



Speketh so Pleyne: A Historical Approach to Plain English (Part 1 of 2)

by Dr Neil James

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. It is also hosting the 2009 PLAIN conference. 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 also currently chair of the International Plain Language Working Group.

If you asked most technical writers how long plain English has been part of communications practice, chances are they would answer by counting a handful of decades. They might cite the Doublespeak Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English, which started ridiculing evasive public language in 1973. Others might suggest that the Plain English Campaign kicked things off with its symbolic shredding of forms on the steps of Westminster in 1979. The most common Australian example might be the NRMA, which revised its insurance policies in the same decade.

But before we get too excited about plain English turning 30 or even 35, it is worth noting that its core concepts are much, much older—dating back at least 2,000 years. They have gone in and out of fashion over the centuries, and their history says much about the quality of public language in each era. Studying this history also reveals that plain English has been experiencing an accelerated influence in modern times. By understanding this influence, technical writers will better judge their own need to engage with plain English and the part it will play in their future work.

In this article, I want to approach plain English historically, focusing less on the developments of recent decades and more on tracing where plain language came from, how it evolved, and where it might be heading.

Adapting to your audience

What we today call plain language (plain English is but one variety²) is actually among the oldest concepts in human communication. It dates back to the emergence of classical rhetoric in Athens over 2,000 years ago, when the first manuals emerged about how to give an effective speech³. At the heart of rhetorical *techné* was the need to adapt to your audience. While this sounds simple enough, it is a lesson we keep forgetting.

Let me cite one recent example. One evening in the British town of Barnard Castle, the Teesdale District

Parish Council sat down for its regular meeting. On the agenda was a report describing itself as a 'sustainability appraisal scoping report for the local development framework core strategy'. The rest of the report was no clearer than its title, sounding rather like this:

The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Rank of Employment Deprivation shows the areas with a high level of involuntary exclusion from the world of work. Approximately 5.9% of the population are classified as Employment Deprived. The former coalfield areas, in the North East of the District, are within the 20% most employment deprived Super Output Areas nationally, **Figure 7**. The more rural wards also suffer from high levels of employment deprivation.⁴

One councillor publicly condemned this language:

The report is incomprehensible to any normal person. Nobody talks like this. Nobody reads books written like this. Frankly, it's a turn-off, and it's not surprising that we are having trouble attracting new members.

What is interesting is that another Councillor came to its defence:

This is just the way that Council reports are written, and if you want to be a councillor you need to understand that. If you go to France, they speak French. Here in the council, we speak like this.

This second response lies at the heart of everything that is wrong with our public language, and it encapsulates neatly everything that plain language stands against. Rather than seeing writing as a

collaborative process—a conversation—where writers and readers achieve outcomes of common interest, professionals too often see it as a one-sided transaction, with writers dictating content and style, and readers simply having to put up with it. To be a

district councillor, you need to learn the language. Then, if anything goes wrong in your communication, it is the reader's fault because it is the reader's obligation to learn that language.

In contrast, tailoring the way you convey your content to your audience was the first principle of classical rhetoric, and it is the first principle of plain language as well. A district council is not a foreign country, and there is no reason why it should write reports as if using a foreign tongue. The content itself needn't change, but plain language communicators analyse their audience closely and choose the tongue that will best convey that content.

What we today call plain language ... is actually among the oldest concepts in human communication.

Propriety of style

When doing this, plain language initially drew heavily from the third canon of rhetoric⁵. The Greeks called it 'lexis' and the Romans called it 'elocutio'. In English this was first of all translated as 'style', but would probably today be as well known as 'expression'. Here's what Aristotle had to say about effective style:

The virtue of style is to be clear, ... and to be neither mean nor above the prestige of the subject, but appropriate.⁶

Aristotle referred to this as 'propriety' in style. Our Teesdale Council example certainly lacked it. It was unclear because its style was unnecessarily above its subject and not appropriate for its public audience. But propriety also means you don't want to swing too far in the other direction. Police in the Kingswood area of Bristol in the United Kingdom found this out the hard way when they used what the *Guardian* newspaper described as an 'Ali G-style text message terminology', putting up placards reading:

Du ur olds knw whr U r o wot ur doin coz D bil wl tel em

D bil cum arnd hre n wl vzit ur olds if ur messin bout⁷

The community reaction was severe. A local charity director commented that 'the Police seem to be falling over themselves to appear trendy when the simple truth is a sign written in plain English would get the message across just as well, if not better.' Propriety does not mean 'dumbing down' or sounding unprofessional, but striking the right balance between purpose, content, style and audience.

Effective word choice

Of course, when Aristotle was writing about plain lexis, English didn't even exist as a language. And as Anglo Saxon emerged from the admixture of Germanic and Danish raiders, rhetorical concepts, indeed rhetorical texts themselves were lost to most of Europe. Literacy was so low that the plainness or otherwise of text was irrelevant. Then something happened to take official language in a direction that Aristotle would never have approved of: the Norman invasion.

When William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, it changed the future of English forever.

He didn't just replace an English sovereign with a French speaker, but replaced the language of an entire ruling class. French became the official language of government, the church, the military, the law, and the academy. Using English marked you as part of the inferior, uneducated majority.

Numbers eventually told, of course, and English recovered its social status. But after nearly three centuries of official French, our institutions did not relinquish the language of privilege lightly. They began to suffuse English with thousands of French words. This greatly extended our vocabulary so that today not quite a quarter of English words come from the French. Yet—and here's the rub—our public language retains about double this proportion, well out of balance with the common tongue.

Propriety does not mean 'dumbing down' or sounding unprofessional, but striking the right balance between purpose, content, style and audience.

In fact, the institutions that established our public language deliberately chose an elevated style to reflect their social and political status. When Sir Thomas Elyot wrote the first educational text in English in 1531 to train those working at the court of Henry the Eighth, his dedication set much of the style to follow:

I late consideringe (moste excellent prince and myne onely redoughted sovereign lorde) my duetie that I owe to my naturall contry with my faythe also of aliegeaunce and othe ... I am (as God juge me) violently stered to devulgate or sette fourth some part of my studie, trustynge therby tacquite me of my dueties to God, your hyghnesse, and this my contry. Wherfor takinge comfort and boldnesse, partly of your graces most benevolent inclination towarde the universall weale of your subjectes, partly inflamed with zele, I have now enterprised to describe in our vulgare tunge the fourme of just publike weale:⁸

This overdressed text used many then new words drawn from French, Latin and Greek. Elyot was attempting to enrich the English language, but the effect was also to separate the language of our institutions from the language of the people. It had its detractors almost from the start. Thomas Wilson in 1553 made the case for 'Plainnesse' and against what he called 'inkhorn' terms:

Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any straunge ynkehorn terms, but to speak as is commonly received: *neither seeking to be over fine, nor yet living over-carelesse*, using our speeche as most men doe, and ordering our wittes as the fewest have done. Some seeke so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language. And I dare sweare this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they say: and yet these fine clerkes will say, they speake in their mother tongue ...

(emphasis added)

Unfortunately, the institutions that became home to the professions tended towards Elyot rather than Wilson, overdressing their language in robes far more formal than their tasks required. The lessons

classical rhetoric taught us about the virtues of a style matching its subject matter were to a large degree lost: Our institutions were more focused on their status than on effective communication.

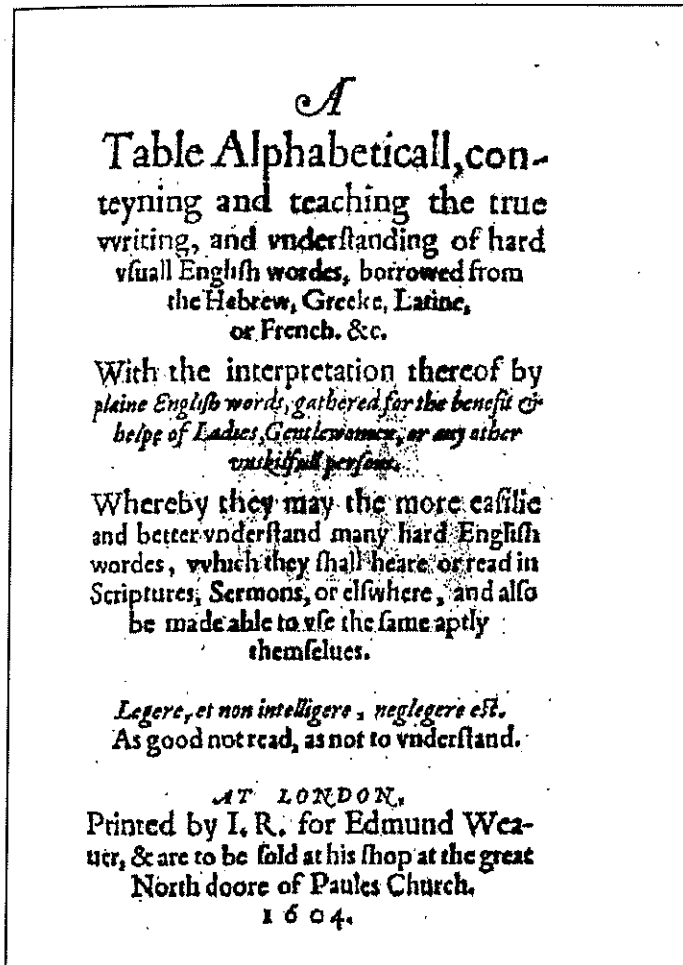
It's perhaps no wonder that in the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer had put the following words in the mouth of one of his characters:

Speketh so pleyne at this time, I yow preye

That we may understonde what ye say⁹

⁹Of course, plain English did have some champions in power at times. Edward the Sixth once wrote of legal language that 'I would wish that the superfluous and tedious statutes were made more plain and short, to the intent that men might better understand them'¹⁰. Unfortunately, even such a powerful supporter did little to change the public language of our institutions.

A complex style, 'above the prestige of the subject', continued to be the norm. It even became necessary to release glossaries of this code in the form of some of our early dictionaries. Here is the title page of one such tome in 1604¹¹:



Literary support for plain English

So although the core concepts of plain language are very old, for much of the life of our public language they were all but forgotten, and certainly not applied. What I find interesting is that renewed impetus for Aristotle's concept of propriety emerged from the literary world at the turn of the eighteenth century. Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* praised Cowper as a new breed of poet, among the first in English who 'combined natural thoughts with natural diction'. He contrasted this with much bad English poetry, in which:

... we find the most fantastic out-of-the-way thoughts, but in the most pure and genuine mother English; [or] the most obvious thoughts, in the language of the most fantastic and arbitrary.¹²

Passive voice ... reduces precision and clarity and increases the demands on readers in comprehending a text.

Wordsworth in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* further explained the renewed philosophy of literary propriety:

There will be found in these volumes little of what is called poetic diction; I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it. ...

I hope that it will be found that in these Poems little falsehood of description, and that my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance.¹³

While this critical theory had a significant impact on literature, unfortunately for our public language, overdressing remained the norm, and using the Latinate end of our vocabulary was a large part of the problem. The first rule of officialese seems to be to choose the longest, most Latinate word. We never 'start' or 'finish' things, or even 'begin' and 'end' them. We write of their 'commencement' and 'termination'. We 'endeavour' instead of 'try', 'utilise' instead of 'use', 'facilitate assistance' instead of 'help'. Of course, individual words make little difference until you build them into full phrases and sentences. We don't 'think', but 'are of the view that'; we speak of replying 'in the immediate future' instead of 'soon'; about 'transferring payment in the amount of \$150' instead of 'paying \$150'. By the time you get to whole paragraphs they sound something like this letter I received from my local council:

In terms of reaching its decision Council took into consideration the matters in your submission and as the proposal complied with the objectives of Council's policies and conformed to the relevant statutory requirements, Council was of the opinion that the application should be approved.¹⁴

By simplifying the vocabulary, you can express the same text as:

Council considered your submission, and decided to approve the application because it complies with Council policy and meets legal requirements.

The first version demands greater skills of comprehensive, higher concentration and patience, not to mention more paper and ink. It seems most intent on sounding authoritative, of conveying 'gravitas'. In Wordsworth's terms, the ideas are not 'expressed in language fitted to their respective importance'.

Expanding the elements of plain English

In the century after Coleridge and Wordsworth, plain English was primarily focused on this rediscovery of propriety of style, which meant using simpler words fitted to audience, content and purpose rather than elaborate, overly-Latinised text. It wasn't until the middle of the twentieth century that the concept began to expand further, and it was again at the hands of two literary giants: Winston Churchill and George Orwell.

Churchill in 1940 took time out—right in the middle of the Battle of Britain—to write a memo to civil servants, imploring them to adopt a more efficient style:

Let us have an end to such phrases as these: 'It is also of importance to bear in mind the following considerations ...' or, 'Consideration should be given to the possibility of carrying into effect ...' Most of these woolly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether, or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from using the short, expressive phrase, even if it is conversational.¹⁵

Here, Churchill is adding to the evolving concept of plain English the notion of inefficiency and clutter. Here is a more recent sample that uses too many words to carry its meaning:

Whilst Management Essentials does provide courses that may be of assistance to you, my principal reason for contacting you was to initiate a process where we could collaborate and review the completeness of the programs currently available to BioGas Ltd employees who have access (and want to utilise) our products. My focus is simply to help maximise users utility from their investment. Through a process of review the outcome could vary from providing reassurance that your existing programs are of the highest quality (and value) through to arming you with questions and options.¹⁶

All this really means is:

While the Management Essentials courses may assist you, I am contacting you mainly to suggest we review the completeness of the current programs for BioGas employees who access our products. My focus is to help users maximise their investment. The outcome might simply reassure you that your existing programs deliver high quality and value, or arm you with questions and options.

So the 'elements' consciously identified with plain English were growing, and they got a further boost in one of the most important essays of the century: George Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language'. Orwell summarises what might be the first plain English manifesto as:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other similar figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short word will do.
3. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word, if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.¹⁷

Orwell was attaching a couple of new things here to effective public language. He began to draw attention to elements of grammar, and particularly the benefits of the active rather than the passive voice. Here's a more recent sample of the difference:

I *think you can fund* this project from your existing budget. (active)

It *is suggested* that consideration *be given* to the implementation of the project out of existing budgetary resources (passive)

Passive voice such as this reduces precision and clarity and increases the demands on readers in comprehending a text. We are far more used to reading a standard subject-verb-object clause, and when a text departs from it, you are asking your reader to mentally pace through two or three steps to understand your meaning. And as Clive James put it so succinctly, 'when the writer is getting all of the fee, but the reader is doing at least half of the labour, the discrepancy can cause resentment'.¹⁸

When readers don't have the time or patience to do half of the work, errors in comprehension are seldom far away. Cognitive psychologists have measured this effect by testing the comprehension of sentences in the active and passive voices. They found a measurable cost in comprehending the passive. In one experiment, active sentences were misunderstood only 26 per cent of the time, while some passive equivalents were misunderstood by up to 92 per cent of participants.¹⁹

The passive voice also de-humanises the prose and makes it harder to call anyone to account. Here for example, is how one florist explains its holiday deliveries:

Public Holidays can be difficult in regards to delivery, therefore as orders *are received* for these days, they will *be evaluated* by a Flowerpoint Consultant initially, then, any action, if at all will *be communicated* to you via phone or email.²⁰

I'm sure that their customers are sitting at home simply bursting 'to be communicated to'. Putting the people back into the text immediately humanises the prose:

Because deliveries can be difficult on Public Holidays, our Flowerpoint consultants check orders received for these days, and will contact you by phone or email to guarantee your delivery.

Orwell's other major contribution was to draw attention to the use and abuse of jargon and cliché. The universities remain particularly prone to Latinate, jargonistic prose. Here's my all-time favourite from the field of cultural studies:

Whether you discuss this open/closed in terms of the semiotic coding of the self and other, some kind of introjected and extrojected cultural imago, or the cross-projection of Lacanian veils on a cultural plane—each of which generates different kinds of problematics and solutions—it nevertheless remains a cross-cultural rule of thumb that "out" is not "in" because "in" is the inverse of "out".²¹

The content behind this passage is reasonably simple: when you migrate from one country to another, you will never feel entirely at home in the new culture—'out' rather than 'in'. Getting this message from the words on the page is another matter altogether. Even a reader familiar with 'cultural imagos' and 'Lacanian veils' would have to work at it. Its unstated purpose seems to be to project authority and complexity, whatever the cost to actual communication.

Ernest Gowers and the *Complete Plain Words*

In the same decade as Churchill and Orwell, the first major account of plain English in the modern sense was published in Britain: Ernest Gower's *Complete Plain Words*. The British Treasury originally commissioned this as a guide for the civil service. It includes all the elements we've seen so far, but added a couple more:

- Be simple. Be short. Be human.
- Be correct.
- Avoid superfluous words.
- Choose familiar words.
- Choose precise words.
- Use correct grammar.
- Use a minimum of stops, and use stops for clarity.²²

Gowers draws attention to sentence length, along with word length, as an element of plain English. The correlation between average sentence length and difficulty of comprehension was already the subject of extensive study in America, and has since been reinforced through about 1,000 studies of readability.²³

To illustrate, let's see what you'd have to confront in the conditions of carriage for the ferry service to Tasmania:

The TT-Line reserves the right at any time to substitute one vessel for another to abandon or alter any voyage either before the commencement or at any time during the course thereof to dispatch the vessel before or after the date or hour advertised or announced for her sailing from any port to deviate from any advertised route for any purpose with liberty to sail without pilots, to proceed via any route, to proceed, return to and stay at any ports whatsoever (including the loading port) in any order in or out of the route or in contrary direction to or beyond the port of destination or often for bunkering or loading or accompanying vehicles whether in connection with the present, a prior or subsequent voyage or for any other purposes whatsoever, and to carry the within passengers, luggage and accompanying vehicles and cargo into and then beyond the port of discharge named herein and to return to and discharge any such cargo at such port, or to tow or to be towed, to make trial trips with or without notice, to adjust compasses or to repair or dry dock with or without cargo on board.²⁴

This was not written in 1809 or even 1909, but in a 2009 document for any public reader who wants to do something as simple as take a ferry. There are 30 'clauses' of much the same ilk stretching onto six pages. Readers of this 196-word sentence would be rightly wondering if they were ever going to sail out of port.

Interestingly, Gowers was also one of the first to link punctuation with plain English. He suggested minimising punctuation, but retaining enough to clarify meaning. This advice remains valid even in the age of the Internet.

In Canada recently, a comma almost cost a company \$2.13 million. It had signed an agreement that:

shall continue in force for a period of five (5) year terms, and thereafter for successive five year terms, unless and until terminated by one year's prior notice in writing by either party.

One party to this deal, Rogers Communications Inc, thought it meant the contract would run for five years before termination. The other party, Aliant Inc, argued successfully that because of the second comma, the 'unless' clause could kick in straight away. The difference meant the deal could be cancelled early, although this was never the original intention. Rogers initially had to pay an extra \$2.13 million for utility poles as a result.²⁵

So, if we pause for a moment and put some of these elements together, we form what was by the 1960s a core of plain language concepts:

1. Write for your audience.
2. Match the style of your text to your content.
3. Use the simplest words possible.
4. Cut the clutter.
5. Avoid unnecessary jargon and cliché.
6. Prefer the active voice.
7. Write in short sentences on average.
8. Use punctuation for clarity.

This was the intellectual base that underpinned the 'birth' of plain language in the 1970s. Much of it was little advanced conceptually on the rhetorical canon of style, but it was at least beginning to be taken much more seriously. After many centuries at the margins, plain English was suddenly an overnight success.

But success brought with it rapid development. If it took 20 centuries for plain language to emerge as an explicit field, it took only 20 years for the scope of that field to triple. Far from the initial focus on propriety of style, plain language was to add content, structure, design and usability to its toolbox, all linked by the underlying principle of audience focus. The result was a more comprehensive discipline, but also inevitable confusion about what plain language actually constitutes. It also brought heavy criticism as communication practice became contested ground in a growing marketplace. I will discuss this second rapid stage in the history of plain English in part 2 of this article, to be published in the next issue of *Southern Communicator*.

¹ This article originated in workshops developed as part of the Sydney Writers' Festival in May 2007, as well as a presentation to the Society of Editors (NSW) in October 2008. A shorter form was published in the Society's newsletter *Blue Pencil* in November 2008.

² Although the English-speaking world has made considerable progress in plain language, it is by no means the only language or country to do so. Sweden is perhaps the most successful, but plain language practitioners also work in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Finnish and German.

³ For a more extensive account of classical rhetoric, see Neil James, *Writing at Work*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2007.

⁴ 'Report "incomprehensible to any normal person"' *Teesdale Mercury*, 23 November 2006, viewed at <www.teesdalemercury.co.uk/teesdale-news/story.1182.html>.

⁵ The five canons of classical rhetoric were invention (developing content), arrangement (structuring it), style (choosing the right level of language), delivery (effective vocal techniques) and memory (ways of memorising your text).

⁶ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, Translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, Penguin Classics, London, 1991, p. 218.

⁷ David Smith, 'Too Trendy Text by Police Force Backfires', *Observer*, 29 January 2006, viewed at <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,5386442-102285,00.html>>.

⁸ Elyot's text and Wilson's rejoinder both come from Baugh and Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 5th edition, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 214 and p. 218.

⁹ Quoted in Martin Cutts, *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995 and 2004, p. 5. Cutts includes an excellent summary of the history of plain English.

¹⁰ Cutts, *Op Cit*, p. 6.

¹¹ Cited in Christine Mowat, *A Plain Language Handbook for Legal Writers*, Carswell Legal Publications, Scarborough, 1998. I am grateful to Christine Mowat for the reproduction of this title page.

¹² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, edited by George Watson, J M Dent, London, 1984, p. 13.

¹³ William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, edited by R L Brett and A R Jones, Methuen, London, 1986, p. 251.

¹⁴ Taken from a letter I received from Blue Mountains City Council in 2003.

¹⁵ You can find a full version of Churchill's memo at <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~mee/writing_churchill_mm5.htm>

¹⁶ This sample was posted by Steve Dowse at the *Sydney Morning Herald* website on 21 February 2006, describing it as 'an actual excerpt from an actual email sent by one of my colleagues'. Only the name was changed.

<<http://blogs.smh.com.au/newsblog/archives/frankensteinn/003636.html>>

¹⁷ George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language' in *Why I Write*, Penguin Books, London, 2004, pp. 102-120.

¹⁸ Clive James, 'The Continuing Insult to Language' in *The Monthly*, June 2006, p. 50.

¹⁹ See Herbert H Clark and Susan E Haviland, 'Comprehension and the Given-New Contract' in Roy O Freedle (ed) *Discourse Production and Comprehension, Volume 1*, Ablex Publishing Company, New Jersey, 1977, pp. 24-27.

²⁰ 'Flowerpoint Delivery' viewed at <www.flowerpoint.com.au/delivery.php> in May 2006.

²¹ Quoted in Neil James 'Latinate Language a Costly Obsession', *Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 19 May 2004.

²² Ernest Gowers *The Complete Plain Words*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1954.

²³ For a comprehensive account of readability, see William Du Bay, *Smart Language: Readers, Readability, and the Grading of Text*, Book Surge Publishing, South Carolina, 2007.

²⁴ The 'Terms and Conditions of Carriage' for the Spirit of Tasmania ferry service, viewable at <<http://www.spiritoftasmania.com.au/terms.htm>>.

²⁵ Originally reported by Grant Robertson 'Comma Quirk Irks Rogers', *The Globe and Mail*, 6 August 2006, viewed at <www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.2006.0809.wr-rogers07/EmailBNStory/Business/Home>. Fortunately for Rogers, it won an appeal, but on the technicality that the contract also existed in French and the ambiguity was not present in that version. Many thanks to Rachel Jones, Deputy Registrar of Regulations, Department of Justice, Nova Scotia, Canada, for this update. The appeal decision is available at <<http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/ENG/Decisions/2007/dt2007-75.htm>>.

ASTC (NSW) is pleased to announce, for our 20th conference, we are joining forces with the Plain English Foundation for the 7th biennial Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) Conference in 2009.

Proposals and submissions are now invited for this major international event, and close on 30 April 2009.

For further information, go to www.plainenglishfoundation.com





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In part 1 of this article, published in the February edition of *Southern Communicator*, I discussed some of the history of plain English.¹

In part 2, I look at the present status of plain English, the push for standards and the future.

Criticism of plain language

So far in our history, plain English offers what seems fairly sensible—even obvious—advice. So it's surprising that as practitioners applied these principles to public language, they were subject to some heavy criticism, much of it in Australia. The Communications Research Institute of Australia (CRIA) has been one of the most vocal critics of plain English, arguing that there is far more to effective communication than these narrow elements of language. It is possible, for example, to write a document passing the plain English test and still have it fail for its audience.²

But even if these criticisms were valid when applied to Gowers or Orwell's concepts of plain English, during the 1980s plain language practitioners in fact expanded their tools well beyond expression elements alone. In doing so, they were simply following the core principle of plain language: adapt to your audience. Political and consumer support, as well as rapidly evolving technology, meant that they could apply this principle to an even greater range of communication elements.

Doubling the scope of plain English

Martin Cutts' 1995 *Oxford Guide to Plain Language* is perhaps the best example of how plain language evolved in that decade. In this reference, we now had 21 guidelines that extended well beyond propriety of style, and certainly beyond expression:

1. Writing shorter sentences
2. Preferring plain words
3. Writing tight

4. Favouring the active voice
5. Using vigorous verbs
6. Using vertical lists
7. Negative to positive
8. Cross-references make readers cross
9. Clearly non-sexist
10. Sound starts and excellent endings
11. Using good punctuation
12. Seven writing myths
13. Conquering grammarphobia
14. Planning effectively
15. Using reader-centred structures
16. Using alternatives to words, words, words
17. Management of colleague's writing
18. Good practice with email
19. Writing better instructions
20. Lucid legal language
21. Basics of clear layout.

All the traditional elements are here of course, but they take up just over half of the focus. The two big additions relate to structure and design.

The guiding principle of structure that plain language most commonly promotes is to start with the most important information and then follow with the details. Officialese documents are instead often structured in a narrative, ordering all information by chronology. A document might start by defining the topic, but will then cast back through its entire history before coming to any kind of point.

In government agencies, for example, the standard briefing note format for ministers follows a series of set headings: 'Issue', defining the problem; 'Background', going into its history at length; 'Current Position', bringing the story into the present; 'Advice', outlining anyone the author has consulted; 'Comment', where we might finally get some analysis, and 'Recommendation', where a minister is asked to approve a particular course of action.

The effect is to concentrate most of the key information towards the end, but spread enough of it throughout the narrative so that ministers spend their time turning back and forth trying to sift out what they need. Suggesting that agencies replace this structure with a top-heavy triangle, which concentrates all the core information at the start, before then moving to the details, is at first like suggesting they walk to the moon during lunch hour.

Yet once they make the change, they are increasingly amazed at how it improves both the efficiency and the quality of the writing.

Sometimes narrative structures emerge in even short documents. Here is an example that I couldn't help but note while standing at a urinal:

Flick Washroom Services

This system is maintained by using the latest in sanitising treatment methods. This affirms that you, the user, can at all times have the peace of mind that a high standard of hygiene is being met. To help us better maintain this facility for your use and that of others.

Please flush after use. ³

Next, there is the design of the text. Increasingly, we are understanding how the visual appearance of text contributes to clarity just as much as the syntax and morphology. No plain English practitioner today would neglect the visual layout to focus solely on expression elements. If document design was not a focus of early exponents such as Gowers, it was mostly because the technology of the time—the typewriter—could add very little value to the text compared to the modern word processor. Now we have caught up.

This rapid expansion in scope was inevitably tied together by the focus on the audience, which was after all the oldest concept in the discipline. When working with elements of content, structure, expression and design, the most reliable results came from analysing the audience in a formal way and testing your text iteratively with representative readers. Plain language was closely connected to the emergence of usability testing and user-centred design. As Ginny Redish, one of the pioneers of testing, put it 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. ⁴

In fact, organisations like the Center for Plain Language in Washington now define plain language less by the elements of structure or expression and more by the success of its outcomes for an audience:

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. ⁵

The current push for standards

So plain language has evolved a considerable way since the basic concepts of propriety that Aristotle put forward. It's not surprising if there is some confusion out there about what plain English actually involves. As a result, the

current trend is to formulate some more rigorous and consistent definitions by setting out formal standards.

But let me define what I mean by a standard when it comes to writing. Broadly speaking, I believe there are three things we work with as plain language professionals:

- the writing itself
- perceptions about the writing
- actual outcomes of the writing.

The writing of course involves the structure, design and expression elements we've been tracing. However, in reader perceptions and actual outcomes, we are starting to codify the ways we adapt to our audience, which I've argued is the very bedrock of our tradition. As a result, contemporary plain English takes account of six areas for standards:

- Audience
- Content and purpose
- Structure
- Language and style
- Design
- Outcomes.

The last 15–20 years have seen a number of attempts at setting standards in different parts of the world using these categories. We don't have space for comprehensive coverage here, but let me outline four examples. The first is typical of the 'checklist' approach adopted by organisations such as the Plain English Campaign (UK), the Plain Language Commission (UK) and the Write Group's WriteMark (New Zealand). These judge whether a text meets plain English standards by assessing key elements:

Purpose

Is the purpose obvious or stated early and clearly?

Content

Is the information accurate, relevant and complete, anticipating readers' questions and answering them? Are essential technical terms explained or defined?

Is a contact point stated for readers who want to know more?

Structure

Is the information well organised and easy to navigate through, with appropriate headings and sub-headings?

Is there appropriate use of illustrations, diagrams and summary panels?

Style and grammar

Is the style appropriate for the audience, with a good average sentence length (say 15–20 words), plenty of active-voice verbs, and reasonably short paragraphs?

Is the document free of pomposity, verbosity and officialese (no aforesaid, notwithstanding, hereby, adumbrates, commencements and inter alias)?

Is the text grammatically sound and well punctuated?

Is capitalisation consistent in text and headings?

If there is a contents page, are its headings consistent with those in the text?

Layout and design

Does the document look good?

Is the type easily readable and is there enough space between lines of type?

Is there a clear hierarchy of headings and spaces?

Have emphasis devices, such as bold type, been used well?⁶

In Australia, the Plain English Foundation applies its verbumetrics system when evaluating an organisation's writing. This breaks down into similar categories, but focuses on quantitative as well as qualitative measures, with a mix of writing, perception and outcome measures. Table 1 shows the most common dozen that we use.

Standards through legislation

The public sector has also been wrestling with definitions of plain language, notably when setting standards for regulating industry and government writing. South Africa, for example, has codified plain English in the new *National Credit Act*:

64. (1) The producer of a document that is required to be delivered to a consumer in terms of this Act must provide that document-

(a) in the prescribed form, if any, for that document; or

(b) in plain language, if no form has been prescribed for that document.

(2) For the purposes of this 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.⁷

But perhaps the most significant recent event was the passing in April 2008 of the Brayley Bill in the US Congress. It narrowly missed out on getting through the Senate before the US election, but will be on the agenda in the new era of Obama's presidency in 2008. Its purpose is:

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

documents issued to the public, and for other purposes.

(2) **PLAIN LANGUAGE.**—The term "plain language" means language that the intended audience can readily understand and use because it is clear, concise, well-organised, and follows other best practices of plain language writing.

SEC. 4. RESPONSIBILITIES OF FEDERAL AGENCIES.

(a) **REQUIREMENT TO USE PLAIN LANGUAGE IN NEW DOCUMENTS.**—Within one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, each agency—

(1) shall use plain language in any covered document of the agency issued or substantially revised after the date of the enactment of this Act;

(2) may use plain language in any revision of a covered document issued on or before such date; and

(3) shall, when appropriate, use the English language in covered documents.

(b) **GUIDANCE.**—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.

If any agency has its own plain language guidance, the agency may use that guidance, as long as it is consistent with the Federal Plain Language Guidelines, the Plain English Handbook, published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the recommendations made by the Comptroller General under section 5(c).⁸

So, although they vary in approach, we have in these examples a fair degree of common ground in what plain language in the modern era might include. We might write a consensus definition along the lines of:

Plain English means writing that adapts and tests the content, structure, expression and design of a text to meet the needs of a particular audience to achieve intended outcomes.⁹

The future

Plain English has come a long way conceptually since Thomas Wilson's plea for 'plainsness' in style. And along with that greatly expanded scope has come significantly greater influence. For both reasons, technical writers will benefit from keeping abreast of these developments, much as they would keep up to date with the technology that delivers any text they write.

The most recent development of note is the formation of an International Plain Language Working Group, with representatives from the three major plain language organisations (Plain Language Association InterNational, Clarity and the Center for Plain Language) as well as representatives from the UK, Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Portugal, Canada, Mexico and the United States.

The group is currently writing an options paper looking at how to professionalise plain language and set more rigorous standards. The paper will focus on six areas:

1. A definitive 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.

This is the first stage of an international process that will probably lead to a professional body of some kind, along with formal plain language standards, research, accreditation, training and advocacy.

Australian and New Zealand technical communicators have a fantastic opportunity to engage with these developments in October 2009, when the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) is holding its seventh biennial conference in Sydney. Its theme will be 'Raising the Standard', and it will present sessions exploring these issues, as well as some of the biggest names in plain language from around the globe.

We hope to see you there!

The Plain English Foundation's verbumetrics system

Following are the most common measures we use for evaluating an organisation's writing. This focuses on quantitative as well as qualitative measures, with a mix of writing, perception and outcome measures.

Table 1: Verbumetrics measures for evaluating writing

| Element | Measure | Scope |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Audience and purpose | | |
| Audience needs | Reader and task analysis | Mapping of benchmarks suitable for the audience of a document. |
| Reader perceptions | Perception surveys | Audience views on existing writing or text. |
| Content and structure | | |
| Focus | % key material | Ratio of key content : detail. |
| Structure | Structure mapping | Evaluation of structural design, complexity, balance, headings, numbering and navigation. |
| Persuasiveness | Value analysis | Ratio of description : analysis. |
| Logic | Proof analysis | Evaluation of key arguments in an analytical document. |
| Design | | |
| Document design | Layout index | Weighted index of elements such as type, spacing, justification, visual aids, headings, bullets and lists and so on. |
| Language | | |
| Tone | Tone scale | Language level and appropriateness for a particular audience. |
| Readability | Fry graph | Likely comprehension of text with intended audience. |
| Clarity | Active voice | Balance of different verb types and likely impact on audience. |
| Efficiency | Key words | Ratio of core meaning words to functional words. |
| Outcomes | | |
| Usability | Testing | Measurement of outcomes with representative audience throughout drafting process. |

Footnotes:

1 This article originated in workshops developed as part of the Sydney Writers' Festival in May 2007, as well as a presentation to the Society of Editors (NSW) in October 2008. A shorter form was published in the Society's newsletter Blue Pencil in November 2008.

2 For example, see Robyn Penman, *Unspeakable Acts and Other Deeds: A Critique of Plain Legal Language*, Information Design Journal 7 pp 121–131 (1993). Joe Kimble has published the most comprehensive response in *Answering the Critics of Plain Language*, The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing, Vol 5, pp. 51-85 (1994-1995). David Sless of CRIA (now CRI) continues to critique plain language using a very narrow definition of what it involves. See any of his regular blogs on the topic at <http://www.communication.org.au/dsblog/>.

3 Transcribed by the author from a public bathroom in Dumas House, Perth, Western Australia.

4 Clifford Anderson *Thumbnail: Ginny Redish*, UPA Voice, June 2005. Redish is a pioneer of usability, notably through titles such as Joseph Dumas and Janice Redish, *A Practical Guide to Usability Testing*, revised edition, Intellect Books, Exeter, 1999 and JoAnn Hackos and Janice Redish, *User and Task Analysis for Interface Design*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1998.

5 See <http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org>.

6 See the Plain Language Commission website at <http://www.clearrest.co.uk/?id=30>.

7 For a useful account of the Act, see http://www.simplified.co.za/default.aspx?link=thinking_legalframe work.

8 A good account of the Brayley Bill can be found at the Center for Plain Language website. Its passage through Congress is recounted in 'Plain Language Bill passes House of Representatives' 376 – 1 April 14, 2008 at <http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org/events/index.html#april14>.

9 Plain English Foundation, 2008.