

Happy
New
Year!

PLAIN Matters

December 2017

Guest Editor Blog: Miguel Martinho

"The Surprises of Reality"

When you ask people for their opinion, you can expect some surprises. Miguel shares some from the International Public Sector Survey. Read his guest editor blog below.

President's Message - Joanna Richardson

December 2017

Dear PLAIN Members,

2017 has been a busy year for PLAIN as we hosted our biennial conference and promoted plain language worldwide.

We are particularly pleased to now have plain language pages on our website in [German](#), [French](#), [Portuguese](#) and [Spanish](#). Our [LinkedIn group](#) is very active and in May we started a [Spanish-speaking LI group](#) too.

This year PLAIN hosted its 11th international conference, in Graz, Austria. It was the first plain language event in a German-speaking country and a great success. If you couldn't make it, you can still access many of the presentations [here](#).

One of the keynote speakers at the conference is this PLAIN Matters' guest editor, Miguel Martinho, updating us on the [International Plain Language survey](#). I hope you read his Guest Editor blog in this issue.

2018 promises to be another exciting year for PLAIN members. We look forward to:

- A members-only section on our website
- An e-journal of publications about plain language exclusively for members
- A plain language event in a Spanish-speaking country

Watch this space and follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) for news.

Wishing you all the best for 2018!

Joanna Richardson

President of PLAIN

Worst Words for 2017

If you shook your head the first time you heard "alternative facts," you're not alone. That term tops the list of the Plain English Foundation's annual Worst Words list for 2017. Others that made the list this year include "joyments," and "betterers."

Many plain language advocates and those who just appreciate language cringed when United Airlines explained that the passenger they dragged off of the plane was the subject of "involuntary deboarding."

Choosing your favorite Worst Words may be a good game to play with your holiday guests. We all have at least one word or phrase that is not music to our ears.

- Member News -

Graz was great...

Looking for the presentations from PLAIN's 2017 conference on Graz? You'll find them here:

<http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/presentations-plain-2017-n.../>

Copyright of the presentations belongs to their respective authors. Please use the direct link to the presentations on PLAIN's website if you want to share them with other people.

...onward to Oslo!

PLAIN will be in Oslo, Norway in 2019.

We look forward to great presentations, fabulous fjords, and a warm welcome from the Oslo team.

Watch this space for more information.

- Guest Editor Blog: Miguel Martinho -

The surprises of reality

International Public Sector Survey (IPSS)

Red wine, bullets, and clarity

Expensive red wines taste best. Bullet points help to understand lists. People appreciate clear

Who is Miguel?

Miguel is Chief Strategy Officer of Claro, and Clarity's representative in Portugal.

He studied Law and was an advisor to the Portuguese Ombudsman. Back then, he would find himself writing to the Prime Minister on behalf of the Ombudsman while at the same

language. These facts are so obvious that it's not even worth putting them to the test. Or is it?

Among the three best Portuguese red wines of 2017 we find a wine costing little more than two euros. Readability tests have shown that low literacy readers struggle with a bullet list. And the early results of the ongoing IPSS, assessing Government communication, had a few surprises in store for us.

How are we doing when it comes to clarity?

PLAIN and Claro recently launched a pilot of the IPSS in the United States, New Zealand, and Portugal. We wanted to:

- know what governments were doing for plain language and how people evaluated these efforts,
- better understand the true role of plain language in everyday life, and
- produce evidence-based arguments for plain language.

Most findings confirmed our expectations:

- All the respondents consider it important that the State communicates clearly (more than 80% answered very or extremely important).
- In the last 12 months, only 12.6% did not find it difficult to understand State communications (48% had difficulty 5 or more times).
- In most State sectors, less than 10% of respondents think communication is clear (New Zealand stands out positively).
- More than 70% think, however, that State communication has improved over the last 10 years, though slightly (about 60%).

So can we breathe a sigh of relief?

How do we make sense of one disturbing surprise?

The survey also offered the option between two sentences, one in plain language and the other in legalese. In New Zealand and the United States, all respondents preferred the clear

time having to help citizens understand their letters from the Ombudsman. This showed Miguel the gap between the complexity of public communication and people's literacy.

Miguel is a pragmatic perfectionist, believing that all organizations, whether public or private, can improve their communication — and he's made this his life's work alongside Sandra Fisher-Martins. He believes that clarity cannot be a privilege of the few, because everyone has the right to understand.

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

sentence. In Portugal, almost 30% preferred the complex one.

On closer inspection, the surprise was even more puzzling. Those who preferred the longest and puffed up sentence were the youngest, least educated, and with lower incomes. Why would this be? Do these young adults feel they need to *say* they like complexity? These are questions that can only truly be answered when we have real survey data to review.

What can we do with data?

Only by deepening the research can we get useful answers. It will be useful, for example, to cross their *preferences* with their actual *ability* to understand clear or complex sentences.

Life has a way of challenging our beliefs, no matter how good our underlying intentions were. That is precisely why it is so important to put them to the test. With our beliefs well challenged, we now look forward to the next phase of the survey. We are curious to see what surprises there will be in other countries as well.

See the results and help us update the survey:

plainlanguagenetwork.org/survey