

Plain language developments in Australia

1. The Don

After a decade in which plain English progressed behind the scenes in Australia, one recent phenomenon brought language back into broader public prominence. In late 2003, Don Watson, the speech writer of former Prime Minister Paul Keating, released a small volume of loosely connected rants about the misuse of language. Called *Death Sentence*, within weeks the book was walking off the shelves, and it went on to be the Book of the Year for 2004. It galvanized mainstream public debate about language in a way that has not happened for over a decade. He followed up quickly with a companion bestseller called *Watson's Dictionary of Weasel Words*.

But how might we read Watson's success, coming as it does after more than two decades of a plain English movement in Australia? Is it a sign of growing support, or does it show that the mainstream experience remains untouched by plain language? Unfortunately, we just do not know. There is little comprehensive information available about the adoption of plain English in Australia. Nor do we have any systematic way of measuring its take up.

2. Institutional support

At the very least, the Watson phenomenon has opened up much needed public discussion about plain English. Our language is now flavour of the month in academic conferences and writers' festivals; it has attracted hours of radio time and metres of column inches. The difficulty is that there has been no established institution in Australia to take advantage of this opportunity. Unlike the United Kingdom, Australia has had no Plain English Campaign with a ready media presence.

Such things have been tried in the past, of course. Official support for plain English peaked in the International Literacy Year in 1990. A publicly funded Reader Friendly Campaign produced a guide and documents kit. It launched the Reader Friendly Awards and attracted considerable media coverage. After strong start, however, the organizers struggled to raise sponsorship, and the campaign folded after two events. Plain language went behind the scenes, quietly working its way through companies and agencies, but without much of a public presence. This is probably why the public responded so strongly to Watson: he provided a missing outlet for their frustration.

For if Watson's success demonstrates one thing, it is that there is still too much poor language about. Our institutions still do not turn to plain language as their first option. And unlike America, Australia has had no plain language laws or Executive Memoranda officially sanctioning plain language at any level of government or industry. There are policies of course, but without formal programs to back them up, they are often ignored. Without institutional backing, the battle for plain language has been fought workshop by workshop, document by document, organisation by organisation.

3. The professions

There certainly have been significant gains. In the law, plain English has transformed the drafting of legislation. Major Federal projects in the past decade included the Corporations Law Simplification Project and the Tax Law Improvement Project, but laws governing sales tax, mining, aged care and the public service also benefited from plainer language. Most Parliamentary Counsels have adopted plain English as standard in their drafting. The Courts, however, still largely use legalese. A study in the Queensland Supreme Court found that the readability of the bench books used to brief juries was at Grade 17. Fortunately, the Courtlink process in NSW, which is rationalizing court administration, has begun to simplify over 300 standard court forms, many of which used decades old wording. Medium-to-large law firms are also making plain language more mainstream, but progress in the smaller suburban law firms has been much slower.

In the world of finance, the public sector is leading the way. Four of the seven Auditors General in Australia have introduced plain language over the last five years. Unfortunately, only one of the 'big four' corporate accounting firms has done so, and for the average taxpayers going to a local accountant, very little has changed. Accountants take the lead in their writing from Australian Accounting Standards, which are close to the worst documents ever written in the English language.

Fortunately, the corporate world is coming under increasing pressure to adopt plain language. A recent Royal Commission found that the quality of financial reporting directly contributed to the high profile collapse of the insurance giant HIH. Commissioner Neville Owen recommended that plain English audit reporting become mandatory. As a result, corporate regulators are beginning to take more notice of plain language, but there is not as yet any compulsion to do so.

Other parts of the insurance industry have been at the vanguard of plain English. The NRMA was the first insurer to convert its policy documents to plain language 25 years ago. Here's how its company solicitor described the experience:

When our first Plain English policy wording was released, Mr Justice Reynolds in an address the Australian Insurance Institute suggested [it] might be at the expense of legal exactitude or, put in another way, might give rise to litigation over particular wordings which would not have arisen had traditional wordings been used. No such increase has occurred—on the contrary litigation has been reduced in this regard.

Despite this kind of evidence, the banks in Australia are not so open to plainer writing. Nobody even attempts to read a mortgage document before they sign it. Recent case law might start to convince them: a bank not long ago lost a case solely because the bench ruled that its customers could not have understood the contract they signed. Even the standard disclaimer that “I have carefully read and understood” the document did not save the bank.

But if the results in the legal, finance and corporate worlds are mixed, the universities are almost determinedly in the stone-age. Academic jargon and obfuscation is rife. Departments of English are not the natural supporters of plain language as departments of writing and rhetoric in America can be. Yet the University of Sydney recently surveyed a range of employers about the writing skills of its arts graduates, and found they fall significantly short of what they need in the workplace.

Then there is government. Almost every agency has some kind of policy or pays some kind of lip service to plain English, yet few achieve anything like it. A survey by the Plain English Foundation found that the average readability of more than 600 government documents from dozens of agencies over the last five years came in at Grade 16. They use about 40% passive voice. Their tone is still too formal, and their layout is awful. There's at least another generation's work needed to turn them around.

4. Future trends

So it is not all doom and gloom, but the task remains large. Fortunately, we have some excellent plain language practitioners throughout the country, such as Peter Butt, Robert Eagleson, Annette Corrigan, Christopher Balmford, Michele Asprey and Nathan McDonald. But there are currently not enough of us for the job at hand. We are largely a movement of individuals, all doing excellent work, but without national standards to work to, without a professional association to strengthen collective action, without comprehensive public programs to reach the broader community. We only tend to get together at international conferences like Clarity and PLAIN.

One attempt to respond to these problems at an institutional level was the establishment of the Plain English Foundation in 2003. I should declare that this is my organisation, so I'm speaking here about my own future hopes. Our initial idea was to be an umbrella and a rallying point for plain language in Australia. To begin with, however, we needed a financial base. That comes from typical plain language consulting activities: training, editing, template engineering, coaching, testing, and so on. We have retrained over 3,000 professionals in plain language. This gave us the financial backing to turn to a broader public purpose.

Sue Butler, editor of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, officially launched the Foundation at the Sydney Writers Festival in 2003, where we held the first of our annual public forums on plain English. The topic of 'Diseased English: can it be cured?' filled an entire theatre and left about 60 people on the footpath outside listening to the discussion on speakers. We repeated the experience in 2004 with a session on 'Political speak: double talk versus plain English'. These sessions generate considerable media interest—dozens of articles and interviews across six states. Even Rupert Murdoch's tabloid *Telegraph* editorialized in support. These first events prove that it is possible to repeat the success of the Reader Friendly Campaign of more than a decade ago.

The next step is establishing a research program to fill some of the knowledge gaps about plain language in Australia. In September 2005, the Foundation co-hosted a conference with the University of Sydney on the methods of the new rhetoric movement and their implications for professional writing. This also attracted the media, with a radio audience in six states topping 2.5 million people. We are also developing a system of performance indicators to measure professional writing in the hope of setting some standards for plain English in Australia.

For Christmas 2005, the Foundation trialed an email campaign, sending out a Christmas e-card with traditional carols written in officialese, legalese, tax accountant speak, computer jargon, and so on. The idea was to circulate a PDF file for free as an ‘idea virus’ promoting plain English, and the impact was enormous. Within hours, newspapers around the world were contacting us requesting permission to reprint. It was a positive lesson in the power of both technology and humour in getting the plain language message out there.

So like the plain language movement internationally, Australia has no shortage of opportunity, but there is more work ahead of us than behind. In the last two years, we’ve re-emerged from behind the scenes to a more mainstream public position. If as a profession we can maintain that public presence, and back it up with the practical consulting work that helps organisations to change their writing cultures, the next generation will see permanent improvements in our public language. At the very least, we will not need a former speech writer such as Don Watson to rally public support.

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www.plainenglishfoundation.com