

NO PLAIN, NO GAIN: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAIN LANGUAGE IN BUSINESS

by Joanne Lozar Glenn

Broadly speaking, the short words are the best, and the old words best of all (Sir Winston Churchill, 1874–1965).

Maybe this has happened to you: you've decided to move your retirement funds from your former employer's plan to another financial institution. You've been told it's a simple paper transfer—a direct rollover. You get the paperwork. The instructions are not simple at all. You call the accounting manager at your former employer and ask her to help you fill out the forms. Even she gets confused. You both do your best and mail the papers to the 403b agency. Three weeks later, they're returned to you. The cover letter says the forms were not filled out properly. You make another attempt, this time consulting with your financial advisor. You send off the papers again. Another three weeks pass, and *déjà vu*—they're back in your mailbox again. Now the cover letter says one of the forms is not complete. You must fill in the missing information, and re-sign and re-date everything. You are feeling like Job, but you patiently mail the papers again. Two weeks pass and you get a phone call. The former retirement plan coordinator still has one more question for you. You answer it and after you hang up you wonder—what is going on here?

Avi Arditti, an editor at Voice of America (VOA), laughs when he hears this story. What's going on is clear writing, or more accurately, the lack of it. "You recognize it when you don't see it," says Arditti, who is also active in the plain language movement.

The lack of clear writing is a big issue right now—big for government, big for business, and big for the legal and health professions. Poor writing creates unhappy customers, and costs organizations time, money, and sometimes lawsuits. For example, until 1973, when Citibank revised the writing in its promissory notes, the company had spent a lot of time in small claims court trying to collect on them. It had also spent a lot of time training customer support staff to answer consumer questions about its forms and contracts (Mazur, 2002). Poor writing also costs lives (see "Business Spotlight" article on CLAD, p. 16).

Good clear writing, on the other hand, does none of these things. And businesses are hungry for employees with good writing skills—businesses spend billions annually on correcting writing deficiencies (College Board, 2004).

The plain language movement has been influential in helping government, businesses, and individuals learn to write clearly, that is, "to express ideas correctly, to express them well, and to express them in a way that makes sense" (College Board, p. 19). This article explains what people mean when they say "plain language." It also examines in more detail the importance of plain language in business and in the workplace and suggests strategies teachers can use to encourage the development and practice of clear writing skills in their students.

Plain Language Defined

Plain language is a style of clear writing that puts readers first (see sidebar, “Plain Language: Just the FAQs”). By paying attention to content, style, structure, and design, a plain language document tries to present information in a way that readers can readily understand (Fig. 1). Businesses that use plain language to communicate with customers save money and time, and please and persuade their readers (Kimble, 1996–97). Customers who read plain language documents can locate information faster, understand content on the first try, and fill out forms correctly without having to call for customer service support.

Plain language has been criticized as a “dumbing down” of information. “That’s just a myth,” says Joe Kimble, a law professor at the Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan. “Plain language is neither ‘dumbed down’ nor ‘baby talk’—that’s just the cartoonish view,” he says. “Plain language is clear and effective communication—the opposite of legalese.” Kimble, who teaches lawyers how to write more clearly, says this about that: “I want to liberate my students from the idea that they have to sound legalistic.”

How to Write Plainly

Plain writing is about creating readable text. Bill DuBay, a plain language consultant in Costa Mesa, California, puts it this way: (1) find out the reading level of your audience, and (2) create texts for them at that level.

Understand reading level and readability. A person’s reading level is affected by his or her vocabulary, the background the person brings to the topic, and the person’s interest in the topic. Creating texts for a particular reading level means understanding the idea of readability.

Readability refers to how easy or hard a document is to understand. You’re probably already familiar with readability, either because of your educational background or because you noticed that Microsoft Word automatically calculates the reading level of a

Figure 1. Features of Readable Text

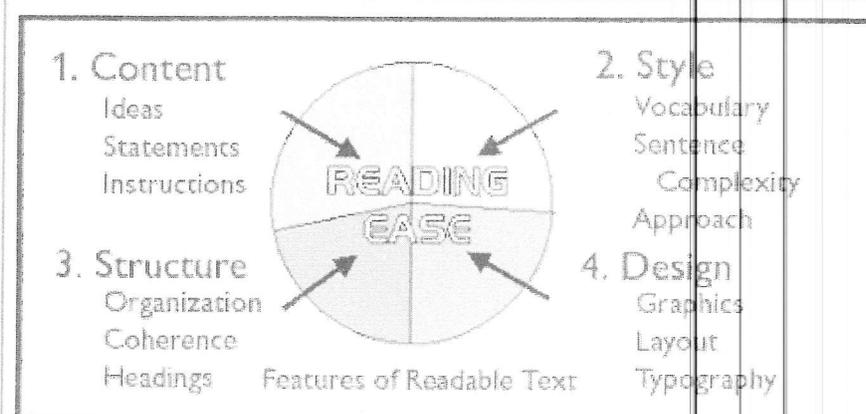


Figure 1. The features of readable text are listed in the order of their importance. Content is most important, followed by style, structure, and design.

Note. From “The Basics of Plain Language” by B. DuBay, B. 2004, June 7, *Plain Language at Work Newsletter*. Retrieved November 10, 2004, from <http://www.impact-information.com/impactinfo/newsletter/plwork11.htm>. Reprinted with permission.

document after you complete a spelling and grammar check. Word uses the Flesch scale, which bases readability on the average sentence length in words and the average word length in syllables (other readability scales include Spache, Dale-Chall, and Fry [NCTE, 1981]). “Researchers have always said that word length and sentence length are the best predictors of how difficult a document is to read,” DuBay says.

To create a text that your audience can read, you must first know your audience and purpose, and the reading level of that audience.

Identify audience readability levels. How do you find out the reading level of your audience? One way is to look at what they read. If you’re writing for other employees, for example, walk around the building and pay attention to the size of their vocabulary and the kinds of reading materials they leave lying around the mailroom or cafeteria. Once you know what your audience reads, you can gauge the readability levels of those materials and begin to create materials at that level.

Writing to readability levels can be challenging. DuBay recommends studying and mimicking the style of

materials written at the level your audience needs. For example, if your audience is at the intermediate 7th- to 9th-grade level, study popular materials written for those in junior high schools. Both *Reader’s Digest* and *USA Today* are also written at that level, along with popular magazines and novels. Consider layout, type size, and illustrations, as well as the tone and language used. But also adjust readability level to the purpose of the material. For example, if you’re writing medical and emergency instructions, like elevator notices for the general public, write no higher than a sixth-grade level.

Create readable text. Text that is easy to read has certain things (besides a readability score) in common. It’s been written by a writer who’s clear about purpose and audience. The writer uses short sentences made up of concrete, familiar words and verbs in the active voice. The writing has a professional yet friendly tone, often using personal pronouns like *you* and *we*. The writing sounds human, and there are no extra words or unnecessary jargon—nor is there needless complexity. In fact, complex information is presented in tables or charts, and the writer uses

design elements (headings, white space, short paragraphs, boldface) and layout as tools for increasing comprehension (Smith, n.d.).

As Kimble puts it, “Resist the urge to sound formal. Relax and be natural (but not too informal). Your main goal is to convey your ideas with the greatest possible clarity.”

You can run readability formulas on the final text, but note that these formulas only *predict* readability. The ultimate test of whether a document is readable is to try it out on the intended reader (NCTE, 1981). “[With so much at stake] in mass documents, why wouldn’t you test the form or the letter or the notices that you send out?” Kimble asks. “Companies lose tons of money [when they don’t].”

The Importance of Clear Writing Skills in Business

If companies lose money when they distribute confusing documents to their customers, what do they gain when they write documents in plain language? Does plain language have a cost benefit?

The answer is “Yes.” Kimble’s article “Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please” lists 25 examples of how converting to plain language made good financial sense and created better customer relations in government, business, and the legal and health professions. And here’s more evidence from references DuBay collected:

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs rewrote certain form letters in plain language. They then tested the effect and found that the new letters reduced support calls from 1.5 per letter to 0.27 per letter. The Department saved an estimated \$40,000 annually.
- Federal Express revised its ground-operation manuals and saved an estimated \$400,000 the first year.
- Computer manufacturer Allen-Bradley rewrote its manuals. Support calls decreased from 50/day to 2/month (DuBay, n.d.).

If plain language has so many benefits, why isn’t it more common? Kimble points to bad habits and the overwhelming influence of poor models.

“Lawyers have written poorly for four centuries,” he says. “Lack of good training has been a problem for a long time, but in the last decade or so law schools have finally started to improve their writing programs.”

Others offer different explanations. Some say that deadlines get in the way, and there’s no time left to do a good edit. Sometimes people don’t realize how unclear their writing really is (this usually happens when writers forget to think about their audience). Sometimes people feel that if they write too plainly, their peers will think they’re not smart. Yet no one ever complains that a document was too easy to read!

As businesses realize the cost of poor writing and the benefits of plain, they are offering or requiring training for salaried

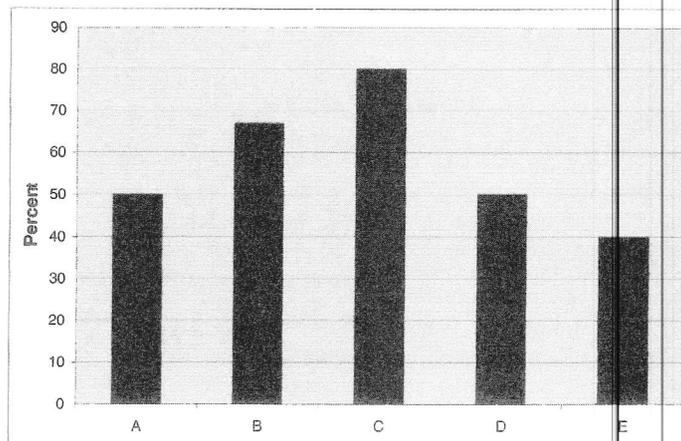
employees who have writing deficiencies. Estimated training costs approach \$3.1 billion annually (College Board, p. 4).

The Importance of Clear Writing Skills in the Workplace

The National Commission on Writing conducted a survey of business leaders and asked them about the importance of writing in the workplace. The title of their report says it all: *Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . Or a Ticket Out* (Fig. 2).

According to the report, writing skills can make or break a career. Writing is not only a threshold skill but a gatekeeper. A threshold skill because poor writing skills can keep a person from being hired. A gatekeeper skill because

Figure 2. Writing Can Make or Break a Career



- Figure 2. Letters A through E correspond to the percentages defined as follows:
- Percent of companies that take writing into consideration when they hire and make promotion decisions
 - Percent of salaried employees in large American corporations who have writing responsibilities in their job
 - Percent of FIRE (service and finance, insurance, and real estate) industries that assess writing during hiring
 - Percent of companies that “frequently” or “always” produce reports
 - Percent of companies that require training for salaried employees with writing deficiencies

Note. From “Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . or a Ticket Out” by the National Commission on Writing, College Entrance Examination Board, 2004, September. Retrieved 10/26/04 from http://www.writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-ticket-to-work.pdf

Plain Language: Just the FAQs

What is plain language?

Plain language is a style of writing that puts readers first. Readers who read documents written in plain language understand what the document means without having to read it twice.

Plain language is a movement, you say? Who started it?

People around the world who were tired of writing that sounded like gobbledygook. In the U.S., "Plain Language" became an official "movement" on June 1, 1998.¹ That's when President Bill Clinton signed a memorandum requiring federal agencies to use plain language principles for most of their written communications. This is what he wrote:

- By October 1, 1998, . . . use plain language "in all new documents, other than regulations, that explain how to obtain a benefit or service or how to comply with a requirement you administer or enforce."
- By January 1, 1999, . . . use plain language "in all proposed and final rulemaking published in the Federal Register, unless you proposed the rule before that date."

The goal was for the government to communicate more clearly with the public. The National Partnership for Reinventing Government issued guidance to help federal employees comply and meet the goal. The memorandum remains in effect until rescinded.

Can you show me an example of what you mean by plain language?

The Plain Language Web site (www.plainlanguage.gov) has lots of them. Here's a great one:

Before

Dear _____:

This letter regards the change in your enrollment status during the term which began September 1, 1996. If the change was due to unavoidable events beyond your control, please notify us as soon as possible. Otherwise, you may be held responsible for an overpayment, or an additional overpayment of benefits.

You withdrew from one or more courses on November 5, 1996.

Currently, your award has been reduced effective December 1, 1996. You will receive a computer-generated letter with more details, including the amount of overpayment, if any.

If you do not provide acceptable reasons for this course change, your check due on or about January 1 may be reduced or not issued at all due to an additional overpayment.

You will be notified when the decision is made on your case.

After

Dear _____:

This letter is about the change in your enrollment during the period that began on September 1, 1996. Because of this change, we may have paid you more than you were due.

What Our Records Show

You reduced your credit hours from 12 hours to 6 hours on November 5, 1996.

What We Did

We reduced your payments on December 1, 1996, to \$202.00 per month. You will receive another letter about this change. The letter will show if you have a debt.

Why write this way?

According to a 1999 article in *The Editorial Eye*, published by EEI Press in Alexandria, Virginia, plain language improves comprehension, and readers prefer it.

Where can I learn more?

The Plain Language Web site has lots of resources. Here's how to get them:²

1. Visit www.plainlanguage.gov
2. Scroll down to the heading "Plain Language Tools."
3. Click on "Writing User-Friendly Documents" and/or "Plain English at a Glance."
4. Surf the rest of the site. It's full of tips and real-world examples.
5. Consider taking a workshop in plain language from the Plain Language Action & Information Network. The Network is a government-wide group of volunteers working to improve communications from the federal government to the public. You can reach them by email (info@plainlanguage.gov) or go to their Web site (www.plainlanguage.gov).

¹ For more information on the origins of plain language, please see the article by Beth Mazur, listed in the sidebar on Resources.

² Note that these steps may have changed by the time you read this. At press time, the Plain Language Web site was undergoing a revision.

Special Tools for Clarity: Guidelines for Communicating Effectively with Your Audience

"[People] don't think of writing as a democratic craft, [they] think of it as a fine art," says Roy Peter Clark, senior scholar at the Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, Florida. "If we taught writing more as a democratic craft, then all writers would write with greater civic clarity, whatever the audience happens to be."

Clark will be celebrating 25 years with the Poynter Institute in 2005, and he wants to celebrate. So he and the Institute are considering declaring 2005 "The Year of Writing Clearly." Some guidelines:

- Control the pace of information.
- Lift the heavy cargo out of text and into images. For example, instead of writing a paragraph of directions on getting to your house, use a map.
- Introduce difficult concepts one at a time.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat—the most important stuff.
- Unclutter stories, paragraphs, and sentences.
- Engage the reader in a conversation.
- Make judicious use of the second person (you, your). It turns language into conversation.
- Use only the most important numbers.
- Translate jargon.
- Look for the human example.
- Reveal the specific impact of the thing you're writing about. For example, if writing about gray water, write, "In times of drought you may be watering your lawn with treated sewage."
- Chart a chronology: tell things in the order they happened. Use words like first, next, then, etc.
- Keep the boring stuff short.
- Reward the reader...after a boring paragraph, bring the writing back to life.
- Find the microcosm—the small world that represents the bigger world. For example, if you're writing about downtown redevelopment after the hurricane, take me to one place you think represents everything else that's going on.
- If it's hard to understand, let the reader in on it. Use this sentence: "Here's how it works."
- Use the "Q & A" format to explain.

transferring your retirement funds from one institution to another. Teaching students plain language skills may very well turn them into writing geniuses, and give them the edge in business.

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¹ Not her real name.

² As of press times, Bullfighter has been discontinued. See <http://deloitte.com> for potential updates.

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Resources for Clear Writing

Organizations

International Association of Business Communicators, www.iabc.com

The National Commission on Writing, www.writingcommission.org

The Plain Language Action and Information Network, www.plain-language.gov

The Plain Language Association International, www.plainlanguage-network.org

The Poynter Institute, www.poynter.org

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Technology Tools¹

Bullfighter²

"Stripping the Bull Out of Business"

Deloitte Consulting - http://www.deloitte.com/dtt/section_node/0,2332,sid%3D27374,00.html

GoToMeeting

"The Next Generation in Online Meetings"

Citrix Online - <http://www.gotomeeting.com/>

Inspiration

A tool for developing ideas and organizing thinking

Inspiration Software, Inc. - www.inspiration.com

Markin

Software for marking student writing; saves "commenting" time

Creative Technology Ltd. - <http://www.cict.co.uk/software/markin/index.htm>

RefWorks

Web-based database and bibliography creator

Refworks - www.refworks.com

¹ This list does not imply an endorsement by either the author or NBEA.

² As of press time, Bullfighter has been discontinued. See <http://deloitte.com> for potential updates.