

CLEAR LANGUAGE AND DESIGN

Letter #10

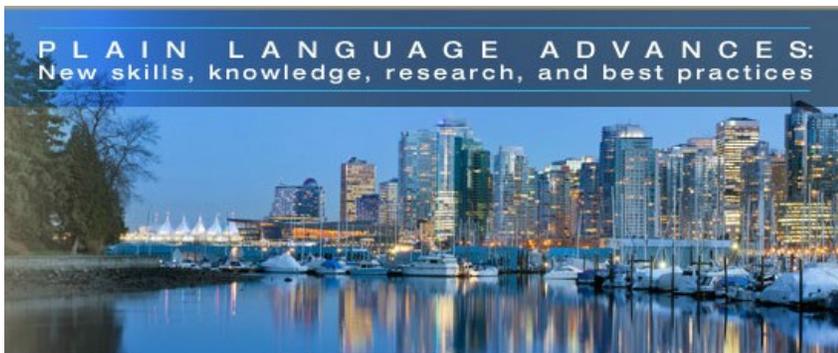
June 2013

Plain Language International (PLAIN) to meet in Vancouver

Over the winter, CLAD Manager Sally McBeth served on a work group to help plan the 9th international PLAIN conference, to take place in beautiful Vancouver from October 10 – 13, 2013. The conference is attracting [speakers](#) from all over the world. We have confirmed presenters from Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Britain, Canada, and the U.S.

This year's conference coincides with PLAIN's 20th anniversary and International Plain Language Day on October 13. We have a lot to celebrate! There is a discount if you [register now](#). You can also still join in as a [sponsor](#) or [exhibitor](#).

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In This Issue

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What does ‘financial literacy’ mean from a clear language perspective?

Financial literacy has been a hot topic ever since the U.S. real estate collapse of 2008 and the subsequent worldwide recession we’re still working our way out of. But plain language advocates were talking about the need for full and clear disclosure long before the mortgage boondoggles and bundled debt scandals. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) [Plain English Handbook](#), published in 1998, remains the classic guide to rewriting complex financial information.

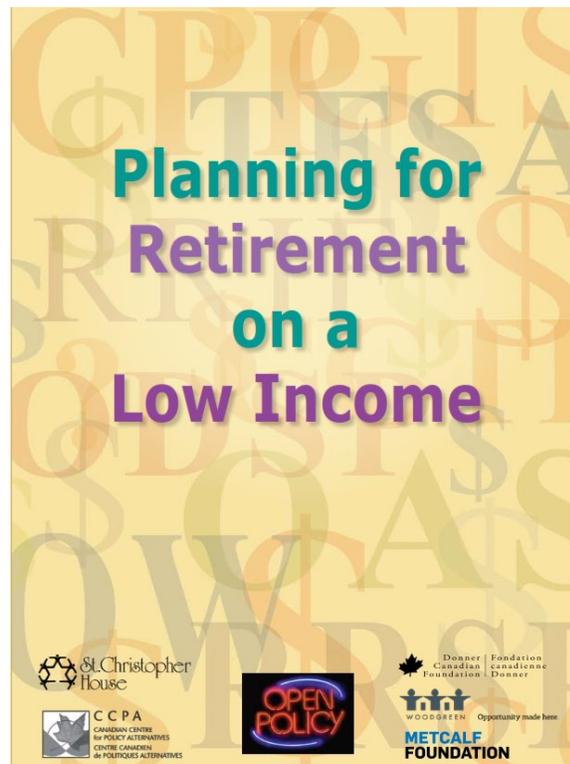
Financial literacy tends to focus on helping ordinary citizens better understand how to control debt, build savings, and exercise their rights as consumers of financial products. This year at CLAD, we’ve been consultants, researchers, and editors on several educational projects of this type, for clients such as financial advice firm T.E. Wealth, the Canadian Centre for Financial Literacy, and the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education.

The most rewarding project we worked on this year was spear-headed by social policy expert John Stapleton and supported by a group of public interest foundations and community agencies. In very clear language, we found ways to help people on low incomes understand that the retirement advice they hear about in the news and at the bank does not apply to them. Retirement savings strategies for people with marginal incomes have to be radically different from those of the middle class.

So from our perspective, financial literacy is about three things:

1. Full and clear disclosure
2. Consumer education
3. Getting the right info to the right people.

You can get the complete set of materials [here](#).



Euphemisms in the news

Oxford defines a euphemism as a “mild or vague expression substituted for one thought to be too harsh or direct.” A good recent example of this is health officials’ use of “permanent deferral” in describing the ban on blood donations from sexually active gay men.

From a clear language perspective, euphemisms do more than soften the truth. They almost always lengthen the word or phrase. Thus the blunt, one-syllable “ban” becomes a lumbering, six-syllable phrase.

Euphemisms can also obscure meaning, and “permanent deferral” is a good example of that as well. A deferral is, by definition, temporary. Permanent means forever. That makes this phrase an oxymoron.

Our advice to writers who feel the need to soften the message is, as always, to keep the reader’s interests first and foremost. While “permanent deferral” may ease the writer’s discomfort, it will only confuse readers. Nor is it likely to do much to stem the controversy.

More resources of interest

Writing for dollars, Writing to Please – The case for plain language in business, government, and law: Professor Joseph Kimble of the Thomas Cooley Law School has gathered and updated a career's worth of insight into the myths, best practices, case studies, and international developments in plain language in one accessible and indispensable little book. You can order it from Carolina Academic Press at www.cap-press.com.

Learn about the early roots of clear language, technical writing, and information design in this fine presentation honouring the legacy of Professor Erwin R. Steinberg of Carnegie Mellon University. Presented by plain language and usability expert Janice (Ginny) Reddish, you can view it at <http://bit.ly/YRvHhu>.

Sandra Fisher-Martins runs Português Claro, a training and consultancy firm that introduced plain language to Portugal in 2007. Even in Portuguese with subtitles, she is one of the most compelling speakers on this topic that we have ever seen. Treat yourself to her TED talk at youtube.com/watch?v=tP2y0vU7EG8&feature=share.

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