THE PLAIN ENGLISH APPROACH TO BUSINESS WRITING

EDWARD P. BAILEY, Jr.

REVISED EDITION

The Plain English Approach to Business Writing

REVISED EDITION

EDWARD P. BAILEY, JR.

For my wife, Janet,

and daughters, Laura and Jeannette

Acknowledgments

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.

Other people have been very helpful:

- Janet Hiller, my wife, who read and commented on everything. She is terrific.

- Brooke Bailey (my brother) and Cathy Bailey (his wife) for their excellent advice on the draft of this book.

- Sister P. J. Cahill and Professors Joan Feeney, Charles Hurst, Arthur Meiners, Robert Sigethy, and Maribeth Wyvill—my colleagues at Marymount University.

- Drs. Jim Gaston, Terry Bangs, and Bill Wallisch—friends, colleagues, and professional inspiration for nearly 20 years.

- Don Insko, who made important contributions to the graphical elements of this book.

- Dr. Fred Kiley, Dr. Greg Foster, Dr. Joe Goldberg, and Ms. Judy Clark—my friends at the National Defense University.

- Marilou and Edward Bailey, my parents; Jeannette and Laura, my daughters; and Jeannette's husband, Max Boot. They provided inspiration.

My thanks to my students—both at Marymount University and in classes I have taught to my business clients—who contributed excellent examples of plain English for this book

Finally, my appreciation to Susan Chang and Linda Robbins at Oxford University Press: I am indeed fortunate to have worked with Oxford and with them.

Fairfax Station, Virginia   E . P. B.
October 1996

Contents

THE NEW WAY
TO WRITE

What is plain English?

Bottom line

Plain English 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. Throughout the book, I talk of plain English as having three parts:

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

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?

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 book's structure?

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.

❖   ❖   ❖

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

CHAPTER 2

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.