

Center for Plain Language, 3936 Rickover Road, Silver Spring, MD 20902
www.centerforplainlanguage.org 301.523.8563

Plain Language Bill Passes the House: Vote Almost Unanimous



by Annetta Cheek

On February 26, 2008, the House Committee on Small Business: Subcommittee on Contracting and Technology, held a public hearing on the Braley Bill, HR 3548. The Hearing was entitled Plain Language in Paperwork—The Benefits to Small Business. Bruce Braley (IA), the sponsor of the bill, chaired the hearing, joined by David Davis (TN), ranking member of the subcommittee.

The panel of witnesses included Christopher Cox, Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission; Robert Romasco, AARP Board of Directors; Todd McCracken, Executive Director of the National Small Business Association; and Annetta Cheek, Chair of the Center for Plain Language.

All the witnesses strongly supported HR 3548. The bill would require federal agencies to write any material intended for the public about government services, benefits, and taxes in plain language. All witnesses cited the cost in time and resources of poor government communication. Several mentioned that Congress should also address regulations, which are not in this bill.

On March 14, the full committee with jurisdiction over the bill, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, marked up the bill and reported it out of committee to the full House. The last step for HR 3548 was a vote of the full House. On April 14 it passed the House, 376 to 1! The holdout, Jeff Flake of Arizona, said in a press release, “Bad bill. I voted no.” I’m surprised, since obviously he’s a plain language advocate.



Annetta Cheek, representing the Center, who by all accounts delivered compelling testimony. She made us proud.

The Plain Language in Government Communications Act, HR 3548, was passed by the House of Representatives on April 14, 2008, by a vote of 376 to 1.

Please call your Senators and urge them to vote for S 2291, the Senate version of the Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2007. S. 2291 was voted out of committee earlier this month without amendment and will soon go to the full Senate for a vote.

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The companion bill in the Senate is S 2291, sponsored by Daniel Akaka (HI). The committee with jurisdiction, Oversight and Governmental Affairs, passed that bill out of committee unanimously on April 10. Senate co-sponsors include Carper (DE), Clinton (NY), Cochran (MS), Collins (ME), Levin (MI), McCaskill (MO), Obama (IL), Tester (MT), and Voinovich (OH). This is a strong set of co-sponsors, from both sides of the aisle.

Now we are waiting for a vote of the full Senate. Given the strong support in the House, we are confident it will pass, if we can get it to a vote. If it does, the two bills will go to a committee of both Houses, which will work out any differences in the two versions. If your Senators aren't on this list, call them and encourage them to sign on as co-sponsors and to help move the bill to the Senate floor.



Congressman Bruce Braley asking a follow-up question of Annetta Cheek (Chair of the Center for Plain Language) after her testimony.

...And, You Can Quote Me!

by Melodee Mercer

The hearing for HR 3548 was enough to make Plain Language advocates feel like the ceiling opened and common sense rained in on the halls of Congress. Congressmen and witnesses alike all said the things we know to be true. With the exception of statistics cited and Chairman Chris Cox's history of the word "gobbledygook," I didn't hear anything I didn't already know. But it was such a joy to hear others take up our cause so eloquently.

Congressman Bruce Braley—Sponsor of HR 3548, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Contracting and Technology, U.S. House Committee on Small Business

"Communications from Federal entities are often confusing and difficult for small businesses to understand. Agencies... have complicated forms and instructions that contribute to a paperwork burden which is costing entrepreneurs nearly \$50 per hour. It doesn't have to be this way.

If the goal of these communications is to produce results and establish guidelines, the government needs to account for the audience. Too often, government bureaucrats issue these



Witnesses supporting HR 3548: (left to right)—Robert Romasco—AARP Board of Directors, Todd McCracken—President of the National Small Business Association, Keith Hall—National Association for the Self-Employed, Annetta Cheek—Chair of the Board, Center for Plain Language, Christine Grundmeyer, RN—National Association of Homecare and Hospice

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forms and paperwork with no thought if anyone will be able to understand them.”

Congressman David Davis—Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Contracting and Technology, U.S. House Committee on Small Business

“I am sure there are people who have read a federal regulation and said, ‘Gee! That sure is a plain and easy-to-read text.’ I am not one of those people. As a small business owner myself, I know firsthand that a quick perusal of the Federal Register is enough to make a wooden man crazy.”

Chairman Christopher Cox—U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission

[To Chairman Braley and Ranking Member Davis and the advocates in attendance] “...while you are leaders in this effort, you are not the first mavericks in Congress to take up the battle for clearly written legal rules. In fact, the very first reported appearance of the word “gobbledygook” was in 1944, when it was coined by a Congressman actually named Maverick. U.S. Representative Maury Maverick was a Texas Democrat who wrote a memo that banned all “gobbledygook language” from his office. He said he made up the word to imitate the noise a turkey makes. And, to show you just how serious he was about plain English, he added in his memo, “Anyone using the words ‘activation’ or ‘implementation’ will be shot.

At the SEC, we have more modest penalties in store for both staff and public offenders. But we’re dead serious about plain English.”

Christine Grundmeyer, RN—National Association of Homecare and Hospice

“For purposes of this testimony, I highlight two areas... where ‘Plain English’ is an elusive element. In fact, if there was a ‘Plain English’ requirement applied to these areas... in the same manner that the substantive standards of the rules have been implemented, it might take 100 or more pages to define,

redefine, clarify, and explain the meaning of ‘Plain English.’”

Keith Hall—National Association for the Self-Employed

“Utilizing plain, easy-to-understand language in government forms and publications is not a complicated issue nor should it be controversial. It is simply the most effective and just manner of communication between our federal government and our citizenry which would produce sound benefits to our nation’s economy.”

Todd McCracken—President of National Small Business Association

“Lacking legions of paperwork soldiers, most small-business owners are left alone in their battle to understand the letters, forms, notices, and instructions they receive from the federal government. As you might guess, far too often, the result is a slaughter. Forget death by a thousand cuts—try a billion. In fiscal year 2005, the American public spent 8.4 billion hours wrestling with federal paperwork requirements...”

Annetta Cheek—Chair of Center for Plain Language

“Poor writing isn’t restricted to the federal government, but the government has a higher responsibility to communicate clearly with citizens. American taxpayers pay the cost of their government, and they deserve to understand what it’s doing... This type of language is expensive, time-consuming, and annoying. It puts citizens at risk and makes it difficult, if not impossible, for federal agencies to fulfill their missions effectively and efficiently.”

If you would like to watch the entire hearing, you can find it on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=8E8F313DCFEA4C79

Center for Plain Language

About the Center

The Center is incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia as a non-stock, not-for-profit corporation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

Newsletter Editors Melodee Mercer, Anne McCann, Eric Spears

Board Members Annetta Cheek, Chair; Joanne Locke, Vice Chair; Lee Clark Johns, Treasurer; Melodee Mercer, Secretary; Deborah Bosley; Dana Botka; Amy Bunk; Joe Kimble; Karen Schriver; William A. Smith; John Spotila

Executive Director Don Byrne

We’re on the Web! www.centerforplainlanguage.org

E-mail editor@centerforplainlanguage.org

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...And, There Were Letters of Endorsement, Too!

Congressman Braley's office received several letters in support of HR 3548 from organizations like the Disabled American Veterans and AARP. We thought you might like to read one of them.

Reprinted with permission: Letter from David P. Sloane, AARP Senior Managing Director, Government Relations & Advocacy

Dear Representative Braley:

AARP supports efforts to encourage greater use of plain language in all government communications, and we commend you for introducing HR 3548, the Plain Language in Government Communications Act of 2007. We believe this legislation will improve the federal government's effectiveness and accountability to the public by promoting reliably clear communication that the public can understand and use.

Some may believe that the desirability of using plain language in government communications is so obvious that legislation encouraging such a standard is unnecessary. Unfortunately, there is ample evidence to suggest otherwise. AARP staff hears every day from our members who cannot understand the dense writing and legalese in correspondence they receive from the federal government. In most cases, this lack of comprehension is not the fault of the reader but rather reflects the impenetrable writing style of the government agency.

Use of plain language in documents issued to the public will save the federal government an enormous amount of time now spent helping citizens understand the correspondence they receive. It will also reduce errors in the public's response to the information government sends out, and minimize complaints from frustrated citizens trying to decipher overly legalistic and non-transparent communications. In short, plain language will result in more effective and efficient government.

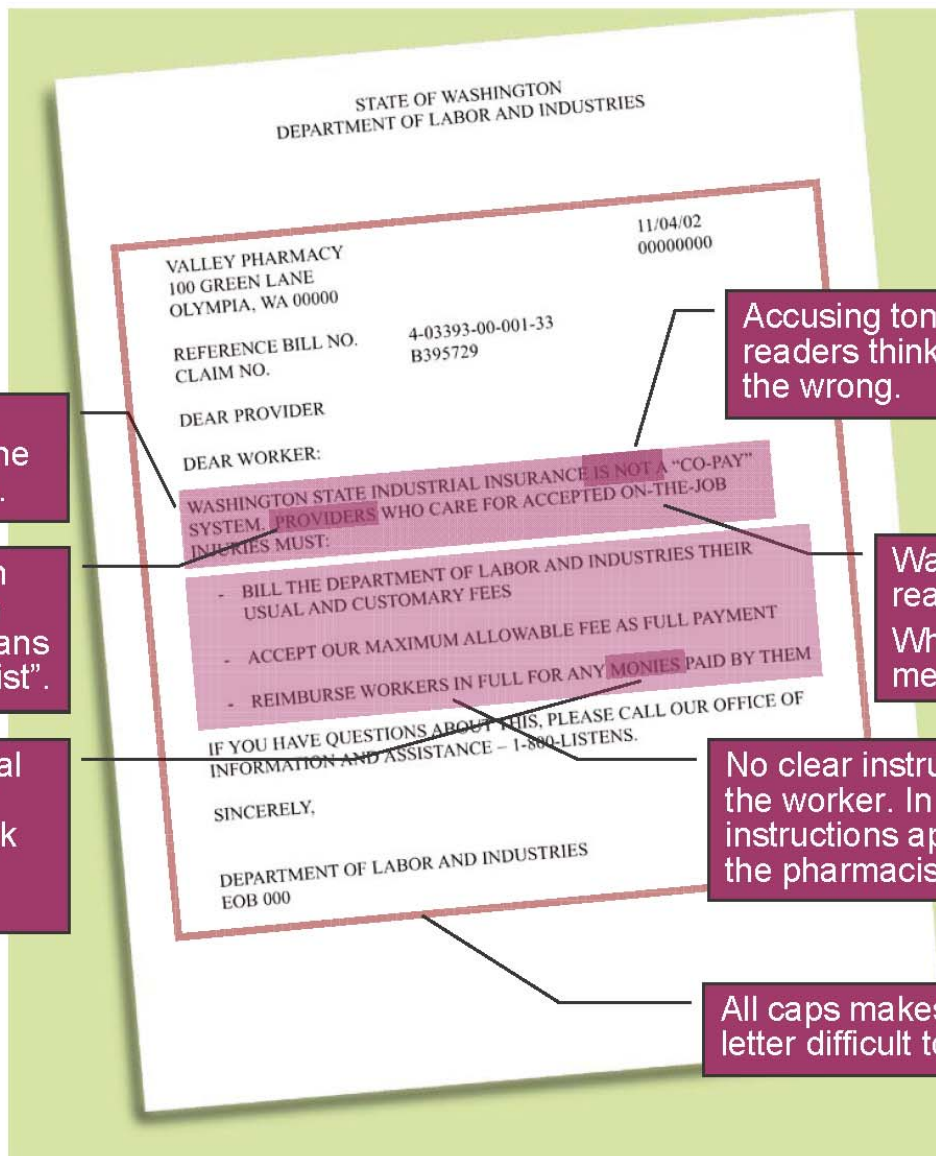
AARP respectfully encourages Congress to adopt this sensible and much-needed legislation.

Show Me

Before-After Examples

This letter was rewritten as part of the State of Washington's first "Plain Talk" project to rewrite 100 form letters in a year. The Washington Department of Labor and Industries' medical billings section, which administers the state's workers' compensation program, was constantly getting calls from injured workers receiving the "Before" letter who thought they had done something wrong. In fact, the pharmacies (referred to as providers in this case) had incorrectly charged them a co-pay, and the letter was actually instructing the workers to get a refund.

Before



The customer isn't told why the letter was sent.

Accusing tone makes readers think they're in the wrong.

"Provider" is an insider term. In this case it means "your pharmacist".

Wasted "prime real estate." What's the message?

Antiquated legal terms make customers think they need an attorney.

No clear instructions for the worker. In fact, instructions appear to be to the pharmacist.

All caps makes the letter difficult to read.

Show Me

Before-After Examples

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After

STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR AND INDUSTRIES
P.O. Box 44000 • Olympia, Washington 98504-4000

Date: _____
TO: Injured Worker _____ Claim Number _____
FROM: Department of Labor and Industries (L&I)

Please ask your pharmacist to refund your co-payment
You mailed us the attached co-payment receipt so that we could reimburse you for this work-injury related cost. However, your pharmacist should not have charged you for filling this prescription(s).

How to collect your refund

- Call or write your pharmacist.
- Explain that your injury was work-related and covered by L&I.
- Give your pharmacist your claim number and the date your prescription was filled, along with any other information requested to bill L&I for your claim.
- If you or your pharmacist has questions, call 1-800-848-0811 for help.

How pharmacists providers are paid in work-injury cases
In work-injury claims, such as yours, pharmacists are reimbursed by L&I and may not be paid by anyone else. This means that if they do receive any payments from you — or your private insurance company — they must refund the money in full.

For details on the legal billing requirements, your pharmacist should reference WAC 296-20-010, WAC 296-20-125, WAC 296-20-170, WAC 296-20-17001, and WAC 296-20-17002.

Medical Information Payment System (MIPS)
PO Box 44269
Olympia WA 98504-4269
Web site address: <http://www.LNI.wa.gov/hsa>

Callout boxes:

- Tell them why you are sending the letter.
- Put your main message at the top.
- State instructions clearly in a logical order.
- Use boldface for your main points. It will make it easier to scan.
- Keep background information to a minimum.
- WAC references belong at the bottom.
- Include your website address.

Attachment

Center for Plain Language Position Paper On International Plain Language Standard

The Center for Plain Language has been a strong advocate for plain language here in the United States, and internationally, as well. At the PLAIN International Conference held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, last October, Joe Kimble presented the Center for Plain Language's position paper advocating for the development of internationally accepted plain language techniques.

The full position paper is presented here without bibliography. The position paper, with bibliography, will be available on-line shortly. We will give you the link in our next newsletter. If you need the bibliography before then, please e-mail us at centerforplainlanguage@gmail.com

Center for Plain Language Position Paper On International Plain Language Standard

International Plain Language Standards, The View from the Center for Plain Language,
by Annetta L. Cheek, with Joe Kimble, Karen Schriver, and John Spotila

The challenges of this conference

The Center for Plain Language supports developing internationally accepted recommendations about plain language techniques. Recommended techniques would help improve communication and build broader support for the use of plain language everywhere. The Center will be glad to join in that development effort.

The Center believes that we should focus our energy and attention on this international effort rather than on trying to set up an accreditation program for plain language professionals. Personally, having been present during the early days of an accreditation program for my original profession (archeology), I know that accreditation endeavors can be divisive. We need to approach this with much caution and not act until we have widespread agreement on what plain language is, considering a multilingual, multicultural context. Otherwise, we may do more harm than good to the plain language effort.

Nor does the Center believe it prudent to devote scarce time and resources to setting up an Institute, unless a University or major donor steps forward to do so with our help. Forming an Institute is a huge task. It takes time, and money. And of course it takes much time to get money. It makes more sense to consider forming an umbrella organization, a federation of organizations, to which PLAIN, the Center, Clarity, and other interested plain language groups could belong. If resources become available, that could grow into the Institute Christine Mowat envisions.

We agree that it would be helpful to have a central entity gathering and disseminating knowledge about plain language. The umbrella organization could take on this role. There is already a significant body of research addressing many of the plain language techniques we promote. This research arises from many different professions and none of us is aware of all that exists. We need to find out about that research; we cannot afford to waste time or money reinventing the wheel. Having a central source for information about research into plain language techniques would be a boon to those of us who practice and advocate plain language.

How do we know it's plain language?

It is difficult to agree on what is "plain" language in any language. Neil James relates a circumstance that is all too common. Plain language practitioners of English face resistance from people who believe they already write in plain language. We can challenge them to tell us how they know, but in truth often we don't know, either. How can we convince doubters that we can write their material in plain language, when we can't clearly tell them what it is? This problem in deciding what is "plain" in my native language, English, becomes even more difficult when we try to determine what is "plain" in Spanish or French or German or Russian, or for that matter in Arabic or Mandarin.

That's one of the major challenges we face in an international program. Language is intertwined with culture and both differ enormously across the globe. To encourage the broad use of plain language, we must identify common principles that interested native speakers can apply within their own language and culture.

The Center believes that we already agree on some of these common principles. With further work, we can expand the list. Let me explain.

Plain language is audience specific and defined by outcomes

Many of us use the definition of plain language originally developed years ago by Ginny Redish. If you want to claim your material is in plain language, your intended audience must be able to find what they need, understand it the first time they read it, and use it to fulfill their needs. Neil talks about outcomes, and to me plain language is measured by its outcomes. When I teach a class in plain language, I use Ginny's definition of plain language. I tell the audience that the rest of what I teach is just techniques a writer can use to achieve plain language—it is not defined by those techniques. No one technique is necessary to create a plain language document. The basic principle of plain language is that the intended audience can use the document for its intended purpose. And the most certain way to tell that is by testing the document with the intended audience. This is true whatever the language and whatever the cultural context.

International Plain Language Standards, The View from the Center for Plain Language (continued...)

Only after we agree on this and other common principles should we turn to the question of techniques. Techniques are means to an end and by their very nature must vary with each different language and each different culture and each different audience. Some techniques may work well almost everywhere. Others may be effective only in certain settings. All of them are tools that practitioners should use only when suitable.

Testing is important

We understand it's difficult to get organizations to test documents. Nevertheless, testing offers a proven way of assessing whether communication is "plain" enough. Besides, we believe it's more realistic to think that we can get organizations to test their documents than it is to think we can get an international group of plain language practitioners to agree on detailed, specific, meaningfully-measurable techniques.

There are different sorts of testing, and some are easier and cheaper than others. We could establish standards on a scale, considering the effectiveness of a testing technique, the number of subjects tested, and whatever other aspects of testing we considered important. Regardless of the specific testing methods, tests would have to support a conclusion that a document has reached the goal of being understandable to and usable by the intended audience. If it has, it is a plain language document, regardless of what plain language techniques were used to achieve that end.

We believe we will make more progress toward international plain language standards if we talk about standards based on testing, rather than on the presence or absence of specific plain language techniques. As it is difficult to get organizations to do testing, we probably need a fallback based on techniques. But we must keep in mind that they are the means to creating documents that work for the intended audience. Their presence does not prove the document is in plain language.

So is there any role for plain language techniques?

Of course. We have to be able to tell people how to get to the goal of having their material understandable and usable by their readers. So we believe we should assemble information on techniques, including which are the most helpful for most audiences and document types. However, we don't think we should get hung up on specifying which techniques are most helpful for which audiences. Nor should we struggle with deciding the degree to which each

technique is required—how long sentences can be, what percent of passive voice is allowed. And the Center opposes the idea of certifying that a document is a "plain language document" if testing does not show that it meets the criteria in Ginny's definition. Without testing, the most we can say is that it uses the techniques of plain language.

Developing a strategy for testing plain language techniques

Assuming we agree there is a role for plain language techniques, we need to assess what's already known. The best arguments for the effectiveness of plain language are found in the empirical literature on how readers respond to writing and design. Here we find studies that show that word choice is crucial and that complex sentences actually do confuse people. Here we find research on the impact of visual design on reading—studies of typography, layout, graphics, and visual impression. Karen Schriver has spent the last year analyzing this empirical literature (a short piece of which is summarized next), but her focus was on studies that bear on writing and design in English—it would be interesting to determine whether and to what degree any of the principles discussed in this section pertain to other languages.

Up to now, the research does not tell us the whole story about what makes text comprehensible and usable, but the good news is that there is already a considerable amount of empirical research on writing and design—important work that plain language advocates can draw on and use now. A recent review of the literature integrates the findings of over three hundred studies of writing and design; see Schriver [1].

A strategy for driving design choices with data: consolidate existing research and identify research gaps

As the international plain language movement moves forward toward making recommendations about plain language techniques, we must build on what is already known and disseminate that information widely. We can then identify gaps in the research literature and fund new investigations of those knotty issues still untested.

Let's examine a plain language maxim and illustrate how a strategy of both consolidating the existing research and identifying gaps between the known and unknown can help us make better and more informed design choices. As a case in point, we will examine the plain language guideline, "use short simple words." The key question is:

International Plain Language Standards, The View from the Center for Plain Language (continued...)

Does the empirical data support this practice? Do readers really understand short words more easily? Do they prefer them? To answer these questions requires examining the literature on word-level textual choices and their impact on readers. Following is a summary of the empirical findings on some of the word-level text features that influence how people read. After this summary, we identify the research gaps in the literature from the perspective of a plain language advocate. An important feature of this analysis is that it could lead directly to designing new studies focused specifically on questions our constituency cares about.

Case in point: consolidating existing empirical findings about word-level choices

Research on the impact of word-level features on reading has been carried out since the 1940s. Studies have focused on issues related to how word choice influences readers' understanding of content. Researchers have identified a number of word-level features that influence the clarity of writing. The most studied word-level textual choices include the following:

- Word Length and Frequency
- Word Difficulty
- Word Concreteness
- Noun Strings
- Nominalizations

Word length and frequency

Word length. Studies of reading tell us that word length is an important predictor of comprehension [2]. Advocates of plain language have long argued that short words make for better understanding, but the research to support this claim has not been integrated. Studies show that short words are easier to recognize, faster to interpret, easier to learn, and better remembered than long words [3], [4], [5], [6]. Information designers who want their readership to retain the content should avoid embroidering the key ideas with long words.

Another consistent finding is that many short words are also high-frequency words, those words native speakers of a language hear all the time [7]. Put differently, words that appear frequently in a language are usually short words, helping people communicate more quickly [8]. Consequently, short high-frequency words are recognized immediately by readers and require little attention to comprehend in comparison to low-frequency words [9], [10]. Furthermore, short low-frequency words are easier to recognize than long low-frequency words [11].

Implications. This research makes clear that short words rather than long words and high-frequency rather than low-frequency words can have substantial benefits for readers. Short low-frequency words are good for all readers—skilled and unskilled—and information designers do readers a favor when they use them.

Word Frequency. Since the early 1900s, reading researchers have been concerned with the impact of word frequency on understanding. Researchers hoped to assess the relative ease of texts by using word frequency to index the difficulty of the text's words. Some of this work led to developing lists of the most frequent words in English [12], [13], [14], [15]. Other research culminated in computational models of how frequently words appear in a language [16]. For example, Zipf demonstrated that in many languages there is a statistical relationship between the frequent and infrequent words, such that short words tend to be familiar words (and more frequent), longer words tend to be unfamiliar words (and more infrequent), and unfamiliar words are often (though not always) more difficult to understand (this relationship is called "Zipf's law"). Zipf showed that in everyday communication, people tend to choose words that require the least effort, coining the "least effort principle" to describe people's tendency to take the shortest route to stating an idea [8].

Klare points out that word frequency plays such a central role in what makes text difficult that it became a basic part of readability formulas [110]; for a discussion, see [17]. Of course, the validity of readability formulas for predicting the understandability of text has been shown to be seriously problematic [18], [19, 20], [21]. Even so, that does not mean that research on word frequency and its correlation with text difficulty is invalid. The correlation has not gone away: hard words still make text difficult. Word frequency has been incorporated into recent comprehensibility formulas that take into account text features derived from current psycholinguistic research and traditional readability measures [10], [9].

Over the years, psychologists and reading researchers have made many comparisons of high-frequency words and low-frequency words [22], [11]. Not too surprisingly, they find that high-frequency words are recognized faster and require less attention than low-frequency words [23], [24], [25]. Studies show that the more memory consumed by recognizing the words in a sentence, the fewer cognitive resources the reader has for higher-level processes such as making inferences about what the text means [5]. More

International Plain Language Standards, The View from the Center for Plain Language (continued...)

recently, information architects such as Maurer have drawn on Lakoff's research on the cognition of categorization to suggest that short high-frequency words often represent fundamental categories and thus have a good "information scent" [26], [27].

Implications. The research shows clearly that information designers should use high-frequency words when they can. Of course, there will always be situations in which a low-frequency word is the perfect choice. When needed, writers should aim for short low-frequency words rather than long low-frequency words. By implication, research on word frequency suggests that organizations should think twice before coining new words and creating acronyms, since their unfamiliarity will likely slow people down, both in searching and understanding. Studies are consistent in suggesting that familiar words should be used in headings, labels, and links to speed the retrieval of content.

Word Difficulty

Studies of word difficulty focus on differences between simple and complex words. Most researchers define simple words as "easy to pronounce" or with "few syllables," and hard as "difficult to pronounce" or with "many syllables" [28], [29]. Research shows that many simple words are high-frequency words [8], [11].

Implications. Information designers can conclude that a simple word is almost always a better choice than a complex one. By implication, this research suggests that organizations should avoid long low-frequency words as well as words that native speakers find tricky to pronounce. This does not mean avoiding precise words. Readers can only acquire an accurate understanding of the content when the text is composed of words that are precise. It does mean that writers should aim to make lexical choices that are precise while at the same time simple and familiar to the general public.

Word Concreteness

An important line of research on how people understand words is concreteness (for example, the difference between understanding "apple" and "liberty"). This research compares abstract and concrete words and finds that learning and remembering concrete words is easier [22], [23], [24]. Studies show that because concrete words often evoke more synonyms and more visual imagery than abstract words, readers have an easier time retrieving their meaning [25], [26].

Concrete words also give writers more opportunities to substitute one word for another (lexical substitution) as they compose progressive sentences. If keywords in the text's main idea are concrete, the idea can be embroidered and extended over sentences and paragraphs with other concrete words that are semantically linked, making it much more likely that readers will get the main point [25], [7], [8].

Implications. If the subject matter is inherently complex, detail the main ideas with concrete words that are vivid. When elaborating main ideas that are inherently abstract, it is better to provide just-in-time information where the reader needs it. In composing online, use a "roll-over" for the detail, particularly if the elaboration interrupts the text; in hardcopy, use margin notes that align horizontally with the content.

Noun Strings

Strings of nouns (noun + noun + noun) make it hard for readers to parse ideas, as in the following (from a letter from a bank):

"You have exceeded the federal banking regulation transaction number for excessive money market pre-authorized automatic electronic debit transactions."

Noun strings often slow readers' efforts to make sense of the syntax of the sentence [27], [28], especially if one of the nouns is also a nominalization—a noun made from a verb or adjective, for example:

"The chief loan officer controls the allocation of pre-screened amortization candidates and the refusal of your application suggests non-qualification or a history of late payment."

Implications. Writers should avoid noun strings for they slow down the reading process and often confuse readers [8], [7]. Noun strings may have more of an impact on readers without topic knowledge about the text's main ideas and on readers who have difficulty with reading. Readers with topic knowledge about the text's content may be familiar with noun strings in that topic area and read them at the same rate as other text.

Overall, even though noun strings are intended to save space (to say the idea faster and make it shorter—usually good ideas), in this case, they appear to do more harm than good [29]. Moreover, they make the text seem dense, ponderous, and at times pretentious.

International Plain Language Standards, The View from the Center for Plain Language (continued...)

Nominalizations

Nominalizations are nouns that have been derived from verbs or adjectives, often with Latin suffixes such as “ize,” or “tion” (e.g., customization instead of customize or cessation instead of cease). Nominalizations tend to make texts wordy and may make it difficult for readers to comprehend the main idea quickly. Studies find that readers often have trouble understanding nouns made from verbs (e.g., amortization) and find it much easier when the verb is recovered (e.g., amortize) [30], [31], [32], [33].

Implications. In general, information designers should avoid using nominalizations, but there are exceptions. Some nominalizations are useful since they may not be hard to understand. They may even reduce sentence length (for example, “failure,” “discovery”). Other nominalizations may be easy to understand if the underlying idea was presented in a previous sentence. For example, consider this sentence: “Researchers’ arguments focus on the cognition of interpretation and on how nominalizations slow reading and add to text density.” In this case, “researchers’ arguments” (used instead of “researchers argue”) is a nominalized subject referring to a previous sentence that would be obvious in context. For a thoughtful discussion, see Williams [34].

Identifying what’s next: gaps in research on word-level features

This summary of the research has shown that word-level features such as length, frequency, difficulty, concreteness, noun strings, and nominalizations can have a significant impact on how readers process text and on whether they understand the main point. This lends empirical credence to the plain language maxim “use short simple words.” Although people in our field may assume that doing so is just “common sense,” it is important that we evaluate our assumptions about what works through testing [35] and assess the value added of revisions that make a difference [36]. In this way, we can make evidence-based decisions as we write and design. And importantly, when we are confronted with arguments about our choices, we can defend our decisions by pointing to the research that supports them.

When we take a closer look at the research on word-level features, we discover issues that need to be studied further, particularly from our field’s point of view. Alas, much of the relevant research on reading texts did not have professional communicators in mind as an audience. For example, in

looking over the research on word-level features, we find gaps in our knowledge. For example, we do not yet fully understand:

Word Concreteness

- Which is better: An abstract yet precise word or a simple but less precise word?
- What are optimal techniques for handling subject matter that is inherently abstract?
- How can information designers make abstract subject matter clear yet maintain the integrity of the content?

Lexical Concreteness and Visualizing the Message

- What is the relationship between the concreteness of a word and the reader’s ability to visualize the word?
- Can writers increase the comprehension and retention of ideas by using concrete words that are easy to visualize?
- Beyond comprehension: Can designers enhance readers’ motivation to read or listen to a message if they employ concrete language?
- Are readers more likely to persist with concrete language?

Noun Strings and Nominalizations

- Do some noun strings and nominalizations convey meaning better than other forms of expression?
- What are the conditions and situations in which a noun string or a nominalization might be the best strategy?

Summary

We at the Center for Plain Language advocate that we consolidate existing research and identify research gaps as we develop recommendations about plain language techniques. In this way, we can build on the best of what is already known and we can characterize what we still need to know with greater precision [37], [1]. This approach will also enable us to isolate the contexts in which particular practices and guidelines do not work. It will put into focus the situations for which we must develop context-specific

International Plain Language Standards, The View from the Center for Plain Language (continued...)

plain language strategies for text design. It makes sense to first survey the research terrain and to consolidate what is known about key issues of plain language. We can then direct our attention to funding studies that will answer targeted questions of interest.

A final challenge

This conference has set out to perform some important tasks—important not only to plain language practitioners, but also to the public in general. The Center hopes this conference takes the next steps, so we can be sure that we will have some successes by the next time we meet—hopefully at Clarity in Mexico City. We join Christopher in calling for a detailed and specific plan for next steps. Please don't leave Amsterdam without it.