Plain Language

Clear Writing Campaign

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Plain Language in the US Government

- President Nixon decreed that regulations be written in “layman’s terms.”
- President Carter issued an Executive Order in 1978 requiring regulations to be easy-to-understand. (President Reagan rescinded it.)
- In 1983, the Federal Communications Commission issued final rules on citizen band radio – this was the first plain language regulation.

- In the late 70s, the Department of Education funded the Document Design Project, which helped many federal agencies develop clear forms and regulations.
- Not much happened in the 80s.
- In the 90s, the Clinton/Gore administration developed a strong interest in plain language.
- Meanwhile, a group of federal employees started meeting regularly. They encouraged their agencies to communicate more clearly.

- The federal group is now called PLAIN. It has a useful website at www.plainlanguage.gov
- President Clinton issued a presidential memo requiring plain language in June, 1998. At the same time, Vice President Gore started the No Gobbledygook awards.

- Throughout the 90s and 00s, many agencies had an increasing interest in plain language—Veterans Benefits Administration, Food and Drug Administration, Security and Exchange Commission, National Institutes of Health, and others.

Why did agencies get interested in plain language?

- Official interest from the top of an organization can help spread interest in plain language.
- Possibly more important, however, is interest at middle and lower levels, where the work happens.
- Individual advocates of plain language, many of them members of PLAIN, were key in making this happen.

How to get an agency interested in plain language

- Start with a clearly defined goal and make sure everyone knows what it is.
- Start a training program for all staff.
- Look for small successes and aim for continuous improvement — not rapid change.
- Start with the documents that go to the most people, or which are causing the most confusion. Measure the difference plain language makes in your results.

- Post examples of clearly written documents on a website or home directory as a reference tool. Before and after examples are especially powerful.
- Evaluate your progress frequently and seek feedback. Adjust your course if necessary.
- Designate “go to” people on your staff who are available to help others.
- Try to get managers to champion the process.
- Start an awards program to recognize achievements and publicize your progress.

What did we achieve?

- By the mid-00s, most agencies had heard of plain language.
- Many agencies had small plain language programs.
- A few agencies did plain language training.
- It was possible to find some clear US government documents.
- The vast majority of government material was still hard to read.

So we decided we would have to

Get Congress to pass a law!

What did we think a law would achieve?

- It would not be a silver bullet – federal writers would not start writing clearly over night.
- It would support all the federal employees who are trying to get their agencies to write more clearly.
- It would make federal agencies aware that Congress cares about clear communication – even if they don't communicate clearly themselves!

Plain Writing Act of 2010

- In October of this year, we reached our goal.
- Congress passed, and the President signed, the Plain Writing Act.
- The Act requires federal agencies to write all material the public needs to get federal services and benefits (and to pay taxes) in plain language.

How did we work with Congress?

To have any hope of success on Capitol Hill, you need either—

Lots of money, OR

Time,

Persistence, and

Contacts.

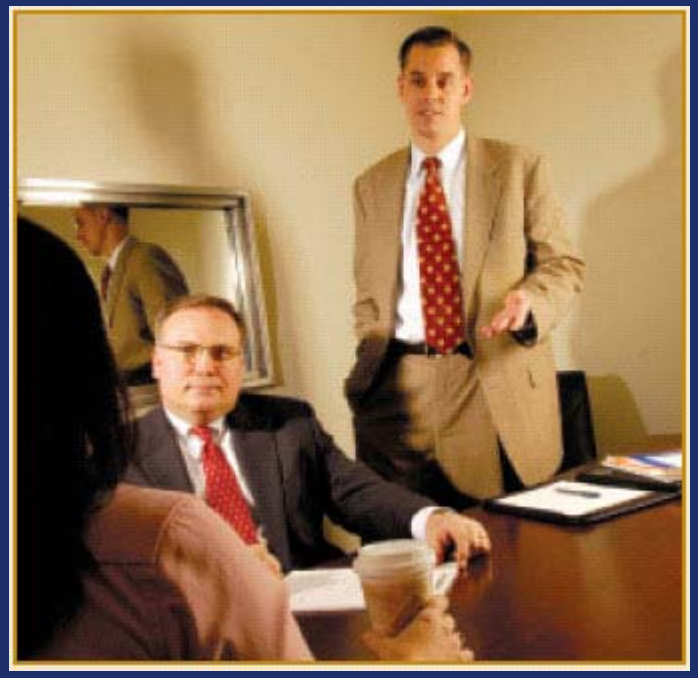
Well we didn’t have lots of money

So we started with a friend of a friend who worked on the Hill.

And she directed us to several other offices that might be interested.

So we started calling lots of people

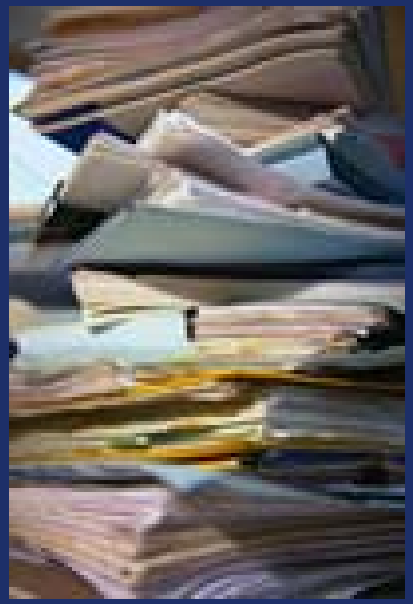
And then we visited many of the same people--whether they really wanted us to visit or not.



And we gave them all a CD with lots of information about plain language.

- a_What is plain language.doc
- b_bottom line.doc
- bottomline.JPG
- c_Clinton exec memo.doc
- d_Smallbusiness testimony 06...
- e_ttl2007_2.doc
- f_BLM final rule 05 02 07.pdf
- g_On Plain Language rules.doc
- h_WRITING READERtoc.doc
- i_WRITING READERsample.doc
- j_shortclips.doc
- k_Cheek testimony 06.doc
- l_Cheek testimony OR bill.doc
- m_criticisms of pl.pdf
- n_financial benefits of PL.pdf
- o_FL EO.doc
- p_Gore PL memo guidelines.doc
- q_pl gov homepage.jpg

This included a draft bill. We had several versions, tailored to the interests of the office we were visiting.



And of course we had the draft that did everything we wanted in a bill.

We visited and called and visited and called for 4 months:

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
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4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
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We finally found someone interested in a bill--

Bruce Braley, Freshman Democrat from Iowa, and a trial attorney

And a few months later

- We also found a Senate sponsor – Daniel Akaka, from Hawaii.

Then we circled around--

Making more calls and having more meetings, trying to get more co-sponsors, targeting members who might be particularly helpful in getting the bills passed.

We also asked for letters of support for the bill from important organizations, like American Association of Retired Persons (a huge and powerful group), the National Small Business Association, Disabled American Veterans, and others.

November 30, 2007

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
U.S. Senate
141 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Akaka:

The undersigned small-business organizations are pleased to support *S. 2291, the Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2007*, and we thank you for your leadership on the issue.

During this whole process, you have to be flexible. You aren’t going to get everything you want.

We really wanted to cover regulations, but we lost that in discussions with an important House committee that will have to approve the bill.

And you have to be ready to provide possible solutions to problems.

For example, the first bill required each agency to write its own guidance—a terrible solution.

So we were ready for the next version . . .

We've had a guidance document on http://www.plainlanguage.gov/ for years, buried on a page entitled "guidance."

So we changed its name to "Federal plain language guidelines" and put a link on the homepage.

And the bill's drafters accepted it as a legitimate set of guidelines.

Federal Plain Language Guidelines

Download the Word or PDF version of the full Guidelines.

Introduction

I. Thinking about your audience
- Identify and write for your audience
- Address separate audiences separately

II. Organizing your document
- Organize to meet your readers' needs
- Address one person, not a group
- Use lots of useful headings
- Write short sections

III. Writing your document

a. Words

1. verbs
- Use active voice
- Use the simplest form of a verb
- Avoid hidden verbs
- Use "must" to indicate requirements
- Use contractions when appropriate

2. nouns and pronouns
- Avoid noun strings
- Use pronouns to speak directly to readers
- Minimize abbreviations

- The bill was formally introduced in 2007.
- In that Congress, we got it out of the House with a vote of 276 to 1.
- But we ran into problems with a conservative Senator, and didn’t get it out of the Senate. So we had to start over.
- The bill was introduced again in 2009. Again, we got it through the House quickly, but ran into some of the same problems in the Senate.

Success at last

- Finally, we got our bill out of the Senate, after some last-minute compromises.
- The vote in the House was 286 to 33, the vote in the Senate was unanimous.

What's next?

- This isn't really the end, it's just the beginning.
- Now we have to help agencies implement the program.
- The federal group will offer training, a model website, a model action plan, and so on.
- The Center will also offer help, and will keep an eye on how effective the agencies are in implementing the bill.

Resources

www.centerforplainlanguage.org

www.plainlanguage.gov

acheek@patriot.net