



## Clear Language and Design Letter #5 November 2005

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## Wow! The worldwide plain language movement is coming into its own

by Sally McBeth, Manager, Clear Language and Design



I'm just back from the 5th conference of the Plain Language Association International, held this year in Washington D.C. What a meeting it was! As the co-organizer of PLAIN's last, highly successful conference here in Toronto, a couple of things about this one struck me as really important.

The attendance was excellent, exceeding the organizers' expectations by 50%. And the people who came were even more diverse than they were in Toronto – in terms of professional background as well as country of origin. At the Toronto conference, representatives of eight countries attended. This time, 14 countries were represented.

At the Toronto conference, we struggled to explain what compelled us to come together from fields as varied as law, information technology, medicine, financial products, aeronautics, graphic arts, and governments at all levels. At the Washington conference, everyone seemed comfortable with the notion that the issue of clarity transcends professional, geographical, and cultural boundaries.

I really got the sense that plain language is on the move. Here are just two of the highlights from the excellent workshops and presentations I attended.

## Highlights from PLAIN – Washington 2005 Clarity in financial disclosures



The financial products industry uses the term 'disclosure' to describe the acres of fine print we all struggle with when we think about buying a mutual fund or getting a credit card. The [US Securities Exchange Commission](#) (SEC) is well known for its pioneering handbook on clear disclosure, so I was looking forward to finding out what this regulatory agency is up to now.

In a fascinating presentation, Susan Ferris Wyderko, Director of the SEC Office of Investor Education and Assistance, walked us through the various iterations of the new 'point of sale' disclosure document they are developing. This will be a template for mutual fund dealers, effectively forcing them to state, in the most graphic and up-front way possible, just how much of the investor's money will go toward service fees. This information is often

hidden or obscured on mutual fund statements. The new disclosure template would also require dealers to disclose any conflict of interest. For instance, if dealers get extra commission for selling certain funds, they will have to say so.

## Keynote speaker Berkey Belser

Another person I've always wanted to meet is [Berkey Belser](#), the original designer of the 'Nutrition Facts' labels we all know from the sides of our cereal boxes and other packaged foods. I was involved in adapting this design for Health Canada, and I was fascinated to hear how Belser thought through, then tested, the design. When you stop and think about it, 'Nutrition Facts' is a radical departure from the alluring and garish marketing messages that surround it. That's by design. More and more, our health is about what, and how much, we eat. 'Nutrition Facts' is designed to stand out and deliver.

Berkey had us all in stitches when he rolled out his personal theory of usability. "Appliances are from Venus – people are from Mars," he declared. None of us want to spend a lot of intimate, quality time getting to know all of the fancy things our watches can do or when to use the 'steam' setting on the microwave (what is that anyway?). "My appliance wants to have a relationship with me," complained Berkey. "I just want to get on with it!"

## What's new in the CLAD resource collection?

### Invasion of the Space Lobsters!



The Canadian Labour Congress teamed up with the National Film Board of Canada to create a goofy and engaging four-minute animated film about the need for plain language. It was a huge hit in Washington, where it premiered. Two giant lobsters, flying what appears to be a fried egg, land on ... oh never mind; just get the movie. For more information, go to [www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca).

### Newsletters and magazines

The Ontario Literacy Coalition's most recent newsletter is devoted to the issue of plain language. It includes a succinct overview from Sally of the common problems and pitfalls with testing materials for grade reading level. The newsletter is available on the [OLC website](#).

The journal "Literacies", which is edited by CLAD Senior Associate Tannis Atkinson, has articles on plain language perspectives from Sally as well Alberta health literacy specialist Janet Pringle and Tamara Levine of the Canadian Labour Congress. To find out about subscribing, e-mail [journal@literacy.ca](mailto:journal@literacy.ca).