



Plain Language Association International (PLAIN)

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AT THE HEART OF COMMUNICATION
across disciplines and around the world

International Plenary Panel:
Plain Language Progress Around the World

Canada

Yvette Souque

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PLAIN LANGUAGE

NATIONAL LITERACY SECRETARIAT, HRDC:

The NLS was formed in 1988 as a federal response to a national issue. The NLS works to ensure Canadians have opportunities to develop ever-expanding literacy and numeracy skills needed to meet the demands of everyday life. We work in partnership with the provinces and territories, business and labour, literacy organizations, voluntary organizations, and other government departments to develop literacy activities in Canada. At the federal level the NLS provides expertise, policy and research support.

FOCUS: I will focus my presentation on NLS's involvement with Plain Language. Federal and provincial government colleagues, the Canadian Labour Congress, and other Canadians, far more knowledgeable than I, have already provided a lot of information about other PL activities in Canada.

NEED: Plain Language is of critical importance because of 3 factors in Canada:

- 1) IALS tells us that 38 % of Canadians face literacy challenges that limits their ability to deal with complex tasks.
- 2) Canada has the highest immigration levels of OECD countries resulting in a substantial percentage of the population not having English or French as their first language.(260k-2001-02, aiming to 300k-1% in next year)
- 3) Canada's population is aging rapidly and IALS tells us that the current over 65 population has significantly lower literacy levels than the under 65 population.

NLS INVOLVEMENT WITH PLAIN LANGUAGE

PROMOTION & AWARENESS:

In 1989, NLS was looking for a federal government initiative for ILY (1990) that could improve access for low literacy Canadians. The NLS was inspired by the UK's major work in plain language. The US was also doing some work. A plain language initiative seemed like a good idea, especially since a number of federal departments had asked the NLS for advice and direction on how better to serve clients. An interdepartmental working group was established, including 14 departments and agencies to raise awareness and provide training on plain language.

Some departments involved at that time continue to be involved today- such as Revenue Canada and some central agencies such as Treasury Board.

In 1991, we published “Plain Language-Clear and Simple”/Pour un Style Clair et Simple” guides. Later these were published in Braille and audio format. They are sold through Canada Communications group- over 30,000 in English and 12,000 in French have been sold to date without promotion. NLS has also distributed thousands free to our partners.

I brought a limited number of copies for participants.

I have also provided a 2 pager that lists the contact information for all the materials I will refer to in my presentation as well as key websites and links.

In terms of awareness and promotion, we’ve also supported numerous plain language awareness and promotion projects undertaken by folks in the literacy community.

LEARNING MATERIALS:

NLS has supported the development of numerous learning materials at low literacy levels. Eg. Canadian Red Cross- First Aid Manual, Consumers’ Association of Canada- Consumer Magazine & Shop Smart & Food Tips

Other examples would include- PL guide to welfare rights, tenants rights and responsibilities, career planning, job prep materials, health and safety information, WHIMS etc.

NLS DOES NOT fund organizations to redo all their materials in PL.

RESOURCE MATERIALS AND TOOLS:

Plain Language Trainer’s guide (E & F) which NLS has made available to partners which enables people to deliver workshops on the use of Plain Language.

Literacy Audit Kit, developed by AAAL is a tool that enables an organization to assess their accessibility to low literacy clients. It looks at the organizations’ communication-forms, pamphlets, signage, and verbal communication and identifies problems and solution to improve accessibility.

SUPPORT TO LITERACY PROVIDERS OF PLAIN LANGUAGE SERVICES:

NLS has encouraged and supported provincial literacy coalitions, amongst others, to develop plain language training and services and to integrate that into their literacy awareness and promotion activities.

SPECIAL PROJECT:

I would like to mention a special initiative which could be a wonderful case study of plain language impact:

The Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) is a national organization whose membership includes some 40 health related associations such as doctors, nurses, optometrists, physiotherapists, dietitians, pharmacists, etc.

CPHA started a Literacy and PL awareness project, supported by the NLS, with its membership to improve awareness about literacy and the need for PL communications with patients. Every member organization received workshops and began to understand the need for PL and the role it could play in improved health services to Canadians. CPHA developed training and materials to help its membership adopt plain language practices such as “medication packaging and labeling guidelines” in general and for specific groups like seniors with low literacy. Member associations have also developed units that are now included in the training programs about literacy and plain language.

CPHA has now established a permanent National Literacy and Health Program. They provide PL services such as assessment, revision, creating new documents, workshops, as well as PL Health information,(they have just published a Directory of Plain Language Information for North America). They also support research that focuses on literacy and health research.

Lots of other activities but not enough time.

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Yvette Y. Souque, BSW and MA is a Program Manager at the [National Literacy Secretariat \(NLS\)](#), [Human Resources Development Canada \(HRDC\)](#). Yvette's background in community development and many years working in the voluntary sector has served her well in current work with literacy. Yvette joined the NLS in 1991, assuming responsibility for the federal-provincial/territorial partnership program in the four western provinces and three northern territories of Canada. She has built partnerships with provinces, colleges, community literacy, social services, school boards, first nations and the literacy community, focusing on the development of the literacy field and resources for and knowledge about adult literacy.

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