



Plain Language Association International (PLAIN)
Fourth Biennial Conference Proceedings

Toronto, Canada — September 26 - 29, 2002

AT THE HEART OF COMMUNICATION
across disciplines and around the world

Plain Language – The International Pilgrimage



Presenter: Christine Mowat
Chair, PLAIN Steering Committee

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning! Welcome to PLAIN's *At the Heart of Communication Conference*. My name is Christine Mowat, Chair of the PLAIN Steering committee, and we on the committee want to tell you how elated we are that this day has dawned for plain language.



We welcome you to Toronto from England, Ireland, Sweden, the European Common Market, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, from the USA and Canada.

May I introduce you to my fellow pilgrim steering committee members – here are the faces for the names you already know:

Audrey Riffenburgh (New Mexico), chair of program committee

Bill Dubay (California), PLAIN Webmaster

Carol Ann Wilson-Story (Houston, Texas), PLAIN Membership Coordinator

Nicole Watkins-Campbell (Nova Scotia), creator of the P.L. Directory

Susan Milne (Ontario), won our contest to name the conference, and shepherded the program package designs and bags

Christine Mowat (Alberta)

May I also introduce the Toronto co-chairs who have poured their hearts into this conference and about whom I'll have a great deal more to say at the end of our time together. They are:

Sally McBeth of Clear Language and Design (CLAD), and

Michelle Black, of Simply Read

I also want to acknowledge at the outset our wonderful Canadian sponsors and supporters:

- National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada
- British Columbia Securities Commission
- Clarica, a Sun Life Financial Company
- Government of Nova Scotia

For the first time, we have financial sponsorship from a large government organization, Canada's National literacy Secretariat. We are immensely grateful to them for their generosity, and also for the support of the British

Columbia Securities Commission; Clarica, a Sun Life Financial company; and the Nova Scotia Government.

This mix of government, regulatory, and financial support illustrates the diversity of plain language's appeal.

Thank you also to PLAIN's partner for this conference – East End Literacy.

Now – you may be wondering– Gregorian chants for a plain language conference? Yes! Because Gregory the Great championed reform and what was referred to as *plainsong*. Chants belonged to the people, not just to the professionals. Some of this early liturgical music shone with stylistic simplicity 1600 years ago!

And we have gathered here as in a pilgrimage. Our movement has that evangelical cast and I believe we need not be ashamed to proselytize. For plain language takes a stand: it advocates clarity, honesty, integrity, transparency and courtesy to readers.

For the next few minutes, I want to explore the international and interdisciplinary dimensions of our specialty, plain language. To do so, I will report on our plain language global pilgrimage, a secular pilgrimage, of course.

Our trip flowed in the wake of that ancient plainsong from 600 A.D. and, for our text, we took along an ancient book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

I need to give you two contexts before we look at examples, however. The first one comes from Henry Fowler.

About a hundred years ago, that great warden of English, author of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, was engaged in the perennial problem, prepositions at the ends of sentences. Fowler was particularly irritated by a London *Times* writer who wrote: "A sentence ending with a preposition is an ineloquent sentence".

Fowler speculated on the origins of this obsession – he called it a superstition – and wrote that, “Some 18th century grammarian made a rule on a quite insufficient induction – as with so many grammatical rules.”

And here’s the line I love: “Grammatical parrots” wrote Fowler, “ have repeated that [so-called rule] from generation to generation.” He then moved rather triumphantly to demonstrate the inelegancy resulting from the slavish adherence to the *London Times* rule:

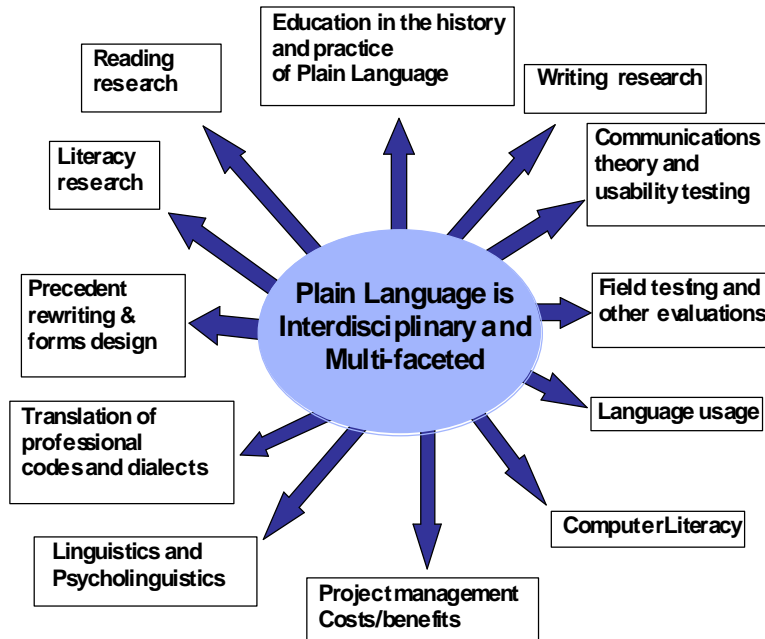
“Do not say, he wrote, ‘Which pond did you fall into?’ Instead such absolutists would ask, ‘Into which pond did you fall?’ Picture,” he says, “the poor dripping mortal being frozen into solid ice by this barbarous frigidity”. Fowler was good at images, too!

I choose this example for several reasons (and don’t misunderstand: I *do* believe strongly in Standard English).

1. Plain language specialists have to face more than just grammatical parrots. We encounter the parroting of bureaucratese, legalese, medicant and many other varieties of English. These dialects deaden language and encourage an elitist uniformity of style.
2. Fowler’s example illustrates the strident opposition to sensibly flexible language use that plain language writers (and Bill Sabin) regularly endorse.
3. Fowler introduces us to a slice of the interdisciplinary pie that provides us with a context for plain language.

Here is an amended diagram from my book, *A Plain Language Handbook for Legal Writers*.

Plain language and its contexts



It's clear we draw from many disciplines and our work reaches around the globe. To illustrate, I want to describe a few experiences we had on our secular pilgrimage. And any of you who has read John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* will remember that the pilgrim must battle through the Slough of Despond.

In our work, we all struggle through *sloughs of despond*. The *before* examples are the sloughs.

We began our pilgrimage in Edmonton, Alberta where I live and walked from Fox Drive onto a freeway- a dangerous start to our pilgrimage, as it turned out! A sign rose up on the roadside:

"High Collision Location" it said.

And underneath: **"Strictly Enforced"**. Imagine how EASL newcomers react to that sign!

Next, we visited a Canadian provincial government and saw a *before* and *after* of a government employee oath.

OFFICIAL OATH

Before

I, _____ do **swear** that I will **execute** according to law and to the best of my ability the duties required of me as an employee in the public service of Alberta and that I will not, without due authorization, disclose **or make known any matter or thing which comes to my knowledge by reason of** my employment in the public service.

SO HELP ME GOD.
(omit if affirmed)

(Signature of Employee)

TAKEN and subscribed before me

at _____
this _____ day of
_____, **A.D.** _____

Clerk of Executive Council, or J.P. N.P.,
Commissioner for Oaths

Note the familiar unplain features in the Oath:

- the swearing
- the strange capitalization which seems to be shouting
- the 61-word sentence
- the SO . . HELP ME GOD: Is it a sentence? It has a period.

Official Oath

After

I, _____, promise to carry out my duties as an employee in Alberta's public service according to law and to the best of my abilities. I will not, without proper authorization, disclose anything that I have learned as an employee in the public service.

Signature of employee

Place

Date

Clerk of Executive Council, or J.P., N.P.
Commissioner for Oaths

- No swearing, just promising
- Clear, direct language
- Two, shorter sentences



When we arrived in Ottawa, we found that Transport Canada's clear language regulations for Transportation of Dangerous Goods had just come into force. Seeing this did our pilgrim hearts good.

We know that plain language sometimes means writing more. We had that reinforced while still in Ottawa. We looked at the *Canada Health Act*, the basis for Canada's public health-care system.

A report of the Royal Commission on health care, headed by a former provincial premier, warned that the ambiguity in the Act allows a process of passive privatization. We discovered that the Act needs to be expanded in plain language detailing the diagnostic services. And, we need separate,

clear language legislation for universal coverage for prescription drugs and home care.

We pilgrims all agree that explaining abstract concepts in everyday language is far from a dumb activity. Indeed, it usually requires more intelligence than speaking in code does. Universality, public administration, and comprehensiveness, for example, are *huge* abstract health care principles. Codes are usually more vague than precise. It's the dialect that's a dumbing down.

After Ottawa, we travelled south to the USA. We revisited former President Clinton's executive order to eliminate one-half of the executive branch internal regulations.

President Clinton's Declaration

Before

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, including section 301 of title 3, United States Code, and section 1111 of title 31, United States Code, and to cut 50 percent of the executive branch's internal regulations **in order** to streamline and improve customer service to the American people, it is **hereby** ordered as follows:
Section 1

Regulatory Reductions. Each executive department and agency **shall undertake** to eliminate **not less than** 50 percent of its civilian internal management regulations that **are not required** by law within 3 years of the effective date of this order. An **agency internal management regulation**, for **the purposes of this order**, means an agency directive or regulation that pertains to its organization, management, or personnel matters. Reductions in agency internal management regulations **shall be concentrated** in areas that will result in the greatest improvement in productivity, streamlining of operations, and improvement in customer service.

Note:

- the difficult syntax in the first paragraph: buried action
- the wordiness requiring two slides and 229 words
- the old language such as *shall* and *undertake*,
- the noun strings
- the passive verbs

- Section 2 Coverage. This order applies to all executive branch departments and agencies.
- Section 3 Implementation. The Director of the Office of Management and Budget **shall** issue instructions **regarding the implementation** of this order, including exemptions necessary for the delivery of essential services and compliance with applicable law.
- Section 4 Independent Agencies. All independent regulatory commissions and agencies **are requested** to comply with the provisions of **this order**.

**67-, 92-, 11-, 33-, and 18-word segments
(229 words)**

After

As President of the United States of America, I order that:

1. Executive departments and agencies work to eliminate at least 50% of their civilian internal management regulations not required by law by September 21, 1993. The reductions are to improve productivity operations and customer service.
2. The Director of the Office of Management and Budget issue instructions, and exemptions, to carry out this order.
3. Agencies reduce internal regulations that refer only to their organization, management, or personnel matters.
4. Independent regulatory commissions and agencies also comply with this order.

**35-, 18-, 10-, and 13-word segments
91 words**

Note:

- action up front
- all active voice
- changed language and design
- over 50% shorter

We applied Clinton's order to his own writing!

Ah, the confubulations and contradictions we plain language pilgrims face.

- Train one group – but leave the rest of the organization in the dark.
- Hire a consultant to rewrite key documents – but don't teach the organization's writers plain language.
- Train middle management – but not the executives.
- Change the regulations into plain language, but not the legislation.
- Legislate plain language – but not in plain language. And since September 11 – create anti-terrorist legislation in mind-numbing legalese.

While we were in the eastern U.S.A., two *Philadelphia Inquirer* writers rendered an annual report's corporatespeak into plain language. Here is one sentence and its translation:

Before

Despite what remains a challenging environment, we are confident earnings will continue to improve, unless there is further material economic deterioration.

It's the type of descriptor, I think you'll agree, that could cover almost any contingency. And here's a tongue-in-cheek rewrite:

After

Earnings might grow. But then again, maybe not.

Does this sound like Warren Buffet?

We met Warren Buffet while on the American leg of our pilgrimage. He is famous for:

- 1) being the second richest man in the world.
- 2) and communicating with his shareholders in a uniquely clear – some would say blunt – and open style.

His letters to shareholders are eagerly awaited and widely quoted in the media. Here is an example of his latest letter to shareholders:

“Though our corporate performance last year was satisfactory, my performance was anything but. I manage most of Berkshire’s equity portfolio, and my results were poor, just as they have been for several years. Of even more importance, I allowed General Re to take on business without a safeguard I knew was important, and on September 11th, this error caught up with us. I’ll tell you more about my mistake later and what we are to doing to correct it.”

An unusually genuine voice! Plain language surprises shareholders.

In England, we pilgrims met John Kirkman who has been slogging through the depths of despond. Those in charge of local development plans are fighting Kirkman’s proposed change to use *must* instead of *should*.

Shall we dance?

must?
should?
may?
would?
shall?

Kirkman has been gathering evidence to prove that, “Applicants *should* conform to . . .” does not mean “Applicants *must* conform”. To us, plain language pilgrims, that was intuitively indisputable. But, such objections to common sense are typical of the sloughs of despond we face.

One of our speakers is presenting a paper on one word: *shall*! It’s a word most of us have argued to eliminate in rewrites over the years.

Despite these examples, the sloughs of despond are becoming less frequent.

In France, we were elated.



A revolution against 460 years of French civilservicespeak has been mounted.



Even singers and television personalities have been recruited by the French government to bring clarity to the impenetrable civil service language. Monsieur Sapin, the Civil Service Minister, used a novel idea for the reform: *les fonctionnaires* (civil servants) are there to serve citizens! They have set up a committee to simplify official language and are rewriting 1600 forms.

Some experts see it as the biggest shake-up in civil service French since 1539 when Francis I dropped Latin as state language.

Our international pilgrimage shows that governments, securities commissions and auditors' general departments are using plain language to slay doublespeak dragons. We have Merwan Saher, a provincial Assistant Auditor General and Joyce Maykut, a Vice Chair of a securities commission here to present organizational case histories to you.

Here's the language that we seek to eliminate: indecipherable prose, uncivil servant-speak, circuitous sentences, academic jargon illiteracy, waffle, evasive language, legal mumbo jumbo, bureaucratese, doublespeak, jargon, passive voice verbs.

Everywhere we went, whether it be New Zealand, Sweden, Germany, India, South America, China or elsewhere, we found groups mounting plain language campaigns.

Arriving in South Africa, we noticed that the banks all claim to write about their products and services in the plainest possible English. One man we talked to, however, gave us the stereotypical defensive reaction. He told us: "We know we need to communicate in plain English but some of our products are extremely technical and *cannot be adequately described* without using the *appropriate nomenclature*."

We referred him to some of the literature on plain language and complexity. (I'm sure his words ring bells for most of us!)

Our final stop was Australia. There we took copious notes:

- 1) All the major Australian law firms claimed to use plain language in precedents, and are investing substantial resources in changing the language and style of their documents.
- 2) Australia is now drafting its legislation in plain language. (Some are plainer than others, reports Peter Butt.)

In Italy this year, Civil Service Minister Franco Frattini, unveiled *Chiaro!* (it means *clear*) a project to make bureaucratic language understandable. "It would be useless," he said, "to translate documents and not train personnel to stop using ancient incomprehensible language." Ministries are now competing for a *Chiaro!* Stamp.

Many organizations in the world are now offering plain language awards. Unlike the struggle of Bunyan's pilgrim, we use rewards to inspire the results we aim for. Here are examples we learned about:

Chiaro! (Italy)

PLAIN Award (International)

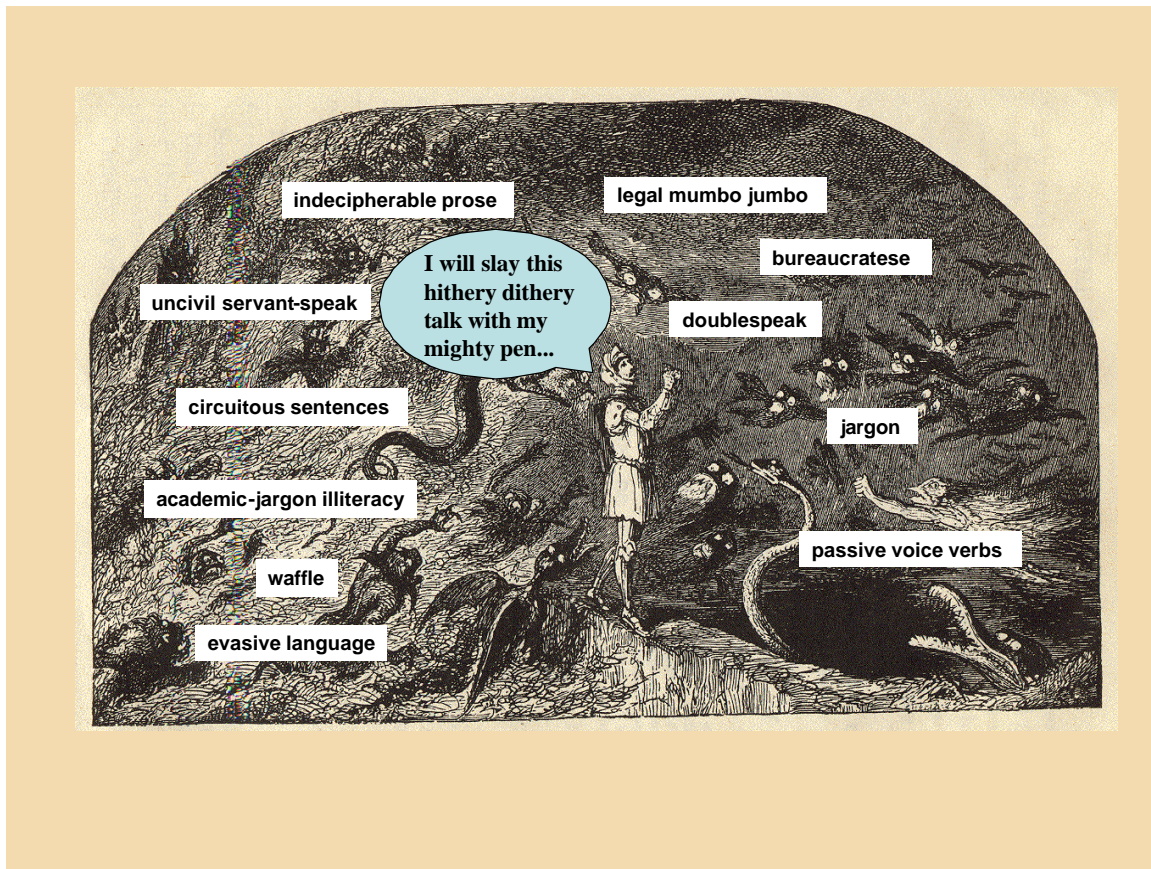
Clarity Award (London)

Crystal Mark and Clear English Standard (U.K.)

California/Pennsylvania Clarity Awards (U.S.)

Wordsmith's CLARITY Goldmark (Canada)

Before flying back to Toronto just in time for this conference – as you can see, we haven't even had time to change our clothes – we took stock. Taking John Bunyan's classic book as our text, we noted a remarkable similarity between his travels and ours.



Seven sins of poor writing

The Sins	The Sins Explained
Talkativeness and Word Lust	Sentences and paragraphs that are too long.
Facing-Both-Ways, Hypocrisy and Superstition	Ritualized language, confusing, fat language, and legalese: <i>Please find enclosed pursuant to your request . . .</i>
Much-afraid and Turnaway	Ambiguous, detached writing voice. The glory of salvation is sought after. <i>Pilgrims seek the glory . . .</i>
Know-Nothing and Conceit	Incorrect grammar, poor punctuation: <i>Scratching each other playfully, the pilgrims watched the monkeys at Calgary Zoo.</i>

The Sins	The Sins Explained
Heedlessness and Inattention to Design	Dead language in monotonous blocks, outdated formats. No headings to “tell the story”.
Illogic	Lack of organization. Poor openings and endings. Lack of logical links in organization.
Insincerity, Ill Will, and No-heart	No audience sensitivity. Officious language. Public doublespeak. Pompous and arrogant, egocentric language.

A plain language critic has analysed Bunyan's style:

"The great charm of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the purity, the homeliness, of its vernacular. Few were ever such complete masters of their 'sweet mother tongue,' in its native vigour, as Bunyan. The book stands unrivalled as a model of our English speech, plain but never vulgar, full of metaphor but never obscure, always intelligible, always forcible, going straight to the point in the fewest and simplest words.

He is powerful and picturesque from his concise simplicity. Bunyan's style is recommended by Lord Macaulay as an invaluable study to every person who wishes to gain a wide command over the English language. Its vocabulary is the vocabulary of the common people."

At the end of our pilgrimage, we went to our computers to brainstorm about the roles we plain language specialists have. We are indeed an eclectic, international breed, representing significant fields and values:

We asked yet again: Who are we?

First, we are *artists*. We look for the clearest and most beautiful form hidden within turgid, flabby, and badly structured writing. Like Michelangelo, we uncover hidden forms and buried meanings.

Second, we are *language and social activists and overseers* calling for disclosure and integrity of information. The true activist connects with society and appeals to people's intrinsic goodness by educating them.

Third, we are *translators of professional dialects*, an art form that requires clarity, elegance, and intellectual effort.

Fourth, we are *protectors, life savers, and safety officers*. We write information in plain language for prescription drugs, or health procedures, or food labels.

Fifth, we are *literacy specialists* and research the readability levels of texts and rewrite them to match the reading abilities of our audiences.

Finally, we are *navigators*. We help consumers through the murky worlds of insurance, wills, agreements, and financial documents.

On our communal pilgrimage, we search for, teach about, and create plain language, the heart of communication. Without it, we turn would-be-readers into exiles in their own linguistic homelands. Without it, we subject readers to a colonial mindset. A refusal to learn and practice plain language betrays democracy. Exclusionary language creates monopolies of power. Plain language makes content accessible to readers.

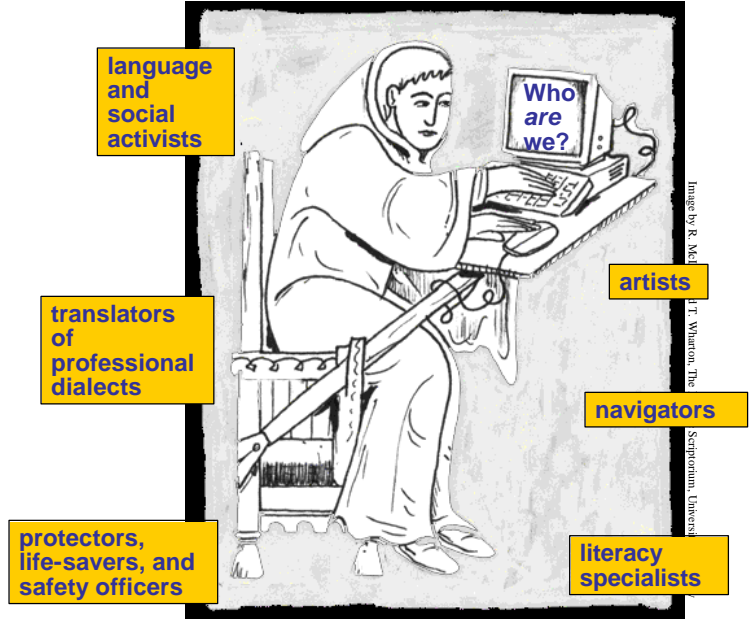
I believe that defending legalese because of its “noble history” represents a regressive romanticism. Plain language supports the public good and empowers citizens. Our world surrounds us with threats of terrorism, unstable markets, and global unrest. As our Canadian Governor-General’s husband, John Ralston Saul, writes in another but related context, “It is precisely in times of difficulty and confusion that the public good needs most to be asserted . . . What this requires is a belief in the long-term cause of reform.”

Plain language is a slow, gentle pilgrimage that puts heart into communications.

We plain language specialists do not always agree. Yet, as our movement matures, my hope is that our differences take place in a context of respectful exchange and reform. *Isuma* is an Inuit word that refers to *the knowledge of our responsibilities towards society that grows over time*. The heart of our movement is here in this room. It is in our plain words.

Thank you.

Plain Language Pilgrims





Plain Language: The International Pilgrimage

Christine Mowat

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Christine Mowat, B.A. (Hons.), M.A., is Chair of the PLAIN Steering Committee. She has been running her plain language consultancy, Wordsmith Associates, since 1980 from Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. As President of Wordsmith, she instructs, designs programs, and manages a team of 10 instructors. In 1999, Carswell published her book, *A Plain Language Handbook for Legal Writers*. Her publications extend over two decades. Wordsmith conducts workshops for professionals at all levels and sectors. Her work with securities commissions extends across Canada.

Religion has nothing to do with plain language, right? Wait for the Steering Committee's surprise entrance before you answer. We often forget the international sweep of our movement. Let's take an around-the-world and across-disciplines voyage to explore the heart of plain language.