

## Why Plain Language is so Important— Results from the Survey of Adult Literacy

by Erin Schmieder & Susan Kleimann

**M**ore than 43% of Americans struggle with basic, everyday tasks like filling out an order form or reading a prescription label. That's more than 93 million people who find it hard to understand the materials they need for everyday life.

In December 2005, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the preliminary findings from its 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy. This survey, the most comprehensive measure of adult literacy since 1992, reveals how people use and understand information. The power of this survey is that it uses tasks that people need for success in their everyday lives—reading an article about a health problem or balancing a checkbook or understanding a prescription label.

The results placed participants in one of four categories and showed

- 14% of the U. S. adult population (30 million people) at the below basic literacy level;
- 29% (63 million people) at the basic level;
- 44% (95 million people) at the intermediate level; and
- 13% (28 million people) at the proficient level.

### The Details

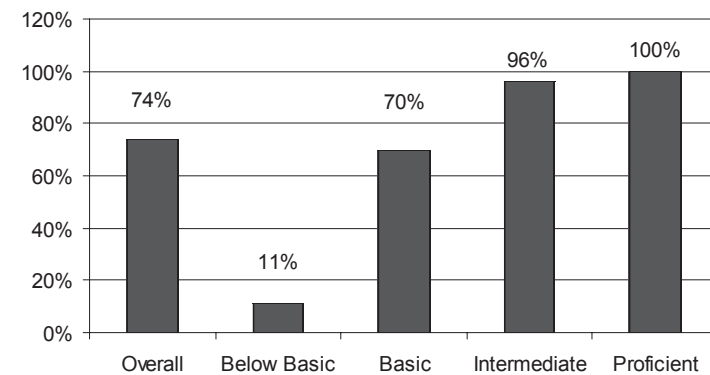
The study divides literacy into prose, document, and quantitative.

#### Prose Literacy

- Measures the ability to search, understand, and use continuous texts such as news stories, brochures, and instructional materials.

**Example task.** Locating a specific piece of information in a short article about high blood pressure

**How many people from each category were successful on this task?**

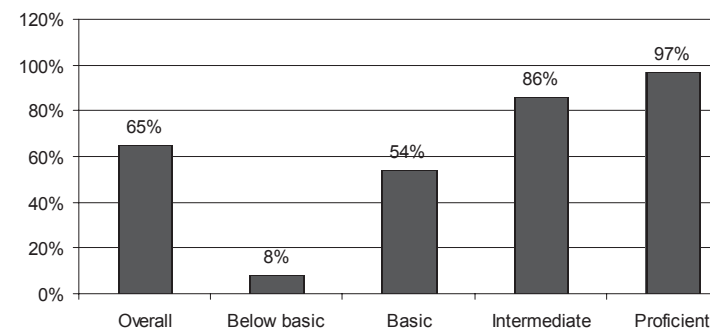


#### Document Literacy

- Measures the ability to search, understand, and use non-continuous texts in various formats. It includes documents such as job applications, payroll forms, maps, tables, and food or drug labels.

**Example Task.** Completing a receipt for certified mail.

**How many people from each category were successful on this task?**



## Center Goes Live, On the Air

By Melodee Mercer

**S**ince February 2006, the weekly internet radio show MyTechnologyLawyer has been featuring plain language as a topic with several of the Center's Board members as regular guest speakers.

The MyTechnologyLawyer program includes topics about technology, technology law, entertainment, business, and policy issues. The radio show's host and creator, Scott Draughton, discovered the Center's Web site while doing several shows with the Society for Technical Communication. He then contacted the Center.

### What we've done so far

In the first show, Center Board member Melodee Mercer co-hosted as five plain language experts talked separately about what plain language is; how it is used in prospectuses, other legal documents, and the Web; and the purpose of the Center.

The show was a success and Draughton asked the Center to do a six-week series of 15 minute spots. These 15-minute spots featured various board members. Another success! Draughton has now asked the Center to do six one-hour shows about plain language.

**We need your feedback!** Send any comments to [melokai@comcast.com](mailto:melokai@comcast.com).

*To access recent segments: Go to [MyTechnologyLawyer.com](http://MyTechnologyLawyer.com), select the Media tab (at the top), click on Radio Show (on the sidebar), and look for the archived shows. The first show was 2/19/06.*

## Results from the Survey of Adult Literacy

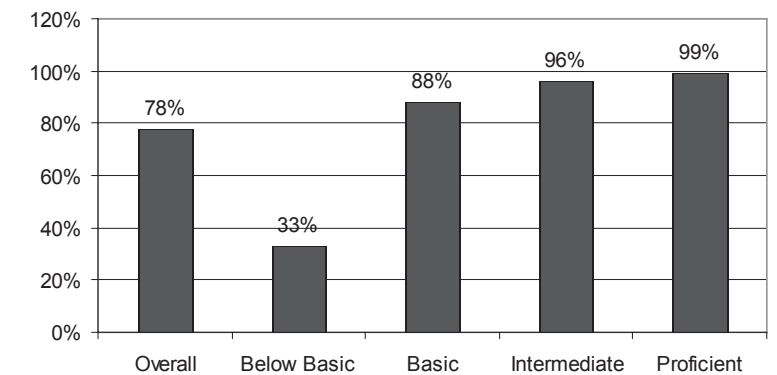
(Continued from page 2)

### Quantitative Literacy

- Measures the ability to do math, to identify computations and complete them using numbers embedded in printed materials. It includes tasks such as balancing a checkbook, computing a tip, completing an order form, or figuring the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.

**Example Task.** Totaling postage and fees for a certified package and entering them onto the form.

**How many people from each category were successful on this task?**



Plain language is making sure that people can understand and use the written documents that impact their lives—and it goes well beyond making sentences shorter or using active voice. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy shows us how important plain language is and gives us the evidence we need to talk to our clients, our bosses, and other decision-makers about why every document must be in plain language.

You can find more information about NAALS at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal>.

### Stay Tuned

From the suggestions we received, the winning submission for the newsletter came from both Susan Kleimann (of Kleimann Communication Group) and Joe Kimble (of the Thomas Cooley Law School).

## 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.

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## Nominees for Board of Directors Bring Varied Experience

According to the Center's by-laws, an election for the Board is held each year. This year, we have three nominees. If approved, they will serve for three years starting on July 1, 2006. You will receive additional information and your ballot in early June.

**Lee Clark Johns**, president of Strategic Communication Inc., has more than 25 years of experience in communication consulting and training. Lee will work to broaden the Center's influence through shared professional development opportunities, advocacy, and networking.

**Karen A. Schriver**, a communication design researcher, consultant, and teacher is president of KSA Communication Design & Research, Inc. Karen will work to set a research agenda for the Center.

**William Smith** is executive vice president of the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and co-founder of the Social Marketing Institute. Bill will bring his experience as a columnist and editorial board member of health communication and education journals.



Center for  
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## Proposed Legislation Will Require Plain Language

The House Government Reform Committee's Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs introduced new legislation (H.R. 4809) that will require regulations to be written in plain language. Government initiatives have encouraged the use of plain language in the past, but the new legislation will codify a definition of plain language.

On March 1, 2006, Center Board members Annetta Cheek and Joe Kimble testified before the committee along with Todd McCracken, president of the National Association of Small Businesses. They discussed the time and money plainly written regulations can save the government, taxpayers, and regulated communities.

### Reducing Burden and Increasing Compliance by Writing Clearly

Writing regulations in easily understood language would help small businesses, citizens groups, and interested individuals comply with regulations and participate in decision-making according to all three experts:

- Testimony by Cheek included examples of just how circuitous and ambiguous some regulation language is.
- Kimble peppered his testimony with examples of how using clear, concise language has saved government and private entities money.

- McCracken explained that using plain language can level the playing field for small businesses. The current bureaucratic language means small businesses often must hire experts to sort through confusing regulations and tax forms. The expense of this effort is a barrier to participation in the regulatory process.

### Writing Clearly is Writing Intelligently

Plain language, according to the experts, is language written in such a way that the intended reader can understand it the first time. Both Kimble and Cheek stressed that using plain language does not mean "dumbing it down." Rather, plain language is just good writing—straightforward and concise.

*Adapted with permission from OMB Watch. Published on 03/07/2006*

<http://www.ombwatch.org/article/articleview/3325/1/434>

### How You Can Support Plain Language Legislation

*To support plain language legislation, visit your representative's office or call. If you write a letter, fax it in. Because of security procedures, letters sent through U.S. mail are delayed significantly. Visit <http://www.house.gov> to get contact information for your state's representatives. This is our chance to make a difference!*



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