



Professionalizing Plain Language:

A POSTCARD ON CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

BY NEIL JAMES

In a year of change for American politics, it is worth pausing to recall an event of significance for every communication professional: the passing of the Brayley Bill through the House of Congress. This bill sets out:

To enhance citizen access to Government information and services by establishing plain language as the standard style for Government documents issued to the public.

The Bill passed by a massive margin of 376–1. Although it was stymied before reaching the Senate, there is every chance it will become law under the new administration. This has enormous implications for all public documents and the professionals who write them.

There is nothing new, of course, in government mandating standards for professional practice. Most professions have legally prescribed reference points for their work. But the remarkable as-

pect of the Brayley Bill is that plain language lacks what other fields usually have: a professional infrastructure. There is no plain language equivalent to a College of Surgeons or Institute of Engineers. So, when the Bill had to set down what is meant by plain language, it resorted to referencing two government guidelines:

In implementing subsection (a), an agency may follow either the guidance of the Plain English Handbook, published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Federal Plain Language Guidelines.

This suggests to me that plain language is starting to gain influence beyond the capacity of its existing institutional base. If we are to make the most of the Brayley Bill, it is time that plain language as a profession caught up.

Some senior practitioners have taken the first step by forming an International Plain Language Working Group in 2008. With representatives from the three major plain language organizations, and practitioners from a dozen different countries, the group has broad terms of reference to examine:

1. The definition of plain language and its scope.
2. Plain language standards.
3. A formal plain language institution.
4. Accreditation and training for practitioners.
5. Research and publications to develop the profession.
6. Advocacy and other activities.

1. The definition of plain language and its scope.

You'd think that by the time a field was being mandated in legislation, it would be well past a clear definition. Yet contention remains about what plain language constitutes, mainly because it has evolved so rapidly in recent decades.

Sixty years ago, texts such as Ernest Gowers' *Plain Words* focused largely on elements of expression: word choice and sentence length, passive versus active voice, unnecessary jargon and cliché. These were the focus when plain English started to gain influence in the early 1970s. It attracted criticism as a result.

Then, from the late 1970s to 1990s, the scope expanded greatly, applying its core principle of audience focus to content, structure, and design in equal measure to expression. Good examples of this more comprehensive approach are Joe Kimble's 1992 "Charter for Clear Writing" and Martin Cutts' 1995 *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, which tripled the scope of the discipline compared with Gowers.

Yet recently, our definitions have become more generalized, focusing on whether a document achieves its outcomes rather than its linguistic elements. The Center for Plain Language definition is:

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

Technical writers or information designers might be wondering how plain language so defined differs from what they do. As Ginny Redish—one of the pioneers of plain language, information design, and usability—said in a recent 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.

A consensus definition of plain language may end up mixing both of these strains, much as the Plain English Foundation in Australia does:

Plain language means writing that adapts and tests the content, structure, expression, and design of a text so that a particular audience will achieve intended outcomes.

2. Plain language standards.

A definitive definition is a crucial first step because it will shape the main practical outcome: international standards. Here again, there are two schools of thought, each flowing from the definitional positions that stress "elements" or "outcomes."

On the one hand, private organizations offering accreditation of documents



The Next Steps

If the benefits of professionalizing plain language are significant, so are the challenges we face. This is why the Working Group has opted for a "hasten slowly" approach. Its first step is to write an options paper, covering these six topics, simply to set out the options and the issues. It will not yet recommend a preferred model. This will allow every practitioner to have input and ownership of the final result. The paper will be published in time for the seventh PLAIN conference in October 2009 in Sydney, Australia. The conference has the theme of "raising the standard" and will include several sessions exploring and debating these developments.

We may not succeed. Working Group members come from the most diverse backgrounds possible, representing the United States, Canada, Mexico, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, France, the United Kingdom, Australia, Portugal, Sweden, New Zealand, and South Africa. But there is plenty of good will in the first stage, along with a clear recognition that measures, such as the Brayley Bill, will work best if they are backed by a professional infrastructure.

work with elements of content, structure, expression, design, and style, checking a document against best-practice criteria. They use checklists but require a great deal of expertise when applying them to each context. Examples include the Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark (UK), the WriteGroup's WriteMark (New Zealand), or the Wordsmith Clarity model (Canada).

One the other hand, there is a strong case for basing standards in an iterative testing regime that focuses on whether a specific document actually works rather than what elements it uses.

Proponents of the first approach point out the cost and time associated with testing every document, and the contexts where testing is not appropriate. Supporters of a testing respond that it is more likely we can encourage organizations to test their documents than get a group of plain language practitioners to agree on techniques. The International Plain Language Working Group will need to resolve these differences.

3. A formal plain language institution.

With the standards hurdle overcome, the next question is where to house any plain language standards. Who will control them, distribute them, and update them? How will that be funded? The problem here is that plain language does not have a strong institutional base. Our two major international organizations have limited operations, no professional staff, and memberships in the hundreds rather than the thousands.

Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) was formed out of the Plain Language Network in 1993 and held the first of its six conferences in 1995. Only recently incorporated, its lifeblood is a lively international email forum. The most important journal in the field is published by Clarity, which has a larger membership but a narrower focus on legal writing.

The new kid on the block, the Center for Plain Language in Silver Spring, Maryland, holds an annual forum and boasts the recent success of the Brayley Bill, but its outlook is confined mostly to the United States. Professional organizations in other countries, such as

the Association of Swedish Language Consultants, have similar national limits. Other influential organizations mix public and commercial activities, including the Plain Language Commission in the United Kingdom, the Plain English Foundation in Australia, and the WriteGroup in New Zealand.

All of these organizations are formally represented on the International Plain Language Working Group, and they will need to decide how to structure some kind of broader institution as a professional base for plain language. This may mean becoming foundation members of a larger body, much as professional accounting bodies band together for their standard setting.

4. Accreditation and training for practitioners.

Of course, it's only a short step from setting standards for documents to setting standards for the practitioners who will apply them. Whatever definition the Working Group recommends, our standards are unlikely to be fixed, immutable rules. They will still require expertise in understanding how to apply them to each context. That then begs the question of the quality of practitioners themselves, and the need for accreditation or certification to regulate their work.

There are already some national models for doing so. The Association of Swedish Language Consultants has had an equivalent to certification through an academic program in a Swedish university. Begun over 30 years ago, it is highly competitive, with around 300 applicants each year for 20 places. More recently, another university has offered a further 20 places, and others may follow. The association will then look at becoming the formal authorizing body to test qualifications and issue certification.

Whether this would work at an international level would depend on the cooperation of a number of universities working in more than a dozen languages in over twenty countries. In many, plain language has minimal influence in the academy and is, at times, actively opposed.

Alternatively, a new institution could take on the task from the outset, includ-

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ing setting standards for practitioners, testing them against those standards, developing a charter of ethics, offering training and support, and re-testing and re-accrediting practitioners over time. It is one of the most fraught processes that any field can go through, but it is essential if that field is to rise to a profession. The Society for Technical Communication has had its own share of debate on this topic.

5. Research and publications to develop the profession.

With an institutional base and clear standards, a fledgling profession might then look at strengthening its research base. Too many of the principles applied in plain language practice stem from conventional wisdom as much as hard evidence. Increasing professionalism means separating what we assume will work from what we know actually does work.

In a recent conference paper, Karen Schriver cited several examples of long-cherished principles that do not stand up to scrutiny. One is the practice of using no more than seven items in a list, based on George Miller's 1956 paper on short-term memory. But Miller's insights related to memory when chunks of information are removed from view rather than remaining on the page. The conventional interpretation of Miller's research turns out to be a misinterpretation.

There are too many similar examples where techniques are applied without a solid research basis. This does not mean they are wrong, but that we do not have enough scientific certainty about their effectiveness. In strengthening the research, a plain language profession will need to reassess the evidence for any technique it uses, identify those supported by solid evidence, and seek to verify or discard those that are under-researched. As with accreditation and training, a cooperative relationship with the academy will be essential, along with an expanded publication program.

6. Advocacy and other activities.

The final area of focus for the Working Group will be the potential for advocacy. Ironically, this was added late to the terms of reference, although the one thing that plain-language practitioners have been very good at is gaining public and political endorsement. The Brayley Bill is but the latest example of high-level government support. The media regularly runs articles highlighting poor language practice. The public seems to lap them up. In Australia not long ago, three books about language were simultaneously in the top-ten bestseller list.

Imagine the difference that a better coordinated, professionally based organization could make in accelerating this impact. With a set of standards, professional accreditation, and continuing research, plain language can realize its potential to reform our public language, improve services, and maximize the opportunities of every citizen to participate in public life. **■**

Dr. Neil James (Neil.James@plainenglishfoundation.com) is executive director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia, which combines plain language training, editing, and auditing with a public campaign for more ethical language practice. It is also hosting the 2009 PLAIN conference. Neil has a doctorate in English and has published three books and over fifty 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 Plain Language Working Group.