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Please forward this newsletter to colleagues who might find it helpful. Thanks!

Greetings from Sydney Australia's 7th Plain Language InterNational conference

Sally McBeth, Manager, Clear Language and Design



What a privilege it was to speak at this conference, explore a gorgeous city, frolic in the surf and revel in the sunshine of an October spring, with the sun in the northern sky.

Nathan Rees, Premier of New South Wales, opened the conference with a plan of action that gladdened the hearts of the delegates. "I want plain English to become an essential part of how the public sector does business. I want to see training in plain English stepped up across the public sector over the next two years ... I intend to establish ... a special category in the Premier's Public Sector Awards for the best use of plain English in our public sector agencies."

And that's not all. "We need rigorous tests for readability applied to all government documents for public consumption," said Rees. "It will be a plain English audit of the entire government sector. And agencies that don't meet the high standards I require will be targeted for remedial training."

Did language play a part in the global financial crisis?

As we slowly drag ourselves out of a particularly devastating recession, economists are asking some hard questions, not just about its convoluted causes, but about how language was used to make complex financial dealings even more obscure – so obscure that even knowledgeable market players had no idea what was in the debt bundles they were buying and selling.

In Sydney, three men from three continents talked about this – Christopher Balmford of Words and Beyond (Australia), William Lutz of Rutgers University (U.S.), and Wessel Visser of BureauTaal (Netherlands).

The credit crisis had its roots on Main Street, not Wall Street, said Visser, because ordinary people did not understand the mortgages they were signing. Lutz, an adviser to the Security Exchange Commission, said all of the financial institutions complied with all the regulations for disclosure. But that is the problem. Institutions were disclosing, but they weren't communicating. The sub-prime debt is toxic for the banks, said Balmford. The unintelligibility of the interbank documents is toxic for us all.

US House of Representatives passes the Plain Writing Act



We are seeing some signs that this bleak message is sinking in. In March, the House of Representatives in the United States passed, by a wide margin, the [Plain Writing Act](#), which will require the federal government to write documents, such as tax returns, federal college aid applications, and Veterans Administration forms in simple, easy-to-understand language.

I was especially interested to see that student aid is covered by the new American act. I redesigned one Canadian province's student loan application last summer. Then I spent a week running it through usability tests with students at two Winnipeg

university campuses and at the University College of the North in The Pas, Manitoba. The students told me that a clear language redesign of the application form made the difference between applying and giving up. But what would they have done instead? I asked them. Get another credit card, came the frightening answer.

Does clear language matter in the world of finance? You'd better believe it.

Two new resources

Plain Language in Plain English: This new 200-page paperback explains the fundamental elements of plain language and its benefits for everyone inside and outside the workplace. Its 18 international contributors, all leaders in the movement, are led by the inestimable Cheryl Stephens. Sally has contributed a chapter on readability measurement. Buy it at <http://plainlanguageinplainenglish.com/ordering/>.

Demand to understand: The Center for Plain Language has produced a brilliant series of video vignettes that humourously illustrate how central clear language is to such critical areas of our lives as health, home ownership, and finances. Check 'em out at <http://www.demandtounderstand.org/>

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