



Welcome to our first electronic newsletter!

Clients and friends like to hear from us now and then -- to get tips and reminders, find out about resources, or hear what's new in the growing world of clear communication. We plan to send our newsletter three times a year. Please forward it to colleagues who might find it helpful!

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Two myths about plain language

by Sally McBeth, Manager, Clear Language and Design



I've been training a lot of people lately, especially in the municipal and provincial governments here in Ontario. It's encouraging to see that there's renewed interest in clarity in our public service. Study after study shows that clear communication creates efficiency and saves millions of dollars. What's not to like about that?

Yet in my workshops I'm still hearing some reservations about plain language. And I take these concerns very seriously, because they always come from people who care deeply about words. Here are two of the most common, and how I respond.

"Plain language could force us to 'dumb down' what we need to say."

First, last, and always, clarity is about writing for your audience. In workshops, I read aloud from a "plain language website" that Fermilab, the big nuclear physics research facility, has put up for amateur physics buffs. The writing is lucid, tight, and graceful – but completely incomprehensible to the lay reader. That's okay with me. I'm not the audience. Fermilab has carefully defined the audience for this site as amateur nuclear physicists – and those folks all know what words like 'supersymmetry' and 'w-w-photon' mean. They don't define them, and that's okay with me too. Plain language means that you do not condescend to readers by telling them what they already know.

But what if Fermilab had to make an announcement to the media about an important discovery? Would they define 'supersymmetry' for the general public? Of course they would.

"Plain language is only an issue for people with poor literacy skills."

Tell that to the amateur nuclear physicists! Everybody benefits from clarity. Think about the busy cabinet minister rushing from meeting to media scrum with a briefing note in his hand. He has seconds to master the information, answer tricky questions accurately. Does he want paragraphs of background he already knows? Does he have time for bureaucratic padding?

Think of the calm, clear concision of Dr. Sheila Basrur during Toronto's recent SARS crisis. This public health leader won the respect of the province for her ability to keep decision makers, health care workers,

and the general public in the picture. She told the story without equivocation, bafflegab, or clinical jargon. Plain language is about public safety – for everybody.

Now think about your own reading habits. How many times have you opened an e-mail from a colleague and wished they would get to the point? More and more CEOs are refusing to read long-winded memos. Using plain language is a way of showing respect for your co-workers. It shows that you value their time.

In the next newsletter, I'll explore some of the myths about measuring documents for readability.

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What's new in our resource collection

Books

E-Writing, by Dianna Booher. New York: Pocket Books, 2001

Poor use of e-mail is the loudest complaint we hear in workshops about office communication. This book covers all of the common mistakes (rambling, unstructured messages, sloppy spelling, too much informality) and gives many great suggestions for getting the most out of this medium.

Presenting numbers, tables, and charts, by Sally Bigwood and Melissa Spore. New York: Oxford, 2003.

People often ask us how to present numbers clearly. Senior CLAD Associate Tannis Atkinson recently attended a workshop on Plain Figures by one of the authors of this excellent book, which outlines many ways to make sure your charts, graphs, and tables tell the story you want to tell.

Websites

www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

We often tell people about The Plain Language Association, an international network of people who care about clear communication. Their website includes lots of free advice and resources, news about government initiatives around the world, and lists of relevant organizations. Non-members are welcome to join a lively email discussion group.

www.w3.org/WAI/

The Website Accessibility Initiative is an excellent resource for people working to make the web accessible to people with disabilities. This site includes the latest Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, answers to common questions, news, discussion groups, and resources and tools.

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Coming soon...The CLAD Readability Mark!

This fall, CLAD will start offering a new service: The CLAD Readability Mark.

Are you proud of the clear language work going on in your organization? Do you have a document that you feel deserves recognition from acknowledged experts in clarity? Starting this September, CLAD will assess your documents and, should you qualify, award a "seal of approval" that you can display on your website or publication. We'll be telling you more in our next newsletter, and posting all the information on our new website. Stay tuned!