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**AT THE HEART OF COMMUNICATION**  
across disciplines and around the world

International Plenary Panel:  
**Plain Language Progress Around the World**

*United States*  
*Our Charge - Challenges and Prospects for Change*

Joanne Locke

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**International Plenary Panel:  
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**United States**

**Our Charge – Challenges and Prospects for Change**

Joanne Locke

Greetings from South of the Border. Some of you attended yesterday's session where we talked about Plain Language in the United States -- mostly my agency, FDA in the Department of Health and Human Services. For those of you who missed it, I'll do a 2-minute recap, then give you a snapshot of some Plain Language successes at other US agencies.

During the last Administration, the President and VP put Plain Language on our radar screen when they issued a memo directing all US Federal Agencies to use Plain Language. In the current Administration, we looked for a Plain Language spokesperson & champion – and we may have found one in my own Department, HHS. But, while details are being worked out, the impetus to write clearly that began officially in 1998 continues in many Federal agencies. My own agency is a good example.

**FDA** can point to plainly written regulations, guidances, internal documents, even some of our scientific White Papers. Of immense value to consumers are our clearly written nutrition facts labels on food and our improved OTC drug labels, with Prescription drug info soon to follow.

Every year FDA recognizes clearly written documents as part of our regular annual award ceremonies. This is unique in the Federal Government. And FDA's website is so clearly written, it routinely wins awards.

Plain Language has become such a part of FDA's culture that it even played an important role in the days following September 11. Last October, we had the challenge of explaining the meaning of "presumptive positive" to FDA's mailroom staff who may have been exposed to anthrax. This was very difficult...and unfortunately the messages were not reviewed to see if they were written "plainly".

But several months later, just days before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, we were successful in persuading scientists to use Plain Language and quickly revise info about potassium iodide dosages for children. This was important because of a threat that a "dirty bomb" would explode on the Mall near the Washington monument during 4<sup>th</sup> of July festivities, releasing radioactive iodide into the atmosphere. Clearly parents would need to quickly understand what to do, if their children

were exposed and needed to take potassium iodide to prevent radiation poisoning.

Writers at our sister-agency, the NIH, concentrate on sharing information about disease prevention and the results of clinical research. They generate an enormous amount of clearly written health information for health professionals and the public including patient information booklets and Web sites. Here's one example of NIH information on a very hot topic – hormone replacement therapy.

### **The Women's Health Initiative**

#### ***New Facts About: ESTROGEN/PROGESTIN HORMONE THERAPY***

##### **Study Results:**

Estrogen/progestin therapy resulted in a 26% increase in breast cancer, which caused the study to be stopped. No increase in deaths from breast cancer occurred from the combined therapy--or in deaths from other causes.

Estrogen/progestin therapy also resulted in:

- 41% increase in strokes
- 29% increase in heart attacks
- Doubled rates of blood clots in legs and lungs
- 37% less colorectal cancer
- 34% fewer hip fractures and 24% less total fractures

And, as I mentioned yesterday, they recognize their best writers at a separate PL award ceremony every year.

Now for some snapshots from other agencies, which illustrate our Plain Language progress in the new Administration. I'll start with the **Dept. of Education**. While for many years their attorneys have been reviewing documents to be sure they are written in clear, simple English, staff report that the Bush Administration appointees have been even more supportive of this effort.

In fact, a few months ago, the Undersecretary of Education sent a memo Department-wide on the subject of "*well-written and timely regulatory documents*" to all senior officers involved in developing regulatory documents. It said, in part: *What we write, and how well we write it will be a major factor in sustaining public interest and involving parents, educators, and local officials in our efforts. In*

*short, we want to put a new face on the Department's regulatory documents.*

Guidelines stated:

- Draft each document in clear, simple English so the public can understand it.
- Avoid jargon, terms of art, and legalistic and bureaucratic language. Don't write for education "insiders."
- Write in short sentences, short paragraphs and brief sections. Make sure headings fully reflect the material that follows.

Next, one of the early leaders in Plain Language, the **Veteran's Benefits Administration** – They started using Plain Language in 1995, years before the Federal Gov mandated it, & they call it "Reader-Focused Writing." Since '95, they've had many changes in top management. But one of the initiatives that survived is the plain language initiative - probably because their plan was based on what their customers told them they needed from VBA.

It also helps that the current Secretary for Veterans Affairs is a very vocal advocate for writing letters to our veterans so they can understand them. After several years of training writers and focus testing their revised drafts, VBA reports it has rewritten 95% of its pattern letters and paragraphs which are used in roughly 30 million pieces of correspondence annually. Now they are tackling forms.

They believe evaluating pattern letters, paragraphs & forms is a must. Therefore, they test all high-usage letters & forms with representative readers, since the only true test of knowing whether a document is understandable is to ask the reader.

The project manager reports that the biggest challenge was the fact that people just didn't think that they could "change the writing habits" of their employees. She said, "We really were trying to change the thought process of people before they actually started writing – To convince them that good writing was about clear thinking." But, with the passing of time, the VA reports they've pretty much succeeded on this one.

**The Bureau of Land Management** is proud of their plainly written regs including one especially well-written one on Mining Claims which makes use of Q&A format and pronouns through-out. I learned that when the new administration arrived, they questioned some of these Plain Language techniques, especially the Q&A format. When the PL lead was asked if he was going to rewrite it, he simply said, "No, that's how we write our regs." And so, they continue to do so.

They have also greatly improved their notices to the public, for example the Notice of Competitive Lease Sale.

Before "Notice is hereby given that on May 5, the US Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Utah State Office, will offer for competitive sale, pursuant

to 43 CFR Part 3120 and procedures herein, certain Federal lands in Utah for oil and gas leasing.”

After: “We are pleased to announce that we will offer for competitive sale certain Federal Lands in the state of Utah for oil and gas leasing.” Followed by Q&As to walk people thru the process.

**Security & Exchange Commission** – In the early 1990s, the SEC was a pioneer in Plain Language in the US Gov. and many of you are familiar with SEC’s Plain Language Handbook. However, anyone who’s been following corporate scandals this past year in the United States knows that the SEC has been busy in areas other than Plain Language. Nevertheless, Harvey Pitt did talk about Plain Language in his first appearance after being selected as head of the SEC. He said, “The SEC promotes Plain English in the filings of companies. It’s something we also ought to practice.” And when you visit their website (<http://www.sec.gov/>), you’ll see that at SEC, despite distractions, they do still practice what they preach.

And echoing Mr. Pitt, last July, President Bush said: “The SEC currently requires the annual disclosure of a CEO's compensation. But that information is often buried in long proxy statements, and seldom seen by shareholders. I challenge every CEO in America to describe in the company's annual report -- prominently, and in plain English -- details of his or her compensation package, including salary and bonus and benefits.”

**OPM** - Our Office of Personnel Management, long a source of frustration for those who wish to enter the Federal job market, has a new person in charge of Employment Service. Richard Whitford urged vacancy announcement writers to stop producing long, bureaucratic job postings and replace them with straightforward, plain English descriptions that entice people to work for federal agencies. “Try putting some excitement in recruitment!” His tips include:

- Use the 2<sup>nd</sup> person, “you” and
- Format announcements simply, use bullets and white space. (Sound familiar?)

At my Dept. (HHS) the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget found she increased the number of job applications for budget analyst position 5-fold by rewriting announcements using these suggestions and posting them in places familiar to non-federal workers.

#### **OPM’s Quick-Tips for Effective Job Announcements**

- **Use Rhetorical Questions.** These are as familiar and engaging as Q&A's, but don't require an answer, for example, *“Do you have the right background to apply for this position?”*

- **Use White Space and Bullets.** Candidates find densely formatted text difficult and unfriendly. Use white space and bullets.
- **Use Interesting Headers.** Make sure headers guide the candidates to what they most need to know.
- **Speak Directly to the Reader.** Use the second person "you" or imperative.

**Next, IRS** – There are few things we dislike more than paying taxes – however, trying to figure how to fill out complicated, frequently indecipherable tax forms only makes it more painful. I’m happy to report that the folks at IRS are starting to recognize they need to be more customer-friendly. A few years ago, they began by having one of our leading Plain Language champions, Melodee Mercer of the Veterans Benefit Administration, work with them on a pilot project to do a major redesign of their official letters. IRS sends out about 110 million annually. The pilot project ended in last year and 7 new letters are out already. 13 more will issue next year.

The catalyst behind this improvement at IRS was outgoing Commissioner Charles Rossotti who was successful in achieving a major turn-around for this once-beleaguered agency because he re-organized it around taxpayers, not chapters of the tax code. This people-orientation was also evident in the more taxpayer-friendly PL notices that resulted from the pilot. Let’s look at a notice called *We Want to Send you a Refund Check* “before & after” the pilot:

Our Plain Language representative from IRS describes the “Before” version as “intimidating and belligerent.” Fortunately, even though Mr. Rossotti is leaving, many IRS decision-makers, including one of the four current Commissioners, are starting to get interested in Plain Language. So, I’m told it’s safe to say IRS is at the beginning of a culture shift in accepting Plain Language.

**FAA** – And finally, here’s a report from FAA’s Annetta Cheek, who continues to be THE driving force behind the Federal Gov’s continuing progress in PL. The plain language program at FAA started in late 1999 (about the time Annetta began working there) in response to a customer survey showing that commercial pilots did not believe the agency’s standards and regulations were clear. Annetta reports that, as she’s seen in other agencies, FAA has many more people who advocate plain language than write it. Indeed, Annetta admits that teaching people who have written in a bureaucratic style their entire careers to write in plain language is a long-term challenge. Here are some of the things they’ve done so far:

- Presented a one-day short course in plain language principles to about 300 FAA staff nationwide.

- Redrafted a major regulation in plain language to serve as a model for others (14 CFR Part 11.)
- Provided 100 staff with copies of Stylewriter editing software. Another 150 will get the program this fall.
- Printed Plain Language posters for display around the agency.
- Developed an FAA plain language manual, based on the manual prepared several years ago by the Plain English Network.
- Developed a plain language web site ([faa.gov/language](http://faa.gov/language)) that features a “tip of the month” and will soon start a “plain language challenge” feature. This will challenge readers to redraft a particularly obscure passage into plain language.

Annetta tells FAA folks that **“The winners will get our eternal gratitude ...and other valuable prizes.”**

I’m sure that all the readers of the government’s new, plainly written documents will be eternally grateful for these clear, understandable written messages from their government.

Thank you.





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**United States: Our Charge - Challenges and Prospects for  
Change**

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Joanne Locke has been Plain Language Coordinator of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) since 1998. This conference is a return engagement for Joanne, who represented the US government's Plain English Network at the 2000 Plain Language in Progress Conference. Since then, she has spoken about plain language in science writing at the annual meetings of the Council of Science Editors (2001) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2002).