Putting Plain Language
Into
Practice

NWT Literacy Council
May 2004

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1.   Introduction

The purpose of this report is to look at the experiences of others who use plain language, and to recommend a plan the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) could follow to implement plain language use.

2.   Background

The NWT Literacy Council has been training GNWT employees to write in plain language for a number of years. During 2001-2002, 127 employees participated in introductory plain language workshops. The Council has continued to deliver training, including two workshops in early 2004.

The Council produced a Plain Language Handbook and a Plain Language Audit Tool. These projects were funded by the GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Communications. The Council distributed the books widely within government.

The evaluation of the plain language workshops in 2002-03 showed that people who take the training use what they have learned in their work. However, they say that training is not leading to strategies to use plain language within the government.

The GNWT has made little progress in adopting plain language writing, either internally, or in communications with the public. People continue to have difficulty using various government forms and understanding public documents.

Workshop participants' suggestions for action
Following plain language workshops, GNWT workers suggest a range of actions the government could take to increase plain language use.
- Make available within government an editor, mentor, or group to review written work.
- Identify application forms, travel claim forms, and assistance forms for review and plain language editing.
- Monitor and give positive reinforcement to develop a plain language pattern.
- Dispel the myth that plain language is dummying down. Help people understand that it is about clarifying the message.
- Make introductory and intermediate level plain language training mandatory throughout the government, rather than an option.
- Find a plain language champion, or "put someone dynamic in charge."
- Contract plain language services from professional consultants.
- Managers must look critically at existing documents and put money in place to revise them.
- We need the buy-in of the Deputy Minister of each department. Start with a GNWT policy and then work on departmental policies from there.

Workshop participants say there are two main barriers to the government adopting plain language. In both cases, participants lay responsibility at the door of senior government officials.

They say the first barrier is that Ministers and senior management do not use plain language when they review and change documents.

Secondly, they say that many senior officials believe that jargon and complex sentences give the appearance that a person or organization is in control and educated.

Promoting a GNWT plain language plan
The NWT Literacy Council believes training is essential to increased use of plain language. However, training on its own is not enough to sustain plain language use over the longer term.

The Council recommends a GNWT-wide commitment and plan to advance plain language use. Such a commitment and plan would include support and direction from senior management, promotion within the government, and further training opportunities.

As a first step to developing such a plan, this paper looks at the plain language policies, plans, and practices among a selection of Canadian jurisdictions and agencies.

3. Overview of Plain Language Use

Plain language use by governments in Canada is increasing. However, it happens on a project-by-project basis and does not include all communications.

Plain language use ranges from new plain language legislation to revised high school report cards.[1] Plain language has yet to become a standard across any government. Plain language use often relies on the expertise of outside consultants.

The Canadian government commits to using plain language within its communications policy. It has published a communications toolkit and information about how to communicate with specific groups, such as seniors, aboriginal people, and less literate Canadians.

Like the federal government, no provincial or territorial government has a stand-alone plain language policy. A plain language policy was drafted by Communications Nova Scotia, but it was not approved by the government.

The GNWT has made commitments to plain language both in its Literacy Strategy, and in *Doing Our Part: The GNWT's Response* to the Social Agenda. Its Communications

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[1] "Harris launches new, plain language high-school report card based on accountability and high standards." News Release. Ministry of Education, Ontario. March 11, 1999.

Policy says: "government communications should use simple language and clear symbols in order to achieve clarity and ease of understanding."

An interdepartmental Literacy Committee within the GNWT advises the department of Education, Culture and Employment on how the NWT Literacy Strategy, including plain language, can be implemented throughout the government. The Education, Culture and Employment division responsible for the Literacy Strategy limited its comments about plain language progress in its 2002-2003 review to a statement that plain language training continued throughout the year for government departments.

Within the GNWT, one department, Public Works and Services, has made the greatest progress toward putting plain language into practice. In its procedures and guidelines, the department identifies plain language as the writing standard for all documents.

The department's action plan, under the NWT Literacy Strategy, was developed in 2001. Its plan includes a literacy committee for the department and these actions:
- Promote the use of plain language within all department divisions and regions. Promotion has included a contest, a Plain Words Work Best poster, and holiday greetings in non-plain language. A bulletin with "unplain" writing examples has been produced.
- Make sure all department manuals, publications and web pages are easy to read. Rewrite the ones that aren't easy to read. Assessments of documents were completed in 2002. A list of 10 priority documents for rewriting was developed with a schedule. Two documents are completed as of February, 2004.
- A guide to employees on how to write in plain language was completed April, 2002.
- Identify and train employees with writing levels lower than their job or advancement needs. No employees have been identified.
- Promote the use of staff writing and computer skills, which includes computer access for all employees. Six of nine regional staff people have computer access.

The Department of Justice has supported training of employees who try to incorporate plain language into materials such as news releases, fact sheets and on the department website. Discussions have taken place, but a formal plan has yet to be developed around the Social Agenda commitment to explore providing plain language summaries of policies and legislation.

The Department of Health and Social Services has contracted out plain language work on a number of projects including a summary of its integrated services delivery model and a survey for community health clinics.

The Worker's Compensation Board (WCB) produced a number of plain language public documents several years ago, including forms, and explanations of coverage for harvesters, artists and carvers, the appeals system, and claims management for employers. The Board, which serves both the NWT and Nunavut, also developed plain

language posters, a version of its letter of decisions, and a terminology list for translation services.

The Board does not fall under GNWT policies. Despite its work in this area, there is no WCB policy dictating that it use plain language to communicate with the public. Its policy about creating and maintaining policy documents includes a statement that plain language will be used during consultation and the development of policies.

The WCB plain language initiatives have tapered off in recent years as staff has changed, though some employees have participated in plain language training.

4.   Case Studies

4.1 Government of Nova Scotia

Communications Nova Scotia is a government agency reporting to the Minister of Policy and Treasury Board. It has a visual identity program, web policy, and advises on all government communications.

A Government-Wide Plain Language Policy

Communications Nova Scotia developed a plain language policy to apply to all government communications. The government did not approve the policy, which is viewed as a victim of both budget cutbacks and competing priorities.

The policy would have placed responsibility for plain language within Communications NS. Communications NS believed a policy would create goodwill, positive perceptions that the government is willing to go the extra mile to give people access to information, and would help people write things correctly the first time.

Communication NS led an interdepartmental Committee to develop the policy. The committee was made up of people with a personal interest in plain language, for example departmental lawyers and information managers.

Under the proposed policy, directors would monitor plain language use, advising Deputy Ministers of progress and problems. The approach would have been education rather than enforcement. Communications NS believed a policy would:

- Save money in the long run.
- Promote unfiltered messages that don't have to be interpreted later.
- Promote accountability.
- Encourage plain language training within existing training budgets.

The provincial government continues to develop plain language materials on a project-by-project basis. Communications NS offers plain language information and an "ask an editor" service on its website.

Lessons Learned

- Resistance to the government-wide plain language policy focussed on the cost of training government employees. Communications NS did not figure out these costs. Instead it suggested that employees who communicate with the public be trained from existing training budgets, which had been reduced by 10 percent.
- Bureaucratic will is as important as political will.
- People need to see the cost of not using plain language. For example, the staff time costs of responding to follow-up requests for information.

4.2 British Columbia Securities Commission

The British Columbia Securities Commission is a Crown corporation. It regulates securities trading in the province and makes sure that investors have the information they need to make informed investment decisions.

Plain Language: A Strategic Priority
The British Columbia Securities Commission made plain language a strategic priority so that securities regulations would be easy to understand for everyone.

It has trained its staff and developed plain language guidelines for all written communications. The *Plain Language Style Guide,* developed by a committee set up in 2001, helps employees communicate more clearly. The chair and vice-chair of the Commission support and talk about plain language, but there is no plain language policy.

The BC Commission decided to strike out on its own and lead by example after the failure of a national attempt to look at plain language for commissions across the country.

Though training was initially resisted by some employees, it provided the vehicle for all 215 fulltime employees to jump on board. Training costs were $100,000 initially. The cost of plain language, including an audit and staff time, is relatively insignificant within the Commission's $28 million annual budget.

In 2002-2003 a private consultant conducted a plain language audit for the Commission, looking at a variety of documents and giving advice on how they could be improved. A mentoring program and on-line plain language discussion group were less successful. The Commission has not done a review to determine how well peer review is working.

The Commission is currently looking at future goals and performance measures. The performance measures are seen as important to know how much time needs to be spent to continue to promote and support plain language use.

Lessons Learned
Support at the top is critical. The chair and vice-chair of the commission made their support for plain language clear and visible. The buy-in from employees can be as important as support from leadership. Here are ways the Commission helped employees see what's in it for them.
- Appeal to people's basic sense of fairness and the entitlement to a right to know.
- Educate about the operational benefits, not just the moral arguments. For example, the Commission saw an increase in media coverage because reporters had clearer information.
- Build on employees' dedication. Because of its emphasis on audience, plain language reminds staff of their mission and the people they serve, for example, the idea of protecting investors against fraud.
- Help people see the wider implications of plain language, that it removes a paternalistic attitude about information. It empowers people to take action.

- Promote pride in the self-improvement aspect of plain language training and use.

The Commission suggests being sensitive to staff who resist plain language.
- Deal with peoples' fear of exposing their ignorance, incompetence, or lack of writing skills.
- Make sure there are no penalties when people use plain language, for example when they are clear about issues and make commitments in writing.
- Encourage plain language, rather than police it.

4.3 Ontario Securities Commission

The Ontario Securities Commission administers and enforces securities legislation in the Province of Ontario. It protects investors, and maintains public and investor confidence in the marketplace.

A Plain Language Directive
The Ontario Securities Commission has no formal plain language policy for its staff. The move toward plain language is a result of a directive from the Commission's Executive Director.

In 2001-02, all 300-400 staff members took plain language writing training. Two training streams were set up, with lawyers and accountants taking legal writing training, and communications and administration staff taking a more general workshop. Training for new staff and refresher courses are ongoing. The cost of initial training was approximately $90,000.

The Ontario Commission is adapting the British Columbia Securities Commission style guide. A plain language audit will result in templates to include in the Ontario guide. The Commission submitted 60 documents for its audit. This audit will also serve as a baseline for future evaluations of how well the Commission is doing in communicating with the public and investors.

The audit is costing between $10,000 and $20,000. The other major cost is the time dedicated by staff.

The Commission is looking at setting up mentoring and peer review programs in the coming year.

Lessons Learned
- Support from senior management must include a willingness to fight for training money and include clear writing as part of performance reviews. Employees need to know that this is how the organization wants to be perceived and how they are expected to contribute.

- Get the right people from all parts of the organization for a plain language committee.
- Use examples of success, such as the British Columbia Securities Commission, that are achieving good results.
- Use good arguments and studies about literacy levels and the need for plain language in internal marketing to employees. This is more effective at changing behaviour than training or dictating to people.
- Use on-going training, style guides, mentoring and other supports to make sure people put plain language into practice after their initial training.
- Use training to improve job satisfaction. It feels good for people to know they are part of an organization that is trying not to be bureaucratic.

4.4   Office of the Alberta Auditor General

The Office of the Auditor General in Alberta gives politicians and senior managers independent recommendations on ways the government can improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

Using the Annual Report as a Plain Language Focus
The plain language work within the Auditor General's office sprang from a desire to improve its 2002 annual report.

The report is the work of many auditors melded into one coherent report. One goal was to reduce the rewriting time needed to clearly tell people what the office has done during the past year, including its recommendations to various parts of the government.

The annual report offers a tangible product to measure success. The main audience is the members of the Legislative Assembly Public Accounts Committee, made up of legislative assembly members (MLAs). The office got positive feedback from MLAs about both the content and the structure of the plain language annual report.

The annual report editor and the communications coordinator founded a group to make the annual report clearer and reduce its length to fewer than 300 pages. They did not use the term plain language because they did not want to get into debates. The group sold their "plain plan" by encouraging concise and clear communication. The core group stayed away from resisters and recognized that change takes time.

The plain language work takes 25 percent of the communications coordinator's time. The annual report committee spent approximately 350 hours on its plain language work. This is equal to the time spent doing a small audit.

The staff of 130 people received plain language writing training in two-day workshops. This training continues to be part of the orientation for new employees. Training costs are covered within existing professional development funds. The Auditor General's office

considers its investment in training as a cost necessary to persuade people to change the way they do business. Clear communication is seen as essential for doing its work.

The Auditor General's office spends $40,000 a year on a consultant to provide advice, answer plain language writing questions, and give feedback to senior managers on their writing. The office also has an internal peer group to support plain language writing.

There is no policy or official statement that says the office will use plain language. The plain language focus has become part of everything that the office does. At the early stages employees think of how their writing will be included in the annual report. The Auditor General's office is also finding that their plain language work helps to improve the way other departments communicate with taxpayers.

Lessons Learned
- Get support at the top by showing the benefits of plain language.
- Champions should model clear writing.
- Emphasize training and help people to "own" their writing. Avoid rewriting for others. This is only a short-term solution and doesn't create permanent change.
- Recognize that the process of writing helps people understand and make their thinking clearer.
- Make clear communications part of the basic abilities required of all employees. Once acceptable standards of competency are developed, it will be easier during performance reviews to identify people who need improvement and feed that into training plans. People need to know that their competence will be measured.
- Reward people using plain language with money or some other means.
- Look for continuous improvement, rather than rapid change. Don't create a backlash.
- Consider the need for plain language on the internet as more people use it to access information.

4.5   Government of Canada

The government of Canada is a liberal democracy. It has an obligation to inform Canadians on a wide-range of issues, programs and services.

A Plain Language Section in Communications Policy
Plain language is one of 31 policy requirements in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada. It has been a provision in the federal communications policy since at least 1988.

The policy states: "To ensure clarity and consistency of information, plain language and proper grammar must be used in all communication with the public." The plain language provision applies to communications within and outside of government. It does not apply to Crown corporations.

Plain language guidelines will be an annex to the Communications Policy. The guidelines will be an updated version of a National Literacy Secretariat booklet published in 1991, called *Plain Language, Clear and Simple*.

The government of Canada has a deadline of 2005 for all departments to have plain language information about their programs and services on the internet.

Communication Canada produced a *Successful Communication Toolkit* in 2003, which includes a section on plain language written communications. It also contains a listing of successful communications projects lead by the federal government, other Canadian institutions, and by other countries. The federal government initiatives include:
- An Elections Canada user-friendly guide to voting in Canada called, *I Can Vote!*
- Health Canada document called *Plain Language Health Information: What Does it Look Like?*
- Four Finance Canada plain language loan disclosure documents.

The federal government will provide nine one-day workshops promoting plain language to employees this fiscal year through the Canada School of Public Service. Each workshop would accommodate a maximum of 40 participants. Two workshops are in French and seven in English.

Literacy organizations and plain language trainers participated in the communicators conference two years ago, which reached 800 of the 2,000 federal communicators across Canada. About half of the communicators come to the government with training and/or experience in public relations, journalism or communications.

The head of each department and institution is responsible for following the communications policy, including the plain language provision. The policy states that the Treasury Board Secretariat and Privy Council Office will monitor compliance through communications plans and audit reports within departments.

Monitoring and enforcement tools are now being developed. Some of the monitoring tools which might be used are a questionnaire, media coverage, and internal audits of materials.

It is a long process for federal employees to master all 31 elements of the communications policy. There is no plain language peer review or mentoring program. However, a number of people review all public documents. Depending on the review process, the document can get more complicated as time goes by, rather than clearer.

Lessons Learned
- Promote plain language over the long term. Regular promotion keeps other priorities and issues from replacing plain language as a priority.
- Make staff conscious about how their writing adopts the language of government.
- Focus on all staff, not just on professional communicators. When not all staff is trained to write in plain language, communications people have to think through the plain language process and sell editing and design changes to the original author or department. And, not all departments or regions have professional communicators. As well, senior document reviewers may make changes that are inconsistent with plain language practice.

4.6 Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development

The department of Agriculture and Rural Development protects the water and land in rural Alberta for agriculture, markets Alberta farm and food industry products, and gives money to farmers during drastic events that affect their income, such as droughts.

Plain Language in a Communications Plan
Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development included plain language in its 1994 communications plan, the first communications plan within the Alberta government.

The department identified and brought together key communicators from each branch in 1994 to promote plain language. These people shared information with all other staff within their branch. There are 55 key communicators among the 12-1300 staff members.

The department hired a consultant to evaluate the forms used by the department, to survey the users of forms, and to provide staff training. Training included train-the-trainer aspects and led to the development of peer reviewers and plain language resource people within the department.

Monitoring and evaluation of plain language communications is done through surveys with audiences the department is trying to reach.

The focus on plain language within Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development is led by the human resources division. It emphasizes plain language within the department, as well as with the public.

The guidelines for the key communicators describe successful communication as:
- Concise, open, honest, timely and direct
- Two-way and allows everyone involved to give feedback
- Accurate and in plain language

Lessons Learned
- Success depends on senior people to champion plain language.
- Help staff see the benefits of plain language. It is estimated the department saved more than $3 million a year[2] by revising its forms. The payback came in not having people call back with questions or for help. This saved 10 minutes per form in staff time.
- Change the organizational culture by defining plain language as a courtesy, as much as a skill.
- Know the audience to communicate effectively. If the audience is diverse or unknown, use the common bottom denominator as a guide.
- Use the corporate training fund, rather than special project funding. Even with downsizing, the training fund will remain because with fewer employees it becomes even more important that they be skilled.

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[2]Christine Mowat. *Clarity*. 1997. as cited on Clear Language and Design website
http://www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign/facts/facts5.htm

5.   Conclusions

There are six main lessons learned from selected agencies that have adopted plain language writing.

1.   Build a strong case for plain language.
2.   People at the top must demonstrate sponsorship and support for plain language.
3.   Market and build trust with employees.
4.   Reward plain language practice. Confront confusing communications.
5.   Keep up the momentum.
6.   Continue to review plain language strategies and learn from others.

The case studies in this report show that plain language practice does not depend on policies. More important influences are leadership, employee buy-in, training and on-going support. These make plain language a part of everyone's job. They change an organization's culture and turn commitments into actions.

6.   Recommendations for the NWT Literacy Council

Build a strong case for plain language.
There are studies about literacy and education levels that show the need for plain language in the NWT. Building a strong case means collecting the information and educating the people who can make change happen.

Using plain language within the GNWT competes with many other priorities and interests. How can the NWT Literacy Council help move plain language closer to the top of the priority list?

1.   Demonstrate how plain language training and promotion costs for the GNWT would be balanced by savings in time, money, and by improved customer service.

2.   Educate and actively recruit plain language champions within the GNWT, particularly among Members of the Legislative Assembly, Deputy Ministers, Assistant Deputy Ministers, and others with influence.

    Make sure enough champions are recruited so that momentum will not be harmed by an election, staff turnover, or change of circumstances.

    Get support for the important elements of a plan to implement plain language.

3.   Apply political pressure.

7. A Plan for Plain Language Use within the GNWT

Objectives	Actions	Timing	Outcomes
Demonstrate Sponsorship and Support at the top.			
Responsibility for plain language within the GNWT is clear.	1. Place responsibility to promote, monitor and evaluate plain language use within the Executive.	Year 1 and ongoing	1. Centralized responsibility ensures government-wide use and accountability. 2. Plain language is seen as a government priority. 3. Corporate Communications and Protocol mandate is clear. 4. The Interdepartmental Literacy Committee advises Executive instead of Department of Education, Culture and Communications.
Leaders model clear writing and recognize it in the writing of others	2. Make two-day plain language training mandatory for all MLAs and senior managers.	Year 1 and ongoing	1. Communications from the office of Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Assistant Deputy Ministers and Directors use plain language writing and design. 2. Changes to documents reviewed by Ministers, their staff, and senior managers use plain language.
Long term training plan for plain language is in place.	3. Corporate Communications and Protocol and Corporate Human Resource Services collaborate on plain language	Year 1 and ongoing	1. Plain language training is priority learning for all GNWT employees. 2. Cost-effective and professional

Objectives	Actions	Timing	Outcomes
	training plan.		plain language training plan is approved and funded.
All GNWT employees receive plain language training.	4. Plain language training is included in the training plan for each employee.	Year 2 and ongoing	1. Plain language training reduces cost of document rewriting by others. 2. Plain language writing encourages clear thinking by GNWT workers. 3. More clear communications with public, even when professional communicator unavailable to review material.
Plain language is considered an essential job skill within the GNWT	5. Plain language writing ability is included in all job descriptions. 6. Plain language is included in performance evaluations for employees and performance standards are developed.	Year 3-5	1. GNWT employees know what plain language skill is expected. 2. Plain language becomes the standard for all GNWT communications.
Build trust and market to employees.			
Be sensitive to reasons people resist plain language.	7. Identify employees with poor writing skills, develop training plans for them. Make their training a priority.	Year 2 and ongoing.	1. Reduce resistance to plain language use.
	8. Involve public service unions, aboriginal organizations, and professional	Year 1 and ongoing	1. GNWT understands resistance to plain language and is better able to deal with opposition.

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Objectives	Actions	Timing	Outcomes
	associations in plain language planning, promotion and use.		2. Resistance to plain language is reduced.
Promote plain language use.	9. Develop a promotion plan that uses a variety of messages and methods. Use the plan to tell employees about the benefits and cost savings of using plain language.	Year 1 and ongoing	1. Employees understand how using plain language helps make their job easier. 2. Employees understand how using plain language helps them do their job better. 3. Employees understand how plain language helps NWT citizens take responsibility and be more self-reliant. 4. Plain language remains a priority of the GNWT.
Help GNWT employees to use plain language.	10. Develop a style guide for GNWT communications. Make it available on the internet.	Year 1-2	1. Employees know how to use plain language. 2. Employees have an easy-to-use reference tool when they prepare letters, e-mail and documents.
Reward Practice and Confront Confusion			
Reward the use of plain language and create awareness of situations where confusing language continues to be used.	11. Start an annual plain language award to recognize excellence.	Year 3	1. Employees know that plain language use is monitored and valued. 2. Examples of plain language excellence are promoted. 3. Employees who use plain language effectively are rewarded.

Objectives	Actions	Timing	Outcomes
	12. Give regular kudos in GNWT newsletters (eg. Bear Facts) to people who use plain language. Identify un-plain language and ways it can be improved.		1. Employees know that plain language use is noticed. 2. Use of un-plain language becomes unacceptable.
Keep up the momentum.			
Help employees to continue to improve their plain language use and skills	13. Develop an on-line editor program and a peer mentoring program.	Year 3-5	1. Employees have access to confidential help with their writing and design.
	14. Continue training, especially for new employees.		1. Employees know that plain language is valued and expected. 2. Employees are encouraged to improve their plain language skills.
	15. Develop new promotion messages and strategies.		1. Employees know that plain language is valued and expected.
	16. List plain language documents on the GNWT and department websites.		1. Plain language efforts are recognized. 2. The public has access to plain language information. 3. Examples of plain language are available for reference.

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Objectives	Actions	Timing	Outcomes
Review plain language strategies and learn from others.			
Evaluate plain language use and report on it annually.	17. Identify indicators for plain language use, measure them.	Year 1-5	1. The progress in plain language use is clear and reported regularly to employees and the public.
The appropriateness of plain language use is evaluated.	18. Produce procedures for audience surveys and document testing that can be used government-wide.	Year 4	1. The audience is acknowledged as the ultimate judge of plain language. 2. Employees know how to make sure that plain language attempts are successful. 3. Knowledge and understanding is gained about different audience preferences and use of government information and materials.
The GNWT continues to learn from others how to improve the use of plain language principles.	19. Plain language use elsewhere is monitored and the information shared among departments regularly.	Year 1-5	1. The GNWT plain language plan is updated regularly based on new information about plain language success elsewhere.
	20. Make a plan to use plain language on GNWT web pages.	Year 4	1. Plain language use keeps pace with how the public gets government information.

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Appendix A

Plain Language Research Outline and Interview Guide

Plain Language Research

Purpose
Find out about the experiences of other provincial and territorial jurisdictions with implementing plain language policy and practices, with a view to recommending a plan the GNWT could follow to implement plain language use.

Research Questions

- What is out there? What is the policy or framework for plain language?
- How did you get there? What was the process for getting where you are now? Champions? Top down or bottom up process?
- What were the biggest challenges?
- What were the opportunities or things that made it possible?
- How do you know you are there? Are all public documents produced in plain language?
- What other documents?
- What is the public response?   Internal response?
- Who determines what is plain language?
- Can you measure impact?

Outcomes

- A summary of approaches taken by other jurisdictions or agencies
- What would support for plain language in the GNWT look like?
- Roadmap for GNWT on actions to take
- Where to house responsibility in GNWT (now interdepartmental Literacy Committee)
- What are the steps GWNT needs to take
- How to encourage discussion about what plain language would look like in each department

Plain Language Research
NWT Literacy Council
December 2003 – March, 2004

Interview Guide

1.   Explain purpose of research

Find out what other jurisdictions or agencies have in the way of policies regarding plain language and how they got there.   Information from others will inform recommendations about what the GNWT should strive for and how to get there. Research being done for the NWT Literacy Council, a voluntary organization which among others activities, is promoting plain language in the NWT.   There is resistance in the GNWT and plain language activities are sporadic, uncoordinated and ad hoc. Council has decided policy needed to see any consistent, long term commitment and resources to plain language.

2.   Describe policies or framework in place?
   a. Who does it apply to?
   b. How is it monitored or enforced?
   c. By whom?
   d. Who approved?
   e. When?
   f. What are the elements?
        i. Training?
        ii. Ongoing skill development?
        iii. Peer review of documents?
        iv. Evaluation or performance measures?

3.   How did you get there?

   a. When start?
   b. Who were the champions?
   c. What was their interest?
   d. Why did they take on this issue?
   e. What were you trying to achieve?
   f. Describe any resistance and how it was handled?
   g. What were the factors that made progress possible (eg. timing, new staff)
   h. What were the steps taken?
   i. What were the costs in training? Other?
   j. Are there still challenges in implementation?   What are they?
   k. Are people clear about what plain language is?

4.   What difference has it made to the organization? Benefits?
   a. How do you know?

5. **What difference has it made to the people you serve?**
How do you know?

6. **What suggestions would you have for others,** eg. the Gov. of the NWT in developing and implementing plain language policy?

7. **Can you provide us with any policy documents, guidelines, reports or budget breakdowns outlining implementation and impacts?**

8. Anything else you want to add?

Appendix B

GNWT Communications Policy

1. Statement of Policy

The Government of the Northwest Territories recognizes that providing information to the public in a timely, accurate and consistent manner is fundamental to the operation of good government. Communications will be managed in an orderly and planned fashion in order to:

(1) ensure that the public is informed about government policies, activities, initiatives and programs and services;

(2) take into account the concerns and views of the public in establishing priorities, developing policies and implementing programs;

(3) ensure that the government is visible, accessible and answerable to the public that it serves; and

(4) present a consistent and positive corporate image of government.

2. Principles

The Government of the Northwest Territories will adhere to the following principles when implementing this Policy:

(1) Adequate information should be provided to the public or its representatives so that the public is able to understand, benefit from and influence the development and implementation of government activities, initiatives, policies, programs and services.

(2) The status of languages as established by the *Official Languages Act* and related regulations or policies and in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms should be respected and upheld in all government communications.

(3) Government communications should be free of sexual or racial stereotyping and shall provide for the fair and representative depiction of people in relation to sex, race, ethnic origin and disability and should reflect the cultural diversity of the Northwest Territories.

(4) To the extent practical, government communications should take into account the special communications needs of key audiences.

(5)   Government communications should use simple language and clear symbols in order to achieve clarity and ease of understanding.

3. Scope

This Policy applies to all departments, agencies and employees of the Government of the Northwest Territories as well as members of the public requesting information on activities, initiatives, policies, programs and services.

4. Definitions

The following terms apply to this Policy:

Communications Planning – a coordinated management planning process that examines and considers public affairs implications and audiences in the development of programs or policies and in making decisions. Communications planning results in the development of communications goals and outlines methods to achieve them.

Corporate Identity –visual identifiers approved to present a uniform and consistent visual identity, as set out in the Government of the Northwest Territories Visual Identity Program.

Designated Spokesperson – a person appointed by a deputy head to respond to inquiries from the public and the media on established policies, programs and services.

Deputy Head – the deputy minister of a department, the chief executive officer of a public committee, board or council or such person as may be appointed as a deputy head.

Public Affairs Services – A specialized activity of communications that ensures a consistent and positive image of the government and Executive Council by identifying media opportunities and public events and coordinating the release of information through the media.

5. Authority and Accountability

(1)   General

This Policy is issued under the authority of the Executive Council. The authority to make exceptions and approve revisions to this Policy rests with the Executive Council. Authority and accountability is further defined as follows:

(a)   Premier

The Premier is accountable to the Executive Council for the implementation of this Policy.

(b)   Deputy Secretary, Corporate Communications and Protocol

The Deputy Secretary, Corporate Communications and Protocol is responsible for the administration of this Policy.

(2)   Specific

(a)   Executive Council

The Executive Council may:

(i)   approve broad policies and broad strategies for government communications; and

(ii)   approve visual identifiers to be used in the development of government's corporate identity.

(b)   Premier

The Premier may:

(i)   recommend communications strategies to the Executive Council;

(ii)   issue guidelines governing communication planning and procedures, including visual identity guidelines;

(iii)   issue guidelines governing public affairs programming procedures; and

(iv)   inform the public of approved government initiatives through the provision of public affairs services;

(c)   <u>Ministers</u>

Ministers:

(i)   will ensure that appropriate communications planning occurs within their departments and agencies;

(ii)   may approve deputy head appointments of designated spokespersons;

(iii)   may inform the public of the approval of departmental initiatives; and

(iv)   may entertain requests for interviews involving policy issues or program and services issues.

(d)   <u>Deputy Secretary, Corporate Communications and Protocol</u>

The Deputy Secretary, Corporate Communications and Protocol will:

(i)   provide support to Executive Council and its committees on communications;

(ii)   review and advise on the communications components of submissions to the Executive Council and Financial Management Board;

(iii)   provide communications advice, direction and support to departments and agencies of the government and monitor and evaluate communications programs;

(iv)   coordinate the organization and implementation of interdepartmental communications strategies and plans; and

(v)   maintain and coordinate the implementation of corporate identity standards and procedures.

(e)   <u>Deputy Heads</u>

Deputy Heads:

(i)   will ensure communications priorities and requirements assigned their respective departments, public committees, boards and councils are met;

(ii)   are accountable for adherence to communications policy, direction and guidelines;

(iii)   will explain approved departmental policies, programs and services; and

(iv)   may appoint individuals to serve as designated spokespersons in accordance with this Policy.

6. Provisions

(1)   <u>Implementation</u>

Executive Council is the authority for government communications planning and ministers have the ultimate responsibility for providing information to the public on government policy, program or services issues.

(2)   <u>Communications Planning</u>

Communications planning assists in the development of a proper understanding, by all groups, of government policies, positions, programs, services and events.

Communications plans are developed in consultation with the Deputy Secretary, Corporate Communications and Protocol and in accordance with communications guidelines issued by the Premier.

(3) <u>Interviews</u>

Requests for interviews involving policy issues or program and service issues are referred to the Minister responsible.

Announcement of new or changed policies, programs and services or government positions, approved by the Executive Council, must be made by the Minister responsible or any other person directed to do so by the Executive Council.

Explanation or discussion of established policies, programs and services may be provided by the deputy head or designated spokespersons.

(4) <u>Corporate Identity</u>

All printed *or* electronic materials and video or film presentations, as well as government buildings, construction signage and moving equipment must be properly identified with the appropriate visual identifier in accordance with guidelines issued by the Premier.

(5) <u>Advertising</u>

Advertising is an essential component of the communications process and must be easily understood and recognized as a product of government. All advertising must conform to provisions of this Policy and be approved in accordance with communications guidelines issued by the Premier.

7. Prerogative of the Executive Council

Nothing in this Policy shall in any way be construed to limit the prerogative of the Executive Council to make decisions or take action with respect to communications outside the provisions of this Policy.

_____
Premier and Chairman of the
Executive Council

Appendix C

Nova Scotia Draft Plain Language Policy and Guidelines

Appendix 1: Proposed Policy

Chapter 0: Plain Language in Government

This Chapter includes:
0.1   Objectives
0.2   Application
0.3   Background
0.4   Accountability
0.5   Policy Directives
0.6   Guidelines
0.7   Training
0.8   Timelines
  a.   **Monitoring**
  b.   **References**

0.1   Objectives:

The province of Nova Scotia is committed to improving communications with Nova Scotians. The objectives of this policy are to

•   make it easier for Nova Scotians to understand and use government information

•   save time, effort, and money for the public and reduce errors for government

•   improve government's accountability to Nova Scotians

0.2   Application:

This policy applies to any form of written communication, including written materials provided by outside suppliers or internal committees that are intended for the public. It includes the following:

•   news releases and brochures
•   memos, notices, and letters
•   application forms, licences, permits, and approvals
•   regulations and contracts
•   consultation papers and policy papers

0.3   Background:

Given the nature of government responsibilities and the frequency and intensity of our interactions with the public and with other departments, we need to communicate in ways that are clear, understandable, and user friendly. The public does not use print materials as most civil servants would expect. The reasons for this are:

* **Attitude**: Many people who read well are not motivated to read or take seriously information from government.

* **Skill Level**: Research shows that 50 per cent of Atlantic Canadians don't use print materials well.

People are inundated with printed materials they often don't have time to read. They are impatient with printed matter: they need a reason to read it. Strong, clear writing that gets right to the point and is well laid out increases the motivation to read. Furthermore, many people do not think that their government cares whether it is communicating adequately. A B.C. study showed that only 26 per cent of people surveyed thought that civil servants and municipal governments even **tried** to communicate with the average person.

Despite the fact that half of our audience has problems using written materials, we still rely on written communication to get our message across. In letters, brochures, print media, pamphlets, the Internet, and other written formats, there is a need to take extra care to communicate in plain language.

0.4   Accountability:

All managers have a responsibility to ensure that written communications are developed in plain language. Understandability and clarity of written communication is the ultimate responsibility of the Deputy head in each department.

To do this, departments may:

* provide training in the use of plain language to staff who develop written materials

* use focus groups, tests, or surveys of consumers when designing forms, brochures and other related print material

* use plain language techniques to periodically revise forms, letters, brochures, and written materials

* ensure that all written communications provided by outside consultants for use by the public are written in plain language

- monitor to ensure that staff are using plain language in their correspondence with the public.

0.5   Policy Directives

0.6   Guidelines

Plain language is communication that considers its audience's information and reading needs in its language, organization, and design. Plain language avoids foreign phrases, outdated or pompous expressions, and jargon. Where jargon is unavoidable plain language communicators explain it. Plain language is clearly and simply written, but it is not condescending or simplistic.

Attached to this document are basic guidelines for plain language. For more information and for up-to-date guidelines, contact Communications Nova Scotia.

0.7   Training

Departments may make arrangements to provide plain language programs for their employees who are responsible for the development of written communications. Any funds spent on these programs are to be absorbed by each department from existing budget allocations. The Department of Human Resources now offers plain language training through consultants. In addition, online training developed by the Province of Ontario's Management Board Secretariat will be available on the Intranet.

0.8   Timelines

For the first two years, large written projects already under way (where the cost to change the writing would be prohibitive) will be exempt from the policy.

- By the end of Year 1: Plain language is to be used in all new documents that explain how to obtain a benefit or service, or how to comply with a requirement.

- By the end of Year 2: All applications and other forms and all letters are to be in plain language.

- By the end of Year 3: All new education and promotional materials and reports, including those from outside consultants, are to be in plain language.

- By the end of Year 4: All new regulations requiring Order-in-Council or ministerial approval and all remaining public documents are to be in plain language where appropriate.

- Ongoing: When regulations are being consolidated or revised, departments should consider redrafting them in plain language where possible.

0.9   Monitoring

Communications Nova Scotia is responsible for providing advice on communication and implementation issues to departments and their agencies, and for monitoring and reviewing this policy periodically.

0.10   References

Communications Nova Scotia styleguide for plain language, Communications Nova Scotia web page.

Appendix 2: Writing Guidelines for Communications

Here are some guidelines to help you keep your writing appropriate to your readers' needs

Organization
- Have a clear purpose.
- Know your audience: what do they need to know? What do they get wrong?
- Put the most important information first; get right to the point.
- Use headings and sub-headings to guide readers.
- Use lists, point form, tables, and question-and-answer formats to make the document easier to read.

Language
- Use clear, straightforward sentences.
- Use a sentence to convey only one idea.
- Prefer a familiar word to an unfamiliar word.
- Explain technical words or concepts that you cannot avoid.

Design
- Choose a type style and size that are easy to read.
- Use upper and lower case, not all capital letters, in text.
- Use line lengths, margins, and line spacing that are appropriate to the text.

Tone
- Address your readers directly in a straight-forward and up-front manner.
- Emphasize the positive.

Check with your readers
You can use focus groups, evaluation forms, or surveys, or you can test informally with people you know who might be part of the audience or who know the audience well.

Appendix D

Communications Policy of the Government of Canada
Table of Contents and pages 1-4.

Communications Policy of the Government of Canada

Government Communications

Archived Policy

Effective Date
Policy Objective
Policy Statement
Application and Authority
Policy Requirements
Monitoring
Procedures
Guidelines
References
Enquiries
Appendix A
Appendix B
Annex
List of Related Topics
Alternate Format(s)
InstructionsRTF (5.26 Mb)
Printable Version

Table of Contents

2. Information Free of Charge

Institutions must provide information free of charge when the information is in their control and it:

    a.   is needed by individuals to make use of a service or program for which they are eligible;

    b.   explains the rights, entitlements and obligations of individuals;

    c.   consists of personal information requested by the individual whom it concerns;

    d.   informs the public about dangers or risks to health, safety or the environment;

    e.   is required for public understanding of a major new priority, law, policy, program or service; or

    f.   is requested under the *Access to Information Act* and fees are waived at the discretion of the head of the institution.

3. Plain Language

An institution's duty to inform the public includes the obligation to communicate effectively. Information about policies, programs, services and initiatives must be clear, relevant, objective, easy to understand and useful.

To ensure clarity and consistency of information, plain language and proper grammar must be used in all communication with the public. This principle also applies to internal communications, as well as to information prepared for Parliament or any other official body, whether delivered in writing or in speech.

4. Official Languages

In all communications, institutions must respect the equality of status of the two official languages as established by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and given effect through the *Official Languages Act* and the *Official Languages (Communications with and Services to the Public) Regulations*. Institutions must adhere to all legal requirements and regulations derived from these statutory provisions.

Institutions must identify and respect all official language requirements that apply when engaging in any of the communication activities stipulated in this policy. Institutions must abide by the Treasury Board's official language policies, which set out various requirements with respect to communications. They must also abide by the requirements of the *Federal Identity Program* concerning the visual presentation of the official languages in communications or information materials.

5. Corporate Identity

Clear and consistent corporate identity is required to assist the public in recognizing, accessing and assessing the policies, programs, services and initiatives of the Government of Canada.

To maintain a recognizable and unified corporate identity throughout the government, institutions must ensure that their buildings, facilities, programs, services and activities are clearly identified

Appendix E

Clear Language and Cost Savings

The Alberta government now has clear evidence that plain language forms save money. At Alberta Agriculture, "with 1,034,530 forms processed a year, and savings in staff time of at least 10 minutes per form ... the annual saving to the government is an astounding $3,472,014."

"Alberta Agriculture saves money with plain language," Christine Mowat, *Clarity,* 1997

Royal Insurance of Canada had a 38% increase in sales when plain language was used in homeowners' insurance policies (from $59 million to $79 million).

Rapport: News about Plain Language, #19, 1996

In Australia, by rewriting one legal document, the Victoria Government saved the equivalent of $400,000 a year in staff salaries.

Writing in Plain English, R.D. Eagleson, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1990

The Motorola Corporate Finance Department has substantially improved its operation after a quality movement. They now close their books in 4 days, down from 12 in 1987. Changes such as clearer directions on forms have helped streamline the process – and save $20,000,000 a year.

"Motorola and NEC Going for Glory," L. Therrien, *Business Week,* 1991

The Ontario Records Council estimates the government has about 83,000 forms. They cost $29 million to print and $2 billion to process. Processing costs are high because **80%** of public forms are filled out incorrectly. It costs 10 times more to process forms completed with errors.

Ontario Government Forms Management Survey Report, Ontario Records Council, Forms

Forum, 1993

Since the British Government began its review of forms in 1982, it has scrapped 27,000 forms, redesigned 41,000 forms, and saved over $28,000,000.

Writing in Plain English, R.D. Eagleson, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1990

Facts Home

Literacy Statistics | Impact on Health & Safety | Customer Service
In the Workplace | Cost Savings | Legal Documents | Aging
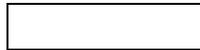
CLAD Home

Appendix F

"The Plaining of Writers." Article in *Clarity* by Marwan Saher

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