

# Plain English Foundation launch address

**Sue Butler, The Macquarie Dictionary publisher**

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By coincidence, when I was asked to address this gathering, I was reading a set of essays by Tom McArthur, one of which was on The Pedigree of Plain English. As usual Tom was both informative and entertaining. He pointed out an early reference to plain English in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* where the Host turns to the Clerke of Oxenforde and asks him for a story. But anticipating the scholarly style that this man might produce the high style of his day, "as when men to kings write", he cautions him to "speak so plain at this time, I pray, that we can follow what you say".

Tom points out that it is no coincidence that at the time that Chaucer was writing *Canterbury Tales*, John Wyclif was translating the New Testament into English with the hope that 'this gospel telleth a playn storie'. This was a society that had a high style and a plain style clearly established and poles apart, and there were those who could see the potential, both political and religious potential, for moving texts out of one context and into the other.

In Australia today styles of writing are not so clearly delineated by the court on one hand and the marketplace on the other. There is a basic division between formal and informal speech and writing. I think that one of the reasons for the popular belief that Australian English has more slang than any other variety is that we offer informality in contexts where others would choose formality as appropriate, and this is to do with the culture of egalitarianism. Our masters need to constantly reaffirm in their speech and writing their connection to Jack who is every bit as good as they are.

The high style for us seems to have become the style adopted by specialist communities whose discourse is highly structured, loaded with specialist terms and generally unintelligible to the average person. Specialist areas construct jargons for ease and accuracy of communication. A concept is given a name so that it doesn't need to be explained over and over again. The community that shares this jargon knows the meaning of the terms employed and can move on to discuss more important issues. Jargon is often given a bad name but it is a good and necessary thing in the right context. Employed out of that context it becomes an evil.

In recent experience plain English has become linked with translating this kind of specialist language when it is directed at a non-specialist audience into the kind of writing that the non-specialist can understand. This is I think the clearest example of the contemporary beneficial outcomes that the plain English movement has sought to produce.

But I feel that there is more to it than that — and that this foundation is seeking to go beyond such blatant contrasts between the plain and the unplain to the kind of writing that many of us produce, writing that misses its mark for a number of reasons.

My father was a journalist and one of the bits of advice that he handed out to me from his experience of writing was that you either know something or you don't. You can't half-know it. And if, as you write, you realise that you are on the not-knowing side of the ledger rather than the knowing side — and this is something that you often don't discover until you attempt to write — then you must down tools and go back and find the knowledge out. Because until you know what you want to say, you won't be able to say it clearly.

You won't believe how often that has come to mind as I write dictionary definitions. It's scary isn't it? The dictionary looks so solid, so complete, so trustworthy, and yet behind it is a person who can be halfway into a definition and then realise that she doesn't actually know what the word means or quite how it is used. And be tempted to go on nevertheless.

Writing definitions is a very special activity and an obvious case where the difference between knowing and not knowing is crucial. But I think it applies to everything that we write. If your mind is clear about what you want to say, then the words flow. If your mind is muddy, but you are required to produce verbiage notwithstanding, then heaven help the reader.

The other story I want to tell is about the son — and yes I'm being deliberately folksy because I think it is important to say that these basics about communication are not remote and academic concepts but part of the stuff of life. All children learn, some more successfully than others, about appropriateness of language, usually in the context of swearing. Sam and I went through the careful negotiations about what he was allowed to say in front of us and what he was NOT allowed to say in front of his grandparents. Or they'd have a heart attack.

I think that basic lesson is generalised to an awareness that a communication doesn't begin and end with you. That there is a person receiving that communication to whom you have some obligation. You must try to make the communication accessible and effective in their terms. If you wish to be accepted and understood.

Of course we must also allow for the situation where the intention is not to be understood. Not to be accessible. Not to be reaching out to the reader. On occasion that can be the whole point. But that is not what we are talking about here.

Finally there is the business of getting the tone right. This is subtle but extraordinarily important. I think that this is a cultural matter that we can see illustrated clearly in speechwriting. If I were an American talking to you today I would be saying:

To be clear in speech and writing is a matter of the gravest concern to us all.  
To be accurate in what we tell each other has consequences that we must bear.  
To be plain in how we say it is the responsibility of each individual.

There is an American rhetoric that makes Australians wince. Not that we don't have our own, but the style is different. Plainer, perhaps. We need to find the right voice — our own but one that exists in a community of voices that have set an established style while still offering possibilities for the future. The problem here is that instead of listening and developing that individual voice, we try to take one off the shelf. We fall back on what we were told at school was good writing, what scored marks at university, what the company seemed to want fifty years ago. All too often what we are adopting as our prestige style is dusty with age and rigid with ossification. We become cliched, boring, pedantic and pompous. And we never listen to ourselves and we never listen to others.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe has spoken about the inhibiting effect of the schoolteacher looking over one's shoulder in producing creative writing. But I think the same inhibition cramps the development of style in prose writing, in letters and emails, in proposals and report writing. We can't seem to fight our way past the schoolmarm to the real lessons of communication that we learnt at home and in the playground.

It seems to me that this is where plain English can go, where this Foundation wants to go. It has already demonstrated that there are practical ways in which

this goal can be achieved and highly desirable outcomes in terms of efficiency of communication. It seems so simple – that we should know what we want to say, be attuned to the person with whom we are communicating, and develop an authentic voice. But it needs to be taught and each individual needs to be motivated to do it. It doesn't come without effort.

I congratulate the Foundation — Dr Neil James and Dr Peta Spear — on their successes to date, and wish them well, as I know we all do, in all their efforts to achieve plain English for this community.