Just to be clear…

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Plain language is here to stay

How would you feel if you couldn't figure out the insurance policy you just purchased? Or, your mother didn't understand the directions on the prescription bottle she just picked up from the drug store?

These situations happen every day. But, have you thought about the consequences? Will you have to pay hundreds of dollars out of your own pocket because you're not covered? Or, will your mother take too many pills?

We're bombarded with information everyday that is hard to understand and sometimes even useless. But, there is something being done about it – plain language!

What is plain language, though? Isn't it just good writing? NO! Plain language is the process of turning complex ideas into clear information that people can actually understand and use. The process begins and ends with the reader – that's why it works!

The idea of using plain language is not new at all. In fact, many initiatives have taken place and different plain language policies have been introduced around the world. Let's take a quick look…

In 1971, the Law Reform Commission of Canada began reviewing all federal laws and publishing recommendations for improvement.

Also in 1971, public attention in the U.S. focused on plain language when the American National Council of Teachers of English formed a Committee on Public Doublespeak. The first plain language documents appeared in the U.S. in 1975. The movement gained wider support in 1978 when President Jimmy Carter announced the need for easy-to-understand federal regulations.

In 1982, the British government adopted a formal plain English policy. The government-funded Civil Service College runs courses on presenting complex information in an easy-to-understand form.

In 1988, The Canadian Bar Association and the Canadian Bankers' Association established a Joint Committee on Plain Language Documentation. Then in 1990, The Canadian Bar Association adopted some recommendations made by that joint committee, including urging Canadian law schools to teach plain language drafting so law students could learn how to write more clearly.

In 1991, Saskatchewan became the first province in Canada to adopt a government-wide Clear Language Program.

In 1998, the U.S. President issued a memorandum containing directives on plain language use. In it, the president said that 'the Federal Government's writing must be in plain language.' In that same year, the Canadian government created a plain language version of the Transportation of Dangerous Goods regulations as part of its ongoing efforts to make its policies and regulations easier to read and understand.

In January 2000, the Canadian government unveiled a new set of plain-language warnings for cigarette packages. And in March 2000, the Canadian Bankers' Association made a commitment to provide customers with clearer banking information – leading to plain language mortgage documents.

Finally in March 2001, the Canadian government released model plain language loan documents designed to make it easier for consumers to understand credit card, line of credit and loan agreements.