

Welcome Speech

Amsterdam PLAIN Conference, September 11, 2007

PP # 1: The logo and conference info

Damas n hearen, huuda morehan. Velcom. Welcome everyone! What a delight, on behalf of PLAIN, to welcome you to our 6th plain-language conference in Amsterdam. And how grateful we are to Bureautaal and Wessel Visser for allowing us to experience this beautiful historic city of Amsterdam.

We are international in a new way here and thrilled that, since our last 2005 Washington DC conference, we have extended our membership to Malaysia, India, Namibia, South Africa, Mexico and others. Even better, we have representatives from those countries as nominees to our new Board.

This conference encompasses a number of firsts! Let me name them:

PP # 2, #3 (Roll out . . . in two slides)

The *Firsts* at the Amsterdam Conference

- **First** conference off the North American continent
- **First** time we present awards for plain-language accomplishments. There are two recipients: one American and one Britisher, both pioneers in our field.
- **First** time we use the arts in our conference with a plain-language dance
- **First** time we have had a plain language consultant with the courage to host our now-large PLAIN conference
- **First** time the PLAIN Executive Committee proposes to its members a bylaw to incorporate and a change in our governance from an Executive Committee to a Board (Sunday morning meeting; *everyone* is invited!)
- **First** time PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language collaborate to present a plenary to propose a working group to initiate plain-language standards
- **First** time we've had over a dozen people willing to be nominated for our Executive Committee
- **First** time we've had the opportunity to discuss a country's new plain-language constitution (the Netherlands) with its drafters

These are indeed significant accomplishments.

Some of you know that PLAIN began in Canada. As a Canadian chairing PLAIN's Executive Committee, I decided to use a Canadian symbol for my welcoming message to you.

I am using the image of the *inuksuk*, the ancient Inuit “writing”. It means “to act in the capacity of a human”.

PP #4, 5, 6 - Three slides of pictures of inuksuit

These deceptively simple stone constructions are carefully nuanced, historically vital forms of communication for the Inuit people who live in Nunavut and the North West Territories of Canada—the far North.

PP #7 Inuksuk (singular)
 Inuksuit (plural)

The language of the *inuksuit* (the plural of *inuksuk*) is a proxy for a human voice. I like that comparison with the human voice of plain language.

Inuksuit give comfort to the travel weary as they point the way to land, the right direction, or food. Plain language in the land of the law comforts travellers with plain-language interpretations. Inuksuit give life-saving advice to the disoriented. Plain language translates technical medicant for sick people and their families. An inuksuk is the language of the community. Plain language is the language of citizens, clients, and the public.

PP #8 Next slide of inuksuk

Our Canadian Arctic landscape is a forbidding environment—as cold and dangerous as is elitist, bureaucratic, impenetrable prose. But by “**writing**” on the vast Arctic landscape with inuksuit, and by writing in plain language, we create clarity within our communities. The Netherlands' great accomplishment of a plain-language constitution is an outstanding landmark.

I want to tell you a remarkable story that a Canadian expert in inuksuit, Norman Hallendy¹ has written about. He has 40 years of traveling, writing , and photographing with Inuit elders in the Arctic.

¹ Norman Hallendy, *Inuksuit: Silent Messengers of the Arctic*, Douglas & MacIntyre Ltd, Vancouver, 2000.

“I was traveling with Lukta, the son of a shaman,” writes Norman. “Lukta was taking me to his father’s old camp quite a distance from Kinngait because I was curious to learn why some people were afraid to go there. Heading off by boat with neither map nor compass, Lukta and I navigated safely through a dangerous narrows and across the yawning bay to reach the camp. After I finished documenting the area, we got back into our boat and began crossing the bay.

We were not far into our return trip when I noticed a white line approaching us quickly. I thought it was ice but it turned out to be a very dense fog, which overtook us within half an hour. The fog was so thick that I could barely make out the other end of the motorized canoe seven metres (23 feet) away. Sharing my concern, Lukta shut down the motor and listened carefully. It was what he could not hear—the sounds of waves lapping on the shore—that troubled him. He thought back to the time we had set off—when the sun was shoulder high—and estimated we had been traveling roughly an hour.

He took out a package of cigarettes, removed the silver paper and folded it into a tiny boat with a sail. He placed it on the water, where it quickly drifted off. From its direction, and taking into account the time of day and season, Lukta knew that the tide was going out into Hudson Strait, which was definitely not where we wanted to be.

Lukta restarted the motor and continued in the direction opposite to the drifting silver paper. We would go along slowly, stop, listen, then continue. Listening was the most important thing. Then, suddenly we bumped into an outcrop, something not indicated on any map we knew of. In the middle of the still dense fog, we quickly got out of the canoe, and Lukta looked around. He could tell by the presence of lichens that the outcrop was not covered at high tide. Aware that it would be all too easy to slip off the rock and fall into the icy water, we carefully sat down facing where we thought the land would be and waited.

It took a few hours and then, sure enough, the fog dissipated, and we could see the land facing us. **The first thing** Lukta did was to pick up some loose rocks and build an inuksuk that pointed toward the land. And in his mind, he recorded the image of precisely what the outcrop looked like.

PP #9 Next inuksuk

When we finally returned safely to Kinngait, Lukta told his fellow hunters all that had happened; that if they ever came upon the outcrop out in the bay and saw an inuksuk made in a particular manner, it pointed toward the land. From then on,

everyone who followed would have that reference point. It was simple, and yet what I had witnessed was what his ancestors and their ancestors had done for thousands of years.” That was to communicate clearly in their writing.

We plain-language specialists can only trace the distinctive history of plain language to 1604, 400 years, not 4000. Then, Robert Cawdry nailed his poster on the great North door of St Paul’s Cathedral in London and, for the first time that we can find in research, referred to using *plaine English*—the mediaeval spelling, *plaine*. Now, because of the international scope of our movement, we call it plain language. At PLAIN’s 2002 Toronto conference, Sally MacBeth summarized the historical inuksuit—landmarks—of plain language for the Canadian conference. (You can find her text on PLAIN’s website.)

PP #10 Inuksuk with Northern lights

Inuksuit are indeed the Arctic’s silent written messengers. And plain-language rewritten documents articulate the often hidden or indecipherable text in poorly written original prose. The rocks, the words; the architecture, the design; and the styles in a particular environments or contexts— all contribute to the final piece of art or document. Both plain language and inuksuit communicate with simplicity and grace to their communities.

I know you will enjoy the inuksuit that our presenters will be offering you in sessions over the next two days. Do enjoy the learning and comraderie of this special Netherlands PLAIN conference.

I close with a slide of an inuksuk I made and photographed at the side of a Canadian river last year . . .

PP# 11 CM’s inuksuk

PP#12, 13 Windmill and inuksuk and “Hey! How did that get into Amsterdam?”

. . . and with a slide to illustrate the wonderful collaboration between the land of windmills, the inuksuit, and the rest of our PLAIN community. Thank you to Bureaitaal and Wessel Visser for their vision and fine preparations. And thank you to my faithful fellow Executive Committee members for their many contributions to this conference, too.

Happy conference!

