

Paved with good intentions: Words of advice for the rocky road of bureaucratic language

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Those who have lived inside the comfortable confines of the Washington, D.C. beltway often find it difficult to appreciate the degree of disdain with which bureaucracies are held by the rest of the country. When one has not had bureaucrats as neighbors, associates, and friends, it may be easy to think of them as purveyors of the sump hole into which unjust taxes are funneled. It may not be difficult to believe that their main purpose in life is to see to it that communications from the government are deliberately unclear, that their tasks are to withhold information from the public, or that they really want to prevent constituents from receiving what is due them. Perhaps because I recently moved two thousand miles from D.C., I have begun to realize the utter contempt that distant, unsympathetic, frustrated outsiders to Washington can have of the bureaucracies of the federal government.

Most businesses use printed language to convince consumers to buy their products, to instruct them about how to use these products, and, when mandated, to warn them about the potential dangers when the products are used. In contrast, much of a government's use of language has a more limited range, primarily to advise people about their rights and what to do about them. Unfortunately, this attempt to be advisory is frequently unclear, and it sometimes even appears to be unnecessarily negative, even threatening. Even worse, the effort can be interpreted as an attempt to disguise constituents' rights or to withhold information rather than to provide it.

This paper, based on research on legal disputes between various federal bureaucracies and constituents, points out some of the difficulties government employees have in communicating with recipients of their services. But it also tries to get beneath these assumptions of ill will and to identify the real points of difficulty in past misunderstandings about the actual intentions of federal bureaucracies. It is my belief that the intentions of most bureaucrats are honorable and that their problems in delivering messages to the public are the result of other factors, many of which can be resolved with the help of linguistic knowledge. Although this paper is addressed to the problems of federal bureaucrats, it also has salience for others who try to communicate helpful written messages of advice in nonbureaucratic settings.

It is only fair to point out that the federal government has not been insensitive to or unresponsive about the complaints of the public about bureaucratic language. During the administration of President Jimmy Carter, such problems were realized, resulting in the creation and initial funding of the Document Design Center, a branch of the American Institutes of Research. Its mandate was to assist government and business in their efforts to write clear prose.

In May 1978, the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs sponsored a conference on insurance policy issues of concern to consumers, which include the language actually used in insurance contracts (Shuy 1998). It should be noted, in addition, that agencies such as the Social Security Administration (SSA) collected complaints about the lack of clarity of their notices and, as a result, developed a “clear writing” division in 1984 to address their problems (Shuy 1998). More recently, in January 1998, the Securities Exchange Commission capped a two-year effort to improve the readability and utility of certain disclosure documents by adopting final rules for its “plain English” initiative. Plain English, in this instance, was defined as short sentences, concrete everyday language, active voice, use of bullets whenever possible, no legal or business jargon, and no multiple negatives.

As promising as these examples of bureaucratic awareness of the problem may be, they tend to exist in a sociolinguistic vacuum. They are based on the assumption that by setting forth a set of rules, even good ones, change will inevitably follow. The fact that this issue surfaces about every ten years suggests that the “let’s just do it” approach has not worked very well. This is not to say that the work of the Document Design Center was not useful, for it came up with some very useful guidelines for clear writing, even if, in the long run, it did not change the face of bureaucratic writing. Today, some insurance policies are a bit clearer than they were before the 1978 Consumer Affairs conference, but most are still bogged down with legal and business expressions and syntax that confuse and confound. The approach taken by the Social Security Administration is another matter and one that bears careful scrutiny, as its notices have improved greatly over the past fifteen years. In fact, the principles that I propose here have been largely fulfilled by SSA, a kind of success story amidst the hand-wringing efforts of most agencies (Shuy 1998).

For bureaucracies trying to write clearly, I offer the following eight areas of advice:

1. Accept the fact that you begin with two strikes against you. The fact that you are a federal bureaucracy puts you in the hole to begin with. You get little help from congresspeople who claim to their home state constituents that they are suffering hardships by just having to live in Washington. They love to hate the bureaucrats whose task it is to implement the laws they created. Often, in fact, their campaigning is based on an anti-Washington motif. Nor is industry much of an ally. Federal agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and

the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), produce regulations governing the wording of warnings required for products that pose dangers to consumers. This causes manufacturers to have to say clearly and precisely what can go wrong with their products, a task that, for obvious reasons, they clearly do not favor.

Then there is the issue of taxes. Americans appear to want a government when they want it, usually to provide services that protect them and provide opportunities and comfort. But they do not seem to want to pay for different services needed by others.

Beginning with a downside such as this makes bureaucratic writing much more difficult than the everyday writing that most of us do. The audience is, by definition, skeptical, if not hostile, to start with. Bureaucratic writers must first recognize this disadvantage and produce prose that overcomes it. They do not begin in neutral. They begin with two strikes against them.

2. Keep a clear focus on why you are doing what you are doing. Bureaucrats write to the public to convey advice about the rights of recipients and how to achieve these rights. However self-evident this fact may be, it is clear that it gets forgotten easily. In order to communicate these rights and procedures, one must have a very clear picture of the recipients, what rhetoricians call recipient design. It is easy for bureaucratic writers to begin with the law or regulation that is to be communicated and then try to translate it into words that the recipient can understand. Wrong. Begin with a clear idea about what the recipient might need or want to know, then translate the law or regulation to suit the reader's goals, not those of the agency. To be sure, such an effort must not distort the intention of the law or regulation, but it has a quite different starting point.

The issue here is a simple one: Why are you here? You are here to serve the interests and needs of the public, not the interests and needs of the laws and regulations.

In our two years of working with the clear writing project of the Social Security Administration, Jana Staton and I addressed this problem in a sociolinguistic way. First, we had writers bring to class the current notices on which they were working. Then, noting that these efforts simply translated regulations, we devised a field trip to a local nursing home. Writers were to pick elderly patients, present the notice, and get feedback about what the patients thought it meant, whether or not they liked it, and what they thought they should do about it. The results of this field trip were enlightening. The patients, on the whole, had no idea what the notice meant or what they were supposed to do as a result of getting it. In short, they hated it. To a person, the writers found the visit invaluable. From that point on, we had them visualize the individual patient they visited each time they wrote a new notice. They established a real person as a reader of their message, not just an

amorphous one. It became clear to the SSA writing staff that they were there to communicate with real recipients and that to do so, they had to start with the recipients' perspective, not SSA's.

3. Remember that not everything can get done at once. What seems to characterize the governmental approach to change is that the event of a decision means that compliance or change will follow immediately. Thus, President Carter's mandate for a service agency to be made available to bureaucracies was enacted with the assumption that things would be different from that point on. Likewise, the Office of Consumer Affairs's 1978 effort to hold a conference on insurance language was assumed to be the turning point after which clear writing would obviously flow. The Security Exchange Commission's (SEC's) 1998 listing of principles of clear writing, along with a mandate to follow them, is assumed to change traditional ways of formatting text and designing prospectuses, proxy statements, and annual reports.

The simple fact is that change of this type does not flow so smoothly. For one thing, institutional memory is almost nonexistent. The fact that the problem of clear writing keeps being rediscovered every ten years or so is evidence enough of this. In addition, the overlay of political appointments in bureaucracies itself causes rapid turnover of those charged with tasks such as clear writing. Of the hundred or so writers that Staton and I trained during the mid-1980s, only a couple are still connected with the project. Some were justifiably promoted to other positions; others left SSA for other opportunities; the head of the project has since retired; the acting director of SSA who shepherded the writing project at its inception was replaced when a new president was elected. Those outside of Washington bureaucracies seldom understand the fragility of life within an agency.

Again, SSA provides the best example of a more continuous effort to create clear and understandable prose. After Staton and I completed our two years of training SSA writers, I heard nothing more about the project. One can only hope, under such circumstances, that the seeds we sowed took hold and yielded good fruit. But we really didn't know for sure until I retired in 1998 and began to receive social security notices myself. I was pleased, as well as relieved, to learn that the current notices are a distinct improvement over those of the mid-1980s. Apparently our work endured the changes of staff, administration, laws and regulations, technology, and other contributing factors.

What differentiated the SSA approach from other awarenesses of the needs of clear language is that SSA recognized that immediate change was unlikely, if not impractical. More important, SSA went beyond a mandate or policy statement. It created an entity for carrying out the idea, brought in outsiders to help with it, and had the patience to wait for eventual improvement. It recognized that not everything would get done at once.

4. Realize that the harder you try, the worse it can get. Staton and I found that the context in which bureaucratic writing takes place is less than conducive for the task. Sitting at a desk in an office with other fellow employees around may work for some writers but it can be deadly for many others. Most people have certain routines that facilitate writing. Bertrand Russell, for example, always sharpened twelve pencils before he set out to write. Others find safe and effective writing spots, favorite chairs or pillows, or special windows to look out of for comfort and inspiration. We discovered that most offices at SSA were starkly governmental. Furniture was standard issue. Decoration was sparse. For the highly motivated or the type who can focus so completely that outside stimulus is unimportant, such a context can work. But for most of us, it can be deadly. Staton and I spent a couple hours wandering around the massive office complex of the agency and found some inspiration spots that we recommended to our writers. One was a little used eating area overlooking a pleasant patio. In warm weather there were many nicely landscaped areas immediately outside the buildings. We encouraged our writers to find a writing spot where they could go to visualize their reader and escape the cacophonous sounds of their assigned desks. Some thought the idea ludicrous but others found that their highly focused efforts to write at their desks was actually more a detriment than an asset.

We also discovered that some of our more highly motivated writers were trying so hard to find the right word that they became blocked. We suggested that they not start at the beginning but, rather, find a major idea they were trying to communicate and begin there, saving the introduction for later. This made sense to them, and obvious analogies are easy to find in life. For example, you can't introduce somebody until you've met them. We urged that the writers get to know their topic before they try to introduce it, a strategy that I have long advocated to struggling dissertation writers at Georgetown. Write what you know first; then worry about how to set it up with an introduction.

Other writers were victims of their most recent information, in this case the same type of list that the SEC has recently produced. They had in their minds a set of marginally useful rules, which in themselves are not wrong, but which focus on the more trivial aspects of writing. For example, short sentences are thought to be better than long ones. Readability formulas stress this rather simplistic notion. Yet short sentences containing unclear cohesion and unclear relationships can be more difficult than long sentences with clear cohesion and clear relationships. In our training program, we dealt with such issues as those noted in the SEC list of rules only after we had focused on the discourse concepts of topics, decision trees, and speech acts, all of which we considered more salient to the development of clear communication. We encouraged our writers to approach their own notices in the same order. Trying too hard to solve the little things tended to block their creation of the big things.

5. Try not to catch it from your colleagues. Bureaucracies are no different from other areas of life in the matter of language contagion. It is clear that first-year law students, if they are to be successful, must learn to write like lawyers. The same can be said for medical students, business people, and academics. This is not bad in itself, of course, because an internally used jargon can be quite useful. Socially, it tells other members of the group that you are one of them and therefore deserve their respect. Cognitively, it provides a shortcut for shared information that need not be made explicit every time the occasion arises. The problem comes when such jargon is used outside the in-group for which it bears these social and cognitive advantages.

There is little reason to identify the marks of in-group bureaucratic language. We all know about Washington's love of acronyms, for example. Nor is there any need to be reminded of the favorite expressions of a government that "shoots down" ideas, "mobilizes" opposition, encourages "zero-defect" systems, "touches base" with the public, or "puts a hard probability" on things. More recently, but already out of fad, are expressions like "pushes the envelope" and "that dog won't hunt."

We may all borrow such language fads, at least until we come to our senses. But in-group members have more at stake. This is their equivalent of a physician's black instrument bag or stethoscope around the neck. It is the lawyer's oversized brief case or the policeman's badge. It marks them as members. And that's okay. The problem comes when doctors, lawyers, policemen, or bureaucrats use this language to people who don't speak it. This, in fact, is what is basically wrong with bureaucratic language. It's not the structure or use within the bureaucracy. It's lack of recognition that outsiders also don't use it. The contagion of bureaucratic language is perfectly acceptable within the bureaucracy. It can be deadly when it is used as the medium for trying to communicate with constituents.

Learning and using bureaucratic language within an agency is not the only motivation for its common existence. Most outsiders are unaware of the competition among branches of the same agency or, for that matter, among agencies for a piece of the federal budget or, in some cases, for survival. Just as one might doubt the expertise of a physician who does not talk like a doctor or an attorney who does not speak like a lawyer, government bureaucracies face the same problem. Who would fund a branch of an agency that can't or won't speak in the expected fashion? Thus, bureaucratic language feeds on itself, not just at the level of individual bureaucrats, but also at the level of the bureaucracy itself.

This being the case, it is questionable whether the word "contagion" is actually appropriate. Perhaps a better term would be "survival." What is clear is that fellow bureaucrats cannot be expected to be allies in ridding the agency of bureaucratese. Simply wiping out bureaucratic language is clearly not the answer. It is not even feasible and it may not even been desirable. Those who would eradicate it are probably barking up the wrong tree.

6. Get help from language specialists. Bureaucracies that genuinely wish to do a better job of communicating with outsiders to their agencies often do a poor job when they try to go it alone. Proclamations that we will do a better job meet with blank looks. Conferences about the problem are amorphous and ineffective. Even setting up an outside vehicle, such as the Document Design Center, merely offers assistance only when and if such is thought to be necessary.

I can think of no better model of how to bring about improvements in communicating with the public than the one devised by the Social Security Administration during the early 1980s. It should be pointed out that the agency was not innately predisposed to improve its notices. To be sure, it recognized that complaints were pouring in, but the major impetus to change came about when Congress required that SSA send out a notice to all recipients of social security that they might also be entitled to supplementary security income.

Dutifully, SSA prepared a draft form of this new notice. After reviewing it, the National Senior Citizens Law Center (Gray Panthers), which had just won a prolonged judgment against Health and Human Services (of which SSA is a part), believed that SSA was trying to obscure the message to the extent that eligible recipients would not be able to take advantage of it. On the other hand, the Gray Panthers also feared that still another lengthy lawsuit might not be in the best interests of Medicare recipients. So instead of taking the matter to court, they asked me to review the offending notice and try to rewrite it so that the intent of Congress might be revealed clearly. I did so, and not only did the Gray Panthers like it, the Social Security Administration also thought it was an improvement. In fact, a few days after seeing it, the director of SSA called me and asked if I would help them with other writing issues.

In light of what I noted earlier about the good intentions of bureaucrats, this event is instructive. Note that once SSA saw how their notice could be made clear, the agency jumped at the chance to accept this new version, hardly evidence of any evil intentions or a desire to disguise the required information. What is more, SSA recognized the inefficiency in its current procedures and acted almost immediately to seize the opportunity to borrow the resources of the Gray Panthers, its adversary in much previous litigation.

The Social Security Administration knew, as other bureaucracies seem not to know, where to get help. To see how bad things were at SSA, it may be useful to assess, as Staton and I did, the state of SSA notice writing in the mid-1980, when we were asked to begin the training program for SSA writers. One of the early notices in our involvement can do this nicely. Appearing on SSA letterhead, the notice read in all caps exactly as shown in box 1.

Not only was the document design of this notice made ineffective by the use of all capital letters, it also suffered from an inept discourse structure, a failure to provide a road map decision tree for the beneficiary to follow, the presence of negative speech acts where it would be quite possible to provide positive ones, and the use of unfamiliar, if not confusing, terminology.

Box 1. Social Security Award Notice

**Social Security
Award Notice**

From Department of Health and Human Services
Social Security Administration
RETIREMENT /84 \$432.70
HOSPITAL 7/84
MEDICAL 7/84

BECAUSE OF A CHANGE IN THE LAW, YOUR REGULAR PAYMENT WILL BE ROUNDED DOWN TO THE DOLLAR EVEN THOUGH YOUR MONTHLY BENEFIT OF RECORD MAY BE IN DOLLARS AND CENTS.

A MONTHLY PREMIUM OF \$14.60 IS REQUIRED TO KEEP YOUR MEDICAL INSURANCE PROTECTION. YOU WILL BE BILLED FOR THESE PREMIUMS. YOU WILL RECEIVE YOUR FIRST PREMIUM NOTICE BEFORE *84. AFTER THAT NOTICES WILL BE SENT EVERY 3 MONTHS. THESE NOTICES WILL SHOW THE MONTHS COVERED, TOTAL PREMIUM AMOUNT, AND THE DATE PAYMENT IS DUE.

YOU CANNOT QUALIFY FOR MONTHLY BENEFITS BASED ON ANOTHER PERSON'S SOCIAL SECURITY RECORD WHEN YOU ARE ENTITLED TO AN EQUAL OR LARGER INSURANCE BENEFIT BASED ON YOUR OWN EARNINGS RECORD.

BASED ON THE INFORMATION GIVEN TO US, YOU WERE BORN ON 7/27/19.

IF YOU NEED MEDICARE SERVICES BEFORE YOU RECEIVE YOUR HEALTH INSURANCE CARD, YOU MAY USE THIS NOTICE AS PROOF OF COVERAGE. YOU SHOULD RECEIVE YOUR CARD WITHIN 4 WEEKS.

IF YOU RETIRE FROM YOUR BUSINESS OR CORPORATION BEFORE THE MONTH YOU ATTAIN AGE 70, YOU WILL BE REQUIRED TO PROVIDE EVIDENCE OF YOUR RETIREMENT BEFORE YOUR BENEFITS CAN BE PAID.

YOU ARE NOT ELIGIBLE FOR ANY TYPE OF BENEFIT OTHER THAN STATED ON THIS CERTIFICATE. ENTITLEMENT TO ANOTHER BENEFIT ON THIS OR ANY OTHER RECORD IN THE FUTURE REQUIRES A SEPARATE APPLICATION.

IF YOU BELIEVE THIS DETERMINATION IS NOT CORRECT, YOU MAY REQUEST THAT YOUR CASE BE REEXAMINED. IF YOU WANT THIS RECONSIDERATION, YOU MUST REQUEST IT NOT LATER THAN 60 DAYS FROM THE DATE YOU RECEIVE THIS NOTICE. YOU MAY MAKE YOUR REQUEST THROUGH ANY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE. IF ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE, YOU SHOULD SUBMIT IT WITH YOUR REQUEST.

This certifies that you (or other person(s) on whose behalf you applied), became entitled under the Social Security Act to the benefits shown.

Martha A. McSteen
Acting Commissioner
of Social Security

Remedies for these problems suggested themselves almost immediately. It was news to the SSA writers that all capital letters make for difficult reading. We had the writing team carry out a topic analysis of this notice to see the flow of ideas presented. They produced the following topic sequence:

1. Your payment will be rounded down
2. You'll be billed for monthly insurance premiums
3. You can't qualify on another person's SS record
4. You were born
5. Use this notice until you get your health insurance card
6. If you retire, provide us with evidence
7. You're not eligible for other benefits
8. What to do if you disagree with these facts

The ludicrous nature of this topic sequence became apparent once the topics were written down in this way. We discussed the fact that this was actually a "good news" notice, telling the recipient that he would be getting benefits. Yet somehow the good news part of the message was not even stated. The writers began to wonder why rounding down of the payment was placed at the most prominent part of the notice, why the bad news of insurance premiums was second, and a warning about using someone else's record was placed third. Gales of laughter accompanied the inclusion of the birth announcement as the fourth topic. It was also decided that the amount the recipient would be getting deserved prominence in the text of the notice rather than being relegated to the inconspicuous box in the top right hand corner.

The SSA writers agreed that a simple topic analysis could help them revise extant notices. It was a short step from this realization to get them to understand that topic analysis could also help them create a viable sequence of new notices that they were currently creating by, first of all, fronting the purpose of the notice then creating a logical sequence of information from the reader's perspective, not the agency's. We also explored different ways of marking the topics of a notice, including headings, question-answer formats, and performatives (such as, "This notice is to inform you that . . ." or "You will receive \$435 a month . . .") rather than embedded or implied topics.

Nor did we feel that speech act theory was too complex and academic for the SSA notice writers to grasp. We introduced rudimentary speech act concepts to them, and they appeared to have no trouble grasping their significance. We pointed out that such analysis comes closer to the kind of intentionality that they needed to understand as they addressed their audience. They needed to figure out the intention of the documents they were trying to revise and to predict the reactions of their unseen recipients. We pointed out that some speech acts, such as offering, promising, thanking, congratulating, and advising, were more positive and

polite than others, such as warning, complaining, giving directives, and threatening, which were more innately negative. The writers then marked each speech act in their notices and got a kind of picture of the effect they were likely to produce on their readers. Even much of the necessary negative information the writers had to provide could be couched in more positive terms, as in sentences like “Your case will not be reviewed unless you ask us to,” which could just as easily be stated, “We will review your case if you ask us to.”

The SSA writers discovered that many of the SSA notices contained warnings when advice would do nicely instead. They found many missed opportunities to offer and even promise. They even found threats in some of the notices. They discovered that they were often giving directives when they just as easily could be providing the advice of alternatives or options.

My point here is that the Social Security Administration, realizing that it was lacking in something, turned to linguistic analysis for help. It knew that it had a problem that was not being solved and did what linguists know to be the right thing but which we do not often experience.

7. Establish a powerful authority for how you use language. Even after numerous successful revisions were made in SSA notices, impetus to continue such revisions was eventually lost. It is the nature of bureaucracies to lose even a good impetus. New directions are decided, new personnel are hired, new administrations have new thrusts. SSA was not unique to this problem. After our two-year training program ended, we wondered whether or not the improvements in notice writing would endure. As noted earlier, I discovered the answer when I retired and began to get notices from SSA myself. I was delighted to discover that they were vastly improved over the notices we reviewed in the mid-1980s. Apparently some force managed to cause this new approach to notice writing in the agency to be preserved.

In retrospect, the reason for this may be that we also built into our training a method for justifying changes to superiors (who may not be sympathetic to altering old notices); and we provided procedures for writing new notices. The issue of authority is a big one in bureaucracies. It is also the case that bureaucracies commonly have competing authorities, such as the authority of law, the authority of leadership, the authority of precedence or policy, and the authority of politics. The SSA writers were subject to all of these authorities and, at least when we worked with them, had no particular authority of their own to combat the many authorities that influenced their work.

This situation produced a kind of hopelessness in many of the writers. It seemed to them that no matter what they wrote, somebody would insist that it be changed to conform to some other version of authority. Our early ethnographic work at SSA revealed such disillusionment to us. Some writers felt that they had to please the policy people. Others expressed concern that the systems people

(computer center) forced formats on them that discouraged clear writing. Others blamed the general counsel's office for forcing them to write like lawyers.

As it turned out, none of those bugaboos actually existed at SSA. Representatives of general counsel, systems, and policy participated in our training sessions and, when faced with such accusations, denied them entirely. The general counsel's office made it clear to the writers that they were not expected to produce lawyer-like prose. Representatives from policy claimed that the regulations they had to follow were not etched in stone and that the writers should try to express them in terms that the beneficiaries could actually understand. The systems people, as it turns out, were delighted to hear our criticisms of the archaic computers, then printing all capital letters, for they wanted new equipment as much as the writers did. Fear of the various authorities of policy, systems, and general counsel were entirely unfounded.

Now realizing that these false fears of authority were not, indeed, true, the SSA writers were still without their own weapons of authority. Absent the authority that linguistic analysis could offer, the agency had sought out other authorities, notably the Flesch Readability Formula (1949). But even SSA had relatively little faith in readability formulas and was easily inclined to reject them once it was pointed out that the basic premises of such formulae are seriously flawed. Shortness of words or sentences does not indeed equate with clarity, which is more likely to occur when words and sentences are cohesive, syntactically clear, and presented in a reasonable discourse style.

Once the authority of readability formulas and simplistic lists of do's and don'ts, such as the one recently offered by the SEC, are discounted, what authority is left for the SSA writers? In order to justify their revisions of extant notices and the new text they produced, these writers needed to be able to convince skeptics, such as supervisors, that they were right in what they wrote. One of the aims of the training program was to create a competing authority, a credibility, a muscle for the SSA writers in order to give them footing in the decision-making process. Such an authority should contain a theory, terminology, and knowledge-based grounding for the language choices they made. Needless to say, these were borrowed from linguistics.

To objectify this authority, together with the SSA writers we constructed what they chose to label the Notice Review Guide, as shown in box 2.

The SSA writers used this review guide as a check on each notice they worked on, whether it was a revision or a totally new notice. When challenged about their choices, they could pull out this record and point out to skeptics exactly why they wrote what they did. It helped, of course, that the critics had little idea of the terms and concepts on the review guide. This gave the writers a technical authority that was not likely to be challenged. The writers, in this case, knew something that the critics did not. More important, of course, is that it provided a constant reminder to the writers themselves about the things that really mattered in the creation of their work.

| Box 2. Notice Review Guide | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Categories | No changes | Changes | Further changes |
| Topics: Topics fronted: Topics marked: Headings: Question-answer: Embedded in first sentence: Topics sequenced appropriately: | | | |
| Explicitness: Ambiguities, inferences: presuppositions made explicit: Reader decision points clear: Reader actions specified: | | | |
| Speech Acts: Match speaker intentions: Made positive: Made explicit: | | | |
| Cohesion: Cohesive ties appropriate: Pronoun reference clear: Relationship markers clear: Lexical repetition effective: | | | |
| Comprehension: Concrete words for abstract: Active voice for passive: Relative pronouns used: | | | |

8. Become bi-stylistic. Despite the difficult lessons learned from experiences such as the Oakland School Systems fiasco with Ebonics, there is a similar and very important lesson found in bureaucratic language: There is a time to use it and a time not to. Even though this principle should be self-apparent, those teaching writing often neglect it. College students are trained to write essays that get them through college, but it is seldom the case that they are also taught the wider, more commonly used, informal styles of writing. In law school the focus is only on writing like lawyers. Whether explicitly taught or not, medical students naturally focus

on using the specialized language of doctors. Similarly, bureaucrats must learn the approved, internal style that will preserve and advance them in their work.

There is nothing wrong with learning any of these styles, and it would probably be disastrous not to. What seems to have been forgotten is that there is more than one audience that needs to be addressed. Most college graduates do not spend their lives writing academic essays. Most lawyers and doctors have to communicate outside the confines of law and medicine. Even bureaucrats have to talk and write to the world outside of their agencies. As we found at Social Security, beginning such communication with a clear notion of the audience, the participant perspective, is key to being bi-stylistic.

The need for such bi-stylism must be both recognized and promoted in bureaucratic agencies. Without it, the absurdities of unnecessary miscommunication are likely to continue.

Conclusions. It may be only passively or reactively helpful to be told that bureaucratic writers begin with two strikes against them, that they should keep a clear focus on their tasks, that they can't get everything done at once, that trying hard can actually make things worse, and that they can catch bureaucratese from their colleagues.

Many bureaucrats already know these things.

The more proactive words of advice involve getting help from specialists in language, establishing an authority to combat the other authorities of the bureaucracy, and learning to switch between the styles needed within the bureaucracy and those needed outside it. Nor can the lack of these things be placed solely on the shoulders of bureaucracies. Linguists, who can offer important help to bureaucrats, have been seldom willing or available. This paper is not only an analysis of the rocky road paved with good intentions of bureaucrats. It is also a plea for linguists to provide the services they need. Our field is uniquely equipped to help bureaucracies in the effort to communicate effectively to their constituents. Recent developments in discourse analysis, speech act theory, pragmatics, language policy, and sociolinguistics offer the core of our potential contributions to a smooth and effective use of language in government. Most linguists have this knowledge. Most bureaucrats do not. It is time for us to bridge this gap of knowledge and actively seek out opportunities to help bureaucracies do their important work more effectively.

REFERENCE

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