Plain English Foundation

Defining the profession: placing plain language in the field of communication.

Dr Neil James
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1. A confusing array

We've already heard a lot during the conference about the problems with traditional legal language. But spare a thought for any of the lawyers schooled in that tongue who decide to do something about it. They might well walk into a bookshop or a library to see what references they can find.

Immediately they would be faced with a confusing array of titles. There are books on technical writing, information design, discourse analysis, business communications, usability, psycholinguistics, transformational grammar, plain English, readability, style and usage. Where does plain language fit into this broadening field of communication? Exactly which texts should a lawyer turn to for help?

It may be little consolation, but our lawyers are not alone in facing this problem. Communication specialists themselves have trouble reaching a firm consensus about their field.

In 1996, J A Anderson surveyed seven major communications texts and identified no less than 249 distinct 'theories' of communication. Nearly 80 per cent (195) of these appeared in only one book. Amazingly, only seven per cent (18) were found in more than three of the seven titles.

So far from being a coherent field with a common intellectual base, communication tends to be a series of isolated disciplines that for the most part ignore each other. Which one of these does plain language belong to?

Robert Craig has identified what he calls seven major communication 'traditions' and traced the overlaps and tensions between them:

Rhetorical—communication as practical discourse.

Semiotic—communication as intersubjective mediation by signs.

Phenomenological—communication as the experience of otherness.

Cybernetic—communication as information processing.

Sociopsychological—communication as expression, interaction and influence.

Sociocultural—communication as the (re)production of social order.

Critical—communication as discursive reflection.

We don't have time to traverse all this territory today, but I want to argue that the tradition of most use for the practical problems of legal communication is the rhetorical tradition. Today, I will outline why this is important and what implications this has for our current debate about plain language standards.

'Defining the profession: placing plain language in the filed of communications.'

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3. The rhetorical tradition

Plain language and rhetoric apply to the same contexts

First of all, the rhetorical tradition is a practical one. Like plain language, it has always offered audience-focused methods for delivering public discourse to achieve practical outcomes.

Rhetoric emerged in the early days of democracy in Greece, when any citizen could argue for a particular action, and being a gifted communicator brought you power and influence. The first teachers of public speaking emerged, and became quite the fashion in the fifth century BC. Then a clever bloke called Aristotle developed the 'techne' or craft of rhetoric as a systematic method of communication, and this applies as well to modern communication as it did to the classical oration.

Aristotle's *Ars Rhetorica* started by outlining three spheres that rhetoric applied to:

- Deliberative—assessing or acting on public policy.
- Judicial—making legal judgments about past actions.
- Ceremonial—celebrating or commemorating a public event or person.

I would argue that most of the examples we will hear about during the conference fit into one or other of these categories. Because of the explosion of text in the information age, we might add a fourth sphere for purely informational documents. But for the most part, plain language today applies to the same scenarios Aristotle identified over two thousand years ago.

Plain language and rhetoric have a similar scope and methods

Of course, having a common context doesn't on its own place plain language in the rhetorical tradition. It is the 'techne' itself, the processes and methods the two have in common, that are of most importance.

By the time of the Roman Republic, the rhetorician and lawyer Cicero had divided the discipline into five 'canons': invention, arrangement, style, delivery and memory. Although these have developed over time, we can still see the five canons operating in plain language practice today.

Traditional canon	Traditional application	Plain language equivalent
Inventio	'Discovery' of arguments	Content: accuracy, completeness and logic.
Dispositio	Arrangement of a speech	Structure: effective sequencing of a document structure for its purpose
Elocutio	Setting the style to a level appropriate to audience and context	Expression: elements such as word choice, syntax, sentence length, efficiency and tone.
Pronuntiatio	Delivery of a speech	Document design: typography, layout and other visual elements.
Memoria	Memorising techniques for long passages of text	Databases, manuals, help files and content management systems.

Invention relates to our work with content, arrangement to structure, and style to expression. While delivery in classical times meant vocal delivery of a speech, for the modern document it now involves the design. Similarly, while rhetoric originally offered techniques for memorising a long speech, today we are more likely to use databases and content management systems to achieve the same ends. The focus has evolved, but the underlying elements remain the same.

Let's compare the traditional canons to a modern definition of plain language. This comes from the South African National Credit Act:

> A document is in plain language if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the document is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal credit experience, could be expected to understand the **content, significance, and import** of the document without undue effort, having regard to-
>
> *(a)* the **context, comprehensiveness and consistency** of the document;
>
> *(b)* the **organisation, form and style** of the document;
>
> (c) the **vocabulary, usage and sentence structure** of the text; and
>
> *(d)* the **use of any illustrations, examples, headings, or other aids** to reading and understanding.

4. Six reasons this matters

So the parallels between plain language and rhetoric are very strong, if not comprehensive. But is this more than just an intellectual exercise? I want to suggest six reasons that this connection matters:

1. It makes our lawyer's task easier

Firstly, it greatly helps our lawyers struggling to find the books of most practical application for their work. These will be within the rhetorical tradition rather than books in the cybernetic or sociocultural traditions.

2. It provides strong intellectual foundations

Secondly, placing ourselves in the rhetorical tradition gives us an immensely rich intellectual tradition to draw on. It offers both a sound theoretical base and centuries of applied experience to build on. There is no point in reinventing the wheel when so much is already available. It doesn't stop us reaching out to other disciplines as well, but we will do so more effectively working from a sound base.

3. It helps overcome definitional confusion

Thirdly, it will help us overcome confusion about what plain language actually is, a difficulty that David Melinkoff captured humorously when he defined plain language as 'an imprecise expression of hope for improvement in the language of the law'.

The most common definitions tend to take a rhetorical approach similar to the one I've quoted so far. They define plain language by the 'elements' that it works with. One of the best would be Joe Kimble's Plain English Charter, which is divided into sections covering 36 general, design, organisation, sentence and word elements.

However, more recent definitions of plain language are becoming more general, focusing on the outcomes plain language produces:

> A communication is in plain language if the people who are the audience for that communication can quickly and easily

> - find what they need
> - understand what they find
> - act appropriately on that understanding

Source: Center for Plain Language

> The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding it at first reading, and in the same sense that the writers meant it to be understood.
>
> Source: Martin Cutts, Oxford Guide to Plain English.

Now I like both these definitions and I quote them often. But I have to confess they also worry me. They tell us more about what plain language achieves rather than how it achieves it. This is not far from saying that anything is plain language if it is good.

At the other end of the spectrum, some practitioners define plain language by focusing narrowly on readability:

> Plain Language is language that is easy to read by matching the reading skill of your audience. Plain language increases comprehension, retention, reading speed, and persistence.
>
> Source: Impact Information. Plain Language Services.

If we place ourselves in the rhetorical tradition, we might be able to strike a definition somewhere in the middle ground, including both outcomes and the elements of focus in the overall plain language process.

> Plain language communication adapts and tests the content, structure, expression and document design of a text so that its audience can achieve intended outcomes.
>
> Source: Plain English Foundation

This definition may not be quite right either, but I hope to have highlighted the problem we need to address. We can't yet call ourselves a coherent field, let alone a profession, while we offer such varying definitions of what we do.

4. It equips us to answer criticism and competition

Fourthly, the main danger of an unclear definition is that as practitioners we may find ourselves defined out of our own field. Already, adherents of other communication models have wrongly criticised plain English for a narrow focus on expression techniques. If we do not agree on an authoritative definition, these criticisms will recur.

But more recently, there has been growing competition for the applied communication work that we do. Disciplines such as information design and usability have emerged as competing fields defining themselves with a broader focus that threatens to take over the territory of plain language. Ginny Redish, one of the pioneers of usability, revealed this danger when she said in an interview:

> My definition of usability is identical to my definition of Plain Language, my definition of reader-focused writing, my definition of document design … We're here to make the product work for people.

If we do not resolve these definitional boundaries, plain language's 15 minutes of fame might rapidly fade. A Clarity conference in 20 years time might be talking about information design instead of plain language.

5. It provides a model for the development of standards

Fifthly, rhetoric provides an excellent model for resolving these issues. It theorises communication in the exact spheres we operate in. It systematically ties together the elements we work with when improving public communication. It offers practical techniques to apply when doing so, but it stresses a flexible process rather than fixed, immutable rules. At its heart is the sovereignty of the audience in each context to determine the right content, the best structure, an appropriate style, effective design and the right channel for communication. It is a sound intellectual model that should inform any standards we might develop.

6. It helps us work at an institutional level

Having this grounding would also help us to set the right institutional framework for the profession. This includes developing our own institutions and interacting with others.

A prime example would be our place within the academy. Although Helena will talk about plain languages training in Sweden, this is a rare exception. For the most part, writing courses at universities are not taught by plain language specialists. Most plain language practitioners are outside the academy patching up the communications problems that it perpetuates. Placing ourselves consciously within the rhetorical tradition would give us one means of entering the academy and spreading the work we do at one of the sources of the problem.

5. Institutional structure

Having our intellectual foundations more firmly placed will also help us develop our own institutional base, which should include the following elements:

1. An agreed definition of plain language and its scope

2. Plain language standards

3. A formal plain language institution

4. Accreditation of practitioners

5. Research activities to develop the profession

6. Training support for practitioners

Of course, there is an awful lot to be done to get to step number six. But with an international working group meeting for the first time at this conference, the process has begun. I am looking forward to hearing from other panelists who will talk about further these steps. In kicking off the discussion, my purpose was to flag the importance of starting with a clear definition of plain language, but to do so by drawing on a sound intellectual tradition.

Dr Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia, which combines plain English training, editing and auditing with a public campaign for more ethical language practice. Neil has published three books and over 50 articles and essays on language and literature. His latest book, Writing at work*, (Allen and Unwin, 2007) is on the language of the professions. He is currently chair of the International Working Group on Plain Language Standards.*