



Center for
Plain Language

Simply Plain

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Center for Plain Language, 1321 Rhode Island Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005
www.centerforplainlanguage.org 202.737.5733

A New Year of Plain Language

By Avi Arditti

Two thousand six is off to a good start for the plain language movement. Take, for instance, the following developments:

- On January 18, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced a plan to make prescription drug information easier to understand. For the first time in more than 25 years, the FDA revised the format of what is known as the package insert.

“Americans are overwhelmed with the complexity of health information,” said Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona. “This problem is compounded by prescription medication information that reads more like legal disclaimers than useful or actionable health information.”

The FDA says confusing medical information leads to many of the estimated 300,000 “preventable adverse events” that happen in U.S. hospitals each year.

“In an effort to manage the risks of medication use and reduce medical errors, the newly designed package insert will provide the most up-to-date information in an easy-to-read format that draws physician and patient attention to the most important pieces of drug information before a product is prescribed,” an agency statement said.

A new “Highlights” section will list the most important information about benefits and risks. The new format will also contain a table of

contents, and the date that the product was initially approved. And it will provide a toll-free number and Internet address to encourage greater reporting of suspected side effects.

For more information:
www.fda.gov/cder/regulatory/physLabel/default.htm

Also, a new interagency clearinghouse called DailyMed provides the latest information about FDA-regulated products: <http://dailymed.nlm.nih.gov>.

- As of January 1, new rules in the United States require clearer labeling of food ingredients that can cause allergic reactions. Labels on packaged foods must state if they contain any traces of the eight foods responsible for 90 percent of allergic reactions. These eight are milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, and soybeans.

Food makers must identify in plain English the presence of any protein derived from these foods.

The law does not affect any products labeled before January 1, so the FDA warns that shoppers will likely see packaged foods without the revised labeling for some time. *(continued on page 2)*

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"This labeling will be especially helpful to children who must learn to recognize the presence of substances they must avoid," the FDA said. "For example, if a product contains the milk-derived protein, casein, the product's label will have to use the term 'milk' in addition to the term 'casein' so that those with milk allergies can clearly understand the presence of the allergen they need to avoid."

An estimated two percent of adults and about five percent of infants and young children in the United States have food allergies. Each year, about 30,000 of them require emergency-room treatment and 150 die, the FDA said.

The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 established the new requirements. Representative Nita M. Lowey of New York originally sponsored the legislation.

For more information:
www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/wh-alrgy.html

- On January 17, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) voted to propose new rules to force companies to reveal just how much they pay their top people.

"The Securities and Exchange Commission today voted to publish for comment proposed rules that would amend disclosure requirements for executive and director compensation, related party transactions, director independence and other corporate governance matters, and security ownership of officers and directors. The proposed rules would affect disclosure in proxy statements, annual reports and registration statements. The proposals would require most of this disclosure to be provided in plain English. The proposals also would modify the current reporting requirements of Form 8-K regarding compensation arrangements," said a news release.

The Commission can't act on the proposed rules until after a 60-day period for public comment.

SEC Chairman Christopher Cox, in a speech on the proposals, said: "I know that some of you are thinking, 'I'll believe that when I see it.' But these rule changes would permit the SEC to get very serious about plain English."

More information:
www.sec.gov/news/press/2006-10.htm

Stay Tuned

Federal Regulations: Make Yourself Heard

Want to comment on regulatory writing in the U.S. government? Visit www.regulations.gov. From the home page, users can find any rulemaking open for comment.

This website is part of the eRulemaking Initiative, managed by the Environmental Protection Agency with other agencies and departments. Their slogan is "Your voice in federal decision-making."

Regulations.gov was launched in January 2003. A new version in September 2005 added a docket management system to offer access to "all publicly available regulatory material." Included are Federal Register notices, supporting analyses, and comments from the public.

First Look: National Assessment of Adult Literacy

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released its National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) report for 1992–2003 on December 15, 2005. The report, titled "A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century," measures the literacy levels of a representative sample of the American public, assessing more than 19,000 Americans age 16 or older.

The 2003 report is NCES' second report on adult literacy. The Assessment categorizes American literacy into four literacy levels: Below Basic, Basic, Intermediate, and Proficient.

You can find more complete information at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal>, or in the feature article on the 2003 NAAL in the next edition of the Center's newsletter.

What's in a Name?

By Eric Spears

When we started to plan this newsletter, we wanted to revive the name *Simply Stated*, to continue the legacy of a newsletter that many plain language specialists remember fondly.

For those too young or new to the field to remember: *Simply Stated* was the newsletter of an earlier plain language group, the Document Design Center (DDC). *Simply Stated* started with a mailing list of 300 names in 1979. A decade later when DDC had to stop publishing it, *Simply Stated* was being mailed to 18,000 people—and anecdotal reports indicated that many more people were reading it. As Susan Kleimann, current Director of the Center for Plain Language, says: “*Simply Stated* was one of the most influential newsletters around for business, government, and academia.”

Unfortunately, the name *Simply Stated* now belongs to another group in a different field. So we need your help to find the best name for this newsletter. *Simply Plain*, which we are using for this issue, is only our temporary name. Help us decide on a permanent name.

Now through March 15, 2006, all members of the Center for Plain Language may submit names for the Center's newsletter. The Center's Board will select the winning entry. If it is your suggestion, we'll give you credit in the newsletter—and you'll have the honor of naming a newsletter that will fill the void left by its predecessor.

Remember: Submit your suggestions by March 15 to Lara Whitman at lwhitman@centerforplainlanguage.org.

2005 Plain Language Conference

By Lara Whitman & Tracy Schmidt

More than 300 people came out November 3 through 5, 2005, in support of the plain language movement. These 300+ people attended the fifth Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) Conference in Washington, DC, which was co-hosted by the Washington, DC-based Center for Plain Language and the Plain Language Action and Information Network. The conference focused on sharing expertise, standards, research, and the practice of plain language.

Support for and belief in plain language came from many different corners of the world: Australia, Canada, Chile, France, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Kingdom, the United States, and many others.

Participants represented both the private and public sector, with people from government agencies, non-profit organizations, and corporations attending the event.

The 2005 conference theme was “Adding Up the Benefits.” The conference consisted of workshops and presentations that featured research and real-life examples showing the benefits of plain language in the private and public sectors. Workshops and presentations included sessions on plain language success stories, revising gobbledygook, measuring results of plain language documents, health literacy, plain language and the Web, and usability testing.

Conference attendees were impressed by the interdisciplinary variety and quality of the workshops and presentations. “Many presenters cited research during their presentations or in response to a question from an audience member, and it really showed their mastery of [the subject],” one attendee stated.

Along with new research, the conference highlighted different ways to think about plain language and how to implement it in organizations. It helped attendees think about many different possibilities in the field of plain language. “The conference reaffirmed [the importance of] clear communication and the value and the contributions each of us is making to this field through our own work,” another attendee said.

The conference sponsors were pleased about the conference turnout, and the conference evaluation results were very positive.

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

Avi Arditti (aarditti@centerforplainlanguage.org)
Eric Spears (espears@centerforplainlanguage.org)
Lara Whitman (lwhitman@centerforplainlanguage.org)

Board Members

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We're on the Web!

www.centerforplainlanguage.org

E-mail

editor@centerforplainlanguage.org

Volunteer

The Center for Plain Language needs your help! Currently, the Center for Plain Language is developing program boards to help guide the future of the its activities. By volunteering, you have a unique opportunity to help shape the organization into a powerful force in the plain language movement.

Please let us know how you can help by E-mailing the Center at editor@centerforplainlanguage.org.

Call for Articles

If you are a Plain Language practitioner or advocate, the Center's Executive Board encourages you to share your plain language success stories with our members. This is a unique opportunity for you to discuss your professional field and how plain language has made a positive impact on your business or in the community.

If you would like to submit an article, please E-mail Eric Spears at espears@centerforplainlanguage.org for more information on submitting articles for publication.



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