

# PLAIN Matters September 2016

Guest editor blog: David Berman

"Alternative text and making documents accessible"

After such an inspiring adventure in Dublin together, I'm thrilled to continue to be a part of PLAIN. I hope you enjoy my blog below.

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## New name for newsletter: PLAIN Matters

You've already noticed our new name at the top of this issue.

With a choice of 33 submissions, it was a tough decision to make. But we are pleased to say that the winner is PLAIN Board member and 2015 conference organizer, [Claire O'Riordan](#) (right).

Thanks to everyone who submitted suggestions. We may be able to use some of them for other PLAIN media.

## New Board members needed

We have some excellent candidates for Board nominations, including people from non-English speaking countries. But we're still looking for a member from Canada with some financial skills, as our bylaws require a Canadian treasurer.

Please let us know if you can recommend someone or if you might like to be a Board member yourself. To join the Board, you must have been a member of PLAIN for the past **12 months**.

To nominate someone, send an email and a short biography to: [membership@plainlanguagenetwork.org](mailto:membership@plainlanguagenetwork.org) by September 30.

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## - Member news -

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### LinkedIn, Logo, AGM

- Check out our new [page](#) about the PLAIN LinkedIn group.
- Our new PLAIN logo is nearly ready. Watch for it coming soon!
- The 2016 Annual General Meeting will be held in the offices of the [Plain English Foundation](#) in Sydney, Australia. The time of the meeting is:

### Save the date for 2017 Conference

Join PLAIN in Austria September 21-23, 2017 at the University of Graz (below) for our 11th biennial conference. We will be hosted by Klarsprache, the Society for Readable Texts. Learn more [here](#).

- Friday, October 7 at 8:00 a.m. AEST – Australian Eastern Standard Time
- Thursday, October 6 at 5:00 p.m. (17:00) Eastern Daylight Time (EDT)
- Thursday, October 6 at 10:00 p.m. (22:00) British Summer Time (BST).

But don't worry. You don't have to go to Australia to join the meeting.

You can join online through GoToMeeting. Email our Secretary Greg Moriarty by **September 30** for instructions: [membership@plainlanguagenetwork.org](mailto:membership@plainlanguagenetwork.org)

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## - Guest editor blog: David Berman -

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I find that document professionals fluent in plain language are often still puzzled by the extra editorial components that need be authored as part of the process of **making a document accessible** for everyone.

These extra bits of wording are actually quite simple to write, once you know how. And they're extremely important for anyone using your document with assistive technologies, such as screen readers that announce information to those who can't see or read.

### When you need alternative text

There are 3 kinds of situations where we potentially need you to provide alternative text. These are:

- images
- table summaries
- charts.

Of the 3, **table summaries** seem to puzzle folk the most. So that's what I'm choosing to share today. Hope it's not too nerdy!

### What table summaries do

What is a table summary? And why does [Adobe Acrobat Pro's Accessibility checker](#)

### About David:

David Berman, RGD, FGDC, is a special advisor to the United Nations on how to use accessible design to fulfill the [Millennium Development Goals](#), and an Invited Expert to [W3C](#), the publishers of WCAG 2.0. He was recently named Inclusive Design Champion for the Government of Ireland. His book *Do Good Design* is available in English, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Malay, Russian, Spanish, and Braille.

### For more information

Check out my multi-part video series on why [Web Accessibility Matters](#).

You can also contact me at [berman@davidberman.com](mailto:berman@davidberman.com) or follow me on [Twitter](#). Or, maybe I'll see you at the [Clarity conference](#) in New Zealand.

And don't forget to get your free [Accessibility Ribbon for Word](#). It supports good causes and better documents!

bug you that your PDF file is lacking such a thing?

Imagine if you were planning a bike trip in the United States, from San Diego, California to Bangor, Maine, and perusing a large table of driving distances between cities in North America.

If you're a **sighted** person, you wouldn't read the entire table from top left to bottom right. That would be horrible. Rather, you'd scan for "San Diego" down the left edge and "Bangor" across the top. And then, you'd discover the cell where the column and row intersect.

Similarly, a **non-sighted** user would never want to listen to the entire table read out loud. Rather, they'd want to know how the table is organized. Their screen reader then flips into "table mode," which allows them to select a column and row and hear what's present within the cell where their selections intersect.

A **table summary** is a description of a complex data table (a grid of information). This summary is intended for people (or search engines) who can't use their eyes to surmise what the complex table is all about.

If you're familiar with **alternative text for images**, think of the table summary as alternative text for complex tables. Having to listen to the entire table to figure out whether it's of interest or not can be quite burdensome. The table summary tells the person what to expect, if they choose to engage with the table.

The table summary is **invisible**. It will only be experienced by people using assistive technologies. So most of your audience won't even know it's there.

### When to add table summaries

You never have to include table summaries. They're never required for compliance with accessibility standards such as [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.0](#), [PDF/Universal](#)

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### Talk to us!

Let us know what you think about our newsletter. Do you have a suggestion for a guest editor? Have you won an award? Have you seen an example of good - and bad - plain language you want other PLAIN members to see? Is there some other news you want to share?

Please contact us at:  
[info@plainlanguagenetwork.org](mailto:info@plainlanguagenetwork.org)

[Accessibility \(PDF/UA\)](#), or [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#).

Though, technically, you could choose to add a table summary to every data table in your document.

I recommend including table summaries only when data tables are sufficiently complex. As a guideline, add table summaries when a table has at least **5 rows** and at least **5 columns**.

### **How to write a table summary**

Here's an example of how to word a table summary: "Table that categorizes cats. Navigate on row headings to choose the species, then on column headings to find the type, hue, paw span, width, and height."

And, just like alternative text for images and charts, don't forget to include table summaries with the main document when you send it for translation into other languages.

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