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In this issue

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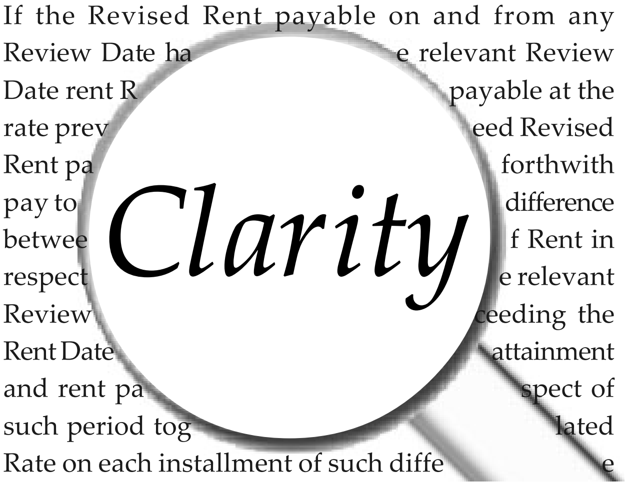

An international association promoting plain legal language

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Clarity … the journal

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We encourage you to submit articles to be considered for publication in *Clarity*. We especially welcome submissions from new writers. Send submissions directly to editor in chief Julie Clement. Please limit submissions to approximately 1,500 or 3,000 words.

This issue

Thank you to Clarity for generously inviting Plain Language Association InterNational[1] (PLAIN) to make this issue a repository for many of our October, 2007 Amsterdam conference papers. *Clarity 59* begins with four plenary papers presented by two PLAIN members and one representative from each of Clarity and the U.S. Center for Plain Language. Hosted by the President of Bureautaal in the Netherlands, Wessel Visser—who delivered sessions in English and Dutch on the rewriting of the Dutch constitution in plain language—the conference attracted about 200 participants.

Held in the exquisite, historic Beurs van Berlage, the conference allowed PLAIN to present awards to two outstanding plain-language pioneers: Mark Adler for his work with Clarity and Professor Joe Kimble for his work with everyone! (See PLAIN's website[2] for the award speeches to them both.) Jodi Bruner dazzled us with her originally composed plain-language dance, "Once Upon a Comma", supported by Sally MacBeth's vocal accompaniment. The drawing in of an arts component to our conference was one of its many firsts.

In this issue, you will read about plain-language challenges in India and Portugal and about its authors' plain-language accomplishments in Netherlands, USA, and Canada. The range of national perspectives and initiatives here reveal the growing awareness of a need to recognize plain language as a profession and an international public trust. We in PLAIN want to focus on the joint heritages of our plain-language specialties.

Neil James and I book-ended the plenary sessions on behalf of PLAIN. The US Center for Plain Language paper was presented by Allen Rotz, but written by Annetta Cheek. Your president, Christopher Balmford, presented on Clarity's behalf.

Our three organizations (and others who wish to join us) are exploring ways to

- share, deepen, and archive plain-language research through PLINI, a possible Plain-Language InterNational Institute;
- develop standards in concert and protect against commodifying or publicizing inaccurate or incomplete plain-language programs; and

- develop plain language as a recognizable and credible multi-disciplinary profession with accreditation.

Over a decade ago, five plain-language "hikers" spent a day climbing in the Rocky Mountains around Lake Louise in my province, Alberta, Canada. Below is an historic picture of the five of us on that memorable day. It comes to mind now, as our plain-language challenges ahead represent an enormous mountain to climb. And, at this point in our history, we are at the base scanning the terrain, trying to chart the best route. *Together* we will draw and re-draw the map as we move forth to create our profession.

Though at an early stage, we begin our ascent with evident riches—an evolving plain-language group of master writers and thinkers, respected authors and researchers, apprentices, renegades, teachers, archivists, critics, and others. We have the potential to build a strong, durable human infrastructure for plain language.

Clarity's Mexico City conference in November 2008 and PLAIN's Sydney, Australia conference in October 2009 will move the dialogue and planning forward. Let us *together* focus on what we need to reach that mountain pinnacle: innovation, risk-taking, forging new alliances, and contributing our time and passions for plain language.

It has been a joy to work with Julie Clement on this issue.

Endnotes

1 Please note the new spelling of our name with the capital I at the front and the N in the middle of InterNational!

2 www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

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Joe Kimble, Phil Knight, David Elliott, Christine Mowat, Peter Butt.

Clarity's 3rd international conference

Mexico City: 20-23 November 2008

Legal language: transparent and efficient

Transparent is part of Mexico's anti-corruption activities: unintelligible documents leave room for officials to exploit the vagueness, ambiguity, uncertainty, lack of clarity to request a bribe, etc.

Efficient is about reducing costs for the organisations that produce, issue, and administer documents and for the people who have to read, use, apply, and comply with those documents.

Clarity is co-hosting the conference with: *Mexico's Underministry of Public Administration*, which is responsible for the government's extensive ongoing plain language activities, and a prestigious private university, *ITAM (Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México).*

All sessions simultaneously translated between each of English, French, and Spanish

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Registration deadline: 17 October 2008

Christine Mowat's *first degree was an Honours B.A. in Philosophy and English, and her M.A. was in Education on the writing process. She taught English at colleges in England, Kenya, and Canada before starting Wordsmith Associates in 1980. With instructors in Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver, Christine has been a plain-language leader, curriculum designer, writer, and instructor for 28 years. She sat as PLAIN's Chair, Vice Chair, and Acting Chair from 2000–2007. For 7 years, she was on the PLAIN executive, chairing both the Toronto (2002) and Amsterdam (2007) conferences. Her book,* A Plain Language Handbook for Legal Writers, *was published by Carswell in 1999 and is now used for all Wordsmith's Improving Legal Writing workshops.*

As President and owner of Wordsmith Associates Communications Consultants since 1980, Christine has conducted plain-language workshops for thousands of legal, business, and government professionals. Recent Wordsmith plain-language writing projects include plain-language work on the Canadian Investment Dealers Association 550-page rule book; municipal, provincial, federal, and corporate policies and agreements; and bylaws.

Plenary paper #1

The building blocks on Wessel's website: the Amsterdam challenge

Christine Mowat

President, Wordsmith Associates Communications Consultants Ltd.
Past Chair, PLAIN

Fifteen years ago, David Mellinkoff, one of the earliest modern plain-language academics—he began writing in the early sixties—included the phrase *plain language* in his plain-language dictionary.[1] I suspect he wasn't winking or even grinning when he wrote that plain language is "an imprecise expression of hope for improvement in the language of the law". Further, he wrote, "Criteria of plainness are not standard." We have set this plenary up to inspire our plain-language community to explore the need and desire to create these standards.

You may have noticed what seemed to be children's building blocks on the PLAIN Conference 2007 website. They may have suggested to some that plain language simplifies ideas. Many outside our field have incorrectly guessed that plain language is a dumbing-down process, a reaching for the lowest common denominator. Or that it is a puerile re-clothing of complex specialist languages in dull and meagre, but understandable, language.

But plain language, as most of you know, has nothing in common with those assumptions.

Plain language is an intellectual pursuit

Plain language is not anti-intellectual. On the contrary, it is an intellectual pursuit that eliminates linguistic arrogance or reader-distancing and condescending language. When we plain-language specialists work with arcane and difficult theoretical science or complex law, our re-writing may involve strenuous intellectual effort.

Some have called us translators as we advocate a kind of de-programming of institutionalized, bureaucratic, foggy, long-winded, evasive, circuitous, or other types of poor writing. But I think the people who appear in Raphael's famous picture, *School of Athens*, most closely represent the skills and knowledge bases we plain-language writers draw on. Here we see Aristotle holding his *Ethics*, Plato with his Socratic dialogues, Pythagoras symbolizing the measurements some of us do, and Michelangelo representing the visual dimension. There, too, is Socrates, devoted to citizen education and Hericlitis, the philosopher who identified "the flux". I needn't explain the latter metaphor!

Indeed, when we immerse ourselves in the intricacies of a subject matter's intellectual activity to re-write a document in plain language, we open doors to new learning. As partners with our clients, we open wide the doors to *their* clients, customers, citizens, and public audiences.

But we are far more than translators. After 27 years, what has surprised me most about my field is the deeper learning that happens to a plain-language re-writer—and often for the original writers, too. I think back to the example of Australian judges who rewrote a piece of legislation and underneath all the legalese, they found mistakes in law. When we discover ambiguities in drafts we are working on and probe for answers, astonishingly, clients will say, "I don't know what that means. It could mean A, B, or C. I guess we'll have to decide what it *should* mean and then rewrite it!"

Plain language specialists are language activists

[My slide showed a crowd with a banner that said, "We support readers' rights to understand text!"]

Plain-language specialists are restless intellectuals and disruptive thinkers. We need to be so because we sometimes face complacency or even hostility. Some lawyers cleave to their traditional legalese. Some scientists claim their disciplines are too complex to be shared. We are, in fact, language activists and leaders who use the building blocks of plain-language principles to change the language of governments, the law, disciplines, professions, and trades. Among other things, plain language is a robust idea encompassing democratic ideals, respect for community, and innovation. We make the language of governments accessible to the owners of governments, the people.

What we do requires a co-operative struggle

Plain language is a publicly initiated and reinforced intellectual activity, and it represents an on-going process to give knowledge to readers and listeners alike. *Plain language promotes a civil tongue.* For all these reasons, we cannot ignore the continuing challenges we face. They persist because there are some who denigrate all public interventions—to change legislation and countless other documents—and they do that denigrating in the name of "traditional intellectual standards". Such people see us as

1. challengers venturing outside our "proper" sphere of intellectual activity,
2. upstarts who are critical of corporate, financial, or government language and aim for unnecessary or faddish change,
3. mediocre writers who are swimming in the demeaning cultural mainstream, lowering the levels of public language.

And what have we done about these critics of plain language?

Well, we have held firmly to our pluralistic and communicative values and gone on about our work. And we have

- rewritten hundreds of thousands of documents around the world,
- instructed hundreds of thousands of workshop participants in plain-language writing,
- tested readability and comprehension levels,
- written plain-language style guides for clients or taught others to do so,
- published books, articles, and manuals,
- conducted plain-language audits on organizations,
- researched numerous aspects of our multidisciplinary field,
- shared our plain language successes and failures,
- joined plain-language organizations,
- participated in plain-language e-mail discussion groups,
- rewritten bylaws, legislation, rules of court, and constitutions,
- constantly tested readers' reactions to our new versions of writing, and
- attended conferences.

We have continued, with clients and each other, co-creating and expanding our plain-language field.

And guess what? Despite some opposition, our building blocks have created a very fine entity in the world.

Having said that, let's admit we don't all agree about what plain language is—or even how to evaluate its success.

Different understandings and emphasis about plain language

On our PLAIN discussion group, we often read the words "I disagree" or "I agree". Sometimes those words are followed by reasons and persuasive research (a 13-page paper once by Martin Cutts), and other times writers simply carry on with an "In my work, I have always . . . I believe it to be so" phrase.

Here is a small selection of the many questions we need to answer with comprehensive research:

1. **Should we pitch all documents to the public at a grade 7 or 8 or 9 level?**

   Should there be different classes of grade levels depending on subject matter and specialized public audiences? How do we find agreement on the appropriateness and importance of grade levels for plain-language documents? Should we ensure that the users, teachers, and recipients of plain language understand that readability tests provide only a rough guide?

2. **Should we banish sans serif fonts from all texts in the name of greater readability if we find one research study that contradicts that claim?**

   What kinds of qualifications do we need in recommending font sizes, typefaces, leading, line lengths, heading and itemization spacing, and so on? (Again, some practitioners fasten on absolute rules as a practical approach.) My company, Wordsmith, suggests between 15- and 25-word sentences on average and 35 words as the longest. Others just say between 15 and 20 words without mentioning the need for a variety of syntax or the occasional need for a longer sentence.

3. **Should we work to educate, or collaborate more closely with, graphic designers who contradict some of our fondest plain-language design principles?**

   For example, some designers, and even publishers of plain-language texts, still use punishingly small fonts or sans serif fonts in pale grey or white that "look pretty" but are hard to read (and almost impossible to copy or fax).

4. **How do we gain agreement on what the concept of simplifying means in our field?**

   Some of us purposely never use the term, yet the recent Oregon Bill in U.S.A. (passed in March 2007) to require plain language in government documents requires simplicity. In PLAIN's testimonial to support that bill, I wrote:

   > *Change* "short, simple sentences" to "short, clear (or "easily understood") sentences". Readers can easily misinterpret *simple sentences* to mean a grammatical reference restricting writing to simple, not compound or complex sentences. Or they might misinterpret *simple sentences* to mean sentences constructed for those "of low or abnormally low intelligence" [4th definition in the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998)].

But the issue of simplifying goes further than these examples, of course.

5. **Is the image-evoking principle that Wordsmith's CLARITY model teaches (image-evoking text and design) as widely recognized in the field as it should be?**

   For example, here is a piece of medical research text[2] enhanced by image-evoking language:

   > The human brain is a powerful and resilient organ. It has many enemies though, and a dramatic vulnerability. When under attack—from a stroke, head trauma or degenerative disease—a small cluster of affected brain cells basically commits suicide. In so doing, it releases toxins that kill off neighbouring cells in droves. Neurons tumble like dominoes to their death in a process that can take hours (in a stroke or a head trauma) or years (in Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease).

   What makes this passage so compelling is the image-evoking language: *attack, cells committing suicide, toxins killing neighbouring cells in droves, neurons tumbling like dominoes to their death.* As well, listen to the rhythm, the fine flow and variety in the language. We need to hear the music in our plain language sometimes—at least in our heads, if not out loud—to find excellence. That kind of sentence production and idea linkages cannot be measured by numbers. But we can analyse texts for variety and freshness of images and clear transitions.

6. **How many types of plain language are there?**

   For example, my own plain-language work has focused primarily on white-collar literacy and legal writing and not on low-level readers. Should we be finding broad classifications?

7. **What are the interweaving strands in our multi-disciplinary field?**

   What kind of overlaps and differences are there between plain-language and literacy studies, for example? Consider the table at the top of page 8 as a start on naming sets of knowledge that bear on our field.

8. **What grammatical and technical standards and expert sources should we recommend in differing countries?**

   Lately, our PLAIN discussion group has focused on the differences, overlaps, and contradictions related to the use of *which* and *that.* We see different style preferences about numbers in sentences, the serial comma, and our very name—*plain*

1 Writing research	6 Standards and variations in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling
2 Reading research	7 Computer literacy, including knowledge of on-screen editing software and techniques
3 Forms and information design	8 Linguistics, including psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics
4 Field testing, usability, and other evaluations	9 Communications theory
5 Subject expertise	10 Project and change management

language, clear language, and restyling. I have noted the enormously different styles that authors use in this journal, *Clarity*. Astonishingly, one judge wrote his piece in short, choppy sentences that (in my view) undermined the very subject he was discussing. Some authors have broken the most commonly accepted rules of punctuation or even used run-on sentences. What variations are acceptable options in our field and in our journals? And what reasons do we give?

9. **Finally, how do we teach and reinforce plain language?**

   This is the most compelling question for many of us. And a related question is how we avoid the danger of plain-language instruction being too quickly and superficially assimilated, despite our best intentions.

Absolutely no absolutes

Let's look at a common source of dispute. Should plain-language writers change the word *unnecessary* to *needless?* We recognize that just because *unnecessary* has five syllables and *needless* has two doesn't mean the second is quicker to understand. On this subject, Martin Cutts has just published a soundly researched booklet, *A Plain English Lexicon, a guide to whether your words will be understood*, soon to be available on his website.

The second example is a sentence that came up for discussion in my office:

Before

> Plain language did not emerge as an entity separate from a growing human rights and global community context.

One person immediately suggested a rewrite structured in the positive:

After

> Plain language grew alongside and related to a growing human rights and global community context.

One can argue that the positive rewrite lacks the creative tension and flow of the first. The suggested change resulted from unthinkingly applying another absolute rule: always put negative syntax into the positive. Clearly, neither of these rules, (i) Use words with the fewest syllables, or (ii) Write in the positive, apply in *all* contexts. By oversimplifying in this way, we are seen to be inflexible, and we begin to alienate workshop participants and clients. We hear them muttering about "forbidden words". Let me add I'm not suggesting it's wrong to supply lists of words with suggested substitutes.

Years ago, in *Clarity* 52, the brilliant Australian plain-language pioneer, Robert Eagleson, called me on my own objection to using numbers instead of words under 10. I had boldly written "Starting a sentence with a number is like going to a party bare-chested". And he had retorted with his title: "The doleful grip of convention", and then wrote, "To cite 1 other example from another country . . ." It turns out that I needed to re-think the constantly changing nature of language and my own inflexibility.

Again and again, we must illustrate how to tailor *every* message, and choose words and styles to suit our audience(s), purpose(s), and context(s).

Steps to the future

We need to consider the steps leading to plain language as a profession. A profession requires mastery of a complex body of knowledge and specialized skills. It requires both formal education and practical experience. What demarcates a profession is mastery of a body of advanced knowledge, particularly knowledge bearing directly on the well-being of others. As custodians of special knowledge that bear on human well-being, professionals are constrained by moral responsibilities to apply their knowledge in ways that benefit the rest of the society.

At the moment, we are not a profession. Nor are we even clear about the limits of our field. What we owe or borrow from other fields, and their interrelationships, have yet to be systematically mapped out.

We know that knowledge is dominantly organized in disciplines. At the same time, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research is developing at the boundaries of traditional, hierarchical disciplines. In a paper exploring the evolving field of disciplines, Peter van den Besselaar and Gaston Heimeriks[3] wrote:

> In *multidisciplinary* research, the subject under study is approached from different angles, using different disciplinary perspectives. However, neither the theoretical perspectives nor the findings of the various disciplines are integrated in the end. An *interdisciplinary* approach, on the other hand, creates its own theoretical, conceptual and methodological identity. Consequently, the results of an interdisciplinary study of a certain problem are more coherent and integrated. [Christine's italics]

Interdisciplinary work integrates concepts across different disciplines. New disciplines have arisen as a result of such syntheses. For instance, quantum information processing amalgamates elements of quantum physics and computer science. Bioinformatics combines molecular biology with computer science. An interdisciplinary team is a team of people with training in different fields. Interdisciplinary teams are common in complex environments such as health care. Will plain language follow that model?

Plain language already encompasses activities that involve a responsibility to serve the public. And plain-language specialists possess growing and complex bodies of knowledge. But we do not yet have the standards for admission and evaluation that inspire general public confidence in a profession that combines its many knowledge strands.

Standards? What standards?

A number of plain-language pioneers in our midst are within striking distance of retiring. We must preserve and make available to others their plain-language expertise, the subtleties and nuances they've amassed in their practices and teachings, and how their writing projects demonstrate that plain language must bend to the context, purpose and audience.

To date, we have all, separately, created our own forms of plain-language teaching. This Amsterdam conference holds great stores of plain language's intellectual knowledge. It holds sources of contradiction, disparate views, and emphases. It holds, in individual units, magnificent examples of models of plain language documents, varying in length from a few days of writing to multi-year projects. All of this separateness and independence has been healthy, and understandable, and will continue; yet at the same time, our plain-language history cries out for new building blocks—for a new co-operative structure.

And, as plain-language practitioners, I think we have all arbitrarily gone off in many directions at once for too long. We have achieved a tremendous amount, but by collecting research in a more systematic way, by developing archives and different kinds and levels of courses in plain language, we will mature. We will better serve our publics, governments, and countries by transforming plain language into a more focused and credible discipline.

And now comes the resonating question: how do we do this?

Plain-Language InterNational Institute (PLINI)

I suggest we start developing a *Plain-Language InterNational Institute* (PLINI)—an institute that draws together the best minds and most experienced specialists in our field. These plain-language specialists will research and develop standards; design and oversee the teaching of courses; develop careful measuring sticks for plain language when appropriate; and, in the fullness of time, create an accreditation system for our profession.

They will need to document a wide range of qualitative and quantitative standards for evaluation. They will differentiate between knowledgeable, carefully supported qualitative judgements and arbitrary "because I like it" or "because we've always done it" reasons.

Specifically, as stewards of our plain-language mission, we need an institute that:

- develops international standards (with national variations) in English
- focuses initially on plain-language research
- studies how plain language works in other languages
- defines plain language more consciously and comprehensively
- creates curricula for differing types and levels of plain language, with instruction on writing both legal and non-legal documents
- is home to plain-language archives
- works ultimately on creating an international school offering plain-language courses in different countries
- includes a plain-language web library and possibly webinars
- attracts international faculty with expertise in specific aspects of plain language
- advocates internationally to government, non-government organizations, and corporations (i) the use of skilled, knowledgeable, and well-trained plain-language writers, and (ii) the monitoring and enabling of clear communications for their publics
- has a dedicated Institute Board and committees with international representatives, and
- develops a PLINI Bylaw for incorporation and policies to enable the raising of funds as a non-profit organization

Too idealistic? Too ambitious? Maybe. But let's see what we can do by 2015. Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) is 14 years old [2007] and has held five conferences in North America. October 2007 is our first European conference in Amsterdam, and the next one is in Australia in 2009. Mexico has expressed interest in sponsoring a conference, tying it to their name for plain language, *citizen language*, or the Mexican term, *lenguaje ciudadano*. *Clarity* itself has sponsored conferences in England, Ireland, and France. What's to keep our organizations, PLAIN, Clarity, the Center for Plain Language and others, from joining forces to create a Plain Language Institute? Nothing ventured . . .

Finally, we must collaborate and share in a way that we have not done before. And we need to start soon.

This is the Amsterdam challenge that PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language now put forward to you.

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Endnotes

1 *Dictionary of American Legal Usage*, 1992

2 Melissa Healy, "Chemical protection against brain damage proves elusive" in the *Los Angeles Times*, reprinted in the *Edmonton Journal*, April 2007.

3 "Disciplinary, Multidisciplinary, Interdisciplinary- Concepts and Indicators – Social Science Informatics Program, University of Amsterdam Roetersstraat 15, NL-1018 WB Amsterdam, The Netherlands, presented to 8th conference on Scientometrics and Informetrics – ISSI2001 Sydney. Australia, 2001

See Christine Mowat's biography on page 4.

Plenary paper #2

Setting the standard: some steps toward a plain language profession

Dr Neil James

Sixth PLAIN conference, October 2007

1. How do you know?

Not long ago, I was approached by a legal organisation to prepare a plain-language program. Or I should say, I was approached by one of its senior staff, who felt their writing could do with a makeover. But when our proposal went to the full Executive, the story rapidly changed. They felt that they were already using plain English as far as possible, and there was no need for further effort. To that, I had one question:

How do you know?

Well, they said, we made plain English mandatory in our writing manual, so we must be doing it. Yes, but how do you *know*? Do you have any way of measuring your writing as plain language? To that, I only received blank looks at four paces.

Now to give you some idea of the writing that we were dealing with, here's a sample from a standard contract drafted and used by that organisation:

> The Consultant will ensure that the Specified Personnel undertake work in respect of the Services in accordance with the terms of this Agreement and will not be hindered or prevented in any way in the performance of their duties in carrying out the Services including but not limited to being removed from the performance of the Services or being requested to perform services which in any way interfere with the due performance of the Services by the Specified Personnel.

In case you are wondering, this actually means:

> The consultant will ensure that the specified personnel deliver the Services without any hindrance.

Anyone reading the two versions is in little doubt which one is the clearer and more readable. The astonishing thing is that senior members of that organisation believed that the first version was as plain English as it was possible for them to go.

When I tried to persuade them otherwise, they quickly asked for the standards that supported my case. I had to admit that, while there is plenty of case-specific evidence, there was as yet no set of international standards backed by an institutional authority. There is no ISO reference point for plain language; no professional body setting industry benchmarks; no accreditation system for practitioners.

Unlike doctors or lawyers or architects or computer programmers, unlike scientists or engineers or accountants, we are not yet a profession. And I would argue that until we establish some kind of professional standards and structure, we will continue to come up against these barriers to our professional credibility.

2. Standards and measures

But let me define what I mean by a standard of plain English. Broadly speaking, I believe there are three things we can measure when working as language professionals:

- the writing itself
- perceptions about the writing
- actual outcomes of the writing.

The writing

Of course, the writing is the most obvious thing. You take a stack of sample documents and analyse the content, the structure, the layout and the expression:

- Is their core content clear?
- What structures do they employ?
- How effective is the layout and design?

- What level of diction do they use?
- Are they mainly in the active or passive voice?
- Is there a lot of redundancy?
- How long are the sentences?
- Are there any grammatical errors?

These are the easiest things to start measuring, and they will tell you a lot about the effectiveness of your writing. This is the traditional territory of plain English.

The problem with measuring the writing alone, however, is that it is in danger of neglecting the context—the real world environment the writing is operating in. You can get all of the elements of language right, but still see the document fail. So further measures are needed.

Reader perceptions

So the next type of measure is your audience's perceptions. You survey your readers and you ask them what they think about your writing.

- Do you find these documents easy to read?
- What impression do our documents give you about our organisation?
- Does this document make you more likely to buy our product?
- What is the most important information you need from this text?
- Are you persuaded by the recommendations?
- How easy are these forms to use?

Answers to these questions will reinforce your analysis of the writing. But we need to be a trifle cautious with reader perceptions, because they are not always accurate. For example, if you ask readers which font they prefer, they will generally pick one that looks attractive. But this is not always the font that is quickest to read. The ultimate test of success is to sit them down and have them read comparable text in different fonts and actually measure which one is the more effective.

The outcomes

Here we are entering the realm of testing, the third kind of measure of effective writing. Take your real world document and actually put it in front of sample readers doing real tasks and see how it works. Measure the outcomes for the writer or for the organisation, such as:

- time—how long does it takes to read and respond to a document
- compliance—the error rates in processing documents
- satisfaction—rejection rates or complaints
- costs—savings in costs such as paper and staff time
- profits—changes in net revenue.

These are often the most compelling and powerful measures because they take account of both text and context. They are even more useful if you can begin testing at the very start of the process to inform your drafting. The disadvantage of outcome measures is that they can be time consuming, a little costly and sometimes downright impractical.

Putting it together

So effective standards need take account of more than language elements such as the average length of sentences. If we put them together, we can come up with some six areas for standards:

Audience

Content and purpose

Structure

Language and style

Design

Outcomes

3. Existing standards

There's nothing exactly new in these elements, as plain language practitioners have been out there working with them for several decades. But what we've been doing individually has varied from country to country and practitioner to practitioner. Let's have a look at some of the attempts at setting standards in different parts of the world. I've taken a small selection from the UK, USA, Canada, South Africa and Australia. These are by no means the only examples, but they will be enough for our purposes today.

Plain Language Commission

It is fitting perhaps that we start with one of our pioneers, Martin Cutts, who is here today.

Martin's organisation, the Plain Language Commission in the UK, lists on its website the factors that it considers when evaluating a document. The WriteGroup in New Zealand uses a similar approach as its set of standards:

Purpose

Is the purpose obvious or stated early and clearly?

Content

Is the information accurate, relevant and complete, anticipating readers' questions and answering them?

Are essential technical terms explained or defined?

Is a contact point stated for readers who want to know more?

Structure

Is the information well organized and easy to navigate through, with appropriate headings and sub-headings?

Is there appropriate use of illustrations, diagrams and summary panels?

Style and grammar

Is the style appropriate for the audience, with a good average sentence length (say 15-20 words), plenty of active-voice verbs, and reasonably short paragraphs?

Is the document free of pomposity, verbosity and officialese (no aforesaids, notwithstandings, herebys, adumbrates, commencements and inter alias)?

Is the text grammatically sound and well punctuated?

Is capitalisation consistent in text and headings?

If there is a contents page, are its headings consistent with those in the text?

Layout and design

Does the document look good?

Is the type easily readable and is there enough space between lines of type?

Is there a clear hierarchy of headings and spaces?

Have emphasis devices, such as bold type, been used well?

Wordsmith Associates Communications Consultants Ltd.

Of course, the other international standard setter here today is Christine Mowat of Canada, whose CLARITY model structures plain language elements in a creative way:

C Conciseness

Communicate efficiently and economically: say the same thing with fewer words and make each word work. Cut empty words that add bulk but not content—don't waste readers' time. Break long sentences in two, or segment comparable chunks as numbered or bulleted items.

L Lean and lively language

Use precise, direct language, instead of imprecise, overworked language. Avoid the trap of thinking that verbose legalese is precise—it's the opposite. Engage readers with clear, compelling language. Substitute for bureaucratese, boilerplate, or institutionalized wording.

A Active voice

Use active voice verbs to:

- shorten and clarify your message
- identify the responsible party and ensure accountability
- speak directly to readers, with natural sentence structure.

R Regular and reasonable

Be sure to use proper grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling: they coalesce to ensure a clear message and minimize misunderstanding. Language rules really do matter, and writers who ignore them risk confusing readers and missing goals.

I Image evoking, concrete and specific

Use image-evoking words to make legal writing both accurate and interesting and create vivid pictures for readers. Specific words and details, as well as analogies and metaphors, paint a clear, crisp picture instead of a vague, diffused one. Visual elements (charts, graphs, tables) are underused and overlooked in a text-based work. The old adage about a picture being worth a thousand words is actually true.

T **Tight organisation**

Design your document to make sense to readers—not just to you. The organization of a document is like the foundation of a house. There's no point in great furnishings (the grammar, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary) if the foundation of the house (the organization) is flawed and crumbling. Use the star-chain-hook formula to build your own structure.

Y **You and your audience**

Consider your audience and the purpose of your message before starting to write. Your goal is to communicate with the readers. Design the document based on their needs. Consider both the big picture and the details—from their perspective. Small adjustments to tone and format can make big improvements for readers.

Plain English Foundation

In Australia, the Plain English Foundation applies its verbumetrics system when evaluating an organisation's writing. This breaks down into similar categories, but focuses on more quantitative rather than qualitative measures, with a mix of writing, perception and outcome measures. Here are the most common dozen that we use:

Element	**Measure**	**Scope**
Audience and purpose		
Audience needs	Reader profile	Mapping of benchmarks suitable for the audience of a document.
Reader perceptions	Perception surveys	Audience views on existing writing.
Content and structure		
Focus	% key material	Ratio of key content: detail.
Structure	Structure mapping	Evaluation of structural design, complexity, balance, headings, numbering and navigation.
Persuasiveness	Value analysis	Ratio of description: analysis.
Logic	Proof analysis	Evaluation of key arguments in an analytical document.
Design		
Document design	Layout index	Weighted index of elements such as type, spacing, justification, visual aids, headings, bullets and lists etc.
Language		
Tone	Tone scale	Language level and appropriateness for a particular audience.
Readability	Fry graph	Likely comprehension of text with intended audience.
Clarity	Active voice	Balance of different verb types and likely impact on audience.
Efficiency	Key words	Ratio of core meaning words to functional words.
Outcomes		
Usability	Testing	Measurement of actual outcomes.

I've chosen these three to illustrate the range of approaches to what is essentially the same task. Interestingly, what all three systems have in common is that they are provided by the private sector. All are plain English consultancies offering their services and expertise for payment. It is hardly surprising then that there has not yet been a combined set of standards. That would perhaps call for the involvement of the public sector.

South Africa—National Credit Act

Yet when legislators have been involved in standards setting, they tend fall back on fairly general guidelines. In South Africa, for example, there were recent attempts to codify plain English in the new *National Credit Act*:

> **64.** (1) The producer of a document that is required to be delivered to a consumer in terms of this Act must provide that document-
> ***(a)*** in the prescribed form, if any, for that document; or
> ***(b)*** in plain language, if no form has been prescribed for that document.
> (2) For the purposes of this Act, a document is in plain language if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the document is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal credit experience, could be expected to understand the content, significance, and import of the document without undue effort, having regard to-
> ***(a)*** the context, comprehensiveness and consistency of the document;
> ***(b)*** the organisation, form and style of the document;
> **(c)** the vocabulary, usage and sentence structure of the text; and
> ***(d)*** the use of any illustrations examples, headings, or other aids to reading and understanding.

While a commendable exercise, the on-the-ground experience has suggested many of the first documents under the new laws use the same—very un-plain—language of old.

USA—H. R. 4809

The Americans have also had a go at legislating for plain language, with several states having passed laws requiring agencies to write in plain English. One of the most recent examples was an attempted amendment to the *Paperwork Reduction Act*, to 'facilitate compliance with Federal paperwork requirements'. In the end, this Bill did not get up, but it is interesting what elements it identified:

> (15) the term 'plain language' means language that is clear and readily understandable to the intended reader and complies with the following standards:
> (A) Uses short words, sentences, and paragraphs.
> (B) Uses active verbs.
> (C) Contains explanations of legal, foreign, and technical terms, unless the terms are commonly understood.
> (D) Avoids defining terms that are commonly understood.
> (E) Uses personal pronouns to refer to affected persons and the responsible agency if helpful to improve clarity.
> (F) Minimizes cross-references.
> (G) Avoids sentences with double negatives or exceptions to exceptions.
> (H) Uses tables, diagrams, pictures, maps, and vertical lists to improve clarity.
> (I) Demonstrates logical organization.
> (J) Addresses separate audiences separately.
> (K) Places general material before exceptions and specialized information.
> (L) Addresses processes covered by a rule in chronological order.
> (M) Follows other best practices of plain language writing.

Although they vary greatly in approach, we have in these examples a fair degree of consensus about what plain language standards might include, and if we return to my checklist, most areas are well covered:

Audience
Content and purpose
Structure
Language and style
Design
Outcomes

So my first conclusion is a positive one: there is a wealth of practical experience we can already draw from to put together some professional standards. Far from starting from scratch, we are starting with a considerable foundation underneath us.

That's not to say that the task will be easy. Here is my top ten list of the main issues we will need to resolve to bring our standards together into a formal professional framework.

4. The top ten issues

1. Consolidating the research base

The first step is to draw together all of the work that we've been doing individually, whether that is in the existing attempts at standards or the research base that supports them. There's little point in reinventing the wheel.

2. Scoping the languages to include

Next, there is the question of how multilingual our standards should be. Our very presence here shows that there is not just a plain English profession in the making, but plain Dutch, plain Swedish, and plain Portuguese ones as well. Do we take on all of these at once, or do we focus initially on English?

3. Positioning plain language with other fields

Thirdly, we need to clarify where and how we sit in proximity to other fields. How do we relate to disciplines like technical writing, information design, cognitive psychology, grammar or rhetoric? Are we the multidisciplinary profession that brings all of these things together? If so, do we define our profession by the tasks we apply our work to, such as the language of public exchange?

4. Testing versus techniques

The next question is what our standards will emphasise. There is at times a dichotomy set up whenever talk turns to plain language: testing versus techniques. One end advocates a testing-driven standards regime as the best way you can guarantee that your document will work. The other end focuses on text-based techniques such as readability measurement, the level of active voice or principles for effective structure.

In reality, I don't believe we need to make an exclusive choice between these two approaches. Indeed, I don't see them as alternative approaches at all, but part of a single continuum of plain language standards. But this is a debate we need to have.

5. Untangling intellectual property

Perhaps a more significant challenge to overcome will be the commercial nature of much of the work done to date. We cannot shirk the fact that many of those who have invested in plain language systems make a living out of this investment. So there will be some difficult tangles of intellectual property to work through.

6. Distributing the standards

Once that is done, there is then the question of what model we use to distribute the standards. Do we make them available for free as a matter of public interest, and if so, how do we maintain quality control? If not for free, do we sell them, and using what model?

7. Setting the institutional structure

Once we have agreed on a common set of standards and a model for distribution, the next practical hurdle will be the institutional structure to administer them. Do we set up a professional association, and can it be international rather than nationally-based? What relationship would it have with existing bodies such as PLAIN and Clarity?

8. Regulating the profession

If we are to take professional associations as our model, that also calls for some kind of benchmarks for memberships, perhaps with formal accreditation for plain language professionals. This is perhaps one of the trickiest challenges, as other fields have already found. In Australia, our editors' societies have been tearing themselves apart wrestling with this issue.

9. Establishing a role in research and training

Then there is the potential ongoing role of our institution in extending the research base and supporting its members, such as through seminars, publications and conferences. This calls for a close relationship with the tertiary sector, but what academic discipline does such a multi-disciplinary area such as plain language deal with?

10. Financing

Lastly, who is going to be paying for all of this activity? The obvious answer is its professional membership, but is our profession large enough and wealthy enough to sustain it? I suggest that setting standards would certainly raise the financial capacity of our practitioners, but do they have the capacity to get it going in the first place?

5. Next steps

If that all sounds like an exhausting workload to take on, it is only so because the potential for our profession is so high. Clearly, however, we are not going to be able to do this all at once. My feeling is that we should separate the tasks into two areas:

- those that are more readily achievable
- those that need work over the longer term.

In the more readily achievable category, I would put the following:

- An umbrella organisation with a draft constitution and operating model.
- A process for consolidating a single set of standards.
- An initial focus on English.
- A volunteer-based effort with minimal member funding.
- An initial priority on consolidating the research base.

I want to suggest a series of specific steps we can take over the next two years:

Step 1: Agreeing to tackle the task.

This process can start now. Today. It starts with the consensus that it is worth taking on. It also starts in the knowledge that we don't have all the answers and don't know what the final destination will be. At the end of this session, perhaps we can call for a vote to test whether we have that consensus.

Step 2: Forming an international working group

If we agree to give it a go, what process do we use to begin? I'm suggesting we form an international working group of twelve practitioners:

Two members each from PLAIN, Clarity and the Center for Plain Language.

Six representatives from other countries to ensure a broad international spread.

Step 3: Preparing an options paper on five areas

The main task of the group would be to set out the available options in five areas:

- institutional structure
- services and activities for our institution
- setting plain language standards
- potential research activities
- funding.

Step 4: Debating the options paper at Clarity 2008

To give this a deadline, I suggest that the working group publish its report in time for the Clarity conference in 2008. Clarity sessions can then be set up to debate specific options.

Step 5: Developing preferred model

Using the feedback, the working group would then prepare over the following year a 'preferred model' for setting up the process.

Step 6: Launch the preferred model at 2009 PLAIN conference

The 2009 PLAIN conference would then see further debate and the formal adoption of a final working model.

What would come further along?

Once this process is complete, our umbrella institution would then be able to:

- complete and launch draft standards
- create a formal funding base for extended activities
- offer individual membership and accreditation
- develop a program of new research
- enable training and professional development programs.

In short, if the process succeeds, we could evolve into the full 'Institute' that Christine Mowat argued for in her opening paper. At a minimum, we would have a formal structure for developing the first plain-language standards, along with some productive debate over the next two years. All for the cost of 12 people donating their time.

No doubt this approach will sound too cautious to some and far too optimistic to others. But let us begin the debate. I look forward to hearing the representatives of Clarity and the Center for Plain Language, and to the discussion throughout the rest of the conference.

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Dr Neil James *is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia, which combines plain English training, editing and auditing with a public campaign for more ethical language practice. Neil has published three books and over 50 articles and essays on language and literature. His latest book, Writing at work, (Allen and Unwin, 2007) is on the language of the professions.*

Does Clarity have your email address?

If you're willing, would you please send your email address to Mark Adler <adler@adler.demon.co.uk> so that he can add you to his email list of Clarity members. We promise not to bombard you with emails, but from time to time Mark sends out information that should be of interest to members. You will also receive a PDF version of the journal as soon as it's available.

Plenary paper #3

Strong, cautious support: Clarity's position on standards and accreditation

Christopher Balmford

Clarity's President

This is a slightly reworked version of a paper delivered on behalf of Clarity—with its Committee's approval—in the plenary session on standards at PLAIN's October 2007 Conference in Amsterdam. It was delivered by Clarity's President, Christopher Balmford.

Strong, cautious support

Clarity strongly—but cautiously—supports the concepts of standards for our industry/ profession. That's strong support: that's strong caution.

As the ideas for standards and accreditation are proposed, considered, and developed, Clarity believes it would be best if PLAIN[1], the Center[2], and Clarity were to work together.

Clarity sees the benefits that credible and sustainable standards and accreditation processes would provide:

• to plain-language practitioners

• to their clients and customers

• above all—to readers everywhere.

That's why Clarity supports the ideas.

Clarity's caution arises from the need for the arrangements to be credible and sustainable.

(As a preliminary issue, almost as an aside, Clarity strongly supports the idea of a plain-language institute. In the past, various organisations of this nature have existed and done good work. But they have closed when government funding was cut. As soon as potential long-term funding is plausibly in the offing, Clarity would like to contribute to establishing an institute. Until then, the discussion seems best focused on standards and accreditation.)

The rest of this paper focuses on Clarity's cautious support for standards—their content and their related processes—and then for accreditation.

Caution about the content of the standards

The caution about standards is about how they are couched in light of these sorts of concerns:

1. Reward effect or form?

As Clarity Committee member and former Clarity President Mark Adler put it, any standards we develop need to "reward effect, not form". After all, if there are levels of standards ranging from "extensive audience testing" to "no testing at all", then will the lower-level standards amount to much more than "try and comply with Cutts[3] or Wydick[4] or Garner[5] or someone else"?

To use (good old) plumbing as an analogy, which of the following do we want reward:

- *effect*—that is: the right water ending up in the right place—that's what matters; or
- *form*—that is: the quality of the work in planning, joining, and laying the relevant pipes etc—what the water does is a minor thing.

Clarity feels strongly it is the effect that matters in the end, although form—and guidelines—are obviously important in producing the desired effect.

2. Rules v guidelines?

There is more concern about "rules" and "standards" than there is about evidence-based "principles" and "guidelines". Clarity supports the Center's comments[6] about learning from the existing research. It welcomes further research that builds on the existing research. We recognize that guidelines are important.

3. Standards about standards—and objectivity v. subjectivity

We need to make sure any standards (as opposed to guidelines) comply with the standards about standards. Many of the existing plain-language "standards" require an expert to exercise considerable judgement to determine if the "standard" has been met. This renders the standard more of a guideline or checklist than a standard. Ginny Redish's paper discusses this point.[7]

4. Different audiences, purposes, cultures, languages etc.

How might the standards cater for different sorts of documents, audiences and purposes—maybe even in different cultures in different languages?

5. Initial credibility

Clarity echoes the Center's point:

> [W]e believe it's more realistic to think we can get organisations to test their documents than it is to think we can get an international group of plain-language practitioners to agree on detailed, specific, meaningfully measurable techniques.[8]

There is likely to be much debate about the standards. Consider the research and analysis of readability formulas with which we are all familiar. It would be risky to launch the standards before they are more widely accepted than readability formulas.

6. On-going credibility

How credible will the standards be, given the following?

- most of us could probably—with our tongue in our cheek—write a document that complied with the standards but that did not communicate effectively.
- most of us could—with a bit more effort—write a document that breached some, or even many, of the standards but that communicated successfully.
- One day, someone who has claimed (perhaps somewhat correctly) that their appalling document complies with the standards will have someone else quite rightly demonstrate that the document fails to communicate. This sort of useful, intelligent, rigorous review of (so called) plain-language documents is healthy and happens already. If it happens with the new standards, then it will damage the credibility of the standards and the organisations involved.

We expect the content of the standards will need to deal with these sorts of concerns directly.

Caution about the process for developing and reviewing standards

Clarity is keen to hear about how the standards might be developed and managed. In particular, Clarity is keen to discuss:

- What is the process for the project: who, what, where, when, budget etc?
- What might the standards look like?
- How might the standards deal with the reasons for caution outlined above?
- How will the standards and related approval and endorsement processes be reviewed, policed, approved, modified etc?

Caution about the process for claiming a document complies with standards

Clarity is keen to hear about, and to discuss, whether and how a document will become entitled to carry any standards symbol, or to be said to comply with the standards. For example:

- Will a writer or an organisation be able to self-assess their document and say that it complies with the standards?
- Will someone be appointed (funded?) to review documents (for a fee?) to authorise the writer or organisation to claim that the document complies with the standards?
- Will a committee review (for a fee?) documents and approve them?

Clarity is cautious about committing to the project until possible solutions to at least some of these are outlined.

Practitioner accreditation—"less support, more caution"

Clarity supports the idea of planning to accredit people. However, it believes accreditation should wait until the standards have been operating successfully for several years.

Until Clarity has a clearer idea of how the standards might work and be monitored, it has great difficulty seeing how an accreditation process might work. In particular:

- What appeals processes might there be for someone aggrieved by the outcome of their application to be accredited?
- How might the accrediting organisation deal with an appeal that went to the courts? . . . perhaps on the grounds that the accreditation process was anti-competitive?

Next steps—Clarity conference in Mexico, November 2008

(I should point out that it is hard to see Clarity being able to contribute any funds to this project. One hundred percent of Clarity's subscription revenue is used to pay for the design, printing, and mailing of this journal.)

Clarity welcomes these developments. It is keen to be involved. It is keen to hear more about the proposals. It looks forward to the next round in the discussion at Clarity's conference in Mexico City on 20-23 November 2008 [http://www.clarity-international.net/conference.htm]. We hope to see you there.

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Endnotes

1 Plain Language Association InterNational—www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

2 Center for Plain Language—www.centerforplainlanguage.org/index.html

3 *The Plain English Guide*, Oxford University Press 2005

4 *Plain English for Lawyers* 5th edition, Carolina University Press, 2005

5 *Legal Writing in Plain English: A Text with Exercises*, University of Chicago Press 2001

6 page 21

7 page 32

8 page 22

Christopher Balmford *is the founder and MD of:*

- *Cleardocs, an online business providing "ready-to sign" legal document packages in Australia and the UK, see www.Cleardocs.com and www.Cleardocs.co.uk. The hallmarks of the Cleardocs brand are "clarity, simplicity, and ease of use"; and*
- *Words and Beyond, a plain-language consultancy business in Australia.*

He is also the President of Clarity.

Plenary paper #4

International plain language standards—the view from the Center for Plain Language

Annetta L. Cheek
Chair, Center for Plain Language, Washington DC, USA

with Joe Kimble, Karen Schriver, and John Spotila

The challenges of this conference

The Center for Plain Language supports developing internationally accepted recommendations about plain language techniques. Recommended techniques would help improve communication and build broader support for the use of plain language everywhere. The Center will be glad to join in that development effort.

The Center believes that we should focus our energy and attention on this international effort rather than on trying to set up an accreditation program for plain language professionals. Personally, having been present during the early days of an accreditation program for my original profession (archeology), I know that accreditation endeavors can be divisive. We need to approach this with much caution and not act until we have widespread agreement on what plain language is, considering a multilingual, multicultural context. Otherwise, we may do more harm than good to the plain-language effort.

Nor does the Center believe it prudent to devote scarce time and resources to setting up an Institute, unless a University or major donor steps forward to do so with our help. Forming an Institute is a huge task. It takes time and money. And of course it takes much time to get money. It makes more sense to consider forming an umbrella organization, a federation of organizations, to which PLAIN, the Center, Clarity, and other interested plain-language groups could belong. If resources become available, that could grow into the Institute Christine Mowat envisions.

We agree that it would be helpful to have a central entity gathering and disseminating knowledge about plain language. The umbrella organization could take on this role. There is already a significant body of research addressing many of the plain language techniques we promote. This research arises from many different professions, and none of us is aware of all that exists. We need to find out about that research; we cannot afford to waste time or money reinventing the wheel. Having a central source for information about research into plain-language techniques would be a boon to those of us who practice and advocate plain language.

How do we know it's plain language?

It is difficult to agree on what is "plain" language in any language. Neil James relates a circumstance that is all too common. Plain language practitioners of English face resistance from people who believe they already write in plain language. We can challenge them to tell us how they know, but in truth often *we* don't know, either. How can we convince doubters that we can write their material in plain language, when we can't clearly tell them what it is? This problem in deciding what is "plain" in my native language, English, becomes even more difficult when we try to determine what is "plain" in Spanish or French or German or Russian, or for that matter in Arabic or Mandarin.

That's one of the major challenges we face in an international program. Language is intertwined with culture, and both differ enormously across the globe. To encourage the broad use of plain language, we must identify common principles that interested native speakers can apply within their own language and culture.

The Center believes that we already agree on some of these common principles. With further work, we can expand the list. Let me explain.

Plain language is audience specific and defined by outcomes.

Many of us use the definition of plain language originally developed years ago by Ginny Redish. If you want to claim your material is in plain language, your intended audience must be able to find what they need, understand it the first time they read it, and use it to fulfill their needs. Neil talks about outcomes, and to me plain language is measured by its outcomes. When I teach a class in plain language, I use Ginny's definition of plain language. I tell the audience that the rest of what I teach is just techniques a writer can use to achieve plain language—it is not defined by those techniques. No one technique is necessary to create a plain-language document. The basic principle of plain language is that the intended audience can use the document for its intended purpose. And the most certain way to tell that is by testing the document with the intended audience. This is true whatever the language and whatever the cultural context.

Only after we agree on this and other common principles should we turn to the question of techniques. Techniques are means to an end and by their very nature must vary with each different language and each different culture and each different audience. Some techniques may work well almost everywhere. Others may be effective only in certain settings. All of them are tools that practitioners should use only when suitable.

Testing is important.

We understand it's difficult to get organizations to test documents. Nevertheless, testing offers a proven way of assessing whether communication is "plain" enough. Besides, we believe it's more realistic to think that we can get organizations to test their documents than it is to think we can get an international group of plain-language practitioners to agree on detailed, specific, meaningfully measurable techniques.

There are different sorts of testing, and some are easier and cheaper than others. We could establish standards on a scale, considering the effectiveness of a testing technique, the number of subjects tested, and whatever other aspects of testing we considered important. Regardless of the specific testing methods, tests would have to support a conclusion that a document has reached the goal of being understandable to and usable by the intended audience. If it has, it is a plain language document, regardless of what plain language techniques were used to achieve that end.

We believe we will make more progress toward international plain language standards if we talk about standards based on testing, rather than on the presence or absence of specific plain-language techniques. As it is difficult to get organizations to do testing, we probably need a fallback based on techniques. But we must keep in mind that they are the means to creating documents that work for the intended audience. Their presence does not prove the document is in plain language.

So is there any role for plain language techniques?

Of course. We have to be able to tell people how to get to the goal of having their material understandable and usable by their readers. So we believe we should assemble information on techniques, including which are the most helpful for most audiences and document types. However, we don't think we should get hung up on specifying which techniques are most helpful for which audiences. Nor should we struggle with deciding the degree to which each technique is required—how long sentences can be, what percent of passive voice is allowed. And the Center opposes the idea of certifying that a document is a "plain language document" if testing does not show that it meets the criteria in Ginny's definition. Without testing, the most we can say is that it uses the techniques of plain language.

Developing a strategy for testing plain-language techniques

Assuming we agree there is a role for plain-language techniques, we need to assess what's already known. The best arguments for the effectiveness of plain language are found in the empirical literature on how readers respond to writing and design. Here we find studies that show that word choice is crucial and that complex sentences actually do confuse people. Here we find research on the impact of visual design on reading—studies of typography, layout, graphics, and visual impression. Karen Schriver has spent the last year analyzing this empirical literature (a short piece of which is summarized next), but her focus was on studies that bear on writing and design in English—it would be interesting to determine whether and to what degree any of the principles discussed in this section pertain to other languages.

Up to now, the research does not tell us the whole story about what makes text comprehensible and usable, but the good news is that there is already a considerable amount of empirical research on writing and design—important work that plain language advocates can draw on and use now. A recent review of the literature integrates the findings of over three hundred studies of writing and design; see Schriver[1].

A strategy for driving design choices with data: consolidate existing research and identify research gaps

As the international plain-language movement moves forward toward making recommendations about plain language techniques, we must build on what is already known and disseminate that information widely. We can then identify gaps in the research literature and fund new investigations of those knotty issues still untested.

Let's examine a plain-language maxim and illustrate how a strategy of both consolidating the existing research and identifying gaps between the known and unknown can help us make better and more informed design choices. As a case in point, we will examine the plain-language guideline, "use short simple words." The key question is: Does the empirical data support this practice? Do readers really understand short words more easily? Do they prefer them? To answer these questions requires examining the literature on word-level textual choices and their impact on readers. Following is a summary of the empirical findings on some of the word-level text features that influence how people read. After this summary, we identify the research gaps in the literature from the perspective of a plain-language advocate. An important feature of this analysis is that it could lead directly to designing new studies focused specifically on questions our constituency cares about.

Case in point: consolidating existing empirical findings about word-level choices

Research on the impact of word-level features on reading has been carried out since the 1940s. Studies have focused on issues related to how word choice influences readers' understanding of content. Researchers have identified a number of word-level features that influence the clarity of writing. The most studied word-level textual choices include the following:

- Word length and frequency
- Word difficulty
- Word concreteness
- Noun strings
- Nominalizations

Word length and frequency

Word length

Studies of reading tell us that word length is an important predictor of comprehension[2]. Advocates of plain language have long argued that short words make for better understanding, but the research to support this claim has not been integrated. Studies show that short words are easier to recognize, faster to interpret, easier to learn, and better remembered than long words[3,4,5,6]. Information designers who want their readership to retain the content should avoid embroidering the key ideas with long words.

Another consistent finding is that many short words are also high-frequency words, those words native speakers of a language hear all the time[7]. Put differently, words that appear frequently in a language are usually short words, helping people communicate more quickly[8]. Consequently, short high-frequency words are recognized immediately by readers and require little attention to comprehend in comparison to low-frequency words[9,10]. Furthermore, short low-frequency words are easier to recognize than long low-frequency words[11].

Implications

This research makes clear that short words rather than long words and high-frequency rather than low-frequency words can have substantial benefits for readers. Short low-frequency words are good for all readers—skilled and unskilled—and information designers do readers a favor when they use them.

Word Frequency

Since the early 1900s, reading researchers have been concerned with the impact of word frequency on understanding. Researchers hoped to assess the relative ease of texts by using word frequency to index the difficulty of the text's words. Some of this work led to developing lists of the most frequent words in English[12,13,14,15]. Other research culminated in computational models of how frequently words appear in a language[16]. For example, Zipf demonstrated that in many languages there is a statistical relationship between the frequent and infrequent words, such that short words tend to be familiar words (and more frequent), longer words tend to be unfamiliar words (and more infrequent), and unfamiliar words are often (though not always) more difficult to understand (this relationship is called "Zipf's law"). Zipf showed that in everyday communication, people tend to choose words that require the least effort, coining the "least effort principle" to describe people's tendency to take the shortest route to stating an idea[8].

Klare points out that word frequency plays such a central role in what makes text difficult that it became a basic part of readability formulas; for a discussion, see note 17. Of course, the validity of readability formulas for predicting the understandability of text has been shown to be seriously problematic[18,19,20,21]. Even so, that does not mean that research on word frequency and its correlation with text difficulty is invalid. The correlation has not gone away: hard words still make text difficult. Word frequency has been incorporated into recent comprehensibility formulas that take into account text features derived from current psycholinguistic research and traditional readability measures[10,9].

Over the years, psychologists and reading researchers have made many comparisons of high-frequency words and low-frequency words[22,11]. Not too surprisingly, they find that high-frequency words are recognized faster and require less attention than low-frequency words[23,24,25]. Studies show that the more memory consumed by recognizing the words in a sentence, the fewer cognitive resources the reader has for higher-level processes such as making inferences about what the text means[5]. More recently, information architects such as Maurer have drawn on Lakoff's research on the cognition of categorization to suggest that short high-frequency words often represent fundamental categories and thus have a good "information scent"[26,27].

Implications

The research shows clearly that information designers should use high-frequency words when they can. Of course, there will always be situations in which a low-frequency word is the perfect choice. When needed, writers should aim for short low-frequency words rather than long low-frequency words. By implication, research on word frequency suggests that organizations should think twice before coining new words and creating acronyms, since their unfamiliarity will likely slow people down, both in searching and understanding. Studies are consistent in suggesting that familiar words should be used in headings, labels, and links to speed the retrieval of content.

Word Difficulty

Studies of word difficulty focus on differences between simple and complex words. Most researchers define simple words as "easy to pronounce" or with "few syllables," and hard as "difficult to pronounce" or with "many syllables"[28,29]. Research shows that many simple words are high-frequency words[8,11].

Implications

Information designers can conclude that a simple word is almost always a better choice than a complex one. By implication, this research suggests that organizations should avoid long low-frequency words as well as words that native speakers find tricky to pronounce. This does not mean avoiding precise words. Readers can only acquire an accurate understanding of the content when the text is composed of words that are precise. It does mean that writers should aim to make lexical choices that are precise while at the same time simple and familiar to the general public.

Word Concreteness

An important line of research on how people understand words is concreteness (for example, the difference between understanding "apple" and "liberty"). This research compares abstract and concrete words and finds that learning and remembering concrete words is easier[22,23,24]. Studies show that because concrete words often evoke more synonyms and more visual imagery than abstract words, readers have an easier time retrieving their meaning[25,26].

Concrete words also give writers more opportunities to substitute one word for another (lexical substitution) as they compose progressive sentences. If keywords in the text's main idea are concrete, the idea can be embroidered and extended over sentences and paragraphs with other concrete words that are semantically linked, making it much more likely that readers will get the main point[25,7,8].

Implications

If the subject matter is inherently complex, detail the main ideas with concrete words that are vivid. When elaborating main ideas that are inherently abstract, it is better to provide just-in-time information where the reader needs it. In composing online, use a "roll-over" for the detail, particularly if the elaboration interrupts the text; in hardcopy, use marginalia that align horizontally with the content.

Noun Strings

Strings of nouns (noun + noun + noun) make it hard for readers to parse ideas, as in the following (from a letter from a bank):

> "You have exceeded the federal banking regulation transaction number for excessive money market pre-authorized automatic electronic debit transactions."

Noun strings often slow readers' efforts to make sense of the syntax of the sentence[27,28], especially if one of the nouns is also a nominalization—a noun made from a verb or adjective, for example:

> "The chief loan officer controls the allocation of pre-screened amortization candidates and the refusal of your application suggests non-qualification or a history of late payment."

Implications

Writers should avoid noun strings for they slow down the reading process and often confuse readers[8,7]. Noun strings may have more of an impact on readers without topic knowledge about the text's main ideas and on readers who have difficulty with reading. Readers with topic knowledge about the text's content may be familiar with noun strings in that topic area and read them at the same rate as other text.

Overall, even though noun strings are intended to save space (to say the idea faster and make it shorter—usually good ideas), in this case, they appear to do more harm than good[29]. Moreover, they make the text seem dense, ponderous, and at times pretentious.

Nominalizations

Nominalizations are nouns that have been derived from verbs or adjectives, often with Latinate suffixes such as "ize," or "tion" (e.g., *customization* instead of *customize* or *cessation* instead of *cease).* Nominalizations tend to make texts wordy and may make it difficult for readers to comprehend the main idea quickly. Studies find that readers often have trouble understanding nouns made from verbs (e.g., *amortization)* and find it much easier when the verb is recovered (e.g., *amortize)*[30,31,32,33].

Implications

In general, information designers should avoid using nominalizations, but there are exceptions. Some nominalizations are useful since they may not be hard to understand. They may even reduce sentence length (for example, "failure," "discovery"). Other nominalizations may be easy to understand if the underlying idea was presented in a previous sentence. For example, consider this sentence: "Researchers' arguments focus on the cognition of interpretation and on how nominalizations slow reading and add to text density." In this case, "researchers' arguments" (used instead of "researchers argue") is a nominalized subject referring to a previous sentence that would be obvious in context. For a thoughtful discussion, see Williams[34].

Identifying what's next: gaps in research on word-level features

This summary of the research has shown that word-level features such as length, frequency, difficulty, concreteness, noun strings, and nominalizations can have a significant impact on how readers process text and on whether they understand the main point. This lends empirical credence to the plain language maxim "use short simple words." Although people in our field may assume that doing so is just "common sense," it is important that we evaluate our assumptions about what works through testing[35] and assess the value added of revisions that make a difference[36].

In this way, we can make evidence-based decisions as we write and design. And importantly, when we are confronted with arguments about our choices, we can defend our decisions by pointing to the research that supports them.

When we take a closer look at the research on word-level features, we discover issues that need to be studied further, particularly from our field's point of view. Alas, much of the relevant research on reading texts did not have professional communicators in mind as an audience. For example, in looking over the research on word-level features, we find gaps in our knowledge. For example, we do not yet fully understand:

Word Concreteness

- Which is better: An abstract yet precise word or a simple but less precise word?
- What are optimal techniques for handling subject matter that is inherently abstract?
- How can information designers make abstract subject matter clear yet maintain the integrity of the content?

Lexical Concreteness and Visualizing the Message

- What is the relationship between the concreteness of a word and the reader's ability to visualize the word?
- Can writers increase the comprehension and retention of ideas by using concrete words that are easy to visualize?
- Beyond comprehension: Can designers enhance readers' motivation to read or listen to a message if they employ concrete language?
- Are readers more likely to persist with concrete language?

Noun Strings and Nominalizations

- Do some noun strings and nominalizations convey meaning better than other forms of expression?
- What are the conditions and situations in which a noun string or a nominalization might be the best strategy?

Summary

We at the Center for Plain Language advocate that we consolidate existing research and identify research gaps as we develop recommendations about plain-language techniques. In this way, we can build on the best of what is already known and we can characterize what we still need to know with greater precision[37,1]. This approach will also enable us to isolate the contexts in which particular practices and guidelines do not work. It will put into focus the situations for which we must develop context-specific plain language strategies for text design. It makes sense to first survey the research terrain and to consolidate what is known about key issues of plain language. We can then direct our attention to funding studies that will answer targeted questions of interest.

A final challenge

This conference has set out to perform some important tasks—important not only to plain-language practitioners, but also to the public in general. The Center hopes this conference takes the next steps, so we can be sure that we will have some successes by the next time we meet—hopefully at Clarity in Mexico City. We join Christopher in calling for a detailed and specific plan for next steps. Please don't leave Amsterdam without it.

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Writing by numbers: are readability formulas to clarity what karaoke is to song?

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Readability tests offer an easy and relatively cheap way of assessing the apparent level of difficulty of a document. Though their simplicity and scientific veneer make them attractive for propaganda, the tests are crude. This article suggests that discussion groups and one-to-one interviews are better for assessing clarity. Yet these methods are usually feasible only where cost and speed are not important. So when deciding whether a document is pitched at an appropriate level for its readers, editorial judgment based on experience will usually be the best aid. A readability-test score should be only a minor factor in making that judgment.

This article is based on a paper given by the author to the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) conference, Amsterdam 2007. A longer version, which also looks at the notion of 'average reading age' (UK) and 'average grade level' (US), and whether plain-language principles are relevant to works of literature, is available at http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=26 (click on 'Articles').

Introduction

The merits of readability formulas are hotly debated. Some people regard them as the essential starting point in any quest for clarity, others as a mathematical hoax, and others as an encouragement to bad writing because to get a 'good' test score authors need to reduce their syllable count and shorten their sentences, and they may take this too far. This article looks at:

1 dubious uses of readability tests

2 what readability tests won't tell you

3 whether discussion groups are more useful than readability tests

4 the problem of irreducibility in plain-language work

5 a new resource Plain Language Commission has developed for authors and editors, based on the *Living Word Vocabulary* that under-pins several well-known readability tests.

1 Dubious uses of readability tests

At Christmas 2006, the UK Government's Department for Education and Skills (DfES) said that millions of Britons would be unable to sing along to their favourite karaoke tunes during the new-year celebrations because weak literacy skills left them puzzled by the words on the screen. The DfES claims were based on a SMOG readability test of 10 pop-songs and it concluded—from the test results alone—that 17.8 million adult Britons (out of around 39 million) would therefore be unable to read the lyrics of Robbie Williams' song 'Angels' as they came on the screen.

I put various lyrics (reproduced in the longer paper on our website) through readability tests. The figures that follow are all US grade level—add 5 for the UK reading age—as scored using Micro Power & Light Co's Readability Calculations Version 6.0.

- 'Angels' scores 4.1 on the Flesch–Kincaid test, but 7.5 on SMOG.
- 'Dancing Queen' by Abba scores 2.9 on Flesch–Kincaid and 6.8 on SMOG.
- 'Three Times a Lady' by Lionel Ritchie scores 2.2 on Flesch–Kincaid and 6.5 on SMOG.
- 'White Room' (rather less of a karaoke favourite) by Pete Brown and Jack Bruce scores 3.7 on Flesch–Kincaid and 6.2 on SMOG.

The difference in scores between Flesch–Kincaid and SMOG may arise because SMOG wants a 100% comprehension level, Flesch–Kincaid only 75–85%. Based on the tests, the

DfES declared that 'Angels' and 'Dancing Queen' required 'Level 2 skills', which it said are 'equivalent to the skills required to pass a GCSE at grades A* to C'.

People with level 1 skills are reading at the level of an average 11-year-old, said the DfES press release, and: 'Level 1 skills would be required to pass a GCSE at grades D to G.' According to the DfES, 'people below this level may struggle to read these songs as well as check a pay slip for deductions and read bus or train timetables accurately'. The DfES says 5.2 million are below this level. (The longer paper on our website gives details of the levels and what they are said to mean.)

But the results rather depend on which readability test is used. Choose Flesch–Kincaid and the DfES won't get its press coverage because 'Angels' and 'Dancing Queen' score 9.1 and 7.9 years respectively, which are apparently within the range of level 1 readers.

In 2007, even more cash was spent on readability-test-based research that discovered millions of people couldn't read and understand celebrity-chef recipes containing unusual ingredients like couscous and terms like 'blackened glaze' and 'aromatic shoulder of lamb' (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills report, September 2007). Many reporters salivated over the story, though the research was derided as a 'pointless official exercise in spending money' by Alice Miles, the *Times* columnist, in her piece 'Gobble-gobble. It's another Whitehall turkey' on 26 December 2007.

Is it good that government departments are spending tax money on dodgy research whose sole purpose is to attract media attention? If the public really needs to know how many people can't read particular song lyrics or recipes, a proper piece of research could use real people and compare their performance on lyrics and recipes with what they achieve when reading texts of known difficulty levels.

2 What readability tests won't tell you

Readability tests can be useful as propaganda when trying to convince people that their documents are too hard for the intended readership, and they also give a very rough idea of the level of difficulty. But they need to be used honestly, with caveats about what they don't do, such as tell you whether:

- the content is any good—whether the facts and figures are right (although, to be fair, most plain-language editors won't do that either)
- the purpose of the document has been clearly stated
- the text is abstract—how nebulous or theoretical it may be.
- the text is logically arranged and puts the big news early
- the headings and subheadings are good signposts and whether they form a sensible hierarchy—in fact, most readability tests require you to omit headings from the calculations
- connector words are present to show the logical flow of the argument
- there are personal-reference words like 'we' and 'you'
- the grammar and punctuation are any good
- the presentation is appealing or appalling
- readers are likely to be motivated to read the text.

In short, they don't tell you about a lot of things that are important. They are fixated on sentence length and syllable counting, which they make proxies for everything else that matters. (And SMOG doesn't really bother with sentence length—it's based mainly on a syllable count.) Long sentences and unusual words can be serious problems for readers, we all know that. But so many other things matter, too, which readability tests ignore. The late Rudolf Flesch, a plain-English guru and originator of the readability tests that bear his name, is quoted approvingly by many who advocate the tests, and he said:

> Some readers, I am afraid, will expect a magic formula for good writing and will be disappointed with my simple yardstick. Others, with a passion for accuracy, will wallow in the little rules and computations but lose sight of the principles of plain English. What I hope for are readers who won't take the formula too seriously and won't expect from it more than a rough estimate. (Quoted in *Readability Assessment of British Internet Information Resources on Diabetes Mellitus Targeting Laypersons*, School for Health, University of Bath, Sept 2004, by Maged Boulos)

But let's look further at what the tests don't tell us about. I regularly see documents that would score well on readability tests but are useless for the intended readers, mainly because they make no sense if you try to work out what they mean instead of just looking at the words superficially. For example, take this excerpt from a booklet about how to fit a child's safety seat in cars, which scores reasonably well on the tests (ie, would be readable by most people). This bit is on the left-hand page of a 2-page spread:

> How to fit the Club Class Extra Rearward Facing
>
> Have you checked that your baby weighs less than 13kg?
>
> In this weight range you must only install the Club Class Extra rearward facing…'

And then this is on the right-hand page:

> How to fit the Club Class Extra Forward Facing
>
> Have you checked that your baby weighs more than 9kg?
>
> In this weight range you must only install the Club Class Extra forward facing.

These sentences, taken individually, are clear and will contribute to a good readability-test result for the whole booklet. But you'll notice that, taken together, they are nonsense because a child of 11kg appears to fit in both ranges. A readability test wouldn't tell you this was nonsense: quite the opposite. It's a blunt instrument.

3 Are discussion groups more useful than readability tests?

In *Lucid Law* (Plain Language Commission, 1994 and 2000) I sought to discover whether a UK Act of Parliament rewritten and restructured in a plainer-English style would be easier for people to read and use. I hired a researcher to test both versions using discussion groups of student lawyers and, separately, 'ordinary citizens'. The full research method, questionnaires etc are shown in the book (free download, http://www.clearest.co.uk, 'Books'). On one question, crucial to understanding the Act correctly, 94% of the student lawyers got the right answer when using my pretend Act but only 48% of them did so with the real Act.

The discussion-group results, based as they were on results with real people, were more persuasive than any readability test based on counting syllables would have been. The rewrite reduced the average sentence length by a third, reduced the overall length of the Act by a quarter, introduced far more headings, grouped the information more logically, and provided a full contents list. Apart from sentence length, these factors are ignored by most readability tests. The typography was also improved—again, the tests ignore this. The Basic Skills Agency, which is funded by the UK Government, sees typography as crucial:

> Difficulties with reading are often more to do with the look and layout of a text, than with the complexity of the text itself. In their efforts to produce attractive, eye-catching material, designers are sometimes tempted to sacrifice clear layout. Complicated layout and design can confuse those with reading difficulties. ('Readability. How to produce clear written materials for a range of readers.' Basic Skills Agency, booklet number A1880, undated—probably 2005)

Desirable though discussion groups may be, however, they are not practical for most of the small-scale writing and editing jobs we tackle. They cost too much to convene and they take too long to set up and run properly. Like most plain-language practitioners, we therefore apply our judgment and experience to the task of writing or editing, without using either discussion groups or readability tests (though I accept that it is reasonable to take account of a readability-test result). It makes sense to convene discussion groups only when economy and time are not crucial factors. One-to-one interviews to check for comprehension can help. Interviewees' abilities can first be checked against passages of known difficulty to help make them representative of readers in a particular ability group.

4 The problem of irreducibility in plain-language work

Bill DuBay, a proponent of what he has called 'the science' of readability testing, advocates putting European Commission laws through readability tests because he feels this would help alert their authors to the level of difficulty in them.

Yet EC directives and regulations are inevitably full of words of 3 or more syllables and many of these are irreducible. Examples include *bioavailablity, directive, specimen, parliament, requirement, provision, effective, harmonized, regulation, standard, marketed, inspection.* Some are not particularly high-register or difficult but they ensure that laws on complex topics (that's most of them) will inevitably exceed 7th-, 8th-, 9th- or even 10th-grade levels as judged by readability testing.

Edwin Tanner's point in the *Statute Law Review* (Vol 25, Number 3, 2004, p223), and mine in *Clarifying Eurolaw* (Plain Language Commission, 2001) to which Tanner refers, is that poor grouping of information, outdated legal-drafting conventions and abysmal sentence structure are the main factors that make EC laws and directives so hard to read—even for lawyers. Readability tests have nothing to say about these things. They just show that the stuff is very difficult.

The Clearer Timeshare Act has been criticized by readability testers for being '13th grade' (UK reading age 18). The Act's average sentence length is 20–24 words, depending on how you treat vertically listed items. There are about 109 long words (ie, those of 3 syllables or more, ignoring repeat words) out of about 3,020 (excluding the citizen's summary). This seems a very low score—only 3.6%. For a topic as inherently complex as timeshare, the vocabulary was, I believe, close to its irreducible minimum. If someone is motivated to read the Act and is prepared to study it a bit, perhaps with the help of a dictionary, then I think they'd be able to get a reasonable understanding of most of it. That's what our testing with discussion groups showed.

So are readability testers really saying that a text with an average sentence length of some 20 words and 3.6% of long words puts it beyond the powers of 70–80% of Americans and Britons? If so, then there's been an even more catastrophic failure in our education systems than most of us dare to think.

5 Plain English Lexicon: a resource for authors and editors

Some readability tests are based on lists of words said to be understood by readers at particular US grade levels, notably the *Living Word Vocabulary* (LWV) by Dale and O'Rourke (1979). I've compiled a vocabulary guide for plain-language authors and editors that includes words from the LWV alongside their grade level as calculated by Dale and O'Rourke's face-to-face testing, followed by a UK reading level, followed by a frequency based on the British National Corpus of 100 million words. Available on our website, it also includes plainer alternatives for certain words, and some commentary.

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Some thoughts on standards

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What is a standard? What are guidelines? What's the difference?

Most people think of a standard as a rule, a requirement. Standards take the word *must* (or *shall* if they are not in plain English). A typical example of a standard would be this one from the U.S. Department of Labor's *Electrical Standards for Construction*:

> Where the exact location of underground electrical power lines is unknown, employees using jack hammers or hand tools that may contact a line must be provided with insulated protective gloves.

Standards like these are rigid. They do not require judgment.

What we really have in plain language are research-based best practices. Best practices = guidelines. Guidelines are not rules. They depend on context. They require judgment. As a colleague and I wrote in a book chapter 15 years ago, "guidelines suggest; rules prescribe."

Attempts to turn plain-language guidelines into measurable objectives like standards would lead to something like a readability formula. I and many others have shown how counterproductive readability formulas are as a way to achieve plain language.

Because our guidelines require judgment, they cannot be standards like the electrical standard I just quoted.

"Write in the active voice" does not mean "Use the active voice for every verb in your document."

The WriteMark checklist asks, "Are sentences mostly straightforward with an average length of 15-20 words?" That question reflects an excellent guideline; it's not a standard; it's not a rule.

Yes, anyone can count the average sentence length—that's what computers do in their readability formulas. But it takes judgment to decide if a sentence is "straightforward." It takes judgment to know when a sentence longer than 20 words is just the right plain-language sentence for the document's purposes, audiences, and the way the audiences use the document. If this guideline were a standard, a document with an average sentence length of 12 words would fail even though it might be a marvelous example of plain language.

I'm sure the Write Group people use their judgment when reviewing documents with their checklist. I'm sure they admit an occasional sentence longer than 20 words—even an occasional document with an average sentence length of more than 20 words. I'm sure they would pass a document with an average sentence length of 12 words if that were appropriate for the context and audience.

Can we have any plain language standards?

If we want to push for standards of plain language, I urge us to focus on process and a generic definition of plain language rather than having specific guidelines masquerade as standards.

The path I suggest is the one that the usability profession took. We have two relevant International Standards Organization (ISO) standards for making sure that products can be used by the people they are meant for: ISO 13407; ISO 9241-11.

ISO 13407, *Human-Centred Design Processes for Interactive Systems*, says that a human-centred approach is characterized by the following:

a. the active involvement of users and a clear understanding of user and task requirements;

b. an appropriate allocation of function between users and technology;

c. the iteration of design solutions;

d. multi-disciplinary design.

. . . And four key human-centred design activities:

a. to understand and specify the context of use;

b. to specify the user and organizational requirements;

c. to produce design solutions;

d. to evaluate designs against requirements.

The standard itself is generic and can be applied to any system or product.

> ISO 9241 *Ergonomic Requirements for Office Work with Visual Display Terminals (VDTs)*—Part 11: *Guidance on Usability* defines usability as:
>
> > The extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use.

Standards have to have an objective measure. ISO 9241-11 says:

> It is normally necessary to provide at least one measure each of effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction.

For effectiveness and efficiency, the typical measure is a behavioral one—we do usability evaluations where we see if the specified users can achieve the specified goals with a preset level of effectiveness and efficiency.

We should want the same for any definition of plain language. In fact, the approach and activities standardized in ISO 13407 work very well as the process for plain language in documents:

1. Understand and specify the purposes of the document.
2. Understand and specify the audience(s) for the document.
3. Understand and specify the context of use. (How will people use the document? What is the physical, social, cultural environment? Is the document for reference? Will it be read through? Will people return to it later to look for specific pieces of information?)
4. Select the appropriate guidelines from best practices for the purposes, audiences, and context of use.
5. Test drafts with members of the audiences to see if they can find what they need and understand what they find.

Our best practices and checklists are handbooks and guidance for getting to a successful outcome through this process.

What about laws that incorporate guidelines? Aren't they setting guidelines as standards?

The recently passed plain language law in Oregon sets out six specifics for plain language:

> a written document conforms to plain language standards if the document, whenever possible:
>
> (a) Uses everyday words that convey meanings clearly and directly;
>
> (b) Uses the present tense and the active voice;
>
> (c) Uses short, simple sentences;
>
> (d) Defines only those words that cannot be properly explained or qualified in the text;
>
> (e) Uses type of a readable size; and
>
> (f) Uses layout and spacing that separate the paragraphs and sections of the document from each other.

Note the "whenever possible," which makes these guidelines, not standards. Thus, the authors of this law selected six best practices to showcase as the main elements of "plain language." All six are good, but we could argue with their limiting the list to just these six. Why not "Use 'you' and 'we'."? Why not "Include bold headings."? And so on.

I suggest that we are better off with a generic definition of plain language, such as the one in the proposed federal plain language bill now under consideration in the U.S. Congress (HR3548, called the "Braley bill" for Representative Bruce Braley [Democrat, Iowa] who introduced it). The Braley bill says

> The term "plain language" means language that the intended audience can readily understand and use because it is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices of plain language writing.

In fact, neither the Oregon law nor the Braley bill is really about the letter of the law. They are about the spirit of the law. The Oregon law and the Braley bill if it becomes U.S. federal law (as we in Clarity should all hope it does) are sending a message to government writers to communicate more clearly with their audiences. Just as most laws have to be interpreted into regulations and handbooks, the plain language laws have to be interpreted into guidelines and checklists.

Should we push for international standards?

PLAIN has limited resources. Getting a standard through the ISO process is a very long and time-consuming task. It can be done, as our usability and human factors colleagues have shown, but . . .

If we do want to have an international standard, I strongly urge us to focus on process and technique with behavioral measures as the required outcome rather than on specific guidelines that cannot, in fact, be turned into rigid rules.

And we in the plain language community must be careful in our use of language, understanding and following the distinction between "guidelines" (best practices) and "standards" (prescriptive rules that can be objectively measured).

ginny@redish.net

Dr. Janice (Ginny) Reddish *has been active in the plain language community since 1978. She was the founder and first director of the Document Design Center at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in Washington, DC. Ginny directed the Center through the 1980s, also serving as a Vice President of AIR. The Center's newsletter,* Simply Stated, *reached 18,000 people 10 times a year for almost 10 years.*

Since 1992, Ginny has been an independent consultant, continuing her plain language work as president of Redish & Associates, Inc. She teaches lawyers, subject matter specialists, and writers how to create plain language regulations, letters, notices, and web sites through her highly-interactive workshops. She works with teams revising all types of communications.

Ginny is co-author of two books on usability; and her new book, Letting Go of the Words—Writing Web Content that Works, *is receiving rave reviews for both its content and its plain language writing and design. Her work in plain language has brought Ginny numerous awards, including the first award from the Center for Plain Language for Outstanding Plain Language Leader in the Private Sector, given at the 5th International PLAIN conference in Washington, DC, in 2005.*

Ginny is active in several organizations and has served on the Board of Directors of the Society for Technical Communication, the Usability Professionals' Association, and the Center for Plain Language. She is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from Harvard University.

Towards a plain *lingua franca* for India

Jyoti Sanyal

Clear English India: www.clearenglish.in

The problem

I come from India, a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country, where about 1,576 languages are spoken. India's search for a 'link language' or 'common language' has landed us in a mess that negates the very idea of plain language.

Much before India got independence from two centuries of British rule, Indian leaders had agreed that Hindi could serve as a link language because all north Indians understand some variant of Hindi. All northern Indians (74% of India's population) use what may be labeled the Indo-Aryan group of languages.

But that left out the southern states of India that use the Dravidian group of languages. And the Dravidian group of languages has no link with Hindi at all.

The Sanskrit connection

But the Dravidian group of languages has absorbed Sanskrit (words). And though the people of southern India (24% of India's population) cannot understand Hindi, they do understand Sanskrit words.

Sanskrit is an ancient Aryan language, a member of the Indo-European language family. Much as Latin influenced European languages, Sanskrit has influenced many languages in south and south-east Asia. India's official Hindi is heavily Sanskritised. That makes it a 'closed language' for much of India. That kind of Hindi militates against the very notion of plain language.

A booklet supposed to explain provident fund to employees is titled in high-flown Sanskrit: *Karmachari Bhavishya Nidhi*. That goes on to cite the *Prakirna upabandhan adhiniyam* and extends the *Karmachari Kutumba Yojana tatha nikshep shahabaddha Bima Yojana ke bibhinna upabandh ke anupalan* *ke liye amantran*! The meaning of that obscure language: employees are invited to the various bylaws of the Employees' Insurance Scheme!

That is a hotch-potch of Sanskrit *officialese*. It can mean nothing to most Indians. The official line is to merely serve Sanskrit coinages for all *officialese* that used to be in English during the British Raj.

Plain Hindusthani

Had India been steered toward a plain language, it would have had to choose plain Hindusthani, which is a mix of colloquial Hindi and Urdu. Urdu is a mixture of Persian and Arabic with Hindi that evolved in India during three centuries of Muslim rule that preceded British rule. That mixture would have been nearer the idea of a plain language and would have served all of north India. But that mixture makes little sense in south India.

And so we have this strange problem: persistence with this Sanskritised Hindi negates the very idea of a plain language. It negates the very idea of a language of mass communication. To opt for plain Hindusthani would be nearer the idea of a plain language. But that would make things difficult for the southern States, where people can understand some amount of Sanskrit, but none of Hindusthani.

A European analogy

Let's consider a European analogy: Suppose European nations were to decide on English being their *lingua franca*. This is not too difficult to imagine. In Europe, there has been a linguistic contest about which language is to become the *lingua franca*, and the answer has often been English.

But English as Europe's *lingua franca* would pose analogical problems: Italy, France, and Spain would prefer Latinate English because all of them speak what are called the Romance languages that are directly descended from Latin. But Latinate English is what the English-speaking world has moved away from in the search for plain English.

Teutonic roots

On the other hand, plain English that moves away from Latinate words and goes nearer its Teutonic origin might be more acceptable to Germany, Holland, and Scandinavian countries (not including Finland and Lapland that speak Finno-Ugric languages). Suppose English, the possible *lingua franca* of Europe, were to move more towards its Teutonic origin. Such a move would please Germany, Holland, and parts of Scandinavia. But that would leave Italy, Spain, and France complaining that de-Latinised English had been made more obscure to them. India faces such a quandary.

The feudal connection

India, like many Asian nations, retains its feudal identity while it calls itself a democracy.

The idea of plain language can take root only in a democracy because only democracy insists on transparency. Feudalism does not admit transparency. Nations like Burma prove that feudalism is opposed to transparency. While Burma may be an extreme example, we find no insistence on transparency anywhere in the Third World, which is yet to emerge from centuries of feudalism.

Formal language

Feudal societies will always create and retain a *formal language*, as opposed to everyday language. And a feudally oriented society will insist on the use of this 'formal language' for affairs to which that society accords importance.

A feudally oriented society will use—and insist on the use of—*special/formal language* precisely where a democratic society would consider the use of plain language *most* necessary. That would include mainstream communication from governments and enterprises; in admin-istration, in courts, in legal texts, in educational textbooks, politics—in short, every sphere important to the plain-language movement.

The right to information

Because such non-democratic societies are strictly hierarchical, there exists no concept of the *right* of all citizens to clear, understandable communication. It took *three* decades of legal wrangling to get India to pass the *Right to Information Act*—only three years ago.

But even that Act is worded in obscure *legalese* of the 18th century. Such gobbledygook persists throughout the Third World—not because people are too stupid to simplify obscure language, but because such effort is never considered necessary where feudal ideas persist.

Elevated language

India's official language, then, has become a *closed language* precisely because feudal notions prevail. India's official Hindi is guided by tomes containing Sanskritised terms for all official English terms that were current under British rule.

Indian bureaucrats who are feudal-minded do not consider that such Sanskritised terms do not make sense to the common people. They persist with this *elevated language* which is a *closed language*.

Sonorous obscurity

The English *officialese* that circulated in India during British rule belongs to an antiquated variant of English that came into India through ill-educated British merchants in the 18th century. But that antiquated language was the language of India's British rulers and, hence, a language associated with the feudal idea of power.

With their feudal mindset, Indians merely translated all official terms in that language into a still more antiquated Sanskrit that is sonorous and obscure.

Gobbledygook and power

Added to the feudal tradition is the Hindu practice of uttering *mantra*s or incantations in Sanskrit that mean nothing to the very worshippers who mutter them. It's a strange phenomenon: the Hindu feels pious while he mutters what he cannot understand.

This is a dangerous tradition:

- it militates against reason
- it leads to the veneration of gobbledygook.

Gobbledygook acquires status in a feudal set-up. This has happened in other countries too, notably Germany. Karl Popper, acknowledged as a major influence in modern philosophy and political thought, spoke of the 'cult of incomprehensibility' that overtook Germany, from where this notion came into Victorian England. This led to the *the unquestioned standard*, said Karl Popper, of stating *the utmost trivialities in high-sounding language . . .* (in: *Myth of the Framework*).

The Indian dilemma

Where then do we go? Should India move toward a plain language that would leave its southern States disgruntled, or persist with the elitist, highly Sanskritised Hindi that leaves most people in India baffled?

One possible solution could be to fall back on English in India. English served as the official language of India during two centuries of British rule. It is still the associate official language in India.

An objection answered

But only 4% of Indians (a country of 1.3 billion people) use English. Although that works out to around 40 million, it means using what could be a 'closed language' for 96% of Indians.

But not more than 4% of ordinary Indians would make sense of the gibberish that official Hindi has come to be, thanks to the Sanskrit coinages into which English *officialese* has been translated. A drive for plain English would need a massive drive to re-orient Indians. An equally massive drive would be needed to orient Indians to Sanskrit *officialese*.

English in Indian schools

All Indian schools teach English as a second or third language. But there is no uniformity yet at which stage of school education the language is introduced. After experimenting with various possibilities, some States introduce English at the primary stage, others around class V or VI. Very few schools, however, teach Sanskrit, which is now only an optional language.

Because politicians rather than educationists decide State policy, the fact that children learn language more quickly before the age of eight has still not sunk in, and the stage at which English is introduced in schools is much delayed in some States.

The method of teaching English

A minority of schools, where English is taught as a first language, follows the Direct Method. But schools where the medium of instruction is one of the 18 regional languages follow confused methods that are closer to the out-moded grammar-translation method.

The British Council's influence

Some States have sought the British Council's help with the teaching of English. But the British Council's chief role is to act as broker for English-language teaching packages manufactured by the ELT industry in Britain.

Those who design such packages have no acquaintance with Indian languages. And therefore, such packages do not take into account *where* or *why* an Indian (or any non-native speaker) has problems learning English.

The need for an alternative method

While the Direct Method is certainly the best method for children, it cannot serve for adults. For best results, the Direct Method requires the learner to be segregated from the mother tongue. This is not possible with the literate adult in a multi-lingual country like India. And if plain English is to spread in India, literate adults would have to be covered in a country-wide effort. Obviously, English will have to be taught by some method that does not require segregation from the mother tongue.

Mother tongue, other tongue

I have worked out an empirical method that uses the mother tongue to teach the 'other tongue'. Very briefly, this method shows learners where and how the 'other tongue' behaves *unlike* their mother tongue. Learners must be drilled especially in those areas.

For instance, the syntax of all Indian languages is flexible, but the syntax of English is rigid. This creates problems for the Indian learner. But if the Indian learner is shown how to tackle this difference in language behaviour, he or she learns how to avoid errors of syntax in English. Indians are prone to such errors precisely because they never have to bother about syntax when using an Indian language.

Similarly, Indians must be drilled in all other areas where English behaves differently from Indian languages. There are four major areas in which English represents a pole-to-pole opposite to Indian languages.

The snags

There are two very big snags in getting India to accept such a method.

1. Indian educationists have never bothered about a method of teaching English. Thinking about an efficient language-teaching method is absent in India.
2. The British Council, which enjoys an advisory role in most Indian States, will run down any ELT method devised by a non-Briton. For the British Council's chief role is to act as brokers for the British ELT industry.

Is no solution possible?

And so this contradictory language problem persists in India:

- Using plain Hindi will leave some part of India disgruntled.
- Using plain English will require a massive effort and a confrontation no individual can muster.

The British Council's ELT packages have failed to spread English in India. But even so, it will oppose an effort to teach plain English through a practical Indian way—because that will not be a British-designed ELT package.

Can Plain Language groups suggest an answer?

I take this opportunity therefore to seek your counsel. As plain language activists, can you think of an answer to this vexing problem of finding a plain language that can serve India's needs?

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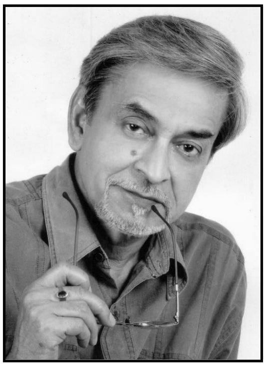

After 30 years with The States-man, *where even his friends thought him hot-headed, chol-eric and impatient,* Jyoti Sanyal *became Dean at Asian College of Journalism, Bangalore, in 1997. Remembered as a hound in class and a lamb outside it by the trainees he inspired with his love of both story-telling and expressive language, Sanyal devoted himself to Clear English India (www.clearenglish.in), which encourages people to use good contemporary English instead of Raj-day commercialese. (From* Indlish-The Book for Every English-speaking Indian.*) Jyoti Sanyal worked extensively to advance the cause of plain English—in education, the media, and private industry.*

It is with sadness that we report that Jyoti Sanyal's daughter, Reshna, wrote to us April 14, 2008, to tell us of her father's death. We acknowledge the significant work he did for plain language in India and will greatly miss his spirited participation in our field.

Getting a grip on plain language

Simo Goddijn

BureauTaal, the Netherlands

We believe in clarity. We believe that you can write any text on any subject in an understandable way. But it is not always easy to convince our customers of that possibility. Moreover, our customers are often not convinced of the necessity.

But suppose we convinced our customer of the necessity of plain language. Our customer will ask us to implement plain language in their organisation. We will create consciousness within the management group about the necessity of plain language. We will train the writers inside the organisation. And we will say: your organisation from now on communicates in plain language.

How then does our customer measure the effects of training? How does our customer know if any specific writer communicates in plain language? How does our customer know if any specific letter is written in plain language? How does our customer know what plain language is? To tackle these questions, BureauTaal developed an instrument to objectively measure if a specific text is written in plain language. We call it Texamen.

What is Texamen?

Texamen is a web application that does three things for you:

- diagnosis: it gives a diagnosis of the language level of your text
- analysis: it analyses what features are responsible for the language level
- feedback: it gives you feedback so you can adjust the language level of your text to the proficiency level of your reader

Our customers use Texamen to ensure that they write in plain language.

What is plain language?

To define plain language, we use a reference system that was developed by the Council of Europe. It is called 'the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in short CEF. CEF defines six language proficiency levels (see Table 1). The meaning of the levels is as follows:

A-levels: basic language user

- A1: breakthrough
- A2: way stage

B-levels: independent language user

- B1: threshold
- B2: vantage

C-levels: proficient language user

- C1: effective operational proficiency
- C2: mastery

B1 is our standard for 'plain language'

Level B1 is our standard for 'plain language'. Why? B1 is the so called 'threshold level'. You need this language proficiency level to function as an independent citizen. And you need this level to be able to receive education. B1 is also the language proficiency level of most of our citizens. In the Netherlands, 40% of the people have reading skills at level B1 (see the contribution of my colleague Wessel Visser on the Dutch Constitution in this volume of Clarity [p 42]). And 20% of the people have reading skills at the A-levels.

Can we use the CEF-reference to measure the language level of a text?

How do we use a reference system that measures language proficiency to measure the language level of a text? Simple. There is

			↓				
low proficiency	**A1**	**A2**	**B1**	**B2**	**C1**	**C2**	**high proficiency**

Table 1: CEF-reference for languages: plain language is defined as B1

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
feature 1						
feature 2						
other features						
sentence length	6	8	10.5	12.5	14.5	>16.5
jargon	0%	0%	w%	x%	y%	z%
feature n						

Table 2: language features and their (imaginary) values for the different language levels

a lot of experience in the field of education in measuring language proficiency. In Europe, the CEF-standard is commonly used in the field of education. Lots of experts use the standard on a daily basis to establish language proficiency in students.

The standard is also used by developers of tests and exams. They use it to adjust the language level of tests and exams to the language level of students. They know exactly how to write a text for a student with, for example, language proficiency B1. They call it a text with language level B1. We profit from the hands-on knowledge of these experts.

How did we develop Texamen?

We asked test developers to assess the language level of 120 texts. Although these experts know exactly how to write a text with a certain language level, they do not exactly know how they do it. Therefore, we distilled common features, in texts of the same language level—quantitative features like sentence length and word length, but also qualitative features such as passive style and the use of jargon. We put the features in a matrix, see table 2.

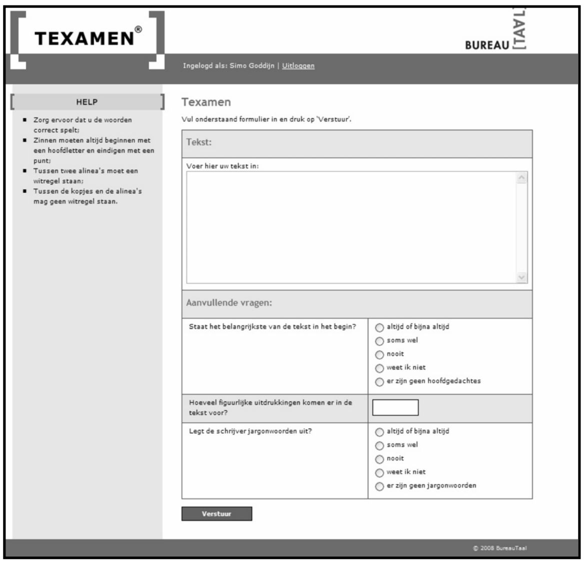

Figure 1: Texamen once you log on to the system

Then, we investigated if we could predict the language level of a new text with this matrix. In 94% of the texts, Texamen predicted as accurately as expert assessors.

We decided it was worthwhile to develop Texamen into an automatic web application.

How do you use Texamen?

It is easy. Once you log on to the system, you will see the screen below (see figure 1).

To assess the language level of your text, you have to accomplish three steps:

1. Copy-paste a text into the upper window.
2. Answer the three questions in the lower windows.*
3. Click the green 'send' button.

* The questions in the lower window are:

1. Is the most important message in the beginning of the text?
2. How many figurative expressions are there in the text?
3. Does the writer explain jargon.

Within a couple of seconds, Texamen returns with an assessment of the language level (see figure 2).

The analysis also gives you a number of features of your text that are responsible for the language level. This feedback is given in a histogram (see figure 3). The feedback enables you to adjust your text to the proficiency level of your readers.

The feedback categories are:

1. low frequency words
2. formal words
3. abstract language
4. complex sentences
5. sentence length
6. figurative language

Why would you want to use Texamen?

A standard for plain language

Texamen sets a standard for plain language. What can we do with such a standard?

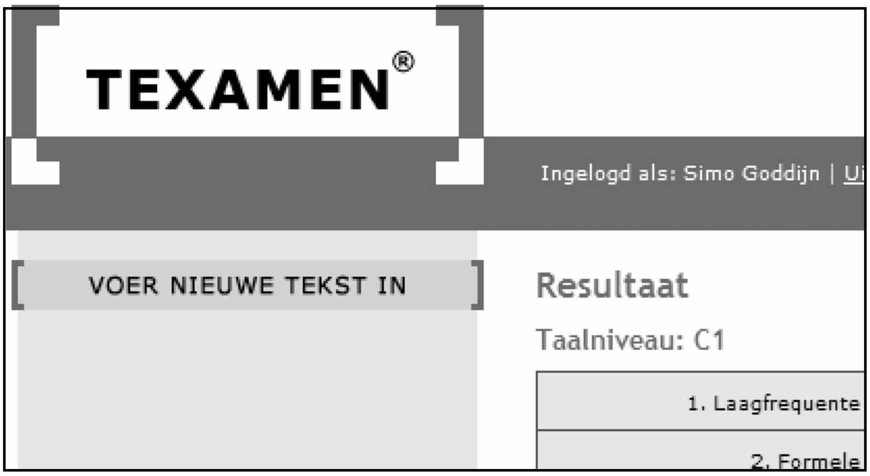

Figure 2: the result of the analysis: assessment of language level

- it enables policymakers to demand plain language from organisations
- it enables supervisory organs to check if organisations obey the policy of plain language
- it enables text writers to correctly execute the policy of plain language

Texamen rules out excuses for not communicating in plain language!

Assessment of language level

Texamen diagnoses your text. It tells you the language level of your text. And if you know the language level of your text, you also know what part of your target group under-stands it. A text that is written in language level B1 can be understood by 95% of the people in our country. But a text written in language level C1 is under-standable by only 40% of the people.

Objectivity

Texamen is objective. It is always hard to receive criticism about a text you wrote. And it is not always easy to criticize someone else's text. Texamen solves both problems. It enables you to check your own text objectively. And it enables the criticizer to objectivise his opinion.

Quickness

Last but not least, Texamen works quickly. Copy-paste your text, answer three questions and your diagnosis is ready. A lot quicker than a personal scan!

Who uses Texamen in the Netherlands?

In the Netherlands, Texamen is used by the government as well as commercial companies. Our customers include:

- the Dutch Authority for the Financial Markets
- banks
- insurance companies

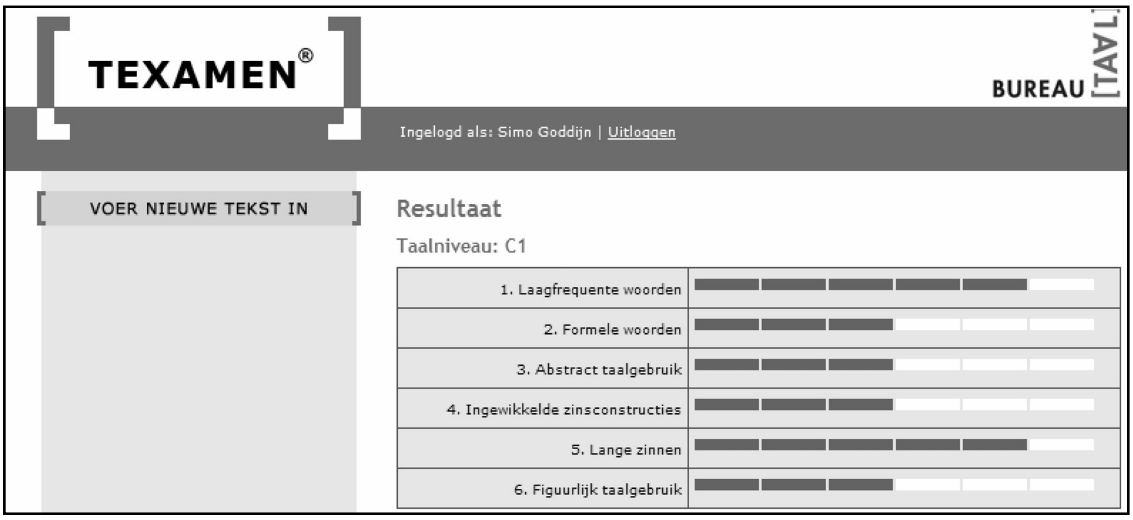

Figure 3: feedback on six features that play an important role in the language level

• pension funds
• schools
• hospitals
• ministries
• local authorities
• and others

Is Texamen available in other languages than Dutch?

In the near future, Texamen will be available in English (expected this year) and in Spanish. We have plans to develop Texamen for French, German, and Italian.

Texamen® is a registered trademark. Texamen (www.texamen.nl) is developed by BureauTaal.

simo@BureauTaal.nl

Simo Goddijn *Journalist; journalism instructor; author of newspaper style manual; author of book on Indian English; writing and editing skills coach (including technical writing and editing)*

CIAJ National Conference—Who really writes the law?

September 11 & 12, 2008 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

The Canadian Institute for the Administration of Justice holds its legal drafting conference organized by the CIAJ Legislative Drafting Committee, chaired by Mr. John Mark Keyes, Chief Legislative Counsel of Canada. This year, it will focus on the intersecting roles of those involved in determining the wording of legislative texts (statutes and regulations), i.e. legislative drafters who turn drafting instructions into text, and those who are responsible for developing drafting instructions and their underlying policy.

Other participants in the law-making processes include translators, editors, jurilinguists and bijuralists, as well as parliamentarians and subordinate legislative authorities. Therefore, one may wonder who really writes the law and what are the distinctive roles of those involved? Are there overlaps or conflicts? Are these roles evolving in response to changes in the political culture or environment for law-making?

The Drafting Team: Its Roles and Relationships

Several panelists will explain how the roles and relationships have evolved over time as well as the future trends. A debate will follow on the *Expectations and Challenges for the Drafting Team*.

What policy role do drafters have? What drafting role do policy advisors have? What challenges are faced by drafting teams today and how can we address or adapt to them?

Legislative Drafting and the International Scene

Legal drafting is the subject of many international influences and exchanges. An overview of the developments in the field will precede two drafting workshops where experienced drafters will discuss recurrent drafting issues in English and French and present their own solutions.

Best Practices for Developing Drafting Team Expertise

Demographics and the challenge of staff renewal mean that drafting teams will be operating with significantly less collective experience than in the past. How do parliamentary and drafting offices develop the expertise needed in Canada and in Australia and how they face time constraints and increasing expectations about the quality of legislation?

The Drafting Dynamic: Drafting Instructions and the Drafting Process

Are there "best practices" for giving drafting instructions and to respond to them? The panelists will offer practical suggestions on how to give drafting instructions and feedback at all stages in the drafting process.

Building Accessibility for People with Disabilities into our Legislation: Avoiding the creation of Unintended Barriers

This concluding session will provide practical exercises and deal with the interplay between courts and legislators when judicial decisions prompt the revision of legislation or the enactment of new legislation.

The Dutch Constitution in plain language

Wessel Visser

BureauTaal, the Netherlands

The Constitution is our most important law. Our Constitution contains the most important rules of our country. For example, it regulates the conduct of our citizens. And it describes the most important rights the inhabitants of our country have. But the language of our Constitution is very difficult. Most people don't understand our Constitution. Sometimes even our ministers and members of parliament don't understand important articles of our Constitution. That's weird, of course. This is the main reason that a group of linguists and state law experts have written our Constitution in plain language.

Why did we write the Dutch Constitution in plain language?

The Constitution is the most important law of the Netherlands, containing the main rules of the Dutch state and its citizens. As a reader, you want to know what the rights of our government and our parliament are? You want to know who is allowed to make public decisions and how we have organised our jurisdiction and our courts. That's all in our Constitution. Furthermore, our Constitution describes the basic rights of the Dutch people. It states, for example, that all people are equal under the law, that it is prohibited to discriminate against people, and that we are allowed to write and say what we think.

But, for many people, our Constitution is very hard to understand because of the difficult legal language. Our Constitution's language is so difficult that even our best state law experts find it difficult to understand—let alone ministers, members of parliament, or ordinary people. That's why we decided to write our Constitution in plain language, so they can understand our Constitutional rules.

How did we do it?

In Europe we have standards describing reading skills of people and reading levels of texts. These standards, called the Common European Framework of References, have been developed by the Council of Europe and are valid for all European languages. Examples include English, Spanish, Greek, Swedish, and Dutch. We distinguish six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2, with A1 denoting the lowest level and C2 the highest level.

The reading level of our Constitution is C1, as measured with Texamen (see the contribution of my colleague Simo Goddijn on Texamen in this volume of Clarity [p 38]). Since the reading skills of the majority of our population is B1 or lower, less than half of our population is able to understand our Constitution. (See Figure 1.)

So our aim was to write the Constitution at reading level B1 because 95% of our population understands texts at this reading level. That's why we call this reading level 'plain Dutch'.

Texamen describes the reading levels of the Council of Europe in detail. Out of Texamen we distilled a large number of language rules, discriminating between reading level C1 and B1, and other reading levels. Using these rules, we have rewritten our Constitution in plain language.

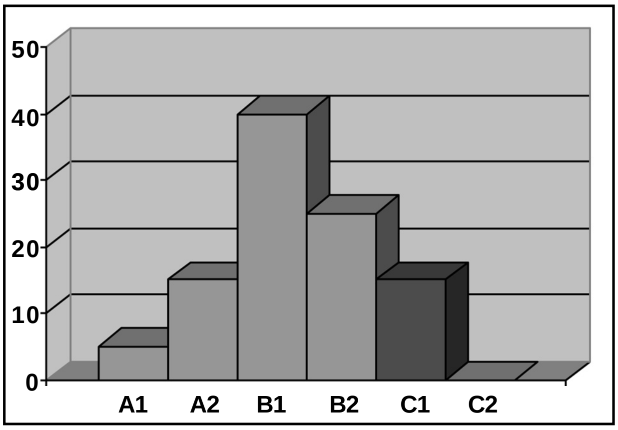

Figure 1: Reading skills of the Dutch population and the reading level of our Constitution.

Just to illustrate the differences between reading level C1 and B1, look at Table 1. The table says that texts at reading level C1 are characterised by, among other things, abstract language, the passive voice, impersonal texts, formal words, ambiguous language, figurative language, and long sentences. At reading level B1, plain language, we avoid these characteristics. At reading level B1, we use concrete language, the active voice, personal texts, informal words, univocal language, literal language and short sentences.

Reading level C1	Reading level B1
Abstract	Concrete
Passive	Active
Impersonal	Personal
Formal	Informal
Ambiguous	Univocal
Figurative	Literal
Long	Short

Table 1: Text characteristics of reading levels C1 and B1

How did we ensure that the content of the Constitution in plain language is legally correct?

Linguists are not necessarily state law experts. Yet we wanted to make a Constitution that is comprehensible for everyone and is equally, or almost equally, as correct as the old Constitution.

Therefore we collaborated with a group of experts on state law and the Dutch Constitution in particular, namely members of our Supreme Court and university professors in political science and in state law.

Our procedure was as follows:

1. The group of linguists, the experts in plain language, wrote the articles of the Constitution in plain language.
2. We discussed every single article with the group of legal experts. Together we developed and refined the texts of the Constitution in plain language.
3. We proceeded till the moment that the group of legal experts said: 'Yes, this is good. The content of the text in plain language is the same as the original text.'

Of course, the original Constitution is made by our government and the two chambers of our parliament. They knew what they were doing. And they have been elected in democratic elections. So the old Constitution is the one and only real Constitution. But the new Constitution in plain language has one great advantage. Since it is written in plain language, everybody understands it.

The new Constitution is not quite the same as the old one, of course. The reason is that we have written the new Constitution in plain language. But we did our utmost, together with the best legal experts we have in the Netherlands, to write in plain Dutch what formerly was written in a very difficult and complex language.

What are the advantages of a Constitution in plain language?

The most important advantage is its comprehensibility. We estimate that some 95% of the Dutch population can understand the Constitution in plain language. This is important, of course. Since everybody understands the Constitution, we can have more meaningful debates about its content. And we citizens are able to obey our most important legal rules.

Another important advantage is that the Constitution in plain Dutch seems to be more precise than the original Constitution. In the old Constitution, we find a lot of abstract, archaic, and figurative language. In plain language, we make abstract language concrete, archaic language modern, and figurative language literal. Often nobody knows the exact meaning of abstract, archaic, and figurative language. It is unclear, for example, what is meant by 'one is free to express his feelings and thoughts by means of the press'. Yet the statement that 'everyone may say or write what he thinks' precisely expresses the meaning of article 7 of our Constitution.

More precise seems counterintuitive.

It seems counterintuitive that a legal text in plain language is more precise than an original legal text. But see for example article 90 of the Dutch Constitution: 'The government enforces the development of international law.' It is not clear what the development of international law means. It is an abstract concept. Ordinary people don't know what that is. And even state law experts have different opinions about this text. In the new Constitution, we write the statement in plain language, making it more precise. 'The government enforces peace between countries and protects human rights.'

This is exactly what the legal meaning of our Constitution is. Reading such a text makes it understandable why the Netherlands participate in the war in Afghanistan. And why our minister of international development wants our troops to go to Darfur in Africa to protect human rights. Such actions are covered in our Constitution.

What do Dutch lawyers think about a Constitution in plain Dutch?

They react differently. Some don't like it. They are very used to the language of their profession, their jargon. And I can understand their position. Legalese is a very efficient way of communicating between professionals. But people outside the craft don't understand much.

Yet most lawyers react enthusiastically. In the Netherlands, we have a special University for legal experts making laws at our ministries. You have to have a Master's degree at this University, at the Academy of Lawmaking, before you are entitled to draft laws at our ministries. BureauTaal is going to educate a new generation of legislative drafters in plain language so that our ministers and members of parliament understand the laws they are making. At this moment, they do not.

Is the new Constitution in plain language equipped for educational purposes?

Yes, we think so. This was the main reason to rewrite our Constitution in plain language. We created it to be used in schools. Our politicians stress the importance of norms and values—whether they are labour, liberals, conservatives or Christian-democrats. But our most important norms and values, the rules of our Constitution, are puzzling for most of our students.

That's why we wrote our Constitution in plain language. The book we produced contains the original articles, as well as the articles in plain language. Furthermore, we give a short explanation to every article. This Constitution is very accessible for students in high schools and in higher education. Several high schools and colleges already use the Constitution in their lessons.

De Grondwet in eenvoudig Nederlands (ISBN 978-90 12 12310 5) is made by BureauTaal (www.bureautaal.nl) and published by SDU Uitgevers.

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Wessel Visser *is the Managing Director of BureauTaal, a Netherlands communications agency that specializes in plain language. He has served in that position since 2002. He holds a bachelors degree and a political-science certificate, and he has served as a researcher for the University of Nijmegen and a number of other institutions. Before becoming the Managing Director of BureauTaal, he was the chairman of the Association for Statistics and Research from 2000–2002. Wessel's company, BureauTaal, sponsored PLAIN's October 2007 conference in Amsterdam.*

Plain Portuguese, the new member of the plain language family

Sandra Martins

Co-founder of Português Claro

This summer saw the arrival of plain language in Portugal. Strangely, no one was expecting it, although many have since then recognised it as something they had been longing for . . . but couldn't name.

The need for clarity

Quitting my job to start a plain language consultancy in a country that doesn't even have a word for it might sound a bit reckless, but it had to be done.

After spending a few years in the UK, it shocked me to return to Portugal and realise that it took me a couple of readings to understand the meaning of most documents the government issued. The same happened with bank papers, contracts, internal documents at work, and even the electricity bill!

In a country where 11% are totally illiterate and 35% have only four years of formal education, corporate and institutional gobbledygook seemed not only unnecessary, but an irresponsible form of discrimination.

Despite recent efforts to cut some red tape, Portugal is still a very bureaucratic country where people and businesses are weighed down by paperwork, forms and permits, for the most part written in a language that nobody understands. The language used by government agencies, an unyielding legacy of decades of dictatorship, reinforces the gap between ordinary people and those in authority. "Most excellent doctor so and so" is still the normal way of addressing anyone in Public Administration or any position of power. And, because in Portugal anyone with a degree is called a doctor, government and most organisations return the favour and address citizens in the same way. If you don't have a degree they might have to call you simply Your Excellency, or something similar.

This might sound like a joke but it reflects the mindset of most Portuguese organisations—very formal, traditional, distant, and self-focused.

As this way of addressing the reader sets the tone for the rest of the communication, you can easily imagine what follows: formulaic, stiff writing, riddled with archaic terms and jargon.

That's normally bad in itself but, in Portugal, where 80% of the population has low literacy skills (below level 3, considered the minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in today's world), it leads to serious exclusion problems.

Lack of awareness is an obstacle

However, in 2007, people had never heard about plain language. The concept didn't even exist in Portugal. When we were thinking of a name for it, we looked at what had been done in Spain and México (Spanish and Portuguese are very similar) to see what solutions they'd come up with. In the end, we picked Português Claro (Clear Portuguese) and tried it out on a few people. I went to the tax office and asked them to explain something in Português Claro—it took them a bit by surprise but they understood what I meant and offered an explanation in plain language.

Another obstacle is the weak consumer and citizen involvement—there is no grassroots movement calling for plain language. People complain (privately, to their friends at the café) but, maybe because they're not aware of the solution, don't really demand a change.

Reasons to be hopeful

Lately there's been a strong political investment in modernising administrative processes. Simplex, a government initiative launched in 2006, aims to make citizens' interactions with the State simpler and more effective. The focus is on simplifying processes, but it could open the way for simplifying and modernising administrative language as well.

Simplex's results have been very positive, with Portugal now being the 3rd in Europe for the accessibility of e-government. The services are there, but the language could still do with some work.

Something else that gives us hope is the current drive, both from government and businesses, to find ways of increasing productivity and becoming more competitive. Plain language, as we well know, has something to offer those seeking ways to save time and money.

The story so far

We spent the last seven months educating people about plain language, hoping that someone would eventually take the plunge and start using it.

In November, Martin Cutts (our mentor, business angel, and general source of inspiration and good advice) came to Lisbon and presented a couple of exciting workshops, one for selected representatives of public and private organizations and the other for journalists. Seeds were planted, and we now have friends in some influential places, all thanks to Martin's persuasive style.

By January, when the thought of getting a proper job was becoming disturbingly frequent, we got our first client, a health insurance company about to launch a new product and looking for a "differentiating factor". Trust me, there was much rejoicing.

Weeks later, Social Security became our second client when they asked us to rewrite a letter that would go out to all 65–69 year-olds in the country. We're now looking at the possibility of rewriting their standard letters and leaflets and developing scripts for their new contact centre. This is the kind of work we set out to do—something that will have an impact on people's lives.

The future

Our To Do list has about 100 entries, but five of them stand out as priorities for 2008:

1. Continue to raise awareness of plain language and its benefits

We don't want Português Claroto be more famous than Persil Automatic, like a certain Mrs. Beckham, but want it to be a household name. Our marketing approach is twofold: we will target decision-makers in large organizations through articles in specialist magazines and high-profile conferences (miraculously, all at zero cost) and the general public through popular TV and radio shows, and articles in magazines and newspapers.

2. Lobby for plain language to be included in the next Simplex

Clear, simple language is already required by law in all communication with citizens but no-one would have guessed it. We're preparing a paper for the Secretary of State for Administrative Modernization with proposals on how plain language can be used to simplify the interactions between citizens and public administration. Our goal is for new simplification or de-bureaucratization projects to incorporate plain language from the start as one of their success criteria. Our dream is to have them adopt plain language as a standard for all government communications.

3. Research Plain Portuguese

The differences between Portuguese and English make it hard to simply transfer the knowledge accumulated by plain English practitioners over the years; we cannot use established resources, like lists of alternative words, and must be careful when extrapolating research findings, like recommended sentence length of 15-25 words.

While some of these issues will be naturally solved as we gain experience and develop our own resources, others require a more scientific approach and we're applying for EU R&D funding to do just so. If it comes through, we'll be able to test our assumptions of what works for Portuguese readers and use that knowledge to develop tools and, who knows, standards.

4. Establish connections with Brazil and other Portuguese-speaking countries

Only 10 million of the 235 million Portuguese-speakers are in Portugal. Most of them live in Brazil (190 million), others in Cape Verde, Mozambique, São Tomé e Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Timor-Leste.

What do these countries have in common, other than having been colonized by the Portuguese in the distant past? They have high levels of poverty, illiteracy and corruption. Brazil had its own dictatorship, Timor was occupied by Indonesia for many years, and Angola and Mozambique suffered long wars, first to gain their independence, later between opposing political forces.

Plain Language could help these countries:

- increase transparency and reduce corruption
- encourage participation and democracy
- send out a positive signal to those thinking of investing there.

So, we're interested in finding out if there are any other Plain Portuguese initiatives out there and creating a network to exchange ideas, resources, etc.

With a lot of help from our friends

We're just starting and the journey ahead is long and bumpy, but never lonely. People like Martin Cutts (Plain Language Commission, UK), Frances Gordon and Candice Burt (Simplified, South Africa), and Annetta Cheek (Center for Plain Language, USA) kept us from reinventing the wheel and helped us think things through many times. PLAIN sponsored our Amsterdam presentation and gave us a chance to introduce Plain Portuguese to the other family members.

In 2009, when we meet again in Sidney, I'm sure we'll have a lot of stories to tell you.

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Sandra Martins *used to be a solution-focused therapist and a translator. Now she runs Português Claro, a plain-Portuguese training and consultancy firm co-founded with Martin Cutts.*

Members by country

Argentina	2	Germany	2	Nigeria	9
Australia	106	Gilbraltar	1	Philippines	1
Austria	1	Gran Canaria	1	Portugal	4
Bahamas	2	Hong Kong	18	Scotland	12
Bangladesh	6	India	8	Singapore	7
Belgium	6	Ireland	4	Slovakia	2
Bermuda	1	Isle of Man	1	South Africa	162
Brazil	1	Israel	4	Spain	3
British Virgin Islands	1	Italy	5	St. Lucia	2
British West Indies	3	Jamaica	1	Sweden	17
Canada	79	Japan	7	Switzerland	1
Chile	1	Jersey	3	Thailand	1
China	1	Lesotho	1	Trinidad and Tobago	3
Cote d'Ivore	1	Malaysia	1	USA	211
Denmark	2	Mexico	7	Wales	7
England	294	Mozambique	1	Zimbabwe	1
Finland	6	Netherlands	6		
France	2	New Zealand	15	**Total**	**1,045**

Plain language for municipalities—tools and efforts

This session was facilitated by three Canadian plain-language specialists who worked as part of a consortium to help the City of Toronto with a significant plain-language project.

Paper #1

Clear language: the municipal challenge

Ruth Baldwin

Plain Writing Services, Ottawa, Canada

This first presentation described two projects undertaken by the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). CAMA is a national, non-profit association with a membership of approximately 350 City Managers, Chief Administrative Officers and Senior Appointed Officials from all parts of Canada. CUPE is Canada's largest union, with more than half a million members across the country. The two organizations have been working together for about 10 years, setting up workplace literacy and learning programs that use a collaborative union-employer model for planning and implementation. CUPE also provides clear language training for union representatives and has developed model collective agreements. Both organizations receive grants from the Canadian government's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLESP) to partially fund literacy-related activities.

Background

I worked with CAMA and CUPE in 2005 to find out about clear-language initiatives in Canada. Our research found not many municipalities had taken up the clear language challenge. Some municipalities provide clear language training for staff on a fairly regular basis; some have undertaken projects to revise by-laws or specific public information. In a couple of cases, the municipality had worked with its unions to begin drafting workplace material in clear language. However, we also found that clear language initiatives are rarely evaluated and they are usually not sustained. They come to an end when staff changes, budgets are cut, or government priorities shift.

The Clarity Kit

In 2006, CAMA and CUPE decided to do more to encourage municipalities to adopt plain language for communications with the public and the workforce. They Sally McBeth and me to develop tools that would address the challenges of working in a municipal environment. What we developed was *The Clarity Kit: Effective Communications for Municipalities*.

The tools in *The Clarity Kit* are designed to support clear language advocates, from management and the union, as they work together to convince decision-makers and those who actually do the writing to adopt and promote clear language. The approach is based on the model CAMA and CUPE have used to set up joint labour/ management workplace literacy programs across Canada. These workplace programs often gain additional support from local literacy groups and other community resources.

Contents of The Clarity Kit

Part 1—provides an overview of clear language issues and of the tools in the kit. It outlines the steps in a clear language initiative, from identifying champions, to developing strategies, to celebrating success.

Part 2—provides tools to help make the case for using clear language in municipal communications with the public and the workforce. It includes:

- an analysis of the problems caused by unclear language
- answers to frequently asked questions about the clear language approach
- two excellent case studies and some before and after examples that demonstrate how effective clear language can be
- the Top 10 Clear Writing Tips
- other resources (such as video presentations, Web resources)

Part 3—introduces the Clarity Audit™, a comprehensive new tool for analyzing how an organization communicates. Clear language advocates can use the Clarity Audit™ to engage individuals in all departments and at all levels of the organization in reviewing and assessing the effectiveness of a wide range of communications. The Clarity Audit™ tells what and where the problems are. Using this information, an organization can develop a plan to implement clear language where it's needed most.

How do municipalities benefit from clear language?

We've identified four general areas in which municipalities will benefit from using clear language for their communications.

1) Because clear language makes information more accessible, it enables a municipality to reach a broader range of people with its public communications, including those who have low literacy levels, those whose first language is not English or French, and people who have visual or learning disabilities.

2) By providing clear communication to citizens about the services they pay for and the issues that affect them, municipalities improve transparency and accountability. Citizens are more likely to understand why and how decisions get made. They may feel less excluded from municipal affairs. They may be less likely to complain about a decision if they understand why Council made it. Also remember that elected officials need to have clear information and a good understanding of the issues to do their job well.

3) Clear communication can have a huge impact on the quality of working life for municipal employees at all levels. It may save time by making processes more efficient. It may improve labour/management relations. And, if we are talking about health and safety, clearly written material can save lives.

4) Clear communication in a municipal union means that more members can find out what's going on and what rights they have won. If members understand what's at stake, they will be more likely to participate in union activities. Clear language may be particularly important for the collective agreement, but there are lots of other workplace communications that could be the focus for clear language revision if the collective agreement is too sensitive.

Conclusion

Changing the way a large organization, such as a municipality, communicates is a major cultural shift. Clear language reform requires new skills and a shift in perspective. These changes don't happen overnight. They take time, energy, resources and strategy. The Clarity Kit provides the tools to help municipalities get started on this important work.

The Clarity Kit is now available in English and French. You can order the Kit from the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators at: http://www.camacam.ca/programs_language_init.asp

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Ruth Baldwin *has more than 20 years' experiences as a writer, editor, trainer and promoter of clear language. Her company, Plain Writing Services, provides training, writing and editing services to government, NGOs, unions and the private sector.*

Ruth is the author of the best-selling publication, Clear Language and Literacy, *published by the Ontario Literacy Coalition in 1990, and the revised version published in 2000. She is also the co-author (with Sally McBeth) of* The Clarity Kit: Effective Communications for Municipalities, *a joint project of the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators and the Canadian Union of Public Employees. Ruth is a member of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) and serves as its Treasurer. She is also a member of the Editors' Association of Canada.*

One city's response: City of Toronto

The last two speakers in this Canadian threesome gave detailed PowerPoint presentations and examples of changes to the City of Toronto's Council Reports and Procedures Bylaw *respectively. Below we summarize the changes the City made to these significant documents.*

Paper #2

Best practices: key features of the City's new staff report design

Sally MacBeth

Manager, Clear Language and Design, Toronto, Canada

1. Research

We looked at best practices internationally and conducted focus groups with report writers, report readers, and Secretariat staff.

2. Analysis

We analyzed a sample of 70 reports from 43 divisions. Then we designed and tested 6 iterations of the new templates with stakeholders.

3. Training

We designed and delivered training to 1057 people in about 30 divisions

4. Evaluation

The team set reading level benchmarks for the reports. Most significantly, we surveyed trainees just before, and three months after, the training. Finally, we asked the participants to measure the readability of their reports and send the results to the Clerk's office.

A comparison of the readability levels of various media was instructive: Canadian newspapers ranged from grades 6–8, 7–9, and 10–13, requiring elementary, middle, or high school levels respectively for readers. The City of Toronto's average report, however, was at grade 16 (undergraduate university) and the average City Secretariat document was 17.5 (doctorate level). Clearly changes were needed.

The goal was to reduce the reading level to grade 10–12 for the Summary and Recommendations and to keep the Comments and Analysis to no higher than grade 12 whenever possible. Here is a list of the best practices the City adopted:

#	Best practices for Council Reports
1	The top right heading signals the report's function—*either* Action Required, Information Only, or Action Required—Confidential Attachment.
2	A prominent title, moved from a hidden subject line below to the top, "telegraphs" the report subject. This makes it easier to distinguish one report from another.
3	Readers will be able to search for reports by a unique reference number, that stays the same throughout the decision process.
4	The old Purpose and Conclusions were repetitive: the new Summary on page 1 combines the two.
5	Longer reports have a contents box.
6	Recommendations use a standardized numbering system, with fewer indents.
7	Recommendations use active verbs and say who should do what.
8	Implementation details have a separate heading, if needed.
9	Financial impact information appears in a table, not as a narrative. A flexible template design means writers can put graphic information in the report rather than attaching it.
10	Headings distinguish between historical background on how the issue has moved through the decision-making process and the background to the issue itself: Decision History and Issue Background.

11 Language is clear and concise.

12 Running footers give a condensed version of the report subject.

13 Frequent, meaningful sub-headings help the reader to scan.

14 Type is set ragged right rather than justified. The uneven white space serves as a place marker and speeds reading.

15 Right and left margins are set at 1.25 inches, giving an optimal line length for easy reading (75 – 85 characters).

What worked? Where were the barriers?

During the research phase, citing international best practices helped create buy-in. Though we encountered much cynicism and change fatigue in the early focus groups, later participants were much more receptive to change when they compared the proposed new templates with old reports. We faced challenges getting buy-in from decision-makers and other key divisions because:

- Corporate Communications was in a leadership vacuum during the project's life—we could not get access to their support and resources.
- The Director of the Secretariat left half-way through the project. His successor felt less ownership of the project.
- A crucial clear language champion, the councillor who chaired the Language Equity and Literacy sub-committee, resigned her seat on Council three months into the project.

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Sally MacBeth *is Clear Language and Design's manager and lead consultant, with 25 years of experience as a professional editor and trainer. In 2006, she co-authored with Ruth Baldwin, the* Clarity Kit, *a guide to clear communication for municipalities. During 2006/07, she was lead trainer and research consultant on the City of Toronto's clear language project for staff report writers and approvers. Sally is an ongoing trainer with the Ontario Cabinet Office's clear language initiative for writers in all government ministries. She also serves as a clear language and literacy advisor to the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police.*

Paper #3

Plain-language changes to the City of Toronto's procedures bylaw

Christine Mowat

President, Wordsmith Associates Communications Consultants Ltd.; Past Chair, PLAIN

This high-energy 120-page project faced the deadlines that came from installing a new Council and from the related wish to present a new set of procedures as soon as councillors began sitting. Wordsmiths, working with a key drafter from the City, met the deadline but did not have time to implement all our recommendations. The City of Toronto's Meeting Management Initiative supported the rewrite of the *Procedures Bylaw*, the most used City bylaw:

> Streamlining procedures will help staff manage deadlines better and eliminate duplicate work so that information is available when people need it. In addition, staff will be able to dedicate more time to other tasks. Clear processes help make decision-making more open and understandable, which helps make the system more accountable.

Council did pass the plain-language bylaw in late 2006. Some of changes we made are summarized below:

Changed all future tenses of verbs and removed the definition of *will*

The original wisely avoided the ambiguous *shall* but had replaced it with an equally ambiguous *will*. We usually substituted the present tense (or *may* or *must* when appropriate), following the-law-is-written-in-the-present-tense rule. The definition of *will* was confusing.

Changed the character of the headings

Headings and subheadings were often too general or not present. Clear, specific headings provide a map to the reader to help review a section quickly.

Changed the Definitions format

The all-capitalized defined words and layout made finding specific defined terms a slow process. Changing the formatting, using a table layout, and removing the all-caps improves speed of reading and has a more pleasing look.

Corrected all the grammar and punctuation mistakes

27-55. C–This was an example of a misplaced modifier. The Clerk (below) is based on recommendations!

Before

Based upon recommendations from the Chair, the Clerk will submit for adoption by Council, as part of the Orders of the Day, a list of recommended urgent matters and Mayor's Key Matters, for priority consideration at the Meeting.

After

List of items for priority consideration
The Clerk submits for Council adoption, as part of the Orders of the Day, a list of recommended Urgent Matters and Mayor's Key Matters for priority consideration at the Meeting. The Clerk's list is based on the Chair's recommendations. *(27-18)*

Applied Wordsmith's CLARITY model throughout (included *C:* keeping sentences to 15-25 words on average and 35 words at most)

The Active-voice principle meant we eliminated ambiguity by changing passive verbs to active voice. For examples, compare the *Before* with 6 passives to the *After* with none:

Before

§ 27-11 Amendment to Chapter. *(93) (27-137)*

A. Two-thirds vote <u>required</u>.

This Chapter <u>will not be amended</u> or <u>repealed</u> except on an affirmative vote of two-thirds of the Members present and voting.

B. Notice <u>to be given</u> at a previous Meeting.

No amendments or repeal of this Chapter <u>will be considered</u> at any Meeting of the Council unless notice of the proposed amendment or repeal <u>was given</u> at a previous Meeting of the Council, or <u>was considered</u> by a Council Committee.

After

§ 27-11 Amending this By-law *(93) (27-137)*

A. Two-thirds vote required

To pass a motion to amend or repeal this By-law requires a two-thirds vote of the Members present.

B. Notice to be given at a previous Meeting

Council will only consider amending or repealing this Procedures By-law at a Meeting if:

(1) a previous Council Meeting received notice of the proposed amendment or repeal, or

(2) a Council Committee had considered the amendment or repeal before.

Recommended replacing *meetingspeak* language

We made a number of recommendations for a glossary to include a wide range of words and phrases that we call *meetingspeak*. Examples include *standing committees* and *in camera*, *release of quick business*, and *speak to a matter* (18 – B (2)).

Substituted easier words for those at too high a register for

An example is *deputations*. The meaning varies slightly with the substitute: in 127 D (1) and (2), it means *public representatives*. In 127 D (7)—originally (6), *deputations* means *public presentations*.

Humanized the voice of the bylaw

For example, we refer to Council, committees, and community councils as *they* or *their* when we need a pronoun reference, instead of using *it* or *its*. This is a grammatically correct choice as collective nouns may be considered either as an aggregate or as separate individuals in a group.

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See Christine Mowat's *photo (page 10) and bio (page 4)*

2 continents + 2 approaches + 1 vision = effective government communication

Francien Malecki

Senior Director of Design and Partner,
Eden Design and Communication, Amsterdam, NL

Rita Roosevelt

Ph.D. , Senior Consultant,
Kleimann Communication Group, Inc, DC, USA

No one can make paying taxes a pleasant experience, but can we make it easier for taxpayers? This paper explores the approaches used to help the Dutch Tax Authorities and the American Internal Revenue Service develop tax forms and instructions that are more efficient and easier for the taxpayer to complete. The two case studies demonstrate how two communication firms—Eden Design & Communication in the Netherlands and Kleimann Communication Group Inc., in the United States—working in two very different cultures thousands of miles apart, share a common vision that drives their process and produces positive and award-winning results.

Our shared vision: two forms of communication—visual and written—work as a dialectic to inform each other. They create a balance together, and they work in concert. One cannot simply change the writing without considering the design, and one cannot change the design without considering the writing. Both firms initiated change in the way their respective tax authorities approach the design of forms and instructions, and change in the way taxpayers interact with those forms and instructions.

Case Study #1: Form-filing Without Fear

Dutch Tax Authorities

Every year, approximately six million citizens in the Netherlands file a tax return on their annual income. To enable them to file their tax returns on time, the Tax Authorities send everyone who must pay tax the "Income Tax Return" Form.

In 2005, the Tax Authorities introduced a new program to assist the elderly and chronically ill by providing additional rebates. In the first year of the program, about 400,000 elderly and chronically ill individuals received the Income Tax Return Form. To be eligible for the rebate, recipients merely had to complete and return the Form.

Unfortunately, the response rate was very disappointing. The target response rate was set at 25%, but only 10% of those individuals who received the Form returned a completed form. The reason—fear of forms was the primary reason for the low response rate. Research showed that elderly and sick individuals were afraid of making errors and of ending up in a situation they could no longer control. An analysis of the Form itself revealed that many of the questions were not even intended for this target audience and the remaining and relevant questions were poorly worded and, therefore, misunderstood by the reader.

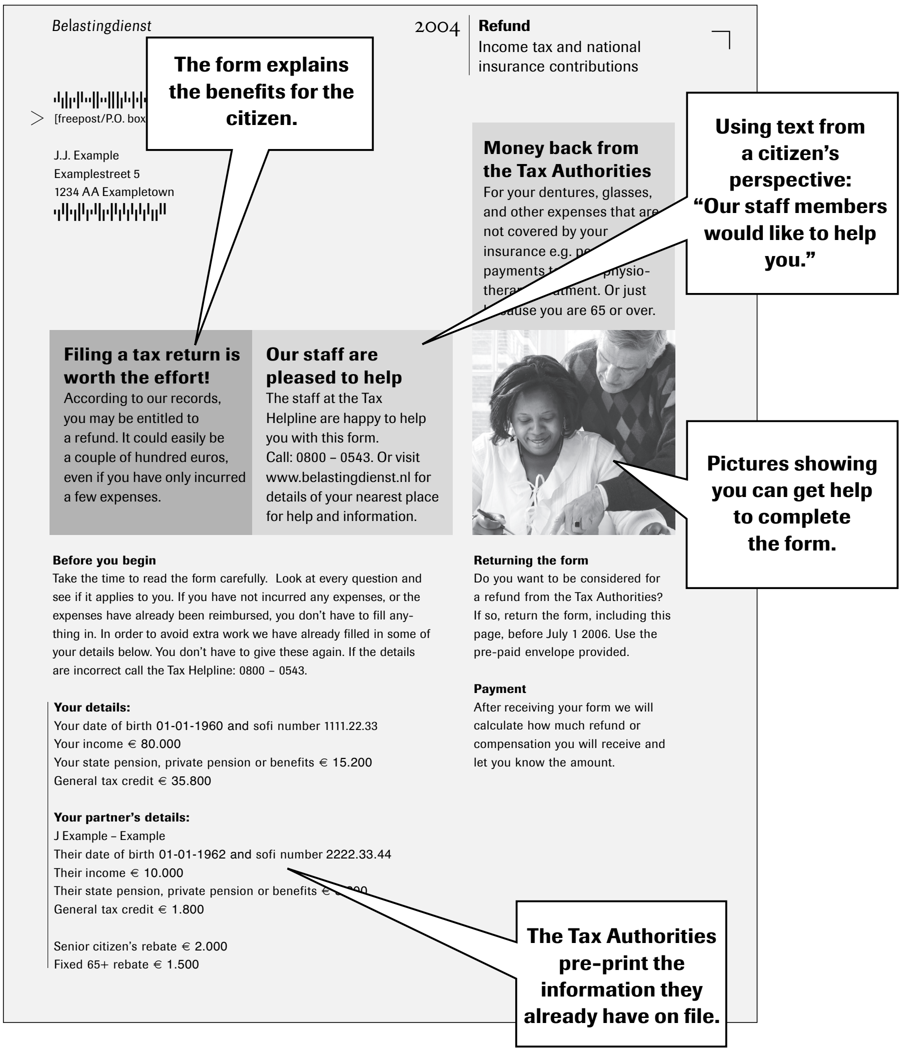
What were we asked to do?

The Tax Authorities were very clear in their mandate to us—

> *Develop a simple-to-complete form that the elderly and chronically sick are willing to use to apply for the extra money to which they are entitled. Make sure that at least 25% of the target group complete and return the Form to the Tax Authorities.*

How did we approach this project?

We designed a new form introducing substantial improvements. Our first task was to remove questions from the old form that were not intended for this target group. In addition, we found that for many of the questions, the Tax Authorities were already capturing much of the information requested through means other than the Form. In these instances, we recommended that answers to questions that are already known to the Tax



Belastingdienst

2004 **Refund**
Income tax and national insurance contributions

[freepost/P.O. box

J.J. Example
Examplestreet 5
1234 AA Exampletown

Money back from the Tax Authorities
For your dentures, glasses, and other expenses that are not covered by your insurance e.g. pe... payments t... physio-thera... atment. Or just b... ause you are 65 or over.

Filing a tax return is worth the effort!
According to our records, you may be entitled to a refund. It could easily be a couple of hundred euros, even if you have only incurred a few expenses.

Our staff are pleased to help
The staff at the Tax Helpline are happy to help you with this form.
Call: 0800 – 0543. Or visit www.belastingdienst.nl for details of your nearest place for help and information.

Before you begin
Take the time to read the form carefully. Look at every question and see if it applies to you. If you have not incurred any expenses, or the expenses have already been reimbursed, you don't have to fill anything in. In order to avoid extra work we have already filled in some of your details below. You don't have to give these again. If the details are incorrect call the Tax Helpline: 0800 – 0543.

Your details:
Your date of birth 01-01-1960 and sofi number 1111.22.33
Your income € 80.000
Your state pension, private pension or benefits € 15.200
General tax credit € 35.800

Your partner's details:
J Example – Example
Their date of birth 01-01-1962 and sofi number 2222.33.44
Their income € 10.000
Their state pension, private pension or benefits € ...000
General tax credit € 1.800

Senior citizen's rebate € 2.000
Fixed 65+ rebate € 1.500

Returning the form
Do you want to be considered for a refund from the Tax Authorities? If so, return the form, including this page, before July 1 2006. Use the pre-paid envelope provided.

Payment
After receiving your form we will calculate how much refund or compensation you will receive and let you know the amount.

Authorities, and are important to the applicant, be pre-printed on the Form.

In addition, we approached this project with the goal of improving the Form using the following criteria:

1. *Writing in Clear Language*

We focused on presenting the advantages of completing and returning the Form in clear language, carefully positioning text to catch the eye:

> *Fill this form in. You can get extra money from the Tax Authorities.*

2. *Developing Concise Descriptions*

We developed concise descriptions, complete with examples to ensure that the Tax Authorities' message was conveyed to the target group:

> *If you complete this form, you can get money for your medical expenses. For example, for your health insurance premium, for glasses or medicines.*

3. *Offering Assistance*

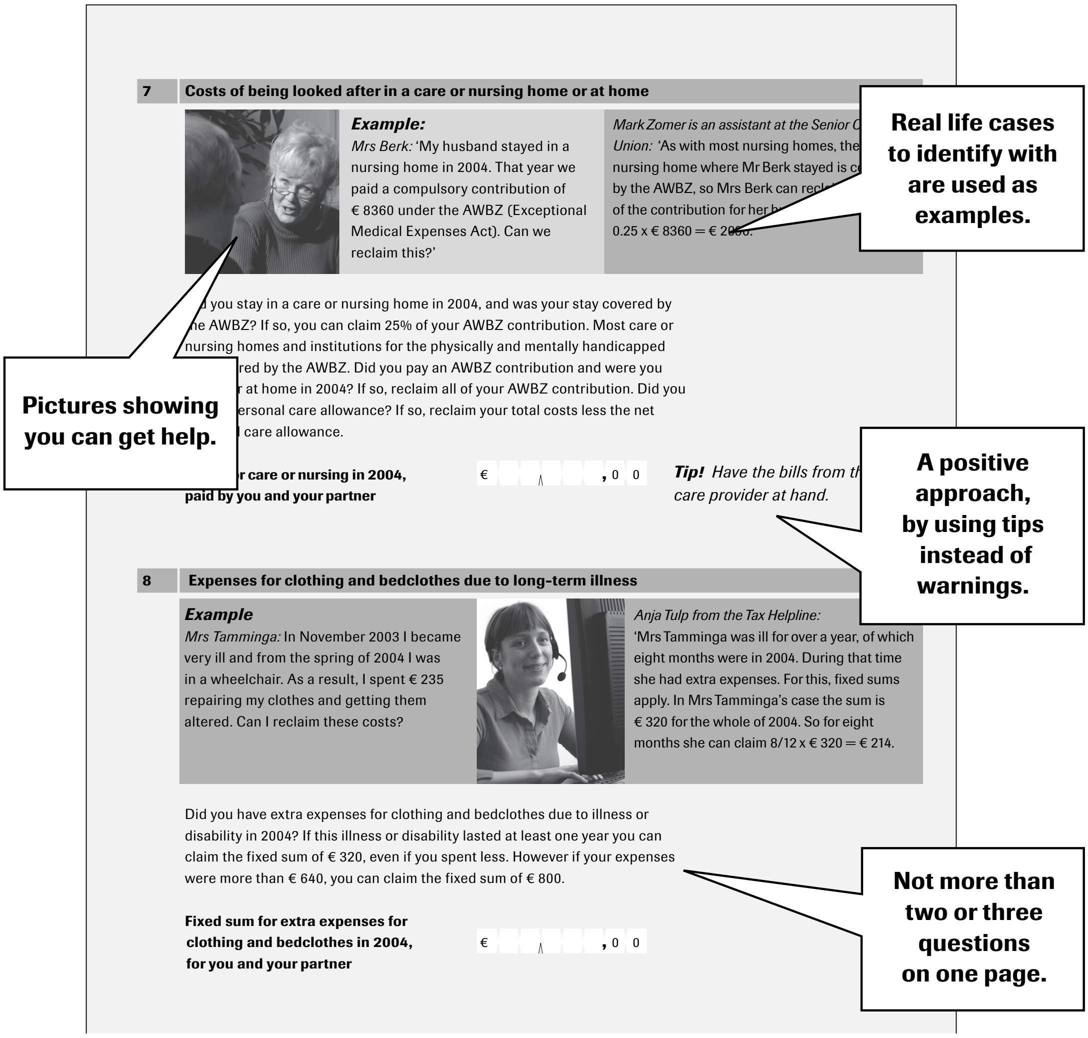
In the old form, little more than a telephone number was included: "Do you have any questions? Call the Tax Authorities…" In the new form, citizens can find the telephone number in a more prominent position and are actually offered help:

> *Our staff will be happy to help you with this form. Call us…*

This message is reinforced by a photo of someone receiving assistance in completing the Form.

4. *Providing scenarios*

Our research showed that people enjoy reading about other people's problems. Problem pages in magazines are especially popular for this reason. We adapted this technique in redesigning the Form to encourage the target group to read it. For each question in the form, we included a scenario. In each scenario, a citizen explains his or her problem to an expert who, in turn,



offers a solution. Occasionally, a photo is included of an expert talking to the Form reader. These photos reinforce the message that the reader can get help if required.

5. *Changing the tone*

One key change that we accomplished was to change the tone of the text. Many government forms come across as serious and businesslike and often include warnings. Our redesigned texts are friendly and reassuring. And instead of warnings, we provide the target group with tips to help them complete the Form.

What are the results of our redesign?

The results of our redesign are astonishing. At the beginning of the project, the Tax Authorities requested that the redesigned Form produce a 25% completed return rate. Mainly as a result of our redesign, as many as 70% of the target group complete and return their Forms.

Case Study #2: Putting Theory into Practice

U.S. Internal Revenue Service

The average American confronts documents that require action on a daily basis. Documents as diverse as forms, applications, directions for equipment use, even recipes all require an individual to read, comprehend, and then act. Studies show, in fact, that this type of "to do" reading represents the single largest type of material read by adults.

Regardless of the document type, all "to do" reading has one thing in common—instructions. Instructions can be as simple as those embedded directly in a form or as complex as requiring an individual to collect related information and then process the directions in the form before completing a task. The instructions booklet that accompanies many Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax forms, especially Form 1040, is an example of this latter type of document.

This project was about research and, specifically, research related to developing and designing a freestanding printed instructions booklet. It is not about forms development or forms with imbedded instructions, and it is not about compiling random considerations of what might constitute a good set of instructions based on intuition. Instead, this project was a direct response to IRS's request to document the elements that constitute best practices in instructions for a freestanding printed booklet, and to provide guiding principles and standards based on a pragmatic review of the literature.

Why was this project initiated?

More than 80 million taxpayers currently file their federal income taxes using Form 1040. The current version of Form 1040 was last revised in 1977. Modifications to Form 1040 to improve tax administration are a challenge because of the lack of space on the already-crowded two pages.

For the last several years, IRS has explored various options to overcome this lack-of-space issue. One solution was to create a streamlined Form 1040 and a new Schedule O to accompany it. Because of the significant changes that need to be made to Form 1040 under this proposal, its instructions would also need to be rewritten. IRS viewed the revision process as an opportunity to take a fresh look at the overall instructions booklet and to consider changes that would otherwise be impossible in the ordinary course of preparing forms for print each year.

What were we asked to do?

This project focused on the printed Form 1040 instructions booklet, with consideration of IRS forms instructions in general. We were asked to:

- Assess the instructions booklets from states and foreign jurisdictions for best practices examples.
- Review the literature related to the development and design of freestanding, paper-based instructions booklets.
- Establish a set of principles and standards to guide the revision of the Form 1040 instructions booklet.
- Provide recommendations and next steps for the revision of the Form 1040 instructions booklets.

How did we approach this research project?

We began this project recognizing that taxpayers will rarely read a tax instructions booklet for pleasure or general enlightenment. Instead, they are quite active and are likely to process information "top down" in which their goals and motives direct how they read and interpret the meaning of the text. Taxpayers read an instructions booklet to find information, to make a decision, to act, and to read only as much as absolutely necessary in order to complete the form. In fact, research shows that individuals begin filling out a form first, and only when they need help, do they refer to the instructions booklet.

We also considered the potential different learning strategies and prior knowledge of taxpayers. We recognized that the instructions booklet should help a first-time user move progressively through the tax form while also permitting a more experienced user to quickly locate specific information. To accommodate a range of users, we decided to treat each line instruction as a stand-alone. We concluded that an ideal instructions booklet would be one with an extensive top-down structure—organizing text and design for maximum recall; using structural signals (e.g., hierarchy), adjunct aids (e.g., icons), and advance organizers (e.g., introductory paragraphs); and imposing consistency in the document. Such a structure would aid comprehension and facilitate action by

- Identifying and organizing important concepts in the text
- Helping readers recognize relationships in the text
- Integrating the text with prior knowledge
- Standardizing actions and outcomes

Moreover, we approached the entire issue of communication as a dialectic between written and visual communication. For taxpayers, how the instructions look would help them understand what the instructions mean. So throughout this project, we looked at how to achieve this balance.

A top-down structure, coupled with the principles of effective visual and written communication, provided the conceptual framework for the three components of our research design:

1. Best practices review
2. Literature review
3. Expert review

Best practices review

In this research component, we assessed instructions booklets from 51 individual state and foreign jurisdictions to identify potential best practices. We used the *Criteria Checklist* that KCG developed to evaluate the instructions booklets in the Round 1 review. We undertook a more focused evaluation during the Round 2 review. Ultimately, the project team identified tax instructions booklets from 13 state and foreign jurisdictions that consistently demonstrated best practices in written and visual communication.

Literature review

We began this component of the research by conducting an initial scan of the broad range of topics on the subject. We found very little in the literature directly related to the development and design of instructions booklets. As a result, we focused our attention on the elements of visual and written communication that impact comprehension and narrowed our research efforts to three interrelated issues:

1. Graphic design
2. Cognitive theory
3. Literacy versus readability

Expert review

We worked with a group of experts[1] as a method of checks and balances between our research-based findings and practical application based on best practices and examples. We solicited their input into our process, tested our hypotheses with them, and learned from their real-world experiences in developing and designing instructions.

What did we learn from our research?

At the beginning of this project, we set out to document best practices in tax instructions booklets and to provide IRS with a set of guiding principles and standards based on a pragmatic review of the literature. In the process, we confirmed that the theoretical constructs of visual and written communication do translate into practical application. These constructs described in the literature were present in the best practices examples that we evaluated. Our selections of the best-in-class examples were further supported by the experts we consulted.

What was obvious to us as researchers was the fact that, over and over, we identified a consistent set of elements among the instructions booklets that we assessed. Additionally, we noticed that these elements were also discussed in the research literature as factors of a message structure, but done so primarily from a theoretical framework or based on a single set of instructions. In this project, we combined the research results and best practices, and illustrated how the theoretical could be applied to meet the practical needs and demands of taxpayers. The results are a set of principles that demonstrate the integration of visual and written communication. We categorized the information in the following way:

- Visual communication

  Page layout
  Visual cues

- Written communication

  Navigational cues
  Message structure

For each principle, we provided a structured set of details including

- Definition
- Research support
- Best practices example
- Significance for IRS
- Recommendation for action

With over 20 principles identified from the research, we acknowledge that these divisions are sometimes arbitrary. For example, aspects of page layout could be considered navigational cues; aspects of visual cues could be part of message structure. In fact, such a blending of the categories makes our point that these two aspects of communication are indeed blended.

How can IRS use our research esults?

We suggested four overarching guidelines to consider as this project moves forward. The actual project can be structured in many different ways, but underlying the structure are the following ideas:

- Implement the ISO 13470 process model to organize the activities of the project.
- Use contributory expertise.
- Make this a special project.
- Push the boundaries.

The goal is to apply the principles and related research to the actual Form 1040 instructions booklet so that IRS can lead in applying research and best practices to its flagship document.

Conclusion

These two case studies are drawn from projects conducted on two continents, by two firms that were unknown to each other, each using a different implementation strategy. Yet the vision that we share is the driver that produces outstanding results for our clients and results in effective government communication. And that vision bears repeating—

> *Two forms of communication—visual and written—work as a dialectic to inform each other. They create a balance together, and they work in concert. One cannot simply change the writing without considering the design, and one cannot change the design without considering the writing.*

Endnotes

[1] Our experts included the following individuals: Dr. Janice Redish, president of Redish & Associates, Inc.; Ellen Lupton, Director of the MFA Program in graphic design at the Maryland Institute College of Art and curator of contemporary design at Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City; Francien Malecki, partner at Eden Design & Communication, based in Amsterdam; Caroline Jarrett, managing director of Effortmark, Ltd., based in the United Kingdom; Dr. Andrew Rose, former director of research at the American Institutes for Research in Washington, DC; Jan Torny, senior project leader at Eden Design & Communication, based in Amsterdam.

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Francien Malecki *graduated on the Rietveld Art Academy, Amsterdam. Her early experience included work for the SDU Design Group and for Tappan. In 1994 Malecki joined Eden Design & Communication as a Director of Information Design and is a partner. Malecki is an expert in strategy and development of non medium dependent forms, documents, manuals and instructions. Her expertise also encompasses process analyses, information designs and strategic advice on the implementation of forms and documents. In 2003 she won the Dutch Design Award for interaction design. Malecki's clients included the Dutch Tax Authorities, the Authority Financial Markets, the Immigration Department and the ING Bank.*

Rita K. Roosevelt, *Ph.D., is a leading expert in communication and public affairs best practices benchmarking with more than 20 years of executive-level experience working with global corporate clients. Dr. Roosevelt has developed and led projects in the public and private sectors providing innovative and cost-effective program solutions on both sides of the Atlantic. Dr. Roosevelt is a researcher, strategic planner, curriculum designer, program developer, academic, and member of the editorial board of the* Journal of Public Affairs *based in the United Kingdom. She is a Senior Consultant with Kleimann Communication Group, Inc.*

Tools and techniques for working with subject matter experts to create plain language manuals

Nad Rosenberg

President, TechWRITE, Inc.

Summary

This paper discusses tools and techniques for editors and writers who need to work with subject matter experts (i.e., engineers, programmers, accountants, etc.) to create plain-language manuals.

Background

Many manuals are created from drafts or other documents written by professionals with extensive experience in their fields. These people know their subject matter inside out and sometimes have trouble communicating clearly to those with little or no knowledge or experience. Paradoxically, it's the people without this knowledge or experience who most need to read and understand the manuals written by experts.

It usually falls to you, the editor or writer, to close this large communication gap and proceed with the creation of manuals that people can actually understand. Through a collaborative effort, you can successfully work with subject matter experts to create manuals that are accurate, well-organized and written so that novice users can understand them.

As you know, this collaboration is sometimes simple and straightforward, but other times, difficult and contentious. If the process is arduous, the resulting manual can be less effective because of the wrestling match with the subject matter expert.

A good collaboration with the subject matter expert typically results in a clearly written, well-organized, accurate plain-language manual, while a poor collaboration usually produces just the opposite. The secret to achieving a positive collaboration lies in developing a good working relationship, and the cornerstone of this is, of course, good communication. The remainder of this paper discusses tools and techniques that can facilitate and even enhance communication between the people involved in crafting plain-language manuals.

Technical tools

The technical tools that most effectively support this communication are the commenting features, offered in many software packages. The commenting features allow writers and reviewers to enter comments either within the margins, directly within the text, at the bottom of pages, or on separate commenting pages. Comments are automatically displayed in balloon shapes or sticky note shapes that point to the text in question. Additionally, most of these tools allow the comment recipient to "answer back" the comment's author in different colored text for the follow-up review cycle.

The commenting features discussed here are found in the Windows versions of Microsoft Word® and Adobe Acrobat®.

Microsoft Word's commenting feature

It's easy to insert comments into a Word document—here's how:

- In Word 2003, select the Insert menu and then Comment.
- In Word 2007, select the Review menu and then New Comment.

One caveat to keep in mind, however, is that to see comments on screen, you must be sure of the following:

- In Word 2003, on the View menu, Markup is selected.
- In Word 2007, on the Review menu, Show Markup/Comments is selected.
  Word automatically displays comments made by different authors in different colors, which is nice for distinguishing who

said what. Additionally, each comment author can change his or her identifying characteristics (e.g., color of text, etc.).

To have comments appear in the printed version of your Word document, they must appear on the screen before you start printing (see the "caveat instruction" above). Then, on the Print dialog, in the "Print what:" drop-down box, don't just select "Document"—make sure you select "Document showing markup."

There are many other options in Word's commenting feature, so to learn more, click on the Help menu and search for "comments."

Adobe Acrobat's commenting feature

Adobe Acrobat has all the commenting features of Word—and then some.

To insert a comment in Acrobat 8 Professional, click on the Review & Comment menu, and select Add Sticky Note. One nice feature about the sticky notes is that you can place them exactly where you want them on the page (i.e., right next to the text in question).

In older versions of Adobe Acrobat, you could only use the commenting feature if you were using the "full" version of the software—this feature was not included in the free Acrobat Reader version. However, Adobe has recently had a semi change-of-heart regarding commenting. Now users can enter comments into a pdf even if they are using the free version of Acrobat Reader. But there's the hitch, of course—the pdf document must be originally created with its "usage rights enabled"—and this can only be done with the full versions of Adobe Acrobat 7 or 8 Professional. Nevertheless, this is still an enhancement because now people who have Acrobat Reader can enter comments into the pdf (as long as it's been "usage rights enabled").

And as with Word, there are a few caveats about printing:

To print pdf documents in Acrobat 8 Professional, select Print and then Summarize Comments. You will then have to choose from a dizzying list of options. The most useful option (in my opinion) is the second one, which prints the comments on the same page as the text.

In Acrobat Reader, as of this writing, there is no simple way to print comments.

There are numerous other sophisticated commenting features in Adobe Acrobat, so as with Word, your best bet is to look through the Help file to thoroughly investigate all of your options.

Techniques

Technical tools are great—but they only go so far in facilitating the necessary communication between the editor/writer and the subject matter expert. The technique component of communication is equally or perhaps more important than the technical tools. Technique often boils down to two things: old fashioned courtesy and common sense. Here are a few communication techniques that typically enhance communication and thus contribute to the development of clear, easy-to-understand plain-language manuals:

It's not what you say, but how you say it. Remember—everyone does take it personally. Always be courteous when commenting on someone else's work.

Adopt a courteous tone in your comments and phrase them as questions. For example, instead of saying "CONFUSING!" you might say something like, "Don't you think this would be clearer if you did X, Y, and Z?" The courtesy element is particularly important when writing an e-mail. Words seem to sting more in e-mails than anywhere else. So the bottom line is re-read and think before you push Send.

Give your subject matter expert reasons why it makes more sense to do it your way. Most people will listen to reason, so give a "friendly" explanation. For example, you might say something like, "Studies have shown that it's easier to understand information if it's chunked into smaller paragraphs." If you really want to be underhanded, you can always interject the rules of grammar, which most people really don't understand but are too embarrassed to admit.

Encourage your subject matter expert to provide lots of concrete examples. Real-life examples are the subject matter expert's greatest contribution to the development of the manual. Some of these examples can be used in text or graphics, but even if they are not explicitly included in the manual, they will undoubtedly inform your writing and editing.

The bottom line here is this: creating a plain language manual is a collaborative effort. Anything you can do to improve the communication between you and your subject matter expert will inevitably contribute to the quality and usability of the end product.

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Nad Rosenberg *is president and founder of TechWRITE, Inc., a company that creates high-quality manuals and e-learning tutorials for a wide range of clients. Since Tech-Write was started in 1985, its primary goal has been to make complicated technical information easy to understand.*

Before starting TechWRITE, Nad managed documentation departments for several large corporations. She is a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, a Senior Member of the Society for Technical Communication, and a Past President of the Philadelphia Metro Chapter of the STC. You can email Nad or call her at 856-848-6593.

John Walton . . .

John Walton, Clarity's founder, was appointed honorary life president at our 10th anniversary celebration in 1993 but felt that he should still pay his annual subscription. We have finally persuaded him that life presidency includes life membership and that *honorary* means *free*. He has made so large a contribution that it seems churlish to ask him for more money.

Clarity has always been an unusual organisation. It has worked informally, without a constitution or rules. Anyone who wanted to take an active part could do so; almost invariably, those who did got on well with each other and had no trouble reaching a consensus. Many became, and remain, friends.

It was John who conceived Clarity and who set this tone during his leadership, which lasted for the first 4 years. Towards the end of the first year he called a general meeting. It was well-attended and lively, and John asked for volunteers for the committee. There was no contest, then or later; anyone who wanted to help was welcomed.

There were about 5 committee meetings a year, all held on Saturday mornings at Rugby Town Hall, where John was head of the legal team. Conversation flowed; discussion of Clarity business merged with legal anecdotes and idle talk. Nobody proposed or seconded motions, or wasted time with the other rituals of most talking shops. But we decided what needed decision. Then we all went to lunch in the town. Between meetings, John still did most of the work until he stood down in 1987.

Picture by Judith Bennett

John Walton at our 10th anniversary celebration

Clarity has spread from England around the world, evolving beyond anyone's expectations, but it remains what John made it: friends co-operating without fuss, and getting results.

John started in the law in 1965 as a trainee clerk, qualifying first as a legal executive and later as a solicitor. Apart from an early year out in private practice, he spent his whole career in local government, retiring in 1997 as chief executive of Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council. He still helps out in local government, and some years ago he returned to the Clarity committee.

Step up for Clarity

Clarity is keen for active members to be involved in running and developing Clarity. There is lots we can do. If you're interested, please email Christopher at Christopher.Balmford@cleardocs.com

A national organization of physicians embraces plain language: a case study and what we learned

Audrey Riffenburgh

President, Plain Language Works
Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

Our Challenge

For many years, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) produced informational brochures for pediatricians to give to parents across the U.S. The brochures were full of detailed, accurate information and were very useful for parents with a college education. However, the brochures were **so** full of detailed information that they were likely to be overwhelming for parents who were upset, worried, hurried, or coping with a sick child. And parents who are among the 43% of U.S. adults functioning at "below basic" or "basic" literacy levels (according to the recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy) were **very unlikely** to be able to use the brochures effectively.

In the early years of this decade, AAP decided to create a line of low-literacy parent handouts. They worked with a colleague of mine who helped them create several very usable, easy-to-read pieces. When the new handouts were introduced to the Board, they were not approved and they were never used. We believe there are two reasons for this: 1) there was not enough awareness of the problem of low health literacy among the Board members, and 2) the new handouts were too different from the usual AAP publications to be acceptable. In the ensuing years, the original parent handouts continued to be the sole offering of that type.

During this same time, however, more and more health care professionals, including many pediatricians, have become aware of issues of low health literacy. In 2005, AAP decided it was again time to address the gap between their higher level materials and the needs of less-educated and less-skilled parents. In 2005, AAP created a Health Literacy Project Advisory Committee. The committee members believe it is imperative for parents to understand health care providers' recommendations in order to be empowered and proactive in caring for their children. Most members of the committee are pediatricians with direct experience of parents who have low health literacy and/or speak English as a second language or not at all. These doctors were already convinced of the need for change in health communication and came to the committee as plain-language champions.

Our Approach

One of the committee's first steps was to set up a team to write a guidebook on health literacy and to oversee the redesign of 27 of AAP's most widely used parent handouts into plain-language, clearly designed documents. The new parent handouts will be a part of the guidebook's resources. They are also available now as a separate compendium.

The team includes the AAP Health Literacy Project Advisory Committee, key AAP staff and Board members, Plain Language Works, and two members of New Readers of Iowa (a former adult literacy student who speaks nationally about health literacy and a current adult literacy student, both of whom are parents). The chairs of the committee, Dr. Mary Ann Abrams and Dr. Benard Dreyer, are serving as editors of the guidebook.

In initial meetings, our team developed a draft process for the revisions of the parent handouts. Plain Language Works began with an assessment of the original handouts and then edited them into plain language. Next, the pieces went back and forth between pediatricians on the committee, AAP staff, the adult literacy students, and Plain Language Works until we came to an agreement. Since AAP's graphic designers were not experienced in applying plain-language design guidelines, Plain Language Works' graphic designer developed an easy-to-use design as well as a style sheet for the AAP designers. After we agreed on the text, the handouts went to AAP designers for their first layout, and requests for illustrations were sent to AAP freelance illustrators. The first drafts of the designs were sent back to the team for design review and returned with requested changes to AAP staff for final layout and design.

What We Revised

In each handout, we cut text from the original, reducing the scope of information. Our guideline was to include only the information necessary for parents to know in order to to carry out the desired action for their child. We sifted out the "nice-to-know" information and kept the "need-to-know." In many cases we discussed and debated what information was critical and what could be cut. This is always a tough part of the process because, as most of you know, content experts are usually very attached to their information. (I include myself in this category!)

We also completely inverted the order of the information. Our new default was to place "need-to-know" information about the action parents should take at, or very near, the beginning of the handout. We moved explanations about the condition toward the end of the handouts. If parents with reading difficulty read only the first part of the handout, they will still find guidance on what they need to *do*. We also shortened long sentences and used primarily one- and two-syllable words where possible to lower the reading level. In this step, we also dealt with new vocabulary and jargon. The reading level of the original text ranged from 8^{th} grade level to 13^{th} grade level. Our revisions range from 5^{th} grade level to 8^{th} grade level or below (with the exception of two pieces at 9^{th} grade level).

Our clear design template and style sheet overcame the problems with the original typesetting and design features, such as small font and pages packed with text. We requested simpler illustrations with less background detail and more ethnic, racial, and economic diversity. We simplified or eliminated medical diagrams as well as charts and graphs. And, finally, we increased the use of sub-headings.

Our Learnings

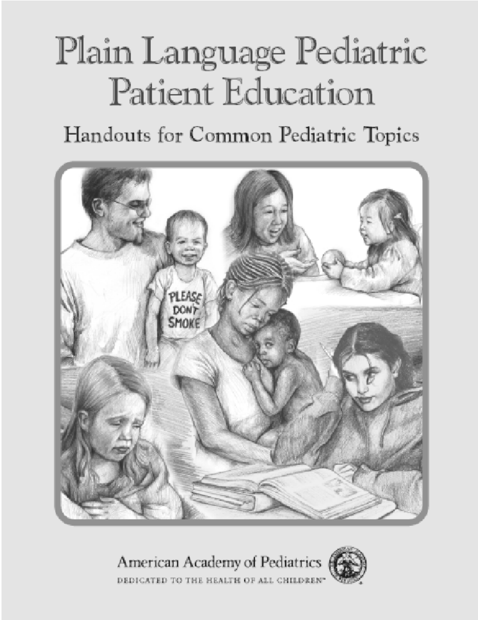
This was a large multi-year project that produced great products and rich learning about organizational change. Our experience involved many issues that arise in consulting with any client, from convincing stakeholders that plain language is needed to the importance of involving everyone upfront. Our key learnings are below.

We all know it is critical to get wide support for a plain-language initiative. We also know it is not always easy. We were lucky to have two well-respected, sensitive, and passionate plain-language advocates as the leaders of our team. They were pediatricians who could speak eloquently about the concerns of other pediatricians and actively sought support for the initiative. They were also careful to invite input from key stakeholders at important times in the process. Their knowledge of the stakeholders as well as how to best reach out to them were invaluable. Even so, it took time. We learned that it's important to have influential supporters from the team contact key stakeholders **early in the process**.

Of course, there was some resistance to plain language. We believe much of the resistance plain-language advocates see is grounded in a misperception of plain-language writing and design. We were successful in overcoming objections when we showed "before" and "after" examples of pieces we had created for other clients. This strategy has worked well for us over the years. Many people are pleasantly surprised and admit they were expecting something more like "See Spot run."

We learned that we should have more carefully defined the revision process and our roles early on. We discovered that members of the team had somewhat different expectations about several aspects of the process. Defining our roles very explicitly would have been helpful. For example, because we did not expect so many revisions and iterations, we did not define who was going to be responsible for receiving and tracking the multiple documents with multiple comments and changes. We did not specify who was in charge of combining comments and changes into one document or deciding whose input was integrated.

During this process, we also learned we needed to clarify the specific type of feedback we were inviting. For example, when we were asking for content feedback, we might also get copy editing suggestions. I don't think any of us on the team expected so many rounds of editing or such detailed input. It was quite difficult to manage the many files flying back and forth. At the same time, it was great to see a high level of involvement, interest, and commitment to the project from so many people. This input contributed to a better final product in most cases and also built strong support and buy-in for the project overall.



All the rounds of revisions took quite a bit of time that we had not included in our cost estimate. Our recommendation is to budget for two to three times the number of hours you might expect and to limit the number of rounds of changes that you will allow.

As in other projects, we found it is critically important to run drafts past members of the intended audience, and in particular, those with limited literacy skills. Their input was often the most influential and convincing to the team. I was very pleased, in fact, with the respect everyone on the team gave them. I believe they were seen as our final judges, as they should be!

In summary, we are delighted with the new parent handouts. We believe millions of parents now have access to information about their children's health they did not have before. We believe that parents always want to do what is best for their children. If they can understand what that is, we have achieved our goal! The compendium of the new handouts, *Plain Language Pediatric Patient Education: Handouts for Common Pediatric Topics* is available at aap.org.

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AudreyRiffenburgh *has been a plain-language and health literacy specialist since 1994. Her firm, Plain Language Works, revises and creates plain-language and low-literacy materials for the medical and disability communities, government agencies, American Indian tribes, and others. Audrey also teaches workshops across the U.S. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in communication with an emphasis in health communication.*

Certified plain-language consultants already exist in Sweden

Helena Englund

Chairman of the Association for Plain Language Consultants

The board of The Association of Swedish Language Consultants have followed with great interest the discussions on establishing an international certification programme for plain language consultants. We are convinced that implementing certification is possible, that it is not too difficult to do, and that in the long run it will also profit those of us working with plain language in different contexts.

Sweden has long had the equivalent of certification for plain language consultants through its education system. For nearly 30 years, a Swedish university has offered an academic programme for language consultants working with the Swedish language. Nowadays the programme lasts three years, and students who successfully complete the programme are awarded a bachelor's degree.

Academic programme for language consultants

Not everyone, however, can become a language consultant. Up until last year, the exclusive programme was available only in Stockholm, and a mere 20 students were admitted to the programme every other year. Now, as well as then, approximately 300 applicants undergo a comprehensive entrance exam to compete for those 20 places. This exam indicates whether the applicants have what it takes to become language consultants. In other words, students accepted into the programme have shown a natural feel for language and an ability to clearly explain facts and ideas right from the start. Admission can in a way be compared to *American Idol*—the university looks for people with a talent for language and educates them to supplement their talent with theoretical knowledge.

The Bologna Declaration on higher education in Europe has led to the language consultancy programme gaining a broader, more international scope. Today the programme provides students with thorough knowledge on the structure of the Swedish language and on debates about grammatical correctness. Students become familiar with how language usage varies in different situations, between various audiences, and for different purposes. The programme also teaches students which factors make it easy or hard to understand different types of texts. The courses include writing and communication exercises, grammar, text analysis, language sociology, language changes, communication history, and language planning.

Plain-language courses in two Swedish cities now

An additional 20 places are now available every other year in Umeå, a city in northern Sweden, which can lead to fewer individuals applying for each place in the future. The admissions procedure is the same as in Stockholm, which ought to guarantee students' linguistic and communication abilities. The Stockholm courses have focused mostly on preparing students to work with language issues related to the public sector. Time will tell whether the Umeå programme will supplement the one in Stockholm with a focus that differs slightly or whether it will follow the structure of the one offered in Stockholm. The first lot of Umeå students will graduate in autumn 2009.

Our profession is well established in the Swedish public sector, and most government authorities know what a language consultant is and what our skills are. For example, at the Government Offices of Sweden, five language consultants work with reviewing all new acts and ordinances. Currently no law is legislated that has not passed the sharp eye of a language consultant.

The process is long, but the objective over time is:

1. to remove all usage that is too abstract and outdated from Swedish acts,
2. to replace all problematic sentences with simple ones, and
3. to ensure that all legal texts have a clear structure suited for their purpose.

Legislation passed nowadays often contains, for example, both concrete examples and bulleted lists.

The private sector has also discovered the benefit of hiring a language consultant. Many of us work for banks, insurance companies, and technical information companies, to mention a few examples. In other words, we can hold our own against journalists, copywriters, and information officers.

Professional association for language consultants

Although we are a small group of professionals, with approximately 300 consultants, our common fundamental values and university degrees unite us.

Most of us are also members in a professional association of which I am the chairperson, The Association of Swedish Language Consultants. The Association's objective is to promote language consultants' means of:

- working for clear, proper and appropriate Swedish
- following the development of the language
- participating in linguistic debates that take place in the public sector, private sector and organisations
- strengthening their professional identity

The Association's website also contains a directory of language consultants who are specialised in different areas. All members have an entry in the directory where they provide their own areas of speciality. Potential clients can search for and find consultants who specialise in, for example, technical documentation, web texts, instructions, and terminology, or holding writing courses. Many clients find language consultants on the website, and this service is completely free.

Naturally the range of salaries and fees varies quite a bit and highly depends on which industry the consultant is active in. The Association recommends its members to charge fees equivalent to those charged by journalists or copywriters. We have specific skills and knowledge, and clients hiring us know that we perform skilled work that differs from services provided by writers and proofreaders.

Certification

In Sweden, we have thus far not seen a need to start certifying plain language consultants because the university programme works in practice as a type of certification. The Association also has acted a guarantee of quality for clients, because only individuals who have passed the language consultancy programme are allowed to become members. If someone has not graduated within two years of the original graduation day, we exclude them from the Association without hesitation.

But we live in a changing world, and I am starting to see a need for certification for primarily two reasons. The first reason is that demand in Sweden is growing for plain language consultants working with the English language. Many large Swedish companies already have English as their corporate language, and much of the communication in Swedish workplaces takes place in English.

My company has many assignments that involve editing and rewriting information in both Swedish and English. These assignments are based on the plain language principles existing in both languages. International certification would greatly help both prospective clients looking for consultants and Swedish language consultants looking for English-speaking partners.

The second reason is that plain language training in Sweden is increasing. Universities in Stockholm and Umeå currently offer two equivalent programmes, but in the future other universities may introduce programmes that are almost identical but not quite. It would then be natural for The Association of Swedish Language Consultants to become the authorising body. The Association would test members' qualifications and issue certificates that would entitle members to call themselves certified plain language consultants. The government of Sweden could perhaps provide government accreditation, as it currently does for interpreters and translators—a model that works well.

The certificate would guarantee the client that the certified consultant

- performs skilled plain language services
- is bound by professional secrecy and follows the code of ethics set by the Association
- applies the price recommendations provided by the Association
- is entitled to use the Association's stamp on written material that meets plain language standards

We Swedish language consultants are very proud of our education and our profession. As the chairperson of The Association of Swedish Language Consultants, I am eager to look after the interest of the Association's members in the ongoing development of our profession and of the world around us. I look forward to sharing my experience as work progresses on setting up an international certification programme for plain language consultants.

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Helena Englund *is a member of Clarity and the chairperson of* Föreningen Examinerade språkkonsulter i svenska *(The Association of Swedish Language Consultants) www.sprakkonsult.org. Helena has a B.A. in Swedish. She is the president of the consultant company Språkkonsulterna and the chairperson of Föreningen Examinerade språkkonsulter i svenska (The Association of Swedish Language Consultants, www.sprakkonsult.org). She is working as a plain-language consultant specialized in legible language and writing for the Web. Helena is also the co-author of* Klarspråk på nätet (Plain Language on the Web) *and* Tillgängliga webbplatser i praktiken (Accessible Websites in Practice), *two books that are spread in editorial offices across Sweden. Clarity member Jennifer Palley translated this article from Swedish to English.*

Eirlys Roberts CBE (1911-2008)

Mark Adler

I was sad to stumble on Eirlys's obituary in The Daily Telegraph yesterday (22 March). A few months ago, we noticed that her subscription to Clarity had lapsed. Eirlys was so long-standing a member, going back I think to our early days, and so enthusiastic in her support, that I feared something was wrong. But she had moved home and I couldn't find her.

The Guardian's obituary is subtitled *The mother of the modern consumer movement and co-founder of 'Which?'*, which gives some idea of her importance and career, but she was involved in many other things. As a young woman she had helped Robert Graves in his research for I, Claudius. During the war, she served in both military and political intelligence. In 1946 and 1947, she played a robust role with the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in Albania and, in the 1970s, she served on the Royal Commission on the Press. In recent decades, she was active in European consumer politics.

Both obituaries mention Eirlys's commitment to plain language, and two of her articles, in *Clarity* issues 41 and 44, are available from our website. But it is for her warmth and kindness that I most remember her. I thought of her as probably in her 70s and was astonished to read that she was 97.

Linguistic lingo for lawyers—
word classes

Sarah Carr

Carr Consultancy and Plain Language Commission

In Clarity 55, *I suggested that the journal could include regular columns called 'Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers' and 'Legal Lingo for Linguists'. These would be practical and fairly short (500 words or so). In* Clarity 55 *and* 56, *I wrote the first two articles, on grammatical terms for verb and personal pronoun forms. When I was thinking what to write about this time, I realised this would be easier if I had an overall framework into which to fit the individual topics. I hope this will also help readers to see how different topics relate to each other. So here I write about word classes.*

Open and closed word classes

There are two types of word class: closed classes, which are finite, and open classes, which are not. Closed word classes tend to comprise a small number of words that are:

- stable, existing in the same form for long periods
- grammatically important
- often short
- sometimes called 'grammatical', 'function' or 'structure' words.

Open word classes comprise vast numbers of words that are:

- much more prone to come and go with cultural change in society
- the main subject matter of dictionaries
- sometimes called 'lexical' words.

Because the boundaries between the word classes are not absolutely fixed, different grammarians may draw them in different places. This is sometimes called 'gradience'. The categories below are based on *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*, by Greenbaum and Quirk (Longman, 1990).

Closed word classes		
Class	**Function**	**Examples**
Pronoun	Replaces a noun or noun phrase that has already been mentioned, or is about to be	she, it, them, mine, ours, theirs, yourselves, this, that, these, somebody, anyone
Determiner	Shows who or what the following noun or noun phrase refers to	a, an, the, this, those, my, your, all, few, each, two, sixth
Auxiliary verb	Expresses the tense and voice of a full verb	to be, to have, to do
Modal verb	Expresses the mood of a full verb: that a state or action is possible, intended or necessary rather than actual	can, may, shall, will, must, could, might, should, would
Preposition	Relates the following noun or pronoun to other words in the sentence	in, on, under, around, of, inside, from, during, through, by, beneath, above
Conjunction	Connects words, phrases, clauses or sentences	and, but, for, nor, yet, so, because, if, after, when, while, when

Closed word classes: functions and examples

Open word classes		
Class	**Function**	**Examples**
Noun	Refers to a person, place or thing	cat, train, website, modem, love, Chris, Liverpool, garden, idea, hospital, fun, computer, fire
Adjective	Adds information about a noun or pronoun	tall, changeable, blue, wonderful, British, pleasant, savoury, triangular, leathery, bad, attractive, suspicious
Full verb	Indicates that an action takes place or a state exists	grow, request, arrive, seek, download, annul, retreat, forbid, act, right-click, rebel, celebrate
Adverb	Modifies a sentence, verb, adverb or adjective	fast, thankfully, really, simply, hopefully, almost, afterwards, sufficiently, gradually, well, clockwise, naturally

Open word classes: functions and examples

Some grammarians include an extra class: interjections, which express sudden emotion. Examples include *oh*, *ahem*, *shhh*, *psst*, *ugh*, *ouch*, *tut-tut*, *phew*, *gah*, *boo*, *wow* and *ah*. They would usually be followed by an exclamation mark.

Words may belong to more than one class. For example, *be* may be an auxiliary or full verb; and *forward* may be a noun, adjective, full verb or adverb.

Relevance of these terms to plain English

Since our job as plain-language practitioners includes getting rid of unnecessary technical terms, we would not use our own professional jargon without good reason. But technical jargon is valuable as a form of shorthand between professionals, so all these terms can be useful in discussions with one another. Some occur more often than others, being more central to common plain-English guidelines. Those of us involved in plain-language training may well need to explain these to laypeople.

Ideas for future columns

Would you like to write about one of the eight word classes not yet covered? Or about a different aspect of verbs or pronouns? There are many other areas of language and linguistics that are relevant to plain language: such as phonetics and phonology, morphology, semantics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and pragmatics. Could you write for this column on one of these?

We also need people to start and write for this column's twin, Legal Lingo for Linguists.

Sarah Carr *has a first degree in French and Scandinavian with Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and a master's in business administration (MBA). Sarah worked as a manager in the National Health Service (NHS) for seven years. She now runs Carr Consultancy, specialising in plain English writing, editing and consultancy for the NHS. Sarah is also an associate of Plain Language Commission. Her publications include Tackling NHS Jargon: getting the message across (Radcliffe Medical Press, 2002).*

2 Big Things—
Message from the President

Standards, accreditation, professionalism—what do we do next?

A thousand informal conversations about "standards" and "accreditation" and just as many about the possibility of "forming a plain-language profession" are becoming increasingly mainstream. These topics are now officially on the agenda. This issue of *Clarity* continues the formal discussions about standards, accreditation, and our "profession" that begun at PLAIN's Amsterdam conference in October 2007. The relevant conference papers are published in this issue.

We need to form views about these topics. They are likely to occupy the "plain-language world's" collective mind for some time. And they may even reshape our world.

What are your views?

Come and find out more and join the debate at Clarity's 2008 Conference in Mexico City in November.

Mexico—Our 3rd international Conference, 20–23 November 2008

Clarity is co-hosting its 3rd international conference with:

- Mexico's Underministry of Public Administration, which is responsible for the government's extensive ongoing plain-language activities; and
- a prestigious private university, ITAM (Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México), see http://www.itam.mx/en/.

There will be translation available (for presenters and audiences) between English, French, and Spanish.

The theme of the conference is *Legal language: transparent and inclusive*:

- *Transparent* is part of Mexico's anti-corruption activities, the point being that unintelligible documents leave room for officials to exploit the vagueness, ambiguity, uncertainty, lack of clarity to request a bribe, etc.
- *Inclusive* is about improving access for all: those who find documents unintelligible, and also the poor, illiterate, disabled, remote, etc.

For more information on the conference theme and for dates for submitting papers, see http://www.clarity-international.net/conference.htm

Do come to Mexico.

Christopher Balmford
President of Clarity
christopher.balmford@cleardocs.com

New members

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Marval, O'Farrell & Mairal
Buenos Aires

Australia

Giuseppe DeSimone
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