



Clear Language and Design Letter #3 April 2005

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The CLAD Letter is sent three times a year. Please forward it to colleagues who might find it helpful!

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Amex Canada Inc. first to be awarded the CLAD Readability Mark



We're very pleased to announce that we have awarded the first CLAD Readability Mark to Amex Canada Inc. for infoNET, the company's intranet reference system for Canadian Call Centre employees.

Several years ago, when Amex moved from an older system to the new web-based format, the company made an important decision to look at all aspects of usability in the conversion process. CLAD was called in to evaluate readability features. We found that the Amex writing team, under the leadership of Senior Technical Writer Ian Cooper, had succeeded in getting the reading level down from a cumbersome Grade 12 on the old reference system to a sleek, accessible Grade 6/7 in the new infoNET format.

infoNET has a wonderful, automated elasticity, responding in tandem with the customer service system. Service centre staff don't have to search for help while they talk with customers -- the appropriate help screens appear based on the nature of the transaction being discussed.

The benefits of this technology are easily lost when companies don't pay attention to the clarity of the actual content. That's one mistake Ian and his team were determined not to make.



"Valuing diversity is a top priority at Amex," Ian told me. "When we started developing infoNET, one of our key objectives was to make the content more accessible to all users - respecting their diversity. Using plain language makes content more accessible to everyone -- it is simpler, easier to understand, but not condescending."

"Having worked with CLAD, I have a great deal of respect for the role they play, both locally in the Toronto area as well as within the global plain language community. Because infoNET contains proprietary, confidential information, it was next to impossible to get feedback and recognition from external peers. The CLAD Readability Mark presented a unique opportunity to have infoNET reviewed and certified by recognized plain language professionals."

Are you proud of the clear language work going on in your organization? Do you have a document -- online or in print -- that you feel deserves the recognition of acknowledged clarity experts?

It's easy to apply for a CLAD readability mark. Download the application form from our website -- it won't take more than half an hour to complete. We'll assess the clarity of your document or online material for an affordable fee. If you qualify, we'll send you the symbol and our permission to use it.

If you don't yet qualify, we'll send you a report outlining the steps you should take to improve readability. Once we've done a final review to ensure you've implemented the bulk of our recommendations, we'll award you the CLAD Readability Mark.

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Bad Form Dept.: What on earth is going on at Canada Revenue?

by Sally McBeth, Manager, Clear Language and Design



Several years ago, Canada's federal tax collection agency made a concerted effort to simplify its forms and guidelines with the help of plain language experts. Since then, things have been deteriorating, with the introduction of new, untested forms and hastily composed instructions riddled with typos.

A case in point is the Ontario tax calculation form with the new, and much-reviled, Ontario Health Premium. To calculate this amount, my eye had to bounce up and down and around the page so often that I got dizzy. (Sample: "If line 43 is equal to or more than line 39, enter "0" on line 47 and go to Step 5.") Just for fun, I started drawing circles and arrows in an attempt to follow the instructional flow. My form

looks like the roadmap from hell.

Here's some advice for government leaders who find they must introduce an unpopular new tax: take the time to design decent forms. You may have been hoping that, by announcing the new tax early in your mandate, you could ride out the political storm. But keep in mind that people do their taxes once a year. If you let your bureaucracy design a teeth-grindingly bad form like this one, people will be reminded every single spring of why they're mad at you.

And another thing. (Yes, this is a rant!) How about even a *copy edit* before these forms go out? Listen to this: "You can transfer all or part of the amount on line 19 to your spouse or common-law partner or to your or your spouse or common-law partner's parent or grandparent."

All you parents who claim your child's unused tuition amount can stop scratching your heads. Yes, you are the missing word.

A skilled plain language review should be an integral part of Canada Revenue's tax form preparation process every single year. I don't believe that's happening anymore. I'd really like to know why.

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Plain language in the news ... plus a conference you won't want to miss!

Plain language in the news ...

In our last *Letter*, we mentioned *Get to the Point: A strategy for writing clearly at work*. A few months ago the author, Rose Grotsky, completed research into the business impact of introducing plain language in the Canadian private sector. A summary of her results was released in January, and is available at: <http://www.nald.ca/WHATNEW/hnews/2005/grotsky.htm>.

Sally McBeth, manager of CLAD, was featured in an article in a recent issue of *Business Education Forum*. In the article, "Plain Language Consultants Clarify Information the Public Wants -- and Needs -- to Know," McBeth says that when you talk about principles rather than rules, and when you talk about clarity, purpose, and audience, "even the most resistant will begin to understand why they need to change." *Business Education Forum* is published by The National Association of Business Education, and is available from 1914 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1596 USA, or by contacting <http://www.nbea.org>.

PLAIN Language Association International meets in Washington DC, November 3 – 6, 2005

PLAIN holds an international conference only once every two or three years, so mark your calendar! The theme for this, the fifth international conference, is *Plain Language: Adding Up the Benefits*. Presentations could include Plain Language in Financial Disclosures, Grammatical Nasties and Niceties, Matching What You Write to What You Want to Read, and Is Plain Legal Language Safe? For more information, including how to register, go to: <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org./conferences/2005/>.