say, “Write all the content on the entire site.” But there's a narrower definition that is probably more common, and that is, the UX writer is the person who writes the little pieces of content in the interface rather than the big articles. And as in this list from Rich Staats. So I want to just point out two kinds of writing that UX writers are generally responsible for. One is messages. Another piece of microcopy is in forms, helping people know what's acceptable rather than having them make a mistake and having to go back and fix it. Well, I've used more than my time, so I want to thank you for listening, and time for a few questions.

Nancy Frishberg: Now, I see a hand raised. It must be Monica.

Monica: Yes. Yes. This is very exciting. I really enjoy your talk, and it comes to my mind how this clear leadership that — we don't want to say dominion — of English in this digital revolution and being a native of Spanish and a late learner of English as a second language, I would frequently — exploring a website, I would prefer to go to the English version because it's much more clear and it's straightforward. And so my question is, how is the job market on this area in other languages? Is it developed here in the U.S. or… Because really, I see a need, like urgent need, of clarifying and helping the development of websites in other lang… at least I can speak for Spanish.

Ginny Redish: Absolutely. It is a huge market, and it is wonderful to have somebody like you who is bilingual. The U.S. government does almost everything bilingual. The National Cancer Institute has a usability lab where they — I don't know if she's still the lead, the lead was a bilingual person. The Center for Plain Language gives out ClearMark Awards every year in English, Spanish, and for the first time this year in French, primarily from Canada, from francophone Canada. But, yes, and most commercial sites that are global are translated, and, in fact, localized, into many, many languages. So, yes, that is a huge field, and I urge you, with your skill in Spanish, to get involved in that.

Monica: That's encouraging. Thank you.

Ginny Redish: Thank you very, very much. Someone says, “Gracias, Monica.”

Robbin: Ginny, can I add something to that?

Ginny Redish: Yes, please, Robbin.

Robbin: Because the plain English or plain language movement is alive and active in many parts of the world. But it's been significant in the U.S. and in England where there have been plain English campaigns. But I think that in other countries with significant languages, I'm thinking particularly France and Germany, there were conservative movements because of the centralized education and administration of those two countries. They had the central language societies and books published.

Nancy Frishberg: Like the Academy, you mean?

Robbin: Yeah. The Académie Française, and in Germany, I think a book called the Duden, who — very prescriptive about language, and “You must do it this way.” And they reinforce the bureaucratic heaviness of their language. And so there have been countervailing forces in those two countries, at least. I don't know what it's like in Spain and in Latin America.

Ginny Redish: Robbin, you're absolutely right. But there's also, the plain language movement has really been spreading. And at our annual conference this year, we had people from 55 countries. And in fact, in Sweden, where you lived for a long time, in the Scandinavian countries, there is tremendous government work in plain language. And so this is spreading. You're absolutely right that some countries have been very, very prescriptive about language, but also, the web has really brought the idea that we must be conversing with people, even to countries that had been more prescriptive about their language. And so I think there is real movement in that.

Robbin: A note from the comments that the Real Academia has also been loosening up lately. Just in the interest of continuity, I did have something additional on the theme of government supporting plain language or not supporting plain language. Ginny, you noted the historical fact that when the new administration came in 1981, I guess it was, and immediately turned off all the plain language support from the government, the American Institutes of Research and the Document Design Center did have their revenge on that administration a few years later because one of the first computer projects that we worked on, computer handbooks and creating a brand-new style, was for an IBM office system called PROFS, which stood for the Professional Office Systems, I think. And it had email, it had calendars, it had documents you could share, la dee dah dee, all those kinds of things in a primitive mainframe way. But they did that, and it was aimed at corporations, and they sold installation of that system to the White House. The White House bought it. Well, along comes the Iran-Contra affair, and Colonel, General, whatever, Oliver North trying to defend himself and talking about messages. But there were documents that were deleted. Oh, they weren’t deleted! They weren't deleted, because they didn't read the handbook that we wrote about what really happens when you delete something. It doesn't really go away. So, you know…

Ginny Redish: That is true, Robbin. And PROFS was a wonderful, wonderful project. We created icons before icons existed, before the graphical user interface. We had icons in our print document. Right? If you will remember. And we really… Of course, Mr. North exemplified a problem that we definitely had in computer manuals and is something we have to recognize in the web, too.

Robbin: I've linked an L.A. Times article, put that in the chat so people can read the story.

Ginny Redish: Right. But one of the things we have to remember about writing as a conversation is, in fact, that people skim and scan and read as little as possible to get the job done. And yeah, your story is a great one, takes us back to the Document Design Center. Paulina has her hand up, and so I'd like to meet Paulina.

Paulina: Something you mentioned. It's not directly to the topic itself, but you were working in a non-governmental platform, like for applied linguistics. Right? At the beginning, you mentioned CAL. And I was wondering — because it's a concern I'm having currently about if I should try to pursue greater studies, like pursue a Ph.D. degree in order to try to get into a career. I know you studied in Harvard, then you went to this non-governmental organization. Do you think someone without your background in that case, could it be a chance to work in UX design or in the kind of web content that you were mentioning to us?

Ginny Redish: That's a very good question, Paulina. In my personal case, the fact that I had a Ph.D. counted heavily towards my getting those jobs, even though the job had nothing to do with the topic of my Ph.D. However, I don't think it's necessary to get a good job, especially today. If you want to work in UX, then you really should have perhaps a master's degree or a certificate. There are a lot of academic programs that offer you a Master's in UX, and that would probably be the degree that you want to get started. PhDs in UX do more likely become academics. And the other thing is, if you're not sure that that's what you want to do, you might get some junior-level experience. I went straight through education. That is, I went from my undergraduate to my graduate work. If I were to advise someone today, I think it might be good to get some real practical experience in a team. There's so much — and I know this is I think what Nancy and Robbin are going to talk about on Friday morning — but there's so much in the workplace that just learning to be able to deliver a product on time, to work collaboratively in a team, to know what the work environment is like and actually in different places, because corporate cultures or company cultures can be so different. Robbin probably remembers, we worked for IBM and Hewlett-Packard at the same time. And we would go out to California. And I don't know about Robbin being male, but as a female, I would pack my three-piece suit to go to IBM and my jeans to go to Hewlett-Packard. Corporate cultures just vary tremendously. But what I'm saying is, you might want to get some experience before you decide to go to graduate school and then go particularly in UX and get a master's degree.

Nancy Frishberg: The thing was, I kept interrupting Robin, because I wanted to highlight, is your brief comments about bites, snack, meal. I went to bed last night thinking, “Who's going to talk about that? Do I have to mention that?” And thank you very much for reading my mind, because I find that very helpful, even when I talk to people who aren't writers but have to put together content, that they should think about, bite, snack, meal [unclear 43:30]…

Ginny Redish: It’s a wonderful concept, and I'm very grateful to Leslie for letting us also teach this important point. If you want more about it, on that slide I do have a link to her website, and you can find her original article about it on that website.

Nancy Frishberg: And it's so famous, it's got a Wikipedia page.

Ginny Redish: Oh, I didn't realize that. Okay. That is wonderful. That is wonderful.

Jennice Hinds: Just wondering, for content creators, I've seen some job postings where they have to deal with a certain field like health or business or law and things like that. Do you think that you need, like, any sort of background in that in order to be able to make it more clear, or is it fine to just kind of go into that field and learn as you go?

Ginny Redish: You will certainly do better in a job search if you have a background in the domain, particularly health, health literacy, because that is a huge field. And if you don't have the background in it, there are a couple, here are a couple of suggestions. One, read in the field so that when you go, if you get an interview, you can talk about the people in the field and what they say, what the general things… For example, one of the differences in a lot of health literacy work compared to what I teach and preach is that some of them still believe in readability formulas, which as linguists we know is hogwash. But — Robbin is putting up his hands — I'm still writing articles about why not to use readability formulas. My other suggestion for you, Jennice, is go and read a lot of health websites and see what is good and what is not about it. Even when we were hiring people at the Document Design Center and the rule was we could not give people a test, but I would say to them, “Find something that you think is not well done and redo it and then come and tell the story. Who is the audience? Why did you make the decisions that you made?” So there are ways in which you can get experience even without going back to school on your own, and there are ways in which you can build your skills in the domain on your own. But you also might find a lot of podcasts or webinars in the field, again, to make you, build your own self-confidence, self-esteem about your knowledge of the field and put yourself in a better position to getting a job in the field.

Perhaps we should close this and move on, but I'm really happy to have worked with so many people. And again, I'm happy to continue this conversation offline, and I look forward to the other talks in the series.

Nancy Frishberg: Thank you so much, Ginny.

Laurel Sutton: Linguistics Career Launch 2021 was a one-month intensive program intended to familiarize linguistics students and faculty with career options beyond academia, in business, tech, government, and nonprofit organizations. Videos of all our recorded sessions are available on our YouTube channel. LCL 2021 was organized by Nancy Frishberg, Alexandra Johnston, Emily Pace, Susan Steele, and Laurel Sutton. You can get in touch at linguisticscareerlaunch@gmail.com.