

Delivering Business Results Through Plain Language

Anaheim Conference

May, 1998

Agenda for the Session

- What is “plain language” and how can it improve business performance?
- The Manitoba initiative
- The plain language assessment tool
- A plain language training curricula

Acknowledgements...

- Workplace Education
Manitoba Steering
Committee

- WORKFORCE 2000
Manitoba Education
and Training

- Alliance of
Manufacturers and
Exporters Canada

- Standard Aero Ltd..

We also are grateful to...

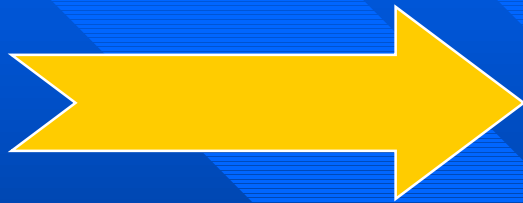
■ Dr. Janice Redish

■ Mr. Ron Blicq

■ Dr. JoAnn Hackos

■ Plain English
Campaign (UK)

Plain language is the design, writing and delivery of information in ways that promote accurate understanding and effective performance



- What is “plain language” and how can it improve business performance?
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Is this plain language?

This senior-level task force would be mandated to provide support to the Project Manager in the establishment of a clear mandate of its role across the departmental silos, with due consideration given to available person-years and financial resources.



And this?

This task force and the Project Manager will develop a mandate that spans several departments and that can be carried out with available staff and money.

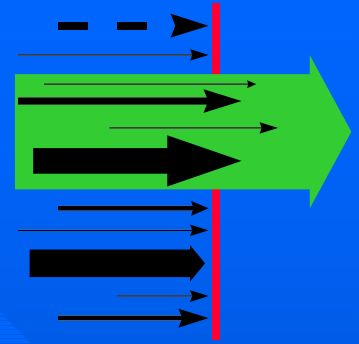


Charles Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids*

- “American businesses are now spending \$30 billion on workers’ training and lose an estimated \$25 to \$30 billion a year as a result of their workers’ weak reading and writing skills.”



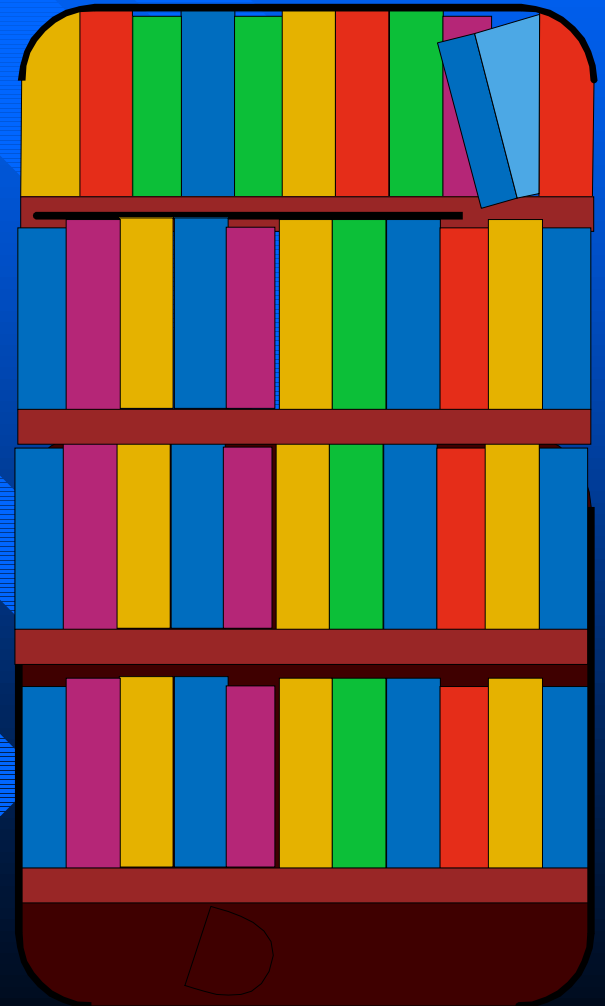
The impetus for change



- Growth of information or knowledge economy
- High incidence of technical failures
- Wave of empirical research aimed at understanding the problem and finding solutions
 - Western Canada Study (TeCiWeC)
 - Society for Technical Communication study
 - Workplace competency and training studies

The scope of the problem

- 45 feet of shelf space to hold documents needed by system programmer
- Caterpillar creates 800 pages of English language information each day
- US businesses generate 600 million pages of computer printouts daily, and create 1 billion documents daily
- 80 million HTML pages on World Wide Web



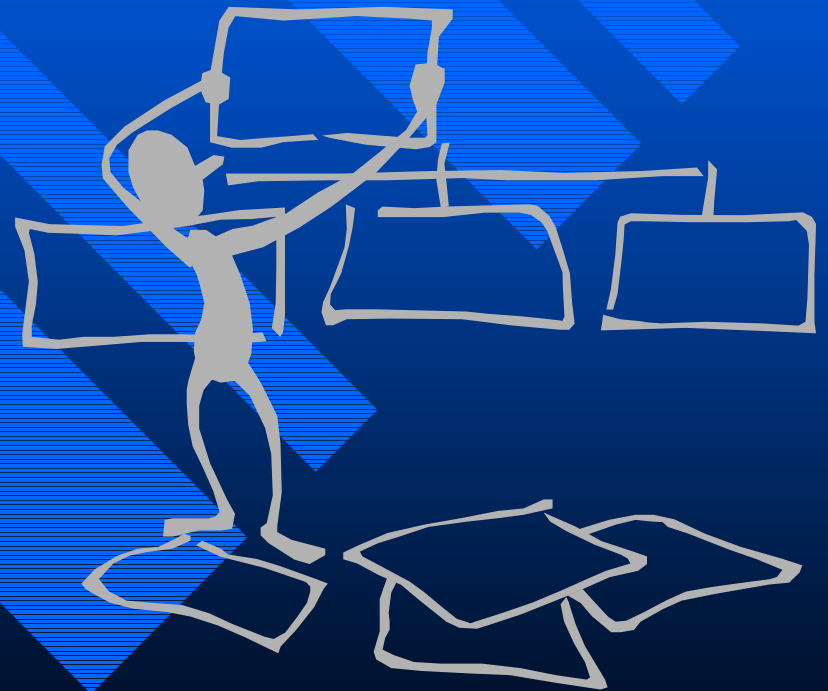
Veterans Affairs “Writing for Real People” project

- 37% of recipients could understand the letters
- 1.5 phone calls for each letter sent



“Writing for Real People” involved...

- Training in information design, document design, audience analysis, style, syntax, graphics
- Development of a new document development process



“Writing for Real People” results:

Before --

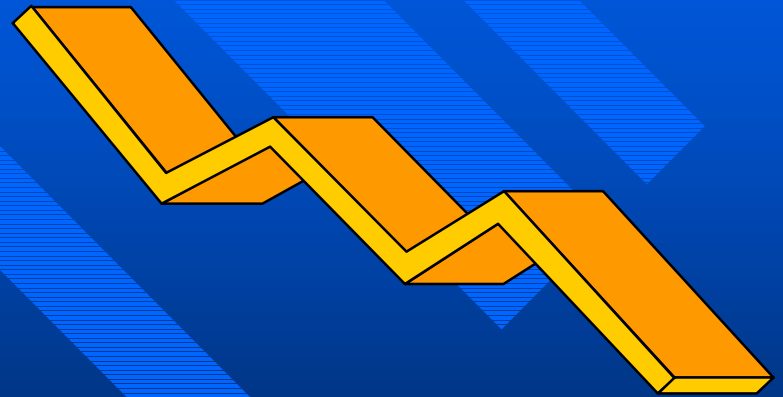
- 37% of recipients could understand the letters
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After --

- 85% of recipients can understand the letters
- 0.27 phone calls for each letter sent
- New letters get a higher response rate
- New letters evoke a more complete response

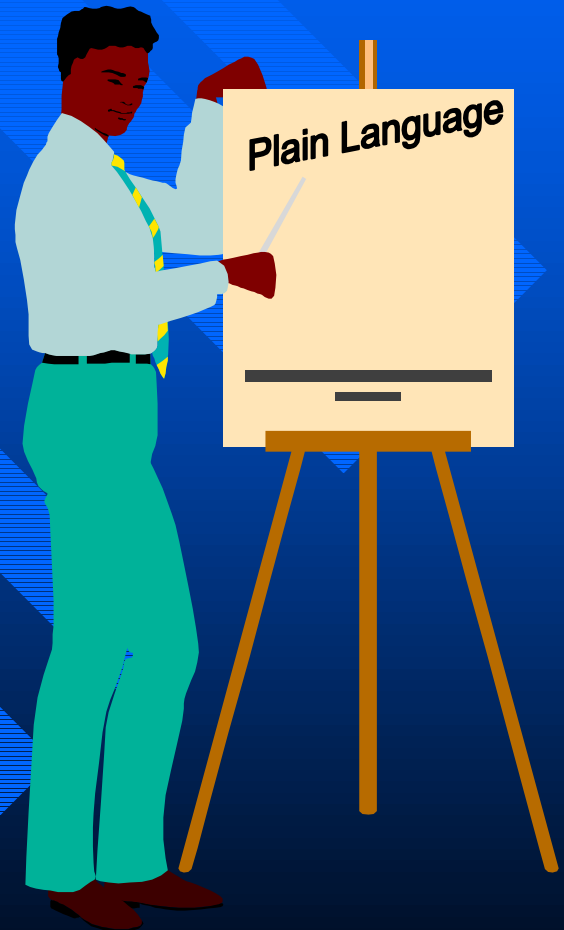
The Allen-Bradley Case Study

- Documentation was 2nd-most important factor in purchase decision
- High level of dissatisfaction with documentation



Allen-Bradley's Solution

- A comprehensive plain language project to improve:
 - Processes
 - Page design
 - Information design
 - Writing competencies



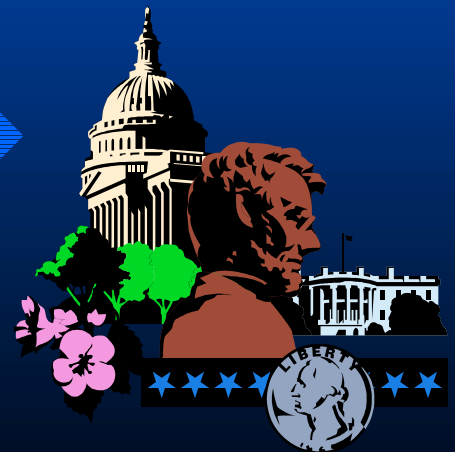
Allen-Bradley's Results

- 50 support calls per day fell to 2 per month
- Increased sales
- Improved productivity
- Lower translation costs



Document Design Center, American Institute for Research

- In 1981 Dr. Andrew Rose demonstrated that “the failure to understand and use public documents correctly is a serious problem.”
- Dr. Janice Redish’s research showed that “Poor writing costs businesses and government agencies enormous amounts of time and money.”



UK Plain English Campaign

- An independent UK-based organization which fights to stamp out all forms of “gobbledygook” - legalese, small print and bureaucratic language.
- Funded by its professional services.
 - Training and publications
 - Editing, design, testing
 - Competitions and awards



A private and public sector working group has researched the situation in Manitoba and beyond...

- What is “plain language” and how can it improve business performance?
- The Manitoba initiative
- The plain language assessment tool
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The Manitoba Initiative

- Phase 1 – research
- Phase 2 – development
- Phase 3 – sustaining the program

Phase 1 – Research

- Literature search
- Internet search
- Phone interviews with international experts
- Interviews and site visits with Manitoba companies



We learned...

- 82% of firms interviewed were interested in improving their performance through plain language
- Documentation related to work processes, quality assurance, and intranets
- Most were interested in a way to assess current performance, and in training



Phase 2 – Development

- Developed a train-the-trainer program
- Developed and tested an assessment tool



Our plain language program involves assessment and training



Does it really work?

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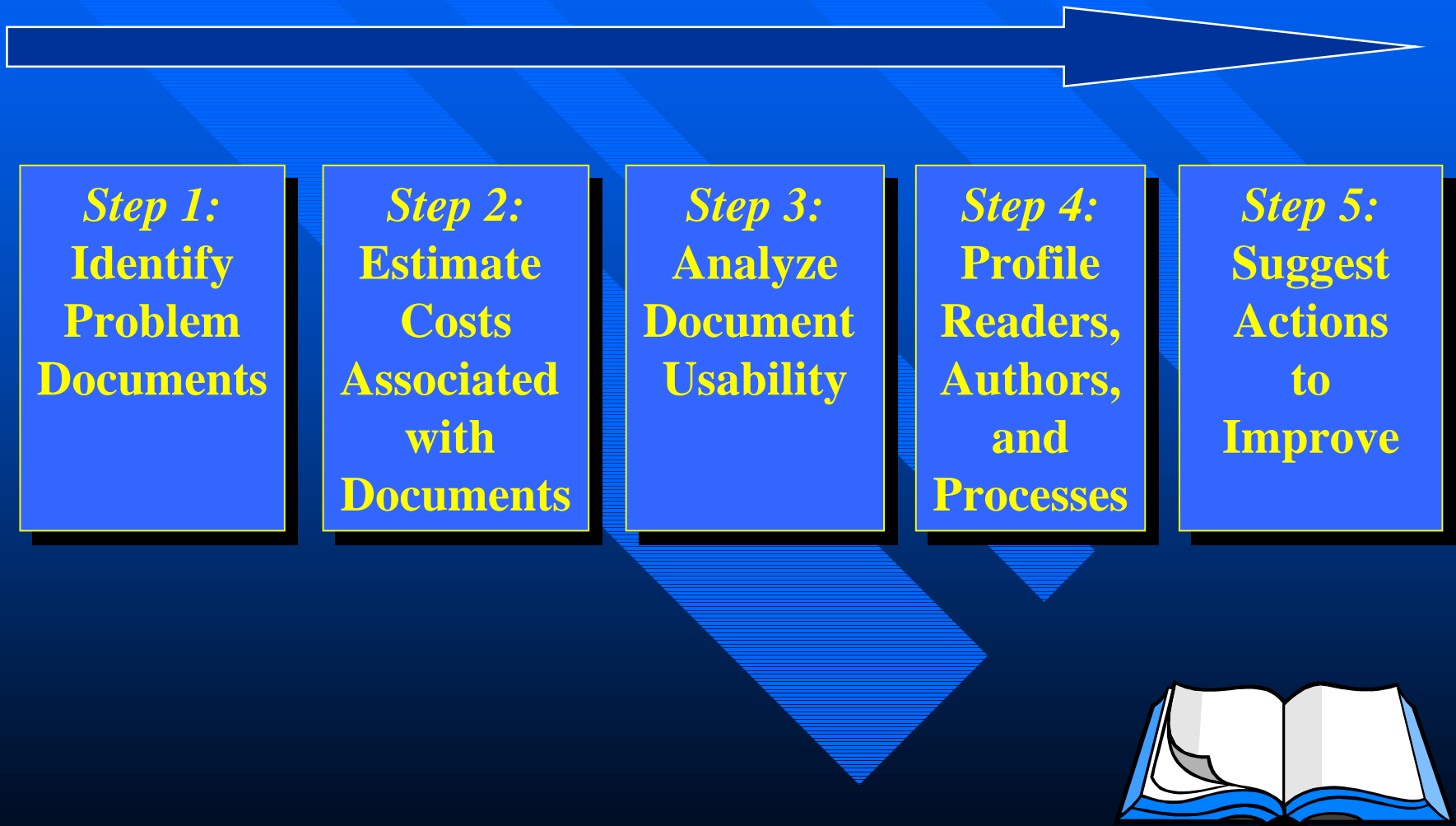


Plain Language Needs Assessment Tool (PLNAT)

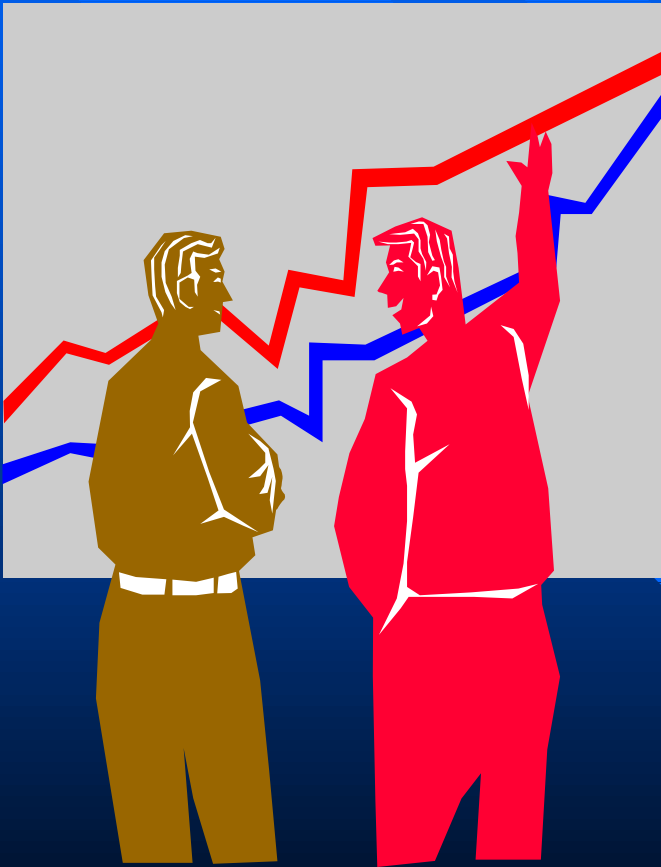
- Assumes that documents should produce business results
- Assesses whether your documents are producing results
- Determines whether training would help



The process for using PLNAT



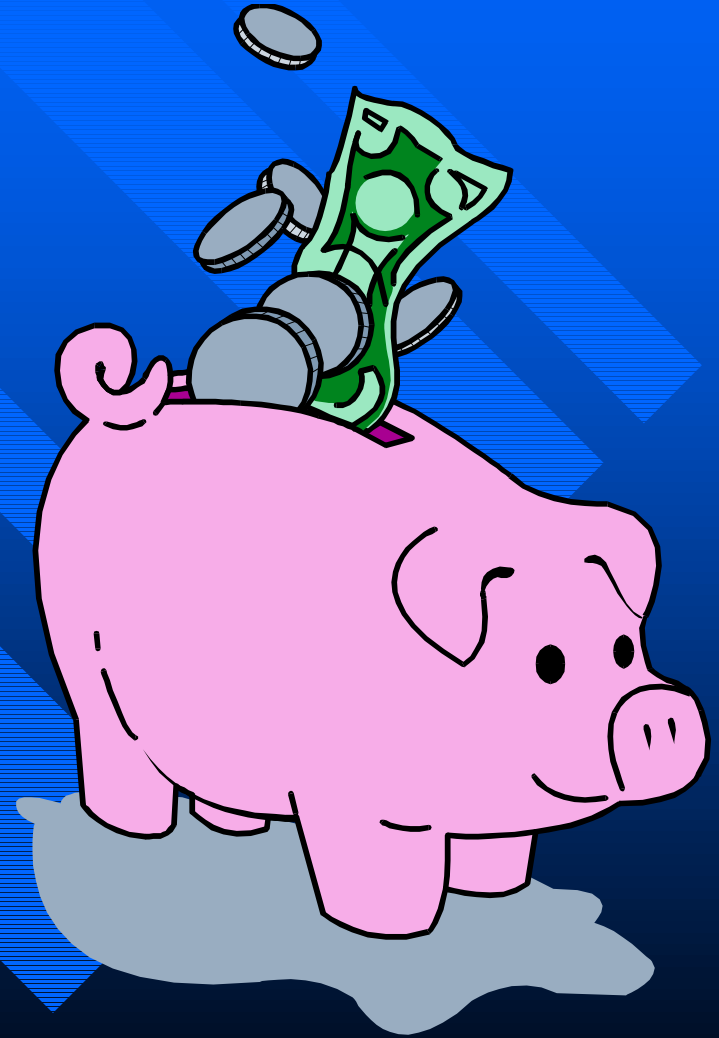
Step 1 -- Identify Problem Documents



- Gather 10 documents (policy/procedure, instructions, processes, etc.)
- Select 3
 - Used often?
 - Achieving results?
 - Biggest opportunity?

Step 2 -- Estimate Costs

- Consider rework and retrieval
- Estimate productivity loss
- Assign costs
- Extrapolate costs



Results of the First Pilot -- Non-Conformance Tags

	Cost of a single incident	Cost of 18 incidents per month	Annual costs
Minimum material cost	\$300	\$5,400	\$64,800
Minimum personnel cost	\$100	\$1,800	\$21,600
Totals	\$400	\$7,200	\$86,400

Note: Dozens of other documents producing the same result, so the company viewed this as a significant quality and financial issue.

Step 3 -- Analyze Usability



- Content organization
- Typography
- Grammar and language
- Graphics
- Calculate a total usability score

We owe an enormous debt to the Document Design Center of the American Institute for Research in Washington DC

- Andrew Rose, “Problems in Public Documents,” *Information Design Journal* Vol. 2, no. 3 & 4, p. 179.
- Janice C. Redish, “Writing in Organizations,” in *Writing in the Business Professions*, ed. Myra Kogen (Urbana IL: NCTE, 1989), p. 98.

Pilot Project Results:

Documents in a Manufacturing Environment

- The worst non-conformance tags scored below 50%
- The worst Company Instructions scored below 70%
- Outcome: training in grammar, usage, and content organization

Documents in a Public Utility

- Content organization and typography scored around 75%
- Grammar and language scored 63%
- Outcome: aggressive plans for reducing sentence length

Step 4 -- Profile Readers, Authors, Processes,

- Create reader profile
- Create author profile
- Perform audience/task analysis
- Create process profile

Put
reader
here



Step 5 -- Recommendations for Improvement

- Analyze costs
- Analyze usability scores
- Analyze profiles
- Develop action plan



Different people are interested in different parts of the assessment tool

■ Trainers –

» Profiling authors and readers

■ QA Managers –

» Identifying and quantifying problem documents

■ Technical Communicators –

» Analyzing usability

To obtain a copy of the assessment tool...

Jonas Sammons

VP & General Manager, Manitoba Division

The Alliance of Manufacturers & Exporters Canada

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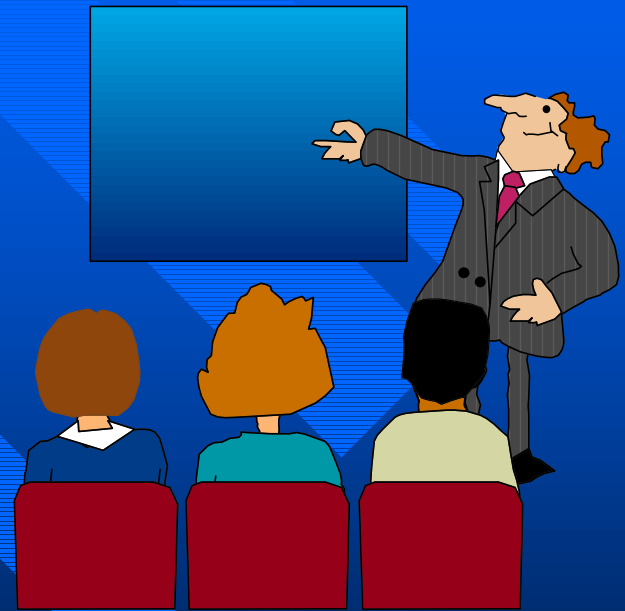
Piggy-Backing on a Proven Curricula

- What is “plain language” and how can it improve business performance?
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Plain Language Training Modules

- National Literacy Secretariat's "Plain Language" curriculum
- Seven additional modules developed during phase 2



The National Literacy Secretariat

Plain Language: Clear and Simple

- Introduction
- Your Reader & Your Purpose
- Organizing Your Ideas
- Using Appropriate Words
- Clear and Effective Sentences
- Clear and Effective Paragraphs
- Presenting Your Message
- Testing for Usability & Readability
- Putting It All Together

Use Simple, Everyday Words

Instead of

Use

accomplish

do

ascertain

find out

disseminate

send out, distribute

endeavor

try

expedite

hasten, speed up

facilitate

make easier, help

formulate

work out, devise, form

in lieu of

instead of

locality

place

optimum

best, greatest, most

strategize

plan

utilize

use

Cut Out Unnecessary Words

Instead of

Use

with regard to

about

by means of

by

in the event that

if

until such time

until

during such time

while

in respect of

for

in view of the fact

because

on the part of

by

subsequent to

after

under the provisions of

under

with a view to

to

it would appear that

apparently

it is probable that

probably

notwithstanding the fact that

although

Avoid Using Jargon

Instead of:

You will receive reactivation and assistance consistent with your requirements.

Use:

You will get the amount of help you need.

Avoid or Explain Technical Words

Instead of:

Economic espionage may be defined as the illegal or clandestine acquisition of critical Canadian economic information and technology by foreign governments or their surrogates

*-Canadian Security Intelligence Service
Public Report, 1992*

Use:

Economic espionage means foreign governments or their agents illegally obtaining critical Canadian economic and technological secrets.

Don't Change Verbs Into Nouns

Instead of:

You will work on the *establishment* of goals for the hiring, training and promotion of designated group employees.

Use:

You will *establish* goals for hiring, training and promoting employees from designated groups.

Clear and Simple Sentences

covers:



- Don't overload sentences
- Use active sentences
- Keep sentences short
- Keep sentences simple
- Avoid ambiguity in your sentences
- Emphasize the positive
- Avoid double negatives

Keep It Short

Instead of:

The parameters of your responsibility are included in the job description you received on your initial day of work at the association.

Use:

Your responsibilities are listed in your job description. You received your job description the first day you worked here.

Link your ideas

Instead of:

The driver of the truck passing by told the officer in the cruiser the car he saw hit the little girl in the intersection was red.

Use:

The driver of the truck told the officer in the cruiser that as he was passing by, he saw a red car hit the little girl in the intersection.

Emphasize the Positive

Instead of:

If you fail to pass the examination, you will not qualify for admission.

Use:

You must pass the examination to qualify for admission.

But something is missing ...

- Business focus
- Specific types of documents



Seven additional modules developed during phase 2

- Train-the-trainer
- Fundamentals
- Effective correspondence
- Instructions
- Policies and procedures
- Progress, status, non-conformance
- Electronic documentation

Some important messages

- Why do readers read?
- Why do writers write?
- Most important purpose for a business document: ROI!
- Measuring value-added through plain language.



Why do we write?



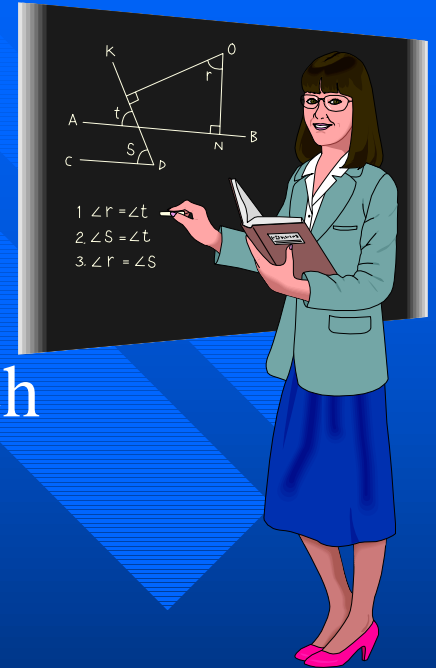
Persuade



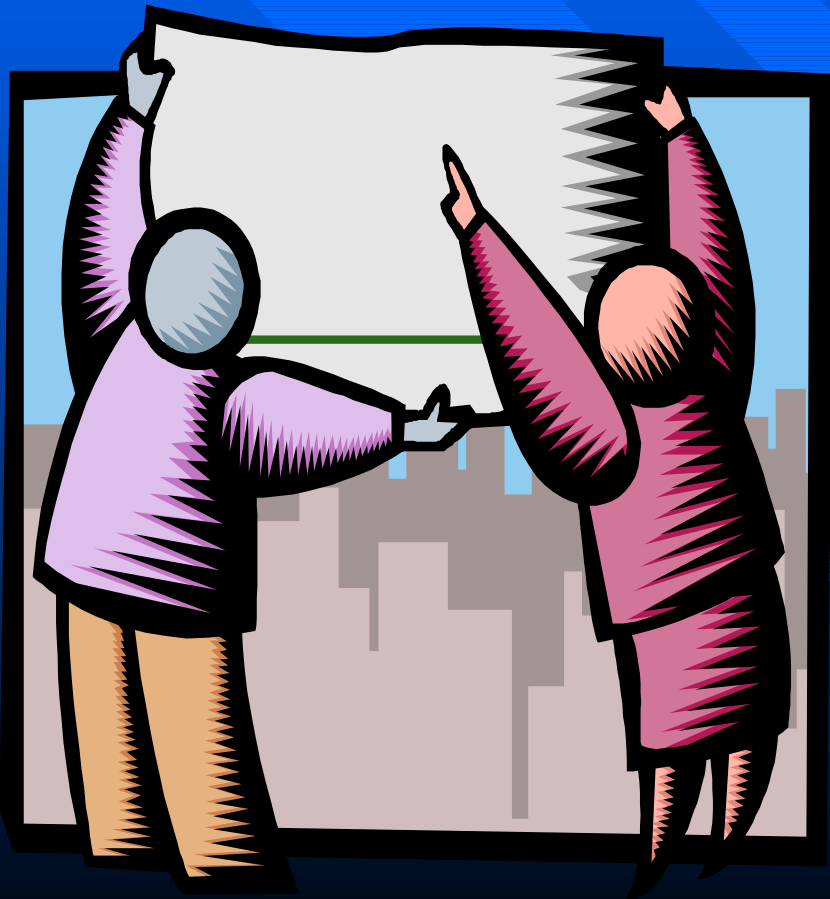
Inform



Teach



Audience Analysis Exercise



- Divide class into 4 groups
- Two groups do part 1, two do part 2
- Read their work and discuss
- The outcome is almost always the same!

Information-chunking exercise

- You need paper and something to write with...



yin

wab

gub

mer

nox

xov

peh

kug

luz

sal

cat

men

pit

ate

ten

lid

bet

put

fit

red

coat

shirt

gloves

socks

shoes

vest

blouse

jacket

scarf

pants

Plain
language
documents
are
very
important
to
all
of
us.

Questions & Discussion

