

Plain English: the past, the present and the future

At our September meeting Dr Neil James spoke about the evolution of plain English and how the concept has been redefined over the last 50 years.

Not long ago, someone in a legal organisation asked me to prepare a plain language program for their staff. When our proposal went to the Executive, however, they argued that they were already using plain English. They were referring to language like this:

The Consultant will ensure that the Specified Personnel undertake work in respect of the Services in accordance with the terms of this Agreement and will not be hindered or prevented in any way in the performance of their duties in carrying out the Services including but not limited to being removed from the performance of the Services or being requested to perform services which in any way interfere with the due performance of the Services by the Specified Personnel.

In case you are wondering, this actually means:

The consultant will ensure that the specified personnel deliver the Services without any hindrance.

Anyone reading the two versions is in little doubt which one is the clearer and more readable. The astonishing thing is

that this organisation believed the first version was actually as plain English as it was possible for them to go.

This points to the first problem that plain English faces: a clear and broadly understood definition. Ask a group of professionals and you will get widely differing definitions. Tonight, I want to survey plain language historically, looking at:

1. Where plain English came from.
2. How plain English evolved.
3. Where plain English might be heading.
4. The implications for editors.

1. Where plain language came from

Adapting to the audience

The core concepts of plain English are among the oldest in the history of human communication. Many of them date back to the emergence of classical rhetoric 2,000 years ago, with the first manuals about giving an effective speech. At the heart of them was the need to adapt to your audience. While this sounds simple enough, it is a lesson we keep forgetting.

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Next meeting: Tuesday, 4 November 2008

Celebrating 40 years of Abbey's Bookshops in Sydney

An evening of memories of the Sydney book scene with one of the city's best-loved booksellers—Eve Abbey.

Ron and Eve Abbey opened Abbey's Bookshop in Pitt Street, Sydney, on 4 July 1968 and in the following decades they opened many other specialist bookshops including Henry Lawson's Bookshop, Centrepoint Bookshop, Bargain Bookshop, City Lights Bookshop and Paddington Penguin Bookshop.

Today, Abbey's Bookshop and Language Book Centre is located at 131 York Street. The company also operates Galaxy Bookshop at 143 York Street which specialises in science fiction and fantasy and won the NSW Specialist Bookshop of the Year Award in 2008. Eve Abbey has been a judge for the Miles Franklin Award and the National Biography Award. She presented Book Talk 88 with Dr Ivor Indyck, inaugurated the Zonta Meet the Author Event (now in its 25th year) and in 1983 began a small customer newsletter which is now a twelve page monthly magazine—*Abbey's Advocate*. In 1981 she was awarded the Michael Zifcak Medal for promotion of Australian books by the National Book Council.

Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, 280 Pitt Street, 6.30 p.m. for 7.00 p.m. Drinks and light refreshments provided. \$15 for members and students; \$20 for non-members and those who do not RSVP; \$7 for holders of a current concession card or student card. Non-members who book and do not show up must still pay. Please RSVP to (02) 9294 4999 (voicemail) or by email to <editorbruce@optusnet.com.au> by Friday, 31 October 2008.

December meeting: Christmas already? Join us for the end of year celebration dinner on Tuesday, 2 December 2008

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Let me cite just one example. One evening in the British town of Barnard Castle, the Teesdale District Parish Council sat down for its regular meeting. On the agenda was a council report describing itself as a ‘sustainability appraisal scoping report for the local development framework core strategy’. The rest of the report was no clearer than its title, sounding rather like this:

The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Rank of Employment Deprivation shows the areas with a high level of involuntary exclusion from the world of work. Approximately 5.9% of the population are classified as Employment Deprived. The former coalfield areas, in the North East of the District, are within the 20% most employment deprived Super Output Areas nationally, Figure 7. The more rural wards also suffer from high levels of employment deprivation.

One councillor publicly condemned it:

The report is incomprehensible to any normal person. Nobody talks like this. Nobody reads books written like this. Frankly, it’s a turn-off, and it’s not surprising that we are having trouble attracting new members.

What is interesting is that another Councillor came to its defence:

This is just the way that Council reports are written, and if you want to be a councillor you need to understand that. If you go to France, they speak French. Here in the council, we speak like this.

This second response lies at the heart of everything that is wrong with our public language. Rather than seeing writing as a collaborative process, with writers and readers achieving outcomes of common interest, workplace writers too often see it as a one-sided transaction, with writers dictating content and style, and readers having to accept it. To be a district councillor, you need to learn the language. If anything goes wrong in your communication, it is the reader’s obligation to know that language.

Propriety of style

In contrast, adapting to your audience was the first principle of classical rhetoric, and it is the first principle of plain language as well. A district council is not a foreign country, and there is no reason why it should write reports as if using a foreign tongue. Plain language means adapting your text to do the job rather than adopting the one-size-fits-all language that will sound the most impressive.

‘...the effect was to separate the language of our institutions from the language of the people.’

In doing this, plain language draws heavily from what was the third canon of rhetoric. The Greeks called it ‘lexis’ and the Romans called it ‘elocutio’. In English this was first of all translated as ‘style’, but would probably today be as well known as ‘expression’. Here’s what Aristotle had to say about an effective style or expression:

The virtue of style is to be clear, and to be neither mean nor above the prestige of the subject, but appropriate.

He referred to this as ‘propriety’ in style. Our Teesdale Council example certainly lacked it. But propriety also means you don’t want to swing too far in the other direction. Police in the Kingswood area of Bristol in the United Kingdom found this out the hard way when they used what the *Guardian* newspaper described as an ‘Ali G-style text message terminology’, putting up placards reading:

Du ur olds knw whr U r o wot ur doin coz D bil wl tel em

D bil cum arnd hre n wl vzit ur olds if ur messin bout

The community reaction was severe. A local charity director commented that ‘the Police seem to be falling over themselves to appear trendy when the simple truth is a sign written in plain English would get the message across just as well, if not better.’

Word choice

Of course, when Aristotle was writing about plain lexis, English didn’t even exist as a language. As Anglo Saxon emerged from the admixture of Germanic and Danish raiders, rhetorical concepts, indeed rhetorical

texts themselves were lost to most of Europe. Then something happened to take public language in a direction that Aristotle would never have approved of: the Norman invasion.

When William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, it changed the future of English forever. He didn’t just replace an English sovereign with a French speaker, but replaced the language of an entire ruling class. French became the official language of government, of the church, the military, of the law, of the academy. Using English marked you as part of the inferior, uneducated majority.

Numbers eventually told, of course, and English restored its social status. But after nearly three centuries of official French, our institutions did not relinquish the language of privilege lightly. They began to suffuse English with thousands of French words. This greatly extended our vocabulary so that today not quite a quarter of English words come from the French. Yet—and here’s the rub—our public language retains about double this proportion, well out of balance with the common tongue.

In fact, the institutions that established our public language deliberately chose an elevated style to reflect their social and political status. When Sir Thomas Elyot wrote the first educational text in English in 1531 to train those working at the court of Henry VIII, his dedication set much of the style to follow:

I late consideringe (moste excellent prince and myne onely redoughted sovereign lorde) my duetie that I owe to my naturall contrary with my faythe also of aliegeaunce and othe ... I am (as God juge me) violently stered to devulgate or sette fourth some part of my studie, trustyng theby tacquite me of my duties to God, your hyghnesse, and this my contrary. Wherfor takinge comfort and boldnesse, partly of your graces most benevolent inclination towarde the universall weale of your subjectes, partly inflamed with zeale, I have now enterprised to describe in our vulgare tunge the fourme of just publike weale:

This overdressed text used many then new words drawn from French, Latin and Greek. Elyot was attempting to enrich the English language, but the effect was also to separate the language of our institutions from the language of the people. It had its detractors almost from the start. Thomas Wilson

NEW MEMBERS

Robert Drummond

Corrina Fox

Susan Hatherly

Margie Peters-Fawcett

Robyn Short

in 1553 made the case for ‘Plainnesse’ and against what were called ‘inkhorn’ terms:

Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any straunge ynkehorn terms, but to speak as is commonly received: neither seeking to be over fine, nor yet living over-carelesse, using our speeche as most men doe, and ordering our wittes as the fewest have done. Some seeke so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language. And I dare sweare this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they say: and yet these fine clerkes will say, they speake in their mother tongue ...

Unfortunately, the institutions that became home to the professions tended towards Elyot rather than Wilson, overdressing their language in robes far more formal than their tasks required.

For many centuries, our public language has been more intent on sounding impressive rather than communicating clearly. What I find interesting is that renewed impetus for Aristotle’s concept of propriety emerged from the literary world at the turn of the eighteenth century. Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* praised Cowper as a new breed of poet, among the first in English who ‘combined natural thoughts with natural diction’. He contrasted this with much bad English poetry, in which:

... we find the most fantastic out-of-the-way thoughts, but in the most pure and genuine mother English; [or] the most obvious thoughts, in the language of the most fantastic and arbitrary.

Wordsworth in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* further explained the renewed philosophy of literary propriety:

There will be found in these volumes little of what is called poetic diction; I have taken as much pains to avoid it as other ordinarily take to produce it. ...

I hope that it will be found that in these Poems little falsehood of description, and that my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance.

While this critical theory had a significant impact on literature, unfortunately for our public language, overdressing remained the norm, and using the Latinate end of our vocabulary was a large part of the problem. The first rule of officialese seems to be to choose the longest, most Latinate word. We never ‘start’ or ‘finish’

things, or even ‘begin’ and ‘end’ them. We write of their ‘commencement’ and ‘termination’. We ‘endeavour’ instead of ‘try’, ‘utilise’ instead of ‘use’, ‘facilitate assistance’ instead of ‘help’.

‘Churchill in 1940 took time...to write a memo to every civil servant, imploring them to adopt a more efficient style.’

Of course, individual words make little difference until you build them into full phrases and sentences. We don’t ‘think’, but ‘are of the view that’; we speak of replying ‘in the immediate future’ instead of ‘soon’; about ‘transferring payment in the amount of \$150’ instead of ‘paying \$150’. By the time you get to whole paragraphs they sound something like this letter I received from my local council:

In terms of reaching its decision Council took into consideration the matters in your submission and as the proposal complied with the objectives of Council’s policies and conformed to the relevant statutory requirements, Council was of the opinion that the application should be approved.

By simplifying the vocabulary, you can express the same text as:

Council considered your submission, but decided to approve the application because it complies with Council policy and meets legal requirements.

The first version demands greater skills of comprehensive, higher concentration and patience, not to mention more paper and ink. It seems most intent on sounding authoritative, of conveying ‘gravitas’.

So plain English first of all was focused on propriety of style, which meant using simpler words fitted to audience, content and purpose rather than elaborate, overly-Latinised text.

2. How has plain English evolved?

The more widespread resistance to this problem probably kicked off with two of the most important writers of the 20th century: Winston Churchill and George Orwell.

Churchill and Orwell

Churchill in 1940 took time out—in the middle of the Battle of Britain—to

write a memo to every civil servant, imploring them to adopt a more efficient style:

Let us have an end to such phrases as these: ‘It is also of importance to bear in mind the following considerations ...’ or, ‘Consideration should be given to the possibility of carrying into effect ...’ Most of these woolly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether, or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from using the short, expressive phrase, even if it is conversational.

Here, Churchill is adding to the evolving concept of plain English the notion of inefficiency and clutter. Orwell identified some further specific elements in one of the most important essays of the century: ‘Politics and the English Language’. Orwell sketches what could be the first plain English manifesto as:

1. Never use a METAPHOR simile or other similar figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print
2. Never use a long word where a SHORT WORD will do
3. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out
4. Never use the passive where you can use the ACTIVE
5. Never use a FOREIGN PHRASE, a scientific word or a JARGON word, if you can think of an everyday English equivalent
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous

There are a couple of new things here. Orwell draws attention now to elements of grammar, and particularly the passive voice. This structure increases the demands on readers in comprehending a text. It also de-humanises prose and also makes it harder to call anyone to account. Why write clearly that ‘I think you can fund this project from your existing budget’, when you could take everyone out of the picture by saying ‘It is suggested that consideration be given to the implementation of the project out of existing budgetary resources’. Orwell’s other major contribution was to draw attention to the use and abuse of jargon and cliché.

Ernest Gowers

In the same decade as Churchill and Orwell, the first major account of plain English, and the first to use the term, was published in Britain: Ernest

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Tiered membership

The society's tiered membership system will work as follows.

Categories

This membership year (2008) the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. will offer members the option of three categories:

1. Existing members (as at 31 December 2006) can remain an ordinary member at the current fee (\$70/75) with the current entitlements; or
2. Existing and new members can become a professional editor member at the current ordinary fee with the current ordinary entitlements, provided you have two years experience in a paid editing role and can supply two letters confirming your experience; or
3. Existing and new members can become an associate member at a reduced fee (\$50) with reduced entitlements (an associate member cannot vote at an election, cannot become an office bearer and cannot be listed in the *Editorial Services Directory*).

Phasing in a new system

Before January 2011 all ordinary members will be asked to choose either:

1. Professional editor member status; or
2. Associate member status.

Four years should be sufficient time for those seeking professional status to gain professional experience if they do not already have it.

Experience

Professional editor members must have at least two years in-house experience as an editor or the equivalent freelance or part-time experience. For example, if you worked half-time as an editor for four years (part-time or freelance) then that would be an acceptable equivalent to two years full-time work as an in-house editor. Professional experience must be in a paid editing role. As professional members may have had career breaks, there is no limit on how long ago the professional editing experience was obtained. Professional editor members will be asked to provide details of their experience and two letters (in English) that can be checked by a subcommittee appointed for this purpose. The subcommittee will simply confirm the statements supplied by the third parties. The letters can just be a statement of the years of experience in an editorial role. See the essential **Professional Editor Membership form** for more details about requirements.

Corporate Associates

A new category of Corporate Associates is also available. Publishing companies and other businesses and organisations that support the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.'s aims can become Corporate Associates. For an annual fee of \$400, Corporate Associates of the society will receive five copies of *Blue Pencil* each month and two copies of the *Editorial Services Directory*, five free admissions to each monthly meeting and two free admissions to special events, such as the Christmas dinner. The usual member rates on professional development courses and workshops will apply to Corporate Associates for up to five attendees.

The Committee

Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

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Gower's *Plain Words*. The British Treasury originally commissioned this as a guide for the civil service. Its content includes all the elements we've seen so far, but added a few more:

Be simple. Be short. Be human.

Be correct.

Avoid superfluous words

Choose familiar words

Choose precise words

Use correct grammar

Use a minimum of stops, and use stops for clarity.

Gowers draws attention to sentence length to go along with word length as an element of plain English. The correlation between average length and difficulty of comprehension has since been reinforced through about 1,000 studies of readability. Gowers was also one of the first to link effective punctuation with plain English.

Criticism of plain English

So, if we pause for a moment and put some of these together, we form what was by the early 1970s the core of plain language concepts:

1. Write for your audience

2. Match the style of your text to your content and don't overdress

3. Use the simplest words possible

4. Cut the clutter

5. Avoid unnecessary jargon and cliché

6. Prefer the active voice

7. Write in short sentences on average

8. Use punctuation for clarity

All fairly sensible advice, so it's surprising that as plain English practitioners applied these principles to public language, they came under

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National survey results released

The fourth national survey of editors was conducted at the conference, 'From Inspiration to Publication', held in Hobart in May 2007. There were 132 responses to the survey with 87% female respondents and 13% male. Respondents were from all states, with some 16% of respondents from Tasmania. The survey was conducted by Pamela Hewitt, formerly a member of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

Just under half of the respondents described themselves as freelance.

Freelance editing rates were on average \$62.55, a slight increase on the average hourly rate of \$61 reported in the 2005 third national survey of editors. Average hourly rates for editing were \$66 in Victoria, \$65 in NSW, \$64 in the ACT, \$63 in South Australia, \$62 in Tasmania, \$56 in Queensland and \$51 in Western Australia.

The highest reported hourly rate for editing was \$160 and the lowest was \$34. Higher rates were charged for services such as project management

and document development. High priorities for respondents included that the professional associations take on a greater public promotion role, that professional development activities increase, and that more effort be put into mentoring and career advice and development. A full report on the national survey is on the IPEd website. Details from the state-based Society of Editors (NSW) salary survey conducted by Meryl Potter will appear in the December issue of *Blue Pencil*.

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some heavy criticism, much of it in Australia.

The Communications Research Institute of Australia (CRIA) has been one of the most vocal critics of plain English, arguing that there is far more to effective communication than these narrow elements of language. It is possible, for example, to write a document passing the plain English test and still have it fail for its audience.

But even as CRIA was making these criticisms, plain language practitioners were already expanding their tools beyond this original focus on expression elements. Martin Cutts' 1994 *Oxford Pocket Guide to Plain Language* is perhaps the best example. Cutts offers 21 'guidelines' that expand the scope of the discipline well beyond Orwell or Gowers:

1. Writing shorter sentences
2. Preferring plain words
3. Writing tight
4. Favouring the active voice
5. Using vigorous verbs
6. Using vertical lists
7. Negative to positive
8. Cross-references, cross readers
9. Clearly non-sexist
10. Sound starts and excellent endings
11. Using good punctuation
12. Seven writing myths
13. Conquering grammarphobia
14. Planning effectively
15. Using reader-centred structures
16. Using alternatives to words, words, words

17. Management of colleague's writing

18. Good practice with email

19. Writing better instructions

20. Lucid legal language

21. Basics of clear layout

All the traditional elements are here of course, but there is so much more. The two big additions relate to structure and design.

Structure and design

The key principle of structure that plain language promotes is to start with the most important information and then follow with the details. Officialese documents are instead mostly structured in a narrative, ordering all information by chronology. A document might start by defining the topic, but will then cast back through its entire history before coming to any kind of point.

In government agencies, for example, the standard briefing note format for Ministers follows a series of set headings: Issue, defining the problem; Background, going into its history at length; Current Position, bringing the story into the present; Advice, outlining anyone the author has consulted; Comment, where we might finally get some analysis, and Recommendation, where the Minister is asked to approve a particular course of action.

The effect is to concentrate most of the key information towards the end, but spread enough of it throughout the narrative so that Ministers spend their time turning back and forth trying to sift out what they need. Suggesting that agencies replace this structure with a top-heavy triangle, which concentrates all the core information at the start,

before then moving to the details, is at first like suggesting they walk to the moon during lunch hour. Yet once they make the change, they are increasingly amazed at how it improves both the efficiency and the quality of the writing.

Finally, there is the design of the text. Increasingly, we are understanding how the visual appearance of text contributes to clarity just as much as the syntax and morphology. No plain English practitioner today would neglect the visual layout and focus solely on expression elements. If document design was not a focus of early exponents such as Gowers, it was mostly because the technology of the time—the typewriter—could add very little value to the text compared to the modern word processor.

3. Where is plain language heading?

So plain language has evolved some way since the basic concepts of propriety that Aristotle put forward. It's not surprising that there is some confusion out there about what plain English actually involves. As a result, the current trend is to formulate some more rigorous and consistent notions of plain English by setting out formal standards.

But let me define what I mean by a standard of plain English. Broadly speaking, I believe there are three things we work with as plain language professionals:

- the writing itself
- perceptions about the writing
- actual outcomes of the writing

The writing of course involves the structure, design and expression

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elements that most people associate with plain English, but in reader perceptions and actual outcomes, we are starting to codify the ways we adapt to our audience, which I've argued is the very bedrock of our tradition. As a result, contemporary plain English takes account of six areas for standards:

- Audience
- Content and purpose
- Structure
- Language and style
- Design
- Outcomes

Existing standards

The last 15–20 years have seen the emergence of attempts at setting standards in different parts of the world. We don't have space for comprehensive coverage here, but let me outline four examples from different parts of the world. The first is typical of the 'checklist' approach adopted by organisations such as the Plain English Campaign (UK), the Plain Language Commission (UK) and the New Zealand WriteMark. These judge whether a text meets plain English standards by assessing the following criteria:

Structure

- Is the purpose of the document clear?
- Do logic and structure support document purpose?
- Are the key messages obvious and clearly stated?
- Are there useful, informative headings?
- Are summaries, examples and pull-quotes used where appropriate?
- Are lists used where appropriate?

Content

- Does the document contain appropriate, accurate content?
- Does the document answer likely questions?
- Are technical terms explained?
- Is it clear who readers can contact?
- Does the document use useful graphics?

Language

- Are precise, familiar, everyday words used?
- Is the text clear and understandable for its intended audience?

Are sentences mostly straightforward with few surplus words

Is the average sentence length 15–20 words?

Are active/passive constructions appropriate?

Are sentences mostly positive?

Are words like 'you' and 'we' used instead of 'the society' and 'the applicant'?

Are paragraphs reasonably short?

Are style and tone appropriate for the intended audience?

Are acronyms explained?

'The last 15–20 years have seen the emergence of attempts at setting standards in different parts of the world.'

Grammar, proof reading and style consistency

Does the document appear free from grammatical errors and well punctuated?

Does the document appear free from spelling and typing errors?

Does the document appear free from visual clutter?

Does the document appear free from inconsistencies in word use, spelling, capitalization and cross-references?

Layout and overall presentation

Is there a high degree of contrast between the type colour and the background colour?

Is there plenty of 'white space'?

Do fonts and other elements support readability?

In Australia, the Plain English Foundation applies its verbometrics system when evaluating an organisation's writing. This breaks down into similar categories, but focuses on more quantitative rather than qualitative measures, with a mix of writing, perception and outcome measures. The most common dozen that we use are listed in the table opposite.

South Africa – National Credit Act
The public sector has also been

wrestling with definitions of plain language, notably when setting standards for regulating industry and government writing. South Africa, for example, has codified plain English in the new *National Credit Act*:

64. (1) The producer of a document that is required to be delivered to a consumer in terms of this Act must provide that document-

(a) in the prescribed form, if any, for that document; or

(b) in plain language, if no form has been prescribed for that document.

(2) For the purposes of this Act, a document is in plain language if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the document is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal credit experience, could be expected to understand the content, significance, and import of the document without undue effort, having regard to-

(a) the context, comprehensiveness and consistency of the document;

(b) the organisation, form and style of the document;

(c) the vocabulary, usage and sentence structure of the text; and

(d) the use of any illustrations examples, headings, or other aids to reading and understanding.

USA – H. R. 3548

But perhaps the most significant recent event was the passing in April 2008 of the Brayley Bill in the US Congress. If it passes the Senate and the President, it will become the Plain Language in Government Communications Act 2007. Its purpose is:

To enhance citizen access to Government information and services by establishing plain language as the standard style for government documents issued to the public, and for other purposes.

(2) PLAIN LANGUAGE.—The term "plain language" means language that the intended audience can readily understand and use because it is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices of plain language writing.

SEC. 4. RESPONSIBILITIES OF FEDERAL AGENCIES.

(a) REQUIREMENT TO USE PLAIN LANGUAGE IN NEW DOCUMENTS.—Within one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, each agency—

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Plain English Foundation Verbumetrics System

Element	Measure	Scope
Audience and purpose		
Audience needs	Reader profile	Mapping of benchmarks suitable for the audience of a document
Reader perceptions	Perception surveys	Audience views on existing writing
Content and structure		
Focus	% key material	Ratio of key content: detail
Structure	Structure mapping	Evaluation of structural design, complexity, balance, headings, numbering and navigation
Persuasiveness	Value analysis	Ratio of description: analysis
Logic	Proof analysis	Evaluation of key arguments in an analytical document
Design		
Document design	Layout index	Weighted index of elements such as type, spacing, justification, visual aids, headings, bullets and lists etc
Language		
Tone	Tone scale	Language level and appropriateness for a particular audience
Readability	Fry graph	Likely comprehension of text with intended audience
Clarity	Active voice	Balance of different verb types and likely impact on audience
Efficiency	Key words	Ratio of core meaning words to functional words
Outcomes		
Usability	Testing	Measurement of actual outcomes

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(1) shall use plain language in any covered document of the agency issued or substantially revised after the date of the enactment of this Act;

(2) may use plain language in any revision of a covered document issued on or before such date; and

(3) shall, when appropriate, use the English language in covered documents.

(b) GUIDANCE.—In implementing subsection (a), an agency may follow either the guidance of the *Plain English Handbook*, published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Federal Plain Language Guidelines.

If any agency has its own plain language guidance, the agency may use that guidance, as long as it is consistent with the Federal Plain Language Guidelines, the *Plain English Handbook*, published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the recommendations made by the Comptroller General under section 5(c).

Although they vary in approach, we have in these examples a fair degree of consensus about what plain language might include. We might fashion a contemporary definition along the lines of:

Writing that adapts content, structure, expression and design to meet the

needs of a particular audience to achieve intended outcomes.

Armed with this definition, we could return to our opening sample and clearly conclude that it is far from plain English.

4. Implications for editors

But what exactly does all of this mean for the editor? Well, I would like to offer five conclusions for you all think about tonight when it comes to the relevance of plain English to your own careers.

1. There is a huge common ground between the fields of editing and plain English.
2. There is considerable economic opportunity in plain English for editors.
3. We need to further professionalise the field of plain English editing.
4. We need to develop substantive editing as a sub-set of editing practice.
5. Editors will benefit from engaging with the current developments in plain English.

A great opportunity for Australian editors to get more involved in plain English is coming up in October 2009,

when the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) is holding its seventh biennial conference in Sydney. We hope to see you there.

Dr Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation and the author of several books including Writing at Work (Allen and Unwin, 2007) a practical manual on effective professional communication.

Michael Lewis resigns

The society's president, Michael Lewis, has announced his resignation from the position due to family reasons and an increasingly heavy workload. Rest assured the society is in good hands with the Vice-presidents Terry Johnston and Pam Peters taking on the president's duties until the end of the year. Michael will also stay on as a general committee member to provide support to the committee. The committee and members thank Michael for his leadership and great contribution to the society during the past three years.

**The Committee
Society of Editors (NSW) Inc**

Freelancers do lunch in the Blue Mountains on Halloween Friday, 31 October

The next freelancers' lunch will be on Friday 31 October at the Grand View Hotel Bistro, Wentworth Falls in the beautiful Blue Mountains. Mains range from \$15; they also take dessert seriously. The hotel is a short walk from Wentworth Falls station and there are some spectacular longer walks to help you justify dessert. The Grand View would like some idea of numbers so please RSVP to Bruce Howarth (editorbruce@optusnet.com.au); he'll be happy to give you information on how to get there.

The society organises these lunches every second month or so. The invitation is cordially extended to other freelancers who work in the publishing industry. See you there!

Pathways to Publication Forum, 3 November

Varuna is conducting a one-day forum for emerging writers, featuring tips and techniques from some of Australia's top publishing names. The sessions

will be held at The Carrington Hotel in Katoomba. Cost is \$145 including lunch and refreshments. Full program and booking details are available from <www.varuna.com.au>.

The Little Green Grammar Book

Mark Tredinnick, guest speaker at our April 2007 meeting, appears to be working his way through the rainbow with the publication of *The Little Green Grammar Book*, following the success of *The Little Red Writing Book*. The new book is described as a 'writer's grammar: a grammar book by a writer for writers.'

Book Industry Survey

The Australian Publishers Association (APA) is partnering with the University of Melbourne Book Industry Study and Thorpe-Bowker to undertake 'an online survey of publishing activity and expectations in Australia'. The study aims to 'redress the shortage of high-quality information on the Australian book publishing industry, a problem exacerbated when the Australian Bureau of Statistics stopped surveying the industry in 2004'. Information about the study is available from the website

<www.culture-communication.unimelb.edu.au/publishing/book-industry-study.html>.

The Editorial Services Directory 2008-09 is now available

Members who have advertised their services in the Editorial Services Director 2008-09 should have received their complimentary copies. Copies can be purchased for \$20 (including postage) by contacting Terry Johnston. See the order form below for details.

IPed positons vacant

IPed is seeking a Company Secretary (paid position for 15 to 20 hours per month) and a Communications Committee Convenor (honorary role). Details are available on the IPed website <http://iped-editors.org>.

Web listing of communications jobs

Another resource for editors seeking work is COMjobs, a website that lists jobs in the communications industry, <www.comjobs.com.au>. Users can register to receive a weekly email of new job listings.

Order form: Editorial Services Directory 2008-09

The *Editorial Services Directory 2008-09*, published by Society of Editors (NSW) Inc., is now available. It has all the usual features including freelance editors listed by various categories such as Services Offered; Types of Published Material they have worked on; Subject (or Genre) specialities; together with an individual directory entry for each freelance editor. The price is \$20 per copy, which includes postage. A 25% discount applies for orders of 10 or more directories.

I would like to buy.....copy/ies of *Editorial Services Directory 2008-09* @ \$20 per copy (postage within Australia included) for a total of \$.....

Name:.....

Organisation:.....

Address:

.....

Cheque/money order, made out to Society of Editors NSW, enclosed for \$.....

Or please charge \$.....to my credit card:
 Bankcard MasterCard Visa

Credit card number:
.....

Expiry date:.....

Name on credit card:
.....

Cardholder's signature:
.....

Please return the form and payment to the society at PO Box 2229, Rose Bay North, NSW 2030 or by fax to (02) 9337 4126.



Deadly award winners

Anita Heiss and Peter Minter are the winners of the 2008 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Deadly Award for outstanding achievement in literature. The award, announced at a ceremony at the Sydney Opera House in October, is for the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (Allen & Unwin), which the pair edited.

4th IPEd National Editing Conference, 8 to 10 October 2009

The Society of Editors (South Australia) will host the conference 'Getting the Message Across' in Adelaide in 2009. See the society's website for more details, <www.editors-sa.org.au>

2008 Society Christmas Party

Tuesday, 2 December

Don't miss a special night of good food, good fun and good company at Kafenes Cafe Restaurant in Enmore starting at 6.30 p.m.

Put this not-to-be-missed date in your diary now.

See the enclosed flyer or the website for more details and to make a booking. RSVP Friday, 28 November.

Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007; Voicemail: (02) 9294 4999
<www.editorsnsw.com>.

Blue Pencil

Editor: Denise Holden

Assistants: Fiona Doig, Catherine Etteridge, Julie Harders, Meryl Potter, Nicky Shortridge

Printer: Complete Design, Marrickville

Published: 11 issues a year (including combined January/February issue)

Your comments and contributions are welcome. Mail them to the Editor, *Blue Pencil*, Society of Editors (NSW) Inc., PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007, or email the Editor at <bluepencil@editorsnsw.com>.

Copy deadline for the December issue is Tuesday, 11 November 2008.

The views expressed in the articles and letters, or the material contained in any advertisement or insert, are those of individual authors, not of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

Advertising rates

Full page, \$375; half page, \$200 (horizontal only); one-third page, \$125 (vertical or horizontal); quarter page \$100 (horizontal only); one-sixth page, \$75 (half of one column). Inserts: \$200 per hundred for DL-sized or A4 pre-folded to DL size. Circulation: approximately 375. Please note that the committee reserves the right to decide whether advertisements are appropriate for this newsletter.

Membership

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor for publication (print or electronic documents) and anyone who supports the society's aims. Membership is available in different categories.

Membership runs for a calendar year. The 2008 fees are \$70 for ordinary member or professional member renewals; \$75 for new professional members (\$45 if joining after 30 June); \$50 for associate member renewals or \$55 for new associate members. Interested organisations can become corporate associates for \$400 per year.

To obtain a membership application form go to the society's website <www.editorsnsw.com>, phone (02) 9294 4999 or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

Listing in the Editorial Services Directory

The society's *Editorial Services Directory* is available online at <www.editorsnsw.com/esd>. New listings and updates can be added quarterly as follows:

- online only: July (deadline 30 June); October (deadline 30 September)
 - print and online: January (deadline 31 December); April (deadline 31 March).
- The cost is \$40 per year (\$20 for new listings received from April to September) in addition to the fee for membership of the society. New listings should be submitted using a template available from Cathy Gray at <esd@editorsnsw.com>.

Committee meetings

All members are welcome to attend the society's committee meetings, generally held each month. Please contact a committee member for details if you wish to attend the next meeting.

2008 COMMITTEE

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Copy deadline for the December issue of

Blue Pencil

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

Professional development

InDesign for Editors (CS3)

Date: Thursday 20 November, 2008

Time: 9.00 a.m. – 4.30 p.m.

Presenter: Alpha Computer Consultants

Venue: Level 3, 123 Clarence Street, Sydney

Cost: Members only \$350 (lunch and refreshments included)

Editors are increasingly being asked to use InDesign for revision and copy fitting, and may also find more opportunities available to them if they are adept in desktop publishing. This course is designed specifically for editors, and we have negotiated a significant discount for members.

Topics covered include an introduction to InDesign; preferences; working with and formatting text, text wrap, paragraph and character styles, text controls, type composition and working with tables.

If you have no knowledge of design terminology or familiarity with design issues, we strongly recommend you read the relevant sections of part 3 of Snooks & Co's *Style Manual*, 6th edition.

Course includes: a folder of easy-to-use course notes for both PC and Mac, with screen shots, certificate, 12 months help desk support (via email to reinforce the learning) and repeat any public course within six months for free (conditions apply). Each student will have their own work station. Adobe certified instructor.

Special notes: The 13 November workshop filled very quickly so we recommend early application, with payment as there are only 11 places available. Reservations without payment will not be accepted. Bookings close Monday 3 November, 2008.

Regional members: Unfortunately we cannot offer our usual discount for regional members as the cost is set by the supplier.

This workshop will be opened to non-members on Monday 27 October, 2008. The 13 November workshop is now full and no further enrolments can be accepted.

Grammar for editors

Presenter: Pam Peters, Professor of Linguistics, Macquarie University

Date: February 2009

Cost: TBA

Venue: City Tattersalls Club, 198 Pitt Street, Sydney

To register for a workshop use the enclosed form or download one from the website. Details of payment options, including direct deposit payments, are on the form. For more information about the workshops, email Meryl Potter at <education@editorsnsw.com>.

Regional members living more than 200 km from Sydney may receive a 40 per cent discount on the cost of the society's workshops (excluding computer based workshops).