



## Clear Language and Design Letter #7 May 2011

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

### **The Financial Services Commission of Ontario creates a clear language training team**

**Sally McBeth, Manager of Clear Language and Design**



The Financial Services Commission of Ontario is an arm's length regulatory agency of the Ontario Ministry of Finance. Over the winter, Sally designed a four-module course for FSCO writers who deal with industry stake-holders and the general public. The four modules are:

1. Know your audience.
2. Organize for action.
3. Write with clarity.
4. Edit for clarity, continuity, and concision.

Sally led two days of intensive training for a team of eight, headed up by Rowena McDougall, Senior Manager, Public Affairs. The training team divided into four pairs, with each pair taking responsibility for delivering one of the modules. Co-facilitation helped the trainers build confidence, and dividing up the modules among them meant that no one person was taken away from regular job duties for too long.

To date, the trainers have brought the course to 100 writers in the Licensing and Market Conduct Division, with a positive response. They plan to roll the course out to other divisions this year. Congratulations, FSCO Writes!

## Sally heads to Stockholm to speak at the 8th Plain Language InterNational (PLAIN) conference



June 9 – 11 will see another international gathering of plain language advocates and experts – this time in Stockholm, bathed in that never-ending light of a northern spring.

Sally has been asked to speak on a plenary panel with Martin Cutts, founder of the U.K.'s Plain Language Commission, Professor Joseph Kimble of the Cooley Law School, and Dr. Annetta Cheek, Chair of the U.S. Center for Plain Language. The panel is chaired by Dr. Neil James of the Plain English Foundation in Sydney, Australia.

The panel's topic is 'defining plain language' and flows from the toils of an international working group and their recently published options paper, *Strengthening plain language: public benefit and professional practice*. Four years in the making, the paper opens up the topic of professional standards and accreditation for our field – the theme of this

conference. It's important and exciting – we'll keep you posted. Find out more about the conference at [www.plain2011.com](http://www.plain2011.com).

## President Obama signs the Plain Writing Act



With quiet fanfare and very little sectarian strife, the Plain Writing Act of 2010 passed into law last October in the United States. Will this boost the cause of clarity here in Canada as well?

On paper, the act gives U.S. federal agencies one year to implement the use of clear language in all public documents. Does this mean that bureaucracy-speak will have withered away come September? Maybe not.

But the law does require agencies to appoint at least one senior official to oversee implementation, no later than June 2011. Agencies must also establish a compliance process, inform the public of their compliance, and solicit public input on the government's efforts. Recently, the Office of Management and Budget published guidance for agencies on how to carry out the mandate.

All of these steps are hopeful signs that clear language will become more closely integrated into government communications practice. Over the past 30 years, there have been many weaker endorsements of the concept by a number of presidents. Maybe this first federal plain language law will move things forward more quickly. We'll be watching with interest.

One of the bill's sponsors, Representative Bruce Braley (D-Iowa), noted that the Veterans Administration recently saved \$8 million in follow-up costs, when it used plain language to revise a letter asking beneficiaries to update contact information. That's the kind of fact that we need to keep bringing to the attention of our own decision makers here in Canada.



## New resources

**Bringing data to life:** Global health researcher Hans Rosling tells the story of the world in 200 countries over 200 years using 120,000 numbers – in just four minutes. Watch him do it in a mesmerizing – and surprisingly optimistic – video clip, using state-of-the-art technology for visualizing

data: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo&feature=player_embedded)

***A tool for measuring readability in French:*** A Québec communications firm has launched a new readability formula called Scolarius. Using similar formulas to those used to grade reading difficulty in English, this is the first fully automated tool we've seen for doing so in the French language. The tool is free to use, and has a focus on grading the reading difficulty of journalistic writing. Have a look at <http://scolarius.com>.

***Great short videos:*** The new plain language law in the U.S. has inspired some creative training tools. Have a look at this set of four short videos on proofreading, tables, acronyms, and using the passive voice. They are produced by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and you can find them on the federal government plain language site: [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov).

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