

## **SMART SENTENCES: Seeking workplace writing solutions through plain English practice**

A paper presented by HOWARD WARNER to The Style Council biannual conference, in Sydney, 10 September 2011

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**“Thank you, Neil [Dr Neil James, executive director of the Sydney-based Plain English Foundation], for that flattering introduction. As Neil mentioned, I’m ‘executive director’ of Plain English People in New Zealand. I think the business name is self-explanatory. But I’m not so sure now about that high-flown title. The word ‘executive’ — it can mean many things, but translated into plain English it simply means ‘you do stuff’. ‘Execute’, the verb, can also mean to kill someone — with a single bullet to the back of the head, I gather. But that’s not part of my job description. Basically, ‘executive’ is rolling up your sleeves, getting stuck in, ‘being hands-on’, as they say these days. And that’s what plain-English practice is.**

“Over the next half hour, I’ll be explaining why I believe sentences are the key to unlocking the plain English conundrum — more now than ever. But first I want to give a perspective on plain English ‘practice’ and ‘practitioners’, how they fit into the whole ‘community’ of PE professionals. And I will touch on the question of benchmarking at the end.

### **Who am I?**

“I’m a dedicated plain English practitioner. I work at the coal face, on the front line, mostly for organisations in the public, private, non-profit and professional-services sectors. Doing the ‘core’ plain English activities of editing, document review and in-house group training. (Other activities we practitioners do include individual coaching in writing skills and development of writing resources.)

### **Pragmatic, not prescriptive**

“Plain English writing is a pragmatic discipline, with the reader at its core. More specifically, the lay reader. The ordinary folk. The hoi-polloi. (Although all specialists, once they step outside their specialty, become lay readers.) Unlike some of you, we don’t work with those who provide specialist information to specialist audiences — legal, academic, technical etc. Just to lay people.

“Obviously this ill-defined, potentially vast audience has a much wider range of reading abilities than any narrowly specialised audience. So any ‘public’ writing needs to be less prescriptive, more adaptable. It’s about what works rather than what is right. But how does this work in practice?

“Basically I see the plain English ‘community’ (because it’s not yet advanced enough to be a ‘profession’) as comprising three distinct groups.

“There are the **academics**, who research and analyse what happens in plain English practice; write about it; maybe teach it as one of a range of disciplines within, say, law or linguistics.

“There are the **advocates**, those who have an interest in plain English, who try to apply it to their field of expertise — government, health, finance, construction, whatever. They advocate for plain English, usually from within an organisation, but it’s not their prime focus.

“Then there are the dedicated plain English **practitioners**, still a very small group within the wider communications field. They understand and identify with the lay audience or public, yet they work closely with communicators of specialist information, workplace writers, non-professional writers — call them what you will. In negotiating these two disparate groups (specialists and laypeople), practitioners tread a very fine line.

### Barriers to overcome

“The specialist-information dynamic in the workplace has three levels: the readers, the writers and, more recently, us practitioners — who are trying to bridge the gap between the other two. And each level has its own set of distinct barriers.

“This is the pragmatic aspect of plain English: recognising barriers and finding ways to surmount them. Or ‘problems and solutions’, as they say in modern biz-speak.

“Lay readers, in tackling specialist information, may stumble over their:

- cultural background
- level of education
- understanding of the subject
- style of processing information — are there other, non-written communication mediums which are more likely to capture their attention?
- discretionary reading — how much time do they have for reading, or even interest?

“Specialists need to understand these barriers if they are to be effective in communicating with their public. To support them, there is a growing body of excellent research on readability levels — from academics in the plain language field, as well as related fields such as literacy.

“However, specialist information providers have their own set of barriers. They can be too close to the subject, or too caught up in entrenched, age-old conventions (think law or accounting).

“There are the models they have always followed unthinkingly : the templates they dump text into, their specialist training, even their university education. The American legal plain-language writer Bryan Garner calls these ‘the nonsense baggage that so many writers lug around’. You also heard that quote, in the punctuation survey [an earlier presentation]: ‘It’s not what I was taught.’

There are the many organisational constraints that prevent easy, clear communication: lack of resources, time or budget; cumbersome, inefficient workflow processes; a hierarchy that (mistakenly) bases writing ability on seniority. Those of you who are freelance editors working for non-publishers will know the frustrations only too well.

“Often the biggest constraints are personal ones: ego, pride, resistance to change. Garner again, in his book *Legal Writing in Plain English*, suggests an element of laziness or obstinacy. ‘Getting to the point will involve much toil and trouble,’ he warns. ‘But it will be worth it for your readers,’ he says, optimistically.

“Practitioners certainly need to understand and empathise with lay readers, especially when we’re editing or reviewing documents for readability. But when training or otherwise advising workplace writers, we particularly need to understand their barriers.

“This is where we practitioners can help take plain English to the next stage, I believe. By analysing and documenting how non-professional, workplace writers write — to supplement the research on how people read.

### Different practical focuses

“Meanwhile, within the plain English world, there is a ‘spectrum’ of views about what plain English actually is, let alone how to practise it. As Neil touched on in his IPEd [Australian Institute of Professional Editors’ biennial conference) talk the other day . I recall him saying something like: we’re all throwing mud at each other. In the spirit of friendly competition, of course.

“Firstly, there’s the **‘word’ approach** — removing jargon and simplifying words. This dates back to Ernest Gower’s bible, *Plain Words*, in the 1940s. But there are still many people today who believe that’s all plain language is.

“Then there is the view of plain English as **correct grammar**, as espoused by Professor Strunk’s timeless book *Elements of Style* and propagated, to some extent, by style guides. That view is still particularly prevalent in the legal profession, I’ve found. But it’s hard to maintain in an age when schools no longer teach grammar.

“The **pragmatic approach** to clear writing emphasises simple sentences and common words. It was pioneered by no less a figure than Sir Winston Churchill, with his edicts to British civil servants to forget their sense of self-importance and just ‘say it’. He recognised this as the best way to engage the public in time of war.

“Newspapers, which have always had a very clear sense of their readers, carried on this pragmatic approach through intensive copy editing. Of course, newspapers face more severe limitations on space than any other medium.

“More recently, we’ve seen a swing to a **structural approach**, especially from plain English professionals from academic backgrounds. You’ll know Neil James’s excellent recent book *Writing at Work*, which explores his fascination with the traditional rhetoric-based approach. Michèle Asprey, a Sydney-based writer on legal plain language, endorses this view. In *Plain Language for Lawyers*, she states:

*A document written in the simplest words and arranged in short sentences will still be difficult to understand if the information is poorly organised.*

“With the rise of technical writing, accessible publishing technology and online mediums, we’ve seen a massive shift in plain English practice towards design and functionality — or ‘informational design’.

### Sentence hardest for writers too

“Personally, I like Churchill’s approach. In fact, I’d reverse Asprey’s statement:

*Lay readers are driven by first impressions. If sentences are dense and too hard to grasp, readers will lose focus. They won’t bother reading on. Then it doesn’t matter how perfectly structured the document is.*

“Think customer contracts. Whether you’re buying a data plan, a domestic flight or an insurance policy, whoever reads right through the first page — let alone all 30-odd pages of dense, fine-print legalese? Most readers just sign and hope for the best.

“However, with all the new approaches to plain English, (whether information design, readability formulas, user testing etc.), I fear that copy editing, or working text at the sentence level, has become a little ‘old hat’. That core Churchillian message of simple active sentences is getting diluted.

“Bryan Garner, again, in *Legal Writing in Plain English*, writes:

*You achieve plain English when you use the simplest, most straightforward way of expressing an idea. You can still choose interesting words. But you’ll avoid fancy ones that have everyday replacements meaning precisely the same thing... Writing well is much more than getting the grammar and spelling right.”*

“And how do we express an idea if not through sentences?

“I can’t resist another quote suggesting that expression is at least as important as structure. I picked up a copy of Elizabeth Manning Murphy’s new book *Working Words* from the (conference) bookstall yesterday and casually opened it to these words: ‘*The words have to work. If they don’t the whole document fails.*’ You can’t be plainer than that!

“In my plain English practice, I find that the area writers struggle with most is writing a simple sentence. So is obviously the key point where readers’ and workplace writers’ barriers intersect.

“See this sentence, from a user manual for box-office staff or ticket sellers:

*Whilst we have understood for some time that frequency of attendance is a key variable in understanding customer behaviour and predicting response, research and database analysis conducted by [company] demonstrated that what people had attended was a major determinant of their likely propensity to attend in the future while the ability to target the delivery of different direct marketing messages and offers to different segments means that differing response rates can be monitored to learn from such experimentation.*

“Very unreadable, but very very common.

“Compare with this example, from the *New Zealand Road Code*:

*Most safety belts are ‘retractable’. This means they stretch automatically to the correct length when you fasten them. They ‘lock’ only if the vehicle stops suddenly.*

“And this from a website disclaimer:

*This site contains links to other websites. The links are provided for convenience only. They are not an endorsement of those websites. You use those other websites at your own risk.*

“Both examples are much shorter, yet they actually contain several sentences instead of just one. This kind of writing is very rare in the world of public information, but obviously more effective. In fact, the first paragraph could be a matter of life or death, so easy readability is essential.

### **Sentence solutions — for both reader and writer**

“But how do you help writers get from example A to examples B and C?

“I apply a pragmatic approach by breaking down ‘the sentence problem’ into five key barriers and solutions. I’ve come to this approach through editing documents for non-publishers, against tight, unrealistic deadlines and budgets. And through training in-house groups who are very knowledgeable in their own field but barely know a comma from a conjunction.

“The real challenge is in how to communicate these barriers and solutions to workplace writers without baffling or boring them with fine points of grammar.

“I focus on simple, positive solutions. Not the formulaic numerical approach — ‘don’t use more than 20 words in a sentence’. Nor the fusty, prescriptive grammar approach of ‘passive is bad’ or ‘never split an infinitive’.

So here it is:

Rank	Problem	Easy solution
1.	<b>Long, complex sentences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Use more full stops.</li> <li>✓ Reduce &amp; simplify linkers.</li> <li>✓ Understand clauses.</li> </ul>
2.	<b>Passive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Think 'who does what'.</li> </ul>
3.	<b>Unwieldy lists</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Understand what a list is.</li> <li>✓ Discard arbitrary models.</li> <li>✓ Keep all items to same pattern.</li> <li>✓ Keep it simple.</li> </ul>
4.	<b>Phrases</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Recognise.</li> <li>✓ Replace with single words.</li> <li>✓ Cut out clutter (e.g. function words)</li> <li>✓ Be ruthless on redundant phrases.</li> </ul>
5.	<b>Ineffective words</b> (unusual, complex, specialist)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Recognise.</li> <li>✓ Prefer common words.</li> <li>✓ Translate.</li> </ul>

"Each section is ranked by the size of the barrier.

"The only bits of grammar I can't get around having to explain are 'verb' and 'clause'. Both are essential to understand in breaking down long, complex or passive sentences.

"Word that are ineffective for a lay audience include:

- jargon
- 'fuzzwords' — buzzwords that can mean anything or nothing
- worthy words — those that supposedly make the user sound clever
- 'fogeys', foreign words, Latinate words, etc — ditto.

"As Winston Churchill put it, very plainly but no less elegantly:

*The old words, when short, are best of all.*

"A great example of practising what you preach.

“Preaching is something I try to avoid in my writing workshops. Participants learn best if they feel they have discovered the solutions for themselves, I find. So they view a number of sentence examples; decide which ones work and which don’t; and work out what’s different. Or they view before-and-afters, and work out why the edited version is better and what’s been done to it. Together they break down sentences and put them back together again, much like a teenage boy with a car in backyard. And then they practise on their own or their colleagues’ writing.

“At every step, the challenge for a plain English practitioner is to break down those writers’ barriers: the conventions, the resistance to change, etc.

“It’s a pragmatic, back-to-basics approach – and positive. There’s nothing new in it, except maybe that it gives as much credence to the writers’ barriers as the readers’.

### **To sum up**

“Plain English practitioners translate workplace documents into reader-friendly language (editing). Or they show why organisations need editing services (through document assessment). Or they help specialist information providers to do it for themselves (through training, coaching and resources).

“Structure, design, formatting and style are all important. But the biggest barriers for lay readers and workplace writers alike are at sentence level — how to avoid those long, complex, passive, dense, unreadable, BORING sentences.

“The challenge for practitioners is how to break through the defences of those writers. For me, those five sentence strategies are the key. And I’d hope any future plain English standards would reflect it.

### **Benchmarks in plain English**

“Which brings me to benchmarking, the theme of this segment. And very timely it is, given that the global plain-language community has lately been debating the question of certification and standards for practitioners.

“My view is that we’re far from ready. Plain English is still too new, too fractured. The community is diversely spread among a number of other disciplines, as Neil touched on. And we’re still too divided in our views about what plain English actually is, let alone what practitioners do, how and with who.

“We should start by regularly documenting our work, building up a body of empirical case studies. But it’s a hard balance, when many practitioners are sole businesses, just trying to make a living.

“Meanwhile, I’ll leave you with these thoughts.....

“First, from Martin Cutts, in *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*:

*Part of writing well is writing tight, ruthlessly, cutting dross. Most readers are busy people who want the main points of your message and fast. Making them read excess words is an unfriendly act — especially in business where a deluge of unwanted paper and emails fall on everyone at every level.*

“I like that he puts the onus on the workplace writer. Of course, we practitioners can help them in their struggle to engage their readers — if they let us.

“And Peter Butt, addressing the ‘Plain Language in Progress Congress’ in Houston, Texas, a few years ago:

*‘I’ve yet to hear anyone complain that writing is too easy to read.’*

“Maybe not entirely original, but it’s very apt.”

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