



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

Plain Language Association International (PLAIN)

**Fourth Biennial Conference Proceedings**

Toronto, Canada — September 26 - 29, 2002

## ***On the "Bridge" and in the "White Space": What to do between sessions: Michelle Black***

Michelle Black, Simply Read Writing Service

*Presented to the [Fourth Biennial Conference of the PLAIN Language Association International](#) at the Opening Plenary, September 27, 2002*

*Conference Co-Chair Michelle Black of Simply Read Writing Service told delegates about the conference activities she organized around the concepts of bridges and white space.*

[www.simplyread.org](http://www.simplyread.org)

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At the opening plenary, Conference Co-Chair Michelle Black of Simply Read Writing Service told delegates about the conference activities she organized around the concepts of bridges and white space. We received much of the content for this set of activities in advance from speakers, delegates and PLAIN listserv members.

**The Bridge:** Bridges are structures that help people and things connect. On the bridge or walkway area of the hotel, we brought the work of our international community together in displays of plain language resources and examples. They included:

- **Resource tables** in our just outside all meeting rooms, where speakers could display, sell or give out resources related to their session.
- A **For Display Only** table where speakers and delegates could set samples of books they'd published, information about their organizations, or other materials they wished to display.
- A **Please Take One** section, where speakers and delegates could set any information that people could take away about books they'd published, information about their organizations, or other materials they wished to display.
- **Before and After** examples of about 15 documents that speakers or delegates had worked on, which were posted on the windows along the Bridge area. Examples ranged broadly: from health information to press releases to government forms, in both their original and clear language versions.

**White Space:** Document designers often promote blank or white space to give readers' eyes a place to rest between text and graphics. Our conference white space consisted of informal, unstructured places – in the areas outside the meeting rooms--where delegates could relax, mingle and consolidate the knowledge they had gained during the scheduled program.

- **The Plain Language Map:** This map – a large sheet of bristolboard with maplike background design--was on a table outside the main ballroom. On each corner of the rectangle was a picture representing each of the four themes that served as organizing themes for the conference sessions: Health, Law, Business and Finance, and the Global Village. A pink heart in the centre, with Plain Language written on it, represented plain language's convergence at the heart of communication.

During the opening Plenary, Michelle explained to delegates that the Map was an opportunity for them to put themselves on the map, by writing names or placing their business cards on the spot in the map where they felt their work fit. She explained that she had put herself mainly in between the health and Global Village corners, since much of her work had been with health information on the Internet.



- A **Graffiti Wall**, where delegates and speakers were encouraged to write and post their “A-has,” thoughts and comments on each session. Flipchart papers bearing the session’s name, post-its, and markers were available and posted on the walls outside the main ballroom.
- The **Plain Language Challenge Contest**: In their Welcome Kits, delegates received an example of a piece of writing that could be made clearer (submitted by Plain members Vicki Schmolka and Betsy Frick). During the two days, Michelle encouraged delegates to try their hand at improving the text, and to submit their names into the entry box located just outside the ballroom. She encouraged those who were interested to post their proposed rewrites on the wall just above the entry box.

We held the draw for the contest on Saturday after lunch, and the three winners each received a copy of the Plain Word card game (produced by the Canadian Public Health Association’s National Literacy and Health Program).

## A Challenge for Conference Participants

We would like to showcase how plain language writers use different approaches to communicate a message. There's no "perfect way". There are always better ways.

To participate in the challenge:

1. Edit Melanie McQuire's notice. You can write on the page or create a computer version.
2. Post your work in the Plain Language Challenge section of the White Space, with or without your name on it.
3. To be eligible for a prize, complete the entry form at the bottom of this page, tear it off and put it in the entry box you'll find there.

During Saturday's lunch, we'll pick names from the box for some great prizes, and post the winners' names. We look forward to seeing your suggested improvements.

How would you revise [Melanie McQuire's public notice](#)?

**Client:** You're a good writer. Your friend, Melanie McQuire, is a good photographer. You and Melanie have agreed to trade editing help for a family portrait. She wrote a draft notice for you to fix up.

**Context:** Melanie lives in a nearby town, population 50,000. She has an idea for a photo series for a toy company and needs to add newborn baby pictures to her portfolio before she presents her idea.

**Audience:** Melanie is confident that she can reach the parents of newborns by posting a notice in the local library, on bulletin boards in stores and restaurants and at the two local gyms offering pre- and post-natal classes. Her main goal is to find newborn twins and triplets to photograph soon. If other people find out about her photography business through the ad, so much the better.

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### Entry Form (***please tear off and put in the entry box***)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How can we reach you during the conference?

\_\_\_\_\_

**MELANIE MCQUIRE**

**P H O T O G R A P H E R**

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**AWARD WINNING PHOTOGRAPHY**

**Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx**

***I need newborn multiples to  
photograph for my portfolio.***

- n Age needed: Babies under one month.
- n I come to you.
- n No cost to you.
- n You will have the opportunity to see the photographs I have taken, but you are under no obligation to purchase.
- n Should you wish to purchase, the price list is discounted 50% to a portfolio model.
- n I will need you to sign a photo release.

*Need more information? Please call me.*



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**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](#).