

A Plain Plan



Presentation by Merwan Saher
Plain Language Association
International (PLAIN)
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Presentation



- Some background
- The project
- Lessons
- Next steps

Self introduction

Acknowledge John Blois (PL Advisor)

Lori Trudgeon (Communications Coordinator)

Review the pieces of the presentation

Background



- Office of the Auditor General
 - Who we are and what we do
 - Our annual report
- Improving our writing
 - Business plan requirement
 - Expert help
 - Ownership of content

OAG

Independent auditors of the GOA

115 people

Annual cost \$15 million

Our purpose is to:

1. Provide assurance on performance reports
2. Improve use of public resources
3. Improve the government's performance reporting

Our AR describes what we've done.

We've decided to meet the expectations of legislators by making recommendations.

Improving our writing

BP says improve effectiveness of communications with legislators and those we audit.

We're getting help from:

- Wordsmith Associates (writing workshops) since February 2000.
- Part-time contractor (John Blois) (PL Advisor)

Fundamental principle – Responsibility for content remains with the auditor.

The project



- Goals
- Execution
- Results

I'll discuss the Project in 3 parts, but first I need to quickly explain our communication process.

Our communication process



- Do the audit
- Exit conference with management
- Management letter
- Annual Report

Audit - that's what we're professionally trained to do

EC - tell management what we've found and what we recommend (confirm our findings).
Written document (detail)

ML - tell the Deputy Minister (and Minister) what we've found
(summary of EC)

AR - Written for the Public Accounts Committee member.
His/her job to examine the government's management of public resources.

One chapter for each ministry.

Project goals



- 2002 Annual Report to be:
 - Clear
 - Concise
 - Shorter
- Measure Success:
 - Surveys of users
 - Implemented recommendations

Clear, concise, shorter

Focus on primary user – PAC member

Deal with our disease of “unintelligible precision”

Good writing and clear thinking go together

↓342 pages

Internet version in mind

Measure success

Survey questions:

1. How readable is it?
2. Can you find your way around?
3. Is it interesting?
4. Does it help you do your job?

Our goal is to have our recommendations implemented within 3 years. Hope to see improved rate of implementation.

Project execution



- Clear Communications Committee (C3)
 - Plan to meet the goals
 - Model chapter
 - Writing guide
 - Senior management support

Plan

- C3 (8 of us) met in February and made a plan
- Told everyone in April what was going on

Model

- Needed a model chapter to show people what was expected
- Structure (eg. Rec. first or last/numbering)
- Got Children's Services to bless model – "Perhaps it's too clear"
- Had an independent Plain Language audit of the Model

Guide

- Commissioned a Writing Guide

Support

- Made sure our OMC knew what was going on and cited their support and advice in our staff briefings.

Project execution



- How the model works
 - Instructions to staff for each chapter
 - Summary
 - Overview
 - Scope
 - Findings and recommendations

Instructions

Mid July issued Model and accompanying document (How the model works) to the Chapter writers (15).

For each chapter:

- **Summary** highlights what a ministry must do to improve its systems.
- **Overview** briefly describes a ministry and its agencies, boards, and commissions.
- **Scope** explains the extent of our work in a ministry—auditing its financial statements and usually, examining some of its systems.
- **Findings and recommendations** describes problems we found and solutions we recommend. We number the most important recommendations and require a response on them from the government.

Project execution

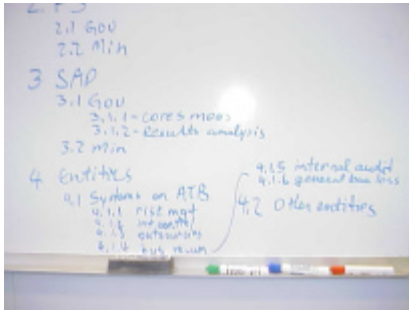


- Exceptions
 - Things we hadn't thought about

Exceptions

- Authors now had 3 weeks to follow our guidance
- This is when the fun began.
- How many exceptions does it take to prove that you don't have a rule?

Debating layout



Nominalization



At this point I was out of the fray on vacation – but plain language was always in mind

John had told me that my writing suffered from too much nominalization, so I'm always on the look out for examples of passive writing

Bombay Municipal Corporation also has signs that read - Hawkers & Urination Prohibited

Project execution



- Reviewing the draft report
 - Auditor General
 - Fresh Fish For Sale Here
 - Fish For Sale Here
 - Fish For Sale
 - Fish
 - AAGs
 - C3

In mid-August our OMC began reviewing the draft report

AG

Fish story

AAGs

- Signalling that they liked it – (Style is influencing audit rigor)(much clearer when evidence is weak)
- Let's get the summaries focussed on what has to be done

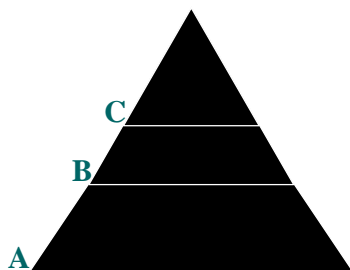
C3

Now turned to quality of writing.

Project results



- Provincial Audit Committee comments
- Costs



PAC

- Very complimentary
- Much clearer (liked the summaries)
- Easier to navigate

Costs

C3 (including PL Advisor) 350 hours additional over previous year



if A = level of detail last year, we probably achieved B this year. C is level we were shooting for.

Down to 296 pages (from 342)

Lessons



- Changing the way you communicate will change the way you do your work
- Clear, concise communication is as much to do with structure as writing
- Be absolutely clear who the audience is
- Don't underestimate the stress on the writers
- Don't underestimate the time needed for final editing

- Process changes (EC, ML, AR)

Clarity of writing leaves no room for substandard work

(I knew the exercise would impact content, but didn't realize it would impact our processes)

- Structure versus writing (the Model was key)
- PAC is audience (not government managers)
- Stress
You are messing with something very personal
Writing styles are ingrained
- Time to edit

Next steps



- Learn what MLAs think about Report after release
- Personal plain language audits and lists of common mistakes
- Confirm the Writing Guide
- Examine our communication process from start to finish
- Work at debunking the myth that clear, concise communication implies that problems are simple and easily solved.

Whether or not a problem is simple is a matter of fact. The auditor's job is to expose the problem with precision.

In summary:

Our Plain Plan was fun

Our Plain Plan was challenging

Our Plain Plan is changing things at the OAG – Alberta

Simplifying language is very difficult – it means you have to know what you're talking about



A Plain Plan

Merwan Saher

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Merwan Saher, C.A. is Director of Communications with the Office of the Alberta Auditor General. He considers it his major responsibility to minimize the risk of delivering unprofessional outputs by identifying and introducing better methodologies and tools for auditing. He heads the team that produces the Annual Report and helps his colleagues use words logically to craft their ideas.

Merwan spoke from notes and regrets that his presentation is not available.