

Plain English Foundation launch

Peta Spear

Sunday, 23 May 2004

Hello everybody and welcome. Thank you for joining us here today at one of the marvellous Sydney Writers' Festival events.

My name is Peta Spear and I'm the managing director of the Plain English Foundation. Today is a very special day for the Foundation. We're celebrating the Foundation's launch as a new educational and cultural enterprise, and its plans to energise and revolutionise how public language is used in this country. And revolution is the word. We've had the barricades in sight for some time now, and today you're all here to help us hoist our flag.

In fact, I'm going to have fly not one, but 5 flags to announce what we're getting up to:

1. We've been introducing plain English writing programs into organisations nationwide. Through our training, we're helping them to shift their writing culture away from officialese and bring it into line with the best practices in writing for public purpose. So far, we've trained more than 1300 staff in government departments. You may notice a change the next time you get a letter about your speeding fine or when you read the latest NSW budget papers with your morning tea and toast.
2. We also have a plain English authoring and editing service. The word 'authoring' is extremely important here because it's our task not only to improve public and professional writing, but to employ writers. Yes, the Foundation is harnessing the passion, the flair, and the sheer delight in language that is the natural province of the author. Better still, we're synthesising this into cutting-edge activities such as plain English auditing—our next flag to fly.
3. In plain English auditing, we measure how effectively an organisation writes. We do a verbumetric analysis of its documents using 10 different tools that underpin good, plain English writing. This helps us to more fully understand what creates excellence in writing. Verbumerics is one of the Foundation's contributions to the study of English usage.

4. Our fourth flag is our research and publications. Our work has already identified areas to excavate and mine. The cost to the economy of writing badly. The effect of grammar being dropped from our state secondary school syllabus 30 years ago. The benefits for our writing culture of restoring classical rhetoric. These, and more, will be projects of public purpose. We want to support this work with publications that will help our society to better understand and use plain English.

5. And that brings me to our fifth and final flag—our public awareness campaign. Public access to knowledge is fundamental to a healthy democracy. To understand our laws, our civil rights, our social obligations, our political processes, and the relevance of our cultural projects, people must understand and share the language used to speak about these things. Plain English is a language for all Australians. We believe it's the duty of those who have knowledge to share it in the most democratic and fair way they can.

We plan to promote plain English through future events such as a national plain English Awards. These will applaud good public and professional writing, and illustrate the bad and the ugly writing.

And as part of our launch today, we're also launching the new Plain English Fund, a non-profit arm that will help fund our public programs, and improve public writing and literacy.

And now, to formally launch the Foundation I'd like to introduce one of the most literate people around.

Susan Butler has been Publisher and Executive Editor of *The Macquarie Dictionary* for the last two decades, with a fourth edition due out next year. Her special interest is writing entries for new words. She developed the Wordmap website with the ABC on regionalisms in Australian English. Sue is also developing English dictionaries in India, Southeast Asia and China. Sue is a well known commentator on Australian English in the media. Her regular feature on Australianisms in the *The Age* on Saturdays led to *Dinkum Dictionary*, the origins of words of particular Australian significance, published by Text Publishing. Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to Susan Butler.