

Written transcript of Michelle Black's appearance on the Ontario Today Phone-in, CBC Radio One, October 1, 2002, as a follow-up to the [PLAIN 4th biennial conference](#).

The host David Stephens is identified as DS, and Michelle as MB. The callers will be identified by first name.

The question for callers was, "Who do you think needs a lesson in plain language?"

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DS: Welcome to the Ontario Today phone-in round two. Here's the latest from the head office of a certain large corporation you might have heard of:

"We have undertaken the appointment of a coordinator who will be responsible for creating the structured training program and coordinating all aspects pertaining to the program and the communications strategy designed to promote the use of the program."

Unh-huh...and this just in:

"The purpose of the study is to propose a strategy and a plan for the establishment of a user training and support solution in order to make optimum use of the program."

Now, we're professional communicators, and we have no idea what they're talking about. That real-life corporate memo is one reason the plain language movement is going strong. It's a worldwide effort to chop down the tangled overgrowth in all kinds of writing. And there have been some improvements.

This afternoon on the phone-in we want to know who's still clouding the issue with impenetrable verbiage: whether it's healthcare, education, the federal tax authorities, we want to know what you think. Who needs a lesson in plain language?

(...call-in numbers edited out...)

Who needs a lesson in plain language. My guest for this hour Michelle Black. She's with the Plain Language Association. She's in our Toronto studio. Hi Michelle.

MB: Hi Dave.

DS: What did you make of those examples?

MB: Uh, well they sound a lot like some of the ones I've already brought, so I'll have to pull out a couple of others [laughs].

DS: Well Jane Farrow's almost making a career on Workology out of this sort of thing; it's a popular feature on Workology anyway. Can you top that? I can't believe it.

MB: Ah. Let me see...hmm, a lot of the stuff that I've been working on has been in consumer information, so here's one maybe. I've got a before and after so I'll read the before:

"Of particular importance to those seeking opportunities for fraud, seniors are much more likely to have developed chronic ailments. Not surprisingly then, seniors are particularly concerned about their health. This concern creates a large vulnerability to quack, miracle cure, hospital fraud, aging cure and other medical fraud of all kind."

DS: Well I don't know, I think my example was the more...[guffaws]

MB: Well

DS: But yeah, I understand, and that was aimed at whom?

MB: Well that's the problem, um the problem with this one is it's reasonably clear, though it has a lot of clauses, but it's aimed at the consumers themselves, the seniors who are likely to have been defrauded, and even if I just read the first line of the After:

"If you have health concerns then you are a prime target for con artists." Period. And then it goes on to say how that can happen. So, it immediately states the purpose from the beginning, and also talks directly to the people that are being affected.

DS: Yeah. So it's still out there, and in fact you just served as co-chair of an international plain language conference in Toronto. What goes on at an event like that?

MB: [laughs] Well, um, this particular conference we saw as wanting to broaden the plain language movement, so what traditionally has gone on is that there are people who have identified themselves as plain language writers. For example, um, the legal tradition has a long, not only a long history of writing stuff that people say is notoriously not easy to understand, but also of trying to look at the ways the laws and judgements are written and how that goes to the consumer eventually, and what it would be possible for them to understand. Um, there are a lot of people in health who do this kind of writing as well, and others sort of in little pockets all over the world.

But what we tried to do with this one was look at a lot of new developments. For example, we had one kind of theme that was called the Global Village, where we talked about the fact that not only are people using technology a lot more now to communicate and so again there's that, that worldwide need to make things easy to understand, and there's a lot of different factors one has to think about, but also looking at different languages and how we make, I think the English language a lot of people assume that that is going to be the language people are going to be trying to read and understand and what characteristics of the English language could make it more difficult for people who don't speak English, who are trying to get their information from the Internet.

Um, and also we brought in a lot of fields like Internet usability and accessibility to Web sites for people with disabilities. And that has more to do with how a Web site is coded so that even if the information is clear, would the coding allow someone who, for example, has a visual impairment, would they be able to access that information on the Internet? Uh, we brought in a lot of people from the health sector who, um, and that's a sector that is growing in

awareness. There are lots of problems but I think there's a lot of awareness growing about the issue of health literacy.

DS: Well, how often do you hear people say, "I've got a really good doctor because he explains things to me." He might have gotten D's right through medical school but, because he can communicate better than a straight-A surgeon who uses a lot of jargon, people feel more comfortable.

MB: Absolutely. I think a lot of it in any kind of environment--and again we brought people from a lot of different ones: business, government, the law, finance, health, you name it--who I think have the common goal of trying to make their information usable for the people who are trying to use it, and thinking about what is common to I guess plain language practice. And this also involves clear design of information as well. But also, what are the specific parts of each of those industries we need to pay attention to in trying to communicate clearly?

DS: Someone I know was once hired to, um, translate I guess you could say--maybe that's a bit strong--uh income tax guides, and was hired on the basis that she knew how to write, but knew absolutely nothing about tax returns, like didn't even fill out her own, and was constantly running into brick walls because the people who did know about tax returns said, "No you can't put it that simply because, you know some smart tax lawyer can get around that or use that as an excuse for getting out of paying taxes. It has to be detailed and dense in order so that the government can cover all of its bases and collect the money that it's owed."

Yaw know, I don't want to, you know...that's probably not the only time that that reason is trotted out as why things seem to be more complicated than they need to be, but is it valid?

MB: Ah...yes and no. Um, certainly, and I think too another reason that language--the sort of bumping up or inflating of language is becoming a problem is that I know, especially in the US and even here to a degree, that people are becoming very litigious, and so everybody that says anything these days is concerned about how it could be interpreted, and how it would stand up in court. And I think that's why we're really fortunate to have people in the legal profession who understand that context of the law and what the words are intended to mean--and also how they could be misconstrued--that can advise those of us outside of the legal profession, where our information is affected by laws, they can help us with that in terms of, you know, letting us know that, okay well that word or that assumption could have a lot of interpretations. So, that's why we look to those folks to try and raise awareness in the legal profession.

Um, the same problem arises in consent forms. That's been a big issue that I've been involved with in terms of the same things. What if we don't put all of these different clauses and sub clauses in, and something happens to them, how is going to stand up in court? But my argument to that would be that if something is written, if you put so many paragraphs and clauses and sub clauses in, it could very well be that the very piece that they need to know--for example, What can happen to you if you take this treatment?--that gets buried, so they don't even get it, and they don't even actually see the information that they most need to get. So that has to do with how the information is designed as well as how it's worded.

DS: Michelle Black from the Plain Language Association, my guest this afternoon on the Ontario Today phone-in. Who needs a lesson in plain language? That's our question [gives numbers to call]. Let's go to the phones. Laura's first in Toronto. Hi Laura.

Laura: Hi!

DS: Who needs a lesson in plain language?

Laura: I think teachers, and people that are involved in education. I'm just going over some of the curriculum outlines for the Grade 3's in a school that my daughter goes to, and um, I'm really not sure for example, if you look at mathematics, what they are expected to know, um there are so many sub-genres and bizarre language, and little tiny "collecting and organizing and understanding and identifying," but they never say well "they have to know how to add, you know, two-digit numbers and very specific things." Like I remember when I was in school, you had little pictures on your report card in kindergarten at least, and you knew that when you were in Grade kindergarten you had to know how to tie your shoelaces.

And report cards are horrendous, because I don't think educators actually want to say, well you know your child is doing badly, they're afraid to put themselves on the line, so they use all these equivocations to avoid criticizing.

DS: And even when you read the words like "Johnny is appropriately associating concepts of numeration..."

Laura: That's it! [laughs]

DS: "Ya don't know whether to get too excited or not."

Laura: I think you could be a teacher!

DS: Well, I don't know whether it's teachers or whether it's board officials or whether it's the Ministry of Education people, with standardized report cards, I don't know at whom the finger should be pointed but, Michelle, what do you make of that.

MB: [laughs] Yeah, as you were talking Laura I was writing down a couple of things, and I also have a bugaboo with the education system in general and I'm also an adult educator and see a lot of that language, and I think that one of the first things that happens--especially with what you said Dave about the boards and where those terms are coming from--is there's a problem of what I call "Who's driving?" in that, you know, you can have a document that's constructed by so many different people including the boards, lawyers and perhaps maybe the educators themselves, and it's often very focused on the context and focus that they are going to need to use to measure their own outcomes (and even there I feel like I'm using some jargon)...

DS: How good a job they're doing.

MB: Yes, thank you Dave! And so I think that oftentimes and with any kind of writing, this is what plain language tries to undo. We often think so much about What needs to get out there, or What is the information we need to tell \*them\*? But on the other side we need to think Who's reading this, and what does that mean to them?

So, what you said about all these long words but no sense of, you know, "My child will learn how to tie his shoes," really what we try to advocate is that when people are writing to an audience who is going to have to understand that information. It has to be put in terms of the results that the child and the parents are trying to get, as opposed to the sort of longwinded, "bumped" terms of what the educators or the boards or others are trying to accomplish--and that's really the disconnect there.

DS: "Tying your shoes" would likely be have to do with "developing fine motor skills" or something.

MB: [laughs] Exactly!

DS: Thank you for that call Laura. Let's go to David from Owen Sound now. Hi David.

David: Oh hi there, how ya doin'?

DA: Not too bad. Who needs a lesson in plain language?

David: Well, I think lawyers may need a lesson, but they already may know this. One thing that lawyers do that I see is they make everything complicated, and when their clients come in they explain it to them in layman terms. And if they can do this then, for anything that is written--be it an income tax explanation or what have you--if the lawyers can write this, then why can't they also attach something in layman's terms saying "Please read this. If you have any questions, then read the hard version." Interpreting the difficult explanation could take someone that didn't go to law school hours and hours, but if they had a framework to go from before they went to the difficult version, then they could read the easy version and say "Okay, I understand the gist of it. Now let's get into the difficult explanation of what the lawyer's trying to say."

And if they could somehow legislate these lawyers to give us both versions of what they're trying to say, then we could take the easy version that us laymen are trying to read, and use that to translate it to other languages.

DS: Well um, Michelle what do you think?

MB: Um, a couple of things again. First of all, as I said one of the original movements or groups that got on the plain language train was the legal community, realizing just what you've said, David. When a decision is handed down or communicated to the person affected by it, it's all couched in subsections and classes and lots of different paragraphs and, again there needs to be more of a focus on what the result is, or what the specific outcome is for the person who's being affected. There are a lot of lawyers I know, fortunately, who do not only do that in their own practice, but also advise others to and set out guidelines for how to communicate certain decisions. And they've even tested them; they tested one version of a decision--actually, we had a world premiere of the study by a gentleman named Joe Kimble from the states. They actually field-tested a decision being handed down: one in plain language and the other in the usual legal terms. And appreciably more people were able to understand the second version that was written in plain language.

So, don't give up hope -- there is much more push for this in the legal community, and there are a lot more people who are starting to become aware of that need. And like what you said, if there's, you know, another attachment or

piece of paper that sort of focuses on, or gives a summary of the main things that are in that longer bit, then you're not assuming that people can't understand that longer, more complicated language, but you're giving them a choice. And that's really what the law should be about.

DS: Well David earlier on I was talking about the tax guides, and if I'm not mistaken what they did--because ya know the tax experts were saying "Well we could be on the hook here if somebody treats this as the gospel truth."--I think there are warnings all the way through the tax guide saying "This is just a guide. If you want the real, unadulterated truth refer to the 800-page Income Tax Act. So, that's how they get around it. So in a sense the tax department has done exactly what you have suggested that lawyers do.

Cathy in Ottawa--Hi Cathy!

Cathy: Hi.

DS: Who needs a lesson in plain language?

Cathy: Any car dealership or car leasing company where you actually have to go in and sign your life away for the next four to five years, and then they start sending you letters saying "Oh, by the way, this is the information that we failed to give you" and you don't understand the information. So you end up calling their 1-800 number and sitting on the phone for 45 minutes, just so they can say "Oh. That wasn't supposed to be in there."

DS & MB: [laugh]

DS: I got something from the City, a tax bill, and I thought they were saying I owed a whole bunch of money and I had to phone them and they assured me that I didn't. But I understand--I don't lease cars, so I don't have your experience, but, yeah, Michelle, sometimes it's pretty...I guess in a way they wanted to share all of the information that is new to you, but if they don't make it clear what it's all about or how seriously they take it, then you could be confused as Cathy is.

MB: Yeah, that happens a lot in--much of my experience has been in working in the hospital sector and there's that same issue of there are so many different people who have different I guess stakes in different parts of that information and it all needs to get into the contract or the instruction or whatever. And then again the reader doesn't know What is the piece that applies to me right away? What is the piece that's never going to apply to me, or might almost never apply to me but I need to know it?

And so, like you said, you get these big long reams of paper and then sometimes you find out, as well, that the stuff you most needed to know \*didn't\* get in there. And that sometimes is a system issue in terms of who's preparing that information. Often when I do plain language writing I don't only look at the one piece of information someone is preparing, but also who else in the organization might need to use or be affected by that information? Also, who might have to answer to this? Then I try to come to some common understanding there, because otherwise it just becomes what's known as "Death by Committee," where everybody's gotta get a little piece of a disclaimer or rule or whatever in there, and then the reader is left with pages and pages of stuff, and where they're not able to make sense of what's most important to them and also, of course, what can happen to them if they disregard it or don't follow certain instructions?

DS: This is one of the strongest arguments I've heard for \*not\* sending out notices to people after, say, they've had a hospital stay to let them know how much their care cost, because I've heard people say there's a concern that people will think it's a bill and they have to pay it. And I always thought they should put in big, block letters at the top: This is not a bill; it's just for your information. But maybe it doesn't work that way. I don't know whether you've come across that particular suggestion Michelle. It's been suggested as a way of controlling health care costs, to let people know how much what they're using is costing.

MB: Right, right. Again, it's just a matter of--like you said Dave--really clearly indicating what the purpose of that information is at the very top. We had a similar example shown this weekend at the conference, but it was quite the opposite. It was from the Canadian government, where there was a letter going out to them saying "You're eligible to apply for the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and here's how to do it." And what happened was there were tons and tons of people who didn't know that they were eligible for this thing, and had gotten this four-page document with its small type about how to apply, but didn't realize that the government was saying "You know what? You could have this if you wanted it. And let's make it easier for you to apply." People just wouldn't bother, because they didn't understand that they were entitled to that. The information they'd gotten with it was just so intimidating and made them think "What's going to happen if I actually apply for this?" And so in the rewrite, I think the original had started with three or four pages, and the rewrite was just a short letter, which started by saying "We want you to know that you are eligible for this, and here are three steps of how to apply for it." And then, perhaps after they've done that maybe you can send them all the information about sort of the different situations that can arise etc.

So it has to do with, also as I mentioned before, how you visually design and organize the information? You could be saying all they need to know, but what does the \*user\* need to know first--not what do you want to tell them first?

DS: Who needs a lesson in plain language? That's our question this afternoon and we have Michelle Black from the Plain Language Association joining us from our Toronto studio. And from Cathy we go to Jacqueline in Fenwick. Hi Jacqueline!

Jacqueline: Good afternoon. How are you?

DS: Good, thanks. Who do you think needs a lesson in plain language?

Jacqueline: Well I think anyone needs a lesson in plain language who's writing something for someone else to read and sometimes even if the language is plain, I think it should be put aside for a couple of days and you read it again yourself to see if it really says what you want it to say.

And I have an example to share. I purchased a cookbook, and it has a section on household helps and hints: "To remove odour from plastic containers, wipe the container with tomato juice, wash the container and lid with soap and water, dry well and put lid and bowl separately in freezer for a couple of days. Also can be used to remove odours from inside of refrigerators and dogs."

[all laugh]

Like, just read it over before it goes out!

DS: And as we say in radio, "Out loud." Because it might not have been as evident on the page, or there might have been a comma after "inside refrigerators, and dogs" and it might have...

Jacqueline: So do we mean "the outside of refrigerators and dogs?"

DS: Well that's what it sounded like when you read it."

Jacqueline: Or does it mean that we put the dogs inside of the refrigerator...

MB: That's what I was thinking!

Jacqueline: I mean the whole thing is just ludicrous, and it provided a bit of levity. I enjoyed reading it and laughing, but I've had trouble reading it out loud because I burst into laughter every time I come to "the inside of refrigerators and dogs"!

MB: It sounds like what you're referring to Jacqueline is that sometimes we go overboard on the other side: uh, meaning that we want to say a lot with fewer words, or we want to use simple language, and there's often a big argument in our group about whether to exactly follow grammatical principles or not, but I think that what you just gave us was an example of why you still have to be a very skilful and careful writer, even to write things simply.

Jacqueline: I think so. Thank you, Michelle.

DS: Thanks very much Jacqueline for your call, and I think--I don't know whether the word euphemism has been used, or if people are sensitive about offending, and they don't want to just come out and say something that's not nice or that's difficult to hear, and this actually came from an OPP (Ontario Provincial Police) press release that was sent out about a car accident, and it stated: "The driver sustained injuries inconsistent with life." In other words, was killed on the scene. But you know they didn't want to say, he was "dead on arrival" or whatever, because you don't want to be that blunt. And I know that I'm guilty of that many times, in terms of sort of beating around the bush rather than just saying something because you don't want to offend somebody. Anyway, we'll continue our discussion after the 90-second newsbreak, which is coming right up. Who needs a lesson in plain language? [gives out phone numbers]

--newsbreak--

DS: Welcome back to the Ontario Today phone-in, I'm Dave Stephens. Who needs a lesson in plain language? That's our question, Michelle Black from the Plain Language association my guest in studio, and Sandra is next on the line from Bracebridge. Hi Sandra. Sandra can you hear me?

Sandra: Uh yeah, can you hear me all right?

DS: Yeah, there you are. Go ahead.

Sandra: Ah, no I was thinking that English is such a wonderful language. I think it was Churchill that said that it's the only language you can talk about a virgin land pregnant with possibilities.

DS: [laughs]

Sandra: But I have a little list, I have a little list. First of all a vice-principal who handed me my timetable and it said "ambulatory invigilation." And I said, "What the hell's this?" It was hall duty. And then...

DS: Was he suggesting that hall duty was beneath you, but that ambulatory...what was the second word?

Sandra: I don't know, but in my school it was often "Keep moving kid because ...[laughs]...ya don't know what's around the next corner." Then there's the VON handbook that was written, and there was something in it called a "Self-care deficit." Now that's a dirty four-letter word called a bath. And then of course there is the, um, the less-attractive language that we've come to hear about later called "collateral damage" where it means "Oh, sorry guys, we killed the wrong people."

But what I wanted to ask Michelle was, a theory of language that I've heard expressed says that basically the language is constructed almost defensively and that, in other words, this is my area of expertise, and I'm going to hang onto it come hell or high water, and the way I'm going to do that is to keep you out and to keep you dependent, is I'm going to fill it with all kinds of obfuscations, with polysyllabic words, so that it becomes a defensive one and a defensive territory. So it's not a question so much of I'm concerned about litigation or that I'm concerned about covering all the bases, but basically it's a case of empire building, and I'm wondering what Michelle thinks about that idea I've heard brooded.

MB: Actually, uh, that was the idea that I think made me feel most strongly about doing this kind of work. As you're saying, there are a lot of folks out here who, we do write the ways that you've mentioned--such as using "ambulatory invigilation" etcetera, because we've come out of school maybe, or we're trying to establish credibility, and to be able to get in with the people who seem already to be able to understand that kind of language.

Yeah, and so I think that a lot of us do it innocently because we see that as a way to get in with a certain niche of people who have power. Our keynote speaker this past weekend was named Bill Lutz, from the US, and he's written a couple of books: one called Doublespeak, and the subheading of that one is "From Revenue Enhancement to Terminal Living." Terminal living meaning death, right?

Sandra: The ultimate rehab!

MB: There you go [laughs]! And that's exactly his premise, and he's saying you know these aren't folks who aren't skilled in using language--in fact they're perhaps more skilled than all us in that room at writing and at constructing language, and that for sure, a lot of times it is done to defend the people giving the messages from having to be accountable for those messages.

Sandra: That's why I loved "Yes Minister and Yes Minister," when Humphrey went into his diatribe, and it became a game for me to try and understand, and taking some pleasure in doing it but this is exactly what was happening.

MB: M-hmmn.

Sandra: Didn't Bob Rae, when he was in government, didn't he spend several million dollars hiring somebody to clarify litigation at one point?

MB: He may very well have, though I'm afraid he was in government before I started in plain language so I don't have contact with that. Although you know it's funny because one of the things I'm finding is that, regardless of what we feel about the politics of the \*current\* government, I'm finding that the way that they speak directly to the consumer on TV--you know, for example the ads they have out about the education system, the newsletters that they put out--very clear and easy to understand. Very very directed towards the consumer. But I wouldn't have been surprised if Bob Rae was behind something like what you mention. It may not have lasted long enough.

DS: I'll just say there have been some complaints about the spending for the ads of the money, but the message is clear. Whether Bob Rae did that or not, as I recall, because I do recall we did a little comedy sketch about it at the time. He came up with some sort of warm and comfy renaming of Ministries when he was in government. Instead of, you know, Solicitor General or Health Minister, it was, I dunno, I don't know what they did but it was very squishy and it wasn't very clear as the old-fashioned name for it. So I guess it went both ways under his regime.

Sandra thanks for your call. Hugh in Shelburne. Hugh?

Hugh: Yes.

DS: Hi. Who needs a lesson in plain language?

Hugh: I was calling about the police, whose conversations tend to carry on like the bus you just missed. I find the way the police talk about people--like "the gentleman in question" etcetera--are so unrealistic and condescending it's incredible. I mean, the term "gentleman" would not be applied to most of the people they use it for.

DS: Yeah. I guess "scumbag" wouldn't be appropriate.

Hugh: Well no, but--"the man"--why does he have to be characterized as a gentleman? The biker who's up on charges for bombing, drug-dealing etcetera etcetera is certainly in no normal way can be construed as "gentleman." And to refer to him as such would be silly I think. And so often when they comment on the injuries suffered, I mean they go out of their way, have strange ways of describing it when plain language would do much better.

DS: I remember back in the early days of the Crimestoppers program in Ottawa, one of the local TV stations did re-enactments, and I used to tune in not because I'm a big fan of crime or anything, but I used to like to hear all these synonyms for criminal that they used. They had "perpetrator" and "varlet" and all these [laughs] wild words when they just sort of meant "the guy we're looking for." Michelle?

MB: A lot of that kind of talk falls into the category of "Officialese--I am an official in this position and these are the kinds of words I need to use." Often there's in law too they talk about the way words are redundantly doubled up like "to have and to hold" or "first and foremost," and the one I always love is when they say, "he had a weapon on his person." He had a weapon! It's that same kind of language and I think that often the more high-level and official-sounding the language gets, probably my instinct is the more the people speaking those words are trying to absolve themselves of some direct responsibility. The more distancing it gets, the fewer people you see.

Hugh: That gets into the field I'm in. I'm an artist and I'm surrounded by critics who speak a language that I do not, and describe work in ways that I can't fathom. And I remember once a piece of mine was being criticized by someone, one of the A students, and when I said, "No that was not my meaning." To my surprise she said, "Well, you're the artist. You don't know what you're doing. You really meant to say this..."

DS: Alright, thanks very much Hugh for your call this afternoon. We came up with all sorts of synonyms for criminals: culprit, delinquent, criminal, malefactor, misdemeanor, laggard, scapegoat, rascal, scoundrel, miscreant--I'm sure they used them all in those days. John calling from Carrying Place. John?

John: Hi how are you today?

DS: Good. Who needs a lesson in plain language?

John: Two large groups of people. Computer software developers are the big deal. I can edit, I can modify, I can change something, but changing it is much easier and that is the spoken language rather than the language that they think I want to hear. I think computer software developers and others tend to like to use the large words, in order to justify themselves and/or put up their prices, and this occurs in a lot of technical jargon as well. No longer is the cable guy the cable guy; now he's a Telecommunications Installer Technician. And I think they use that largely to put up their prices and make people believe they can't do things themselves.

DS: And you have to wonder in terms of the computer software people if they did make it more clear, how much money they could save on their 1-800 tech support offices, too.

John: Yes, when I go to write an e-mail--or when I write an e-mail, I should say--when I write an e-mail now they want me to "compose a letter." Now, I don't remember when the last time was that I composed a letter. I may have written a letter yesterday, but I certainly never \*composed\* a letter. And, it becomes a "document."

I don't handle documents in my everyday life. It's not a part of my spoken language, it's as simple as that. When I'm dealing with lawyers I'm dealing with documents, which is once in a lifetime, I hope.

DS: Michelle why is it, when e-mail is supposedly such a casual form of communication that we use words--er, they use words like that.

MB: Ah...this could be a whole show unto itself. With technology, I think one of the things that's happened is the sort of primacy of the people who know all of the big words in this particular field, 'cause it is one that so many of us are trying to catch up with and trying to adjust to, and to try and be able to speak that jargon. And so a lot of us are trying to learn words like "document" and so on because it makes us feel more comfortable.

Sometimes it depends: when we're talking about things like instructions, sometimes it is necessary to pick a certain word, even if it's a higher-level word, because it can't be construed as anything else. In fact one of the visitors we had was from Bombardier Aerospace, and she was talking about the fact that for example the user who is going to use a technical manual to repair an aircraft at thousands of feet in the air--the words that you use to describe the procedures have to have only one meaning in the context, and that meaning

has to be understood by the folks who use these manuals to mean that thing only. So that when they have seconds to try and repair something and read the manual, there will be no ambiguity. For example, where it says "replace," does replace mean take out the old one and put in a new one? Or does it mean take out the one that's there, clean it, and put it back in? And these things are vitally important.

But with software, oftentimes I think it's just that the people who are using these terms, they were created for that particular context, but the people maybe don't think about the fact that you, the user, are going to be thinking about it in a totally different context, and it's not going to be the same one that they were using in constructing the software. Um, there's a big problem I think in workplaces because there are a lot of folks--you know the joke is that the techies don't know how to explain it to everybody else--how to do something. And that's often where there needs to be an intermediary, such as a technical writer or communications person--for technical writers this is often what they do--who can come between the person at this high technical level to whom that makes perfect sense in terms of the context and the structures they're thinking in.

DS: And I don't want to paint all software or all technology people with the same brush 'cause sometimes you get the instructions and they're really easy to follow. And other times it's just give up and I'm going to phone their toll-free number. But sometimes I've often found that the instructions are condensed and made very small--I guess to make them less intimidating--but then they're condenses so much to make them useless. And then if there'd been more information then maybe I wouldn't have had to plug in that telephone number.

MB: M-hmmn, and actually for plain language I mean those are the kinds of data that plain language writers are collecting, such as how much time was saved by the organization not having to answer customer questions and complaints, and then of course how much money gets saved, how much customer satisfaction is there. And those are three really big measures that we can look at in different contexts.

DS: Reputation means a lot when you're looking for repeat customers for the upgraded version. Uh, John thanks for your call. Janet in Kanata. Hi Janet!

Janet: Hi there, how are you?

DS: Good. Who needs a lesson in plain language?

Janet: Um, the guys--and I'll be specific--the guys that are writing all those labour relations collective agreements. I think there's a tendency with the men to put in language, that it's a one-upmanship kind of thing. [missed section on tape]...add a few words in here or there, beef up some areas, try to resolve some specific problems with a broad brush, and make their language very broad so they think it will capture everything. And in the end you have no idea what anyone is talking about: sections that should be together aren't, and there are things that are all over the place, and so it's very very difficult to understand them sometimes.

DS: Do you have an example of--if not sort of asking you to read something but a situation that you got caught in?

Janet: Oh, no, I've just dealt with a lot of collective agreements and the one place I worked in, Windsor, we were at a hospital and at one point we had nine collective agreements going all at the same time. And even if you had similar

bargaining units, the language was all different. What do they mean by a "date of hire" for some things? Is it your seniority date? Is it the day you walked in the door this time, or is it the date you first got hired four years ago before you quit four times and got hired back five times --what is it?

So there's a lot of those. I can't give you a specific one, but they're very difficult to read sometimes because they're referring to different things in different sections and not being very clear about it.

DS: And I'm wondering Michelle whether that might be the result of, ya know, sort of last-minute quick negotiations to try and prevent some sort of work stoppage.

MB: Yeah, and I was thinking again about what I'd said earlier about Death By Committee, meaning that something like that is usually an ongoing document and maybe once upon a time when it was only fifty pages it was prepared in a comprehensive way where, you know, you could refer to--the pieces that you needed were logical according to what you needed to know. But then people come in over time and um, what you said about writing things too ambiguously by putting them too simply,

I mean another thing that needs to happen--and this happens with Web sites as well. People think they should just cut and paste something and it will fit with the context, but every once in awhile someone has to look at the piece as a whole, and look at the inconsistencies in the flow of language, look at the inconsistent information, and you know if you think you need to say something in a really broad way, and then nobody understands what it means, you might consider having some kind of, you know, some sort of list of some of the examples of what that situation could be. If the document gets really big, and you're concerned that you really need to use some of the terms for that industry or that agreement, then have a glossary in the back or something, in that case, which also helps someone to navigate the document, and maybe find explanations for some of those pieces that are in the main text.

DS: That's why I asked Janet for an example, to illustrate what she was saying. Thank you Janet for your call. At eleven minutes before the hour it's Michelle Black from the Plain Language Association our guest this afternoon. Who needs a lesson in plain language? [gives out phone numbers again] Denis in Ottawa. Hi, Denis?

Denis: Dennis.

DS: Dennis, I'm sorry.

Denis: No, not a problem. Um, who needs it? The poor, overworked writers of this world. I used to be a writer myself, and I've done everything from press releases to trademark applications to technical documentation--a lot of marketing materials. And the problem with being a young writer at the bottom of the heap is that you're dealing with a lot of territoriality and egos, political correctness, legal weasel-words--and that's an actual term, by the way--you quickly figure out that the clearest words are almost never the right words, and it's almost easier for you--it's often, not almost always--the right thing not to say anything, as long as you can get it approved. And I actually became a marketing consultant myself because, you know, sitting in a room with a bunch of executive egos, all of them throwing sub-modifiers at me, insisting that I add their particular pet phrase into the document, and then finally coming out with a 150-word, one-sentence mission statement that I was then told to put on the

front page of the Web site as the corporate statement of who we were. So, it's a very, very difficult thing. So I would just not take credit for the original one in that case.

DS: Well, I guess that's another one of Death By Committee.

Denis: Absolutely! For sure.

DS: Thanks Denis for your call. Anything to add Michelle?

MB: Um, actually Denis, you're not alone in terms of being a writer and trying to make sense of all this. I'd like to offer a resource to anybody out there wanting to know what do we mean by plain language or how do we do plain language. It's the Web site of the Association, it's Plain Language Association International, and I'll give you the, it's [www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org). The acronym for our association is PLAIN, and there are resources from lots of different industries including law and a lot of how-to guides about how to do plain language, and I'd recommend for anybody to take a peek at that, because it really gives you a sense of how broad the movement is becoming. In fact one of our guests this weekend was encouraging us not to use the word "movement" any longer, because what we're trying to say now is that this is something that should just be established. It's not just something to strive for anymore because there are enough of us out there that do it.

The other thing I would say about writing is that, when we think about writing we often think about the creative part of writing, or the persuasive part of writing. And again, a lot of that has to do with writing to impress rather than writing to inform. I wanted to make that distinction, because people who are writing creatively, who use flowery words and all that--there is a perfectly good group of contexts for that, so we're not saying that you should, you know, strip the language down to something that is really dry and not expressive and not colourful. But it really again just depends on the context of the user, and a lot of us in school these days--a couple of years ago I taught a class, first-year college--and it was amazing. I understand that grammar teaching in school nowadays is not what it once was, and so people are coming out not even really feeling comfortable with just basic grammar and sentence structure, and you know learning plain language rules and grasping the rules of grammar makes it a lot easier to not fall into that trap of feeling like we need to inflate everything.

DS: M-hmmn. Denis thank you for your call. Paul phoning from somewhere on the 401. Hi Paul!

Paul: Good afternoon.

DS: Yes, who needs a lesson in plain language?

Paul: Well I'm looking at it in the reverse. Your guest mentioned a moment ago that she doesn't want to use the language get towards being dry, and lacking colour. Yet in point of fact the English language can be an art form, and I'm concerned that by making it plain, it's a form of dumbing down. The fact that someone that's in university exhibits the ability to express themselves in verbiage and uses terms such as "obfuscation" etcetera etcetera, and that being wrong, I would like to think that instead of going the other way so we don't challenge our people too badly, verbally, that we're doing the opposite--we're saying "Let's make it simpler so that they can understand it." I think we're going the wrong way.

MB: I think it depends on the context, Paul.

Paul: Well, let me say this too, I write a number of papers, and I have to submit these papers to various and sundry bodies--and yes I'll admit that I've come across some boobs that have written some strange papers that really don't say anything. But in point of fact I cannot in many of my documents--as a matter of fact in all my documents--I can't simplify it because the true meaning, the clear understanding and essence of the phraseology it is imperative that I use the English language in an extremely constructive way so that people have a comprehensive understanding of exactly what I am trying to impart. Because when you're reading words, you're not looking at the person's face; you're not hearing their voice; you're not getting their vocal inflection, or any type of glare in their eyes--you're just on the written word. So without the colour, without the substance and depth of the verbiage, there's a very good chance you can lose the substance of their meaning in the application.

DS: Who's your audience Paul, when you're writing?

Paul: It varies. I can write to some people in the federal government--I do work with the Canadian Coast Guard, so in other instances I might be working with engineers. So I'm not writing in such a way so it's key holed to PhD's only. I have to write in such a way that it's going to address a fairly broad spectrum, someone from a PhD to an engineer to a general staff that would work in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans etcetera. I'm not writing to a very narrow group of people who are highly educated. It's a fairly broad spectrum.

DS: But they're all professionals, is what you're saying.

Paul: No, not in the true sense of the word. It could be a third engineer reading the document. For example, the systems that I sell I have to put clear understanding in the documents and manuals so that when they can't get a hold of me they can read my manual to get the essence of what I'm saying. And these are guys that are sometimes working on the tools. So it's not simply a case of using five-syllable words at all times, but to completely write a sentence and a paragraph to make sure that the full meaning and the full intelligence of the message I'm trying to send is completely understood.

DS: All right Paul, I'm going to hold you there. Michelle earlier you talked about the importance of the full meaning being incredibly specific for someone who's trying to fix an airplane at ten thousand feet, and I think that for some of what Paul was getting at. But maybe to switch professions I'd say that maybe it's okay for, say, actuaries in an insurance company to use one form of language when they're communicating with each other, but when we're trying to write instructions to clients or the public that maybe they should use a different form of writing.

MB: That's exactly what I'm trying to say, most definitely. Different language works in different contexts, and again I think that the key factor is that when someone else is outside that context, they're needing to do something with that information, think about what you want to see happen and whether you need to use the words that traditionally have been used to help them accomplish that task.

DS: Thank you, and one more caller, Adele in Ottawa. Hello Adele!

Adele: Hi. Um, I thought that last call was very interesting. Plain language doesn't necessarily imply unsuccessful speech acts. I took linguistics a few years ago, and I was working on my certification for teaching of English as a Second Language, and I was one of the older people in the class--I was mid-forties--there were younger people who hadn't studied grammar. So the instructor put a sentence on the board: The minister is ready to eat. And there were people in the class who actually didn't get the sense that there might be more than one way to get that. So it was diagrammed out to show that a minister is not a commodity that we can eat when we choose something. But I've seen this happen as a text reviser in government, where a lot of big words are used as a power trip, and then when you strip the document of the big words, you find that they don't know what they're saying.

DS: All right, Adele I've gotta hold you there because we're out of time, but thank you for your call. And Michelle, thank you for coming in. It's been a most interesting hour.

MB: Thanks for having me.

DS: Michelle Black is a consultant and owner of Simply Read Writing Service in Toronto. You can find out more about the Plain Language Association by going to the Web site: [www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org).

--End of transcript.



On the "Bridge" and in the "White Space":  
What to do between sessions

## **Michelle Black**

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Michelle Black has been a professional communicator for more than 15 years. Along with health information and education, she specializes in organizational communication for both print and online formats, most recently through her consulting business, Simply Read Writing Service. With an honours degree in French and Spanish, Michelle is about to complete her Masters in Adult Education. She co-chairs this conference with [Sally McBeth](#).