Plain English at Work

A Guide to Business Writing and Speaking

Edward P. Bailey

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A Guide to Writing and Speaking

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For my wife, Janet,

and daughters, Laura and Jeannette

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Introduction

This book combines—and significantly updates—two previously separate books of mine:

- *The Plain English Approach to Business Writing*
- *A Practical Guide for Business Speaking*

The goal of both books was similar: to help people communicate clearly and easily to busy people at work.

Plain English is the key. It helps you as a writer *and* as a speaker. Combining the previous books now gives you help in two very important types of communication for people in business: writing and speaking.

Here's what I suggest:

- If you think your more immediate need has to do with writing, just read the chapters in order. The writing part begins the book.
- If, however, your more immediate need is to give a good presentation, turn to Chapter 17 and start there.

If you decide to start with Chapter 17, though, I urge you to return eventually to the beginning of the book and read the part on writing. The writing and speaking parts of the book complement and reinforce each other.

You should find plain English a very practical, effective, and easy way to communicate. For me, and for many others, it has been a real breakthrough, a lifting of a burden.

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I continue to express my gratitude to two people who helped lead me to plain English many years ago. One I never met: Rudolf Flesch. But I read his books and found them wonderfully motivating. The other person, Dr. Tom Murawski, is one of my best friends. He gave me one of those books by Flesch and has inspired me ever since.

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What is plain English writing?

Bottom line

Plain English writing is easier to read—and easier to write. It can express the range of ideas, from simple to complex.

When I first came across plain English, I was teaching writing in college. You can guess what I had been teaching: an overly formal style designed more to impress than simply to communicate clearly to the reader.

Since then, I've switched to plain English and taught it extensively—in college and to many thousands of people in government and business. This book is a result of those experiences, and it's designed to help you discover plain English.

When you make that discovery, you will find that writing is much easier for you—and it will be better, too.

What is plain English?

Plain English, to put it simply, is a way of expressing your ideas clearly in writing and speaking. As for plain English writing, I think of it as having three parts:

- *Style.* By style, I mean how to write clear, readable sentences. My advice is simple: write more the way

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you talk. This may sound simple, but it's a powerful metaphor that can revolutionize your writing.

- *Organization.* I suggest starting with your main point almost all the time. That doesn't mean it has to be your first sentence (though it can be)—just that it should come early and be extremely easy to find.

- *Layout.* This is the appearance of the page and your words on it. Headings, bullets, and other techniques of white space help your reader see—visually—the underlying structure of your writing. The value is immense. I think of layout as fun to do, and easy, too, with today's computers.

Plain English is not limited to expressing only simple ideas: it works for all kinds of writing—from an internal memo to a complicated technical report. It can handle any level of complexity.

What *isn't* plain English writing?

Businessese isn't plain English, nor is academese, bureaucratese, legalese, or any other "-ese."

Here's an example of some businessese from a federal regulation:

> Each application shall be supported by a comprehensive letter of explanation in duplicate. This letter shall set forth all the facts required to present to this office a complete disclosure of the transaction.

Those of you with business experience know this example is just beginning businessese, relatively uncomplicated compared with what the true Masters of Gobbledygook can turn out.

Nevertheless, it could be more straightforward. Here's a better version. Notice that it loses no preciseness:

You must send us the following:

- one copy of your application
- two copies of a letter explaining the complete details of your transaction

See the difference? You can understand the first version with a little effort, but you'd hate to read several paragraphs—or pages—in that style. The second version won't win the Nobel Prize for literature, but it *is* straightforward communication.

And, at times, plain English does approach art. A clean, straightforward document can be beautiful in its simplicity and efficiency.

Why is plain English better than the "other way"?

Plain English has two important advantages over the other way of writing:

- It's far easier for your reader to read.
- It's far easier for you to write.

You don't need many more advantages than those, do you? But let's look further.

In the past, plain English seemed merely a preference: you like the old way; I like plain English. Who's to decide? Well, psycholinguists have simplified the decision. Their work shows clearly that plain English is easier for all of us to read, no matter how smart we are. And no matter how much experience we have as readers.

For example, psycholinguists have learned that we all take longer to read less familiar words (like *commence*) than

familiar ones (like *begin*). The difference is only a few hundred milliseconds in time—but a lot less strain on the short-term memory (and the older I get, the less strain I want to put on mine).

The implication? As writers, we can help our readers by preferring ordinary words.

That's just one very brief example of what the psycholinguists have been up to. I investigate their work at length in another book, *Writing Clearly: A Contemporary Approach.*

Because of the work of psycholinguists, writing style is no longer like the width of lapels: "What's the style this year—wide or narrow?" Instead, there's solid scientific underpinning for the plain English movement.

There's a further reason for writing plain English, too.

Suppose you're the boss—a manager with 15 people working for you. A prestigious project comes in, requiring a report. Only two of your people are both qualified to work on it and have time available:

- One has a straightforward style that's easy for you and your client to understand.

- The other laboriously churns out complex, bureaucratic products that make you reach for the aspirin bottle.

Who will you choose?

If you assign the project to the bad writer, you know you'll have to do extensive rewriting (and maybe most of the writing, too). On the other hand, if you assign the project to the good writer, you can do what you're paid to do: manage. And the final product will be much better because you can spend your time evaluating drafts for content instead of struggling simply to decipher them.

Who is writing plain English these days?

It's hard to believe, but many people still write businessese. But many have also shifted to plain English. In other words, there's a "fence"—with some people on the bureaucratic side and others on the plain English side.

Fortunately, more and more people are moving to the plain English side—and when people reach that side, they never jump back. The advantages of plain English are just too obvious.

Also, many large organizations today are endorsing plain English:

- *Private business.* Many successful companies require plain English. Major improvement in writing has occurred in the fields of insurance, computers, banking, and health care.

- *Federal agencies.* Many (perhaps *most*) federal agencies are training their people to write in plain English.

- *U.S. military.* Each military service strongly urges plain English—by regulation (and those regulations are in plain English, too).

- *Scientific and engineering organizations.* Many of these organizations have to be able to express their ideas to lay people.

- *And even lawyers!* Too many lawyers still depend on the language of the Magna Charta, but even this "iceberg" is starting to slide into the sea. There are, for example, sample wills and other standard documents available to lawyers in plain English.

The move today is clearly toward plain English because it works. It can work for you, too. This book will show you how to write it.

What's the structure
of this part of the book?

The next three chapters introduce the three fundamentals of writing in plain English: style, organization, and layout. The rest of this part of the book then goes into more detail on each of the fundamentals.

For example, after you get the fundamentals of layout in Chapter 4, later chapters will cover other topics of layout such as choosing typefaces, designing effective headings, and using graphics. There are chapters expanding on style and organization, too.

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So let's begin the journey. For many, it has changed their lives. I know it has changed mine.

Style: writing a
readable sentence

Bottom line

Write more the way you talk—with ordinary words, a variety of punctuation, personal pronouns, and contractions.

Let's start with a quiz. Choose "a" or "b":

How have you produced most of the words in your life?
   a. by writing them
   b. by speaking them

For most of us, the answer is "b": we've *spoken* many more words than we've written.

"What does that have to do with writing?" you may ask.

Everything. You see, in plain English, words and sentences are more like those in spoken English. Spoken English is the language we're most comfortable with—the language that works for us.

That's why most professional writers use spoken English when they write. Check the editorial section of your newspaper. What do you find there?

If your paper is typical, you'll find the editors use spoken English. Look in one of the most popular papers in the world: the *Wall Street Journal*. You'll certainly find spoken English there.

In fact, the biggest headline on page one of every *Wall Street Journal* is "What's News—." The contraction makes the tone informal, and the dash leads the reader into the text that follows. Informal tone and awareness of the reader are two common characteristics of plain English.

The key advice: "Write the way you talk"

Thus, the key to plain English is this: talk to your reader. Simply talk on paper. Write the way you talk.

Imagine you're actually standing in front of your reader. Or talking on the telephone. What would you say—in an organized and polite way? Then write those words.

Sound simplistic? Some people are afraid that "writing the way you talk" means being simple-minded, writing like a kindergartner. But that would be true only if you talk like a kindergartner. The advice is to write the way *you* talk. Look for spoken English: look in magazines, newspapers, successful books. And *listen* for it, too: listen to the most moving speeches, the best newscasts.

What you will find is that the best of writing and the best of speaking have much in common. And what they have in common produces plain English.

Should we *really* write the way we talk?

Well . . . we don't want to write the way we sometimes talk, complete with the occasional "uhs" and rambling, disconnected sentences.

But if you imagine a reader in front of you, if you imagine you are actually talking on paper to that reader, the words will come out like the best of speaking—and the best of writing, too.

Tip

For the next thing you write, try putting down the words as you would actually say them. That's what I do: I sit in front of a computer, "talking" through the keyboard to my imaginary reader.

Don't worry about the theoretical differences between writing and speaking. Simply talk on paper.

Specific tips for writing the way you talk

To talk on paper, you may have to change your writing. For example, when you write:

- Do you normally use words like *commence* instead of *begin,* and *prior to* instead of *before?*

- Do you normally avoid all marks of punctuation except the period and the comma?

- Do you normally avoid using any personal pronouns— like *I, we,* and *you?*

If so, you're a typical bureaucratic writer. Get ready to take the most important step in your writing career. Here's what I suggest:

- Use ordinary words.

- Use a variety of punctuation.

- Use more personal pronouns.

- Use contractions.

If you're like me before I began writing plain English, these suggestions may seem like heresy, like crimes against the English language. Now, though, I think I committed my crimes before I followed these suggestions—not after.

Let's examine those four suggestions in more detail.

Use ordinary words

Which column do you normally choose your words from when you're writing?

advise	tell
assist	help
commence	begin
furnish	give
prior to	before

If you're the way I used to be, you probably choose from the left-hand side.

In fact, when I first saw a list like this, I was shocked to find that I chose *most* of my words from the left-hand side. And I could have given you very good reasons, too—something to do with nuances of meaning.

Then I noticed that when I spoke I consistently used words from the *right-hand* side. Why were the nuances so important when I wrote but not when I talked?

After serious soul-searching, I realized that the so-called nuances weren't really there at all. Instead, I had come to believe that I needed to write with a formal tone—that was the real reason I was choosing the more "impressive" words. As a result, I'd stopped writing with my most important vocabulary: the words I use in speaking each day.

So here's my advice on words. Do as the good professionals do:

- Good professionals use *ordinary* words unless they need something more precise—which happens fairly often.

- But bad amateurs use *impressive* words all the time— unless they can't think of them.

To see what I mean, let's look at writing by a successful professional, Russell Baker. This is the first paragraph of one of his books, *Growing Up* (which won the Pulitzer Prize). He's telling us about his mother, who's in a nursing home but doesn't realize she's there. She's living in the past.

As you read, notice that the passage says *extraordinary* things with *ordinary* words:

> At the age of eighty my mother had her last bad fall, and after that her mind wandered free through time. Some days she went to weddings and funerals that had taken place half a century earlier. On others she presided over family dinners cooked on Sunday afternoons for children who were now gray with age. Through all this, she lay in bed but moved across time, traveling among the dead decades with a speed and an ease beyond the gift of physical science.

Absolutely terrific, isn't it? And where are the "impressive" words? About the only one is *presided*—a good choice that gives us the sense of the matriarch, the woman in control. As I said, such choices help with preciseness.

But ordinary words are precise, too. Do any of Baker's phrases stand out as especially nice? I like "her mind wandered free through time." Where's the "impressive" word there? There isn't one—yet the idea is far from ordinary or simple. And preciseness? The word *wandered*—a perfectly plain word—is right on target.

Writing with ordinary words doesn't mean writing with kindergarten language or producing only simple-minded ideas.

Writing with "impressive" words does mean making the reader's job harder. Even though we know all the words in the left-hand column, we have more trouble reading them,

particularly if many appear in the same sentence or paragraph. And they usually do if writers consistently choose their words from the left-hand side.

For example, let's look at a sentence with mainly impressive words:

> Subsequent to the passage of subject legislation, it is incumbent upon you to advise your organization to comply with it.

And if we rewrite that sentence with ordinary words:

> After the law passes, you must tell your people to comply with it.

Would you rather read pages of the first version or the second?

By the way, the second version keeps the phrase "comply with it." It could have said something like "follow it," but the word *comply* seems to make the message a little more urgent. So I don't suggest you always choose the ordinary word. But—to use a word from computer terminology—make ordinary words your *default*. Choose other words if preciseness demands, just as you do when you speak.

And ask yourself what words Russell Baker (the professional who wrote about his mother) would choose if he were writing your document.

For a list of simpler words and phrases, see Appendix A.

Use a variety of punctuation

The second suggestion on style is to use a variety of punctuation. Too often business writers use only periods and commas.

Have you ever heard anybody speak in a monotone? Well, people who write with only periods and commas are like

speakers who speak in a monotone, forcing you—the audience—to do too much work: "What was important in that sentence? What's going to be carried over to the next sentence?" The audience has to figure that out because the speaker, using a monotone, isn't helping.

Good speakers do help, though. They use hand gestures and voice inflection to help their listeners along. Good writers, using spoken English, allow punctuation to replace those hand gestures and that voice inflection.

This chapter doesn't cover all the important marks of punctuation you need to learn. A later chapter does that. But this chapter does look at one easy punctuation mark— the question mark—to illustrate the need for more than periods and commas.

A number of years ago, someone asked if I ever used questions in my writing. I realized that I never did, and I didn't know why. So let me ask you now: "Do you use questions in your writing? If you look at the last ten pages you've written, will you find any?"

If your answer is "yes," you know one of the secrets of effective writing. If your answer is "no," that means you're generating your sentences very differently when you write and when you talk—undoubtedly, you use questions often in your talking. And the sentence structure in good talking is better than the sentence structure in typical bureaucratic writing.

So let's look more closely at when to use questions in writing. One time is when you really have a question:

- When does the new copying machine get here?

- How far is Santa Fe from Albuquerque?

Too often, though, people "write around" the question: "Request this office be informed of when the copying

machine will be delivered." The shift away from the question is a shift toward writing in a monotone. Your question—often the very purpose for writing—loses emphasis, doesn't it? So don't avoid the question mark when you're asking for something. The reader will more likely take notice of the question because of the emphasis it receives.

Now let's focus on another time to use the question: the question that you, the writer, will answer. Such questions focus what you're saying and emphasize your answer—just as vocal inflection and hand gestures do when you're talking. In other words, such questions draw the reader in.

Let's look at an example. Here's some writing in a monotone (without questions):

> The main point is that the defective computer disks are not the responsibility of the manufacturer, as we first suspected, but of the wholesaler, who stored them at a 130 degree temperature.

Now let's add questions:

> Just who's responsible for the defective computer disks? Is it the manufacturer, as we first suspected? No. The *wholesaler* is responsible—he stored them at a 130 degree temperature.

See the difference questions make? I know. I cheated. In addition to the question mark, I also used a really short sentence ("No."), italics, and a dash.

You don't need to use these techniques in every line you write. But if you're not using them at all, then you're probably communicating with far less emphasis in writing than in speaking.

So the message is to use a variety of punctuation to control your emphasis and replace the hand gestures and voice inflection we all use in speaking. The question mark is one