Clear Writing in the Professions. ERIC Digest.

In virtually all areas of business, it is essential to communicate in ways that clients, employees, and the public can understand. Advertising appeals must be intelligible, product warranties must be comprehensible, and job instructions must be stated clearly enough to be followed. It is in the interest of the merchant, the advertising writer, and the lawyer to make sure that their writing is clear. Fortunately for those who must read and interpret communication in business and the professions, there have been...
concerted efforts to improve that communication in recent years. This digest presents
details of some of those efforts.

THE PLAIN ENGLISH MOVEMENT

As they have become better informed, members of the public have begun to demand
that sales contracts, warranties, and other consumer-oriented documents be written in
clear, understandable language (Crandall, Charrow 1990; Collins 1986). Proponents of
the so-called "Plain English movement" have sought, through legislative lobbying
campaigns and other means, to encourage government and business professionals to
clarify the language of these items. In states including New York, such efforts have
resulted in statutes requiring that certain kinds of documents be drafted in
straightforward language (Sullivan 1986). Business people are unlikely to take language simplification efforts seriously if their
superiors do not participate. For a pattern of consistently clear, understandable
communication to take root in a given company, those in the highest levels of
management must demonstrate through their own actions that improved communication
is a top priority of the entire organization (Williams 1986). At the same time,
organizations that embrace plain English appear to benefit from better internal
communication and improved public relations (Dorney 1987). Indeed, a genuine belief in
honest and responsive communication should be central to a company's values and
culture. Plain English is one way to achieve this goal.

WRITING IN PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

Because writing is such a critical part of the practice of law, many law schools have
worked to strengthen their writing programs. At some of the schools, the Plain English
movement has been a central part of legal writing education. For instance, at the
Southwestern University School of Law, writing teachers instruct students in principles
of revision adapted from Richard Wydick's book, "Plain English for Lawyers" (Meteer
1985).

Communication, as an integral part of legal practice, performs separating, unifying, and
prestige functions. Legal language has some of the features of a dialect which has
evolved in ways that set it apart from standard English. Those seeking to reform legal
communication must realize that there is more to the language of the law than its
distinctive lexicon (Charrow, Crandall 1990). Simply replacing every "hereinbefore" and
"to-wit" with more generally recognizable, contemporary terms may not be enough to
assure that a legal document will be readable. Legal writers also tend to employ such
devices as archaic prepositional phrases, the passive voice, and a characteristic set of
articles and demonstrative pronouns (Charrow, Crandall 1990).

Woolever (1986) argues that the entire process of legal writing would be shorter,
clearer, and more effective if writers would give as much attention to the politics of the
rhetorical situation as they do to legal research. This requires: (1) understanding the
three dramatic elements in the rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, tone); (2)
recognizing how these elements apply to the major categories of legal writing; (3)
determining who the audience for each document will be.

In the same vein, Comprone (1991) maintains that student writers can be taught to
become rhetorically conscious when instructors involve them in complex considerations
of purposes and audiences, on secondary and tertiary as well as primary levels.
Organizational report writing, for example, is often directed to a primary audience of
managerial decision-makers, a secondary audience of production personnel, and a
tertiary audience of, perhaps, marketing or research specialists.

As engineers tend to spend a good deal of their time writing, many engineering schools
now either include writing courses in their curricula or integrate writing instruction into
existing courses (Hodes 1986). Carnegie Mellon University now offers a Master of Arts
in Professional Writing (MAPW) for students seeking careers as document designers in
business and government. Through coursework, internships, research, and teaching
assistants, the program seeks to help students (1) refine their writing, reading, and
critical skills; (2) understand rhetorical theories underlying composition; (3) understand
the structures and practices of English discourse more fully; and (4) comprehend the
relationship between verbal and visual communication (Jones, Steinberg 1987). Higher
education institutions such as UCLA have even instituted workshops to improve the
writing of their own administrators (Hartzog 1983).

WRITING AND THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

The medical profession is another field in which the continuing improvement of
communications is a goal. Clear doctor-patient communication can be literally a matter
of life and death. With that in mind, researchers have examined such subjects as the
readability of cancer information pamphlets (Kuiper 1985). Medical consent forms have
been analyzed as well. The forms are often so laden with both medical and legal jargon
that even educated laypeople cannot decipher them. Scholars have offered specific
proposals for improving consent forms (Kaufer 1983). To help doctors communicate
more effectively with their professional peers, the University of Florida College of
Medicine has instituted a course in scientific writing for its pediatric fellows. The course
addresses topics including prose, syntax, writing style, and the construction of scientific
papers. In response to strong student interest in writing instruction, the medical college
has added an advanced course (Cox 1990).

THE PUBLIC AND THE PROFESSIONS

As members of the public, in their roles as citizens and consumers, have become more
educated about products and services, government, and health, they have become
more assertive in demanding information about those topics. It is increasingly necessary
for business and government leaders to communicate with the public in a manner that
acknowledges the intelligence of the average person but recognizes the public's lack of
familiarity with the jargon of a particular field. The Plain English movement and business
communication research can aid in the process of improving contacts with consumers.
The teaching of the fundamentals of clear communication to future business leaders
while they are still in school is another very valuable technique for improving the flow of
information from business to the public. Students can be taught to view writing as a
social act, and to internalize the conventions of good writing. Auburn University's
business and technical writing course is an example of programs that employ peer
reviews, revision, and audience awareness to achieve these goals (Werner 1987).
In the past few years academic interest in writing in the professions has accelerated,
probably in large part because of the multidisciplinary aspect of the field (Kogen, 1989).
And many academics are beginning to see that the discipline of professional writing can
contribute much to our understanding of writing and communication in general.

"Texts produced by writers in the world of work are not only words and sentences, ideas
and information, but also acts of discovery, negotiation, compromise, commitment,
creation, persuasion, and control" (Matalene 1989).

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