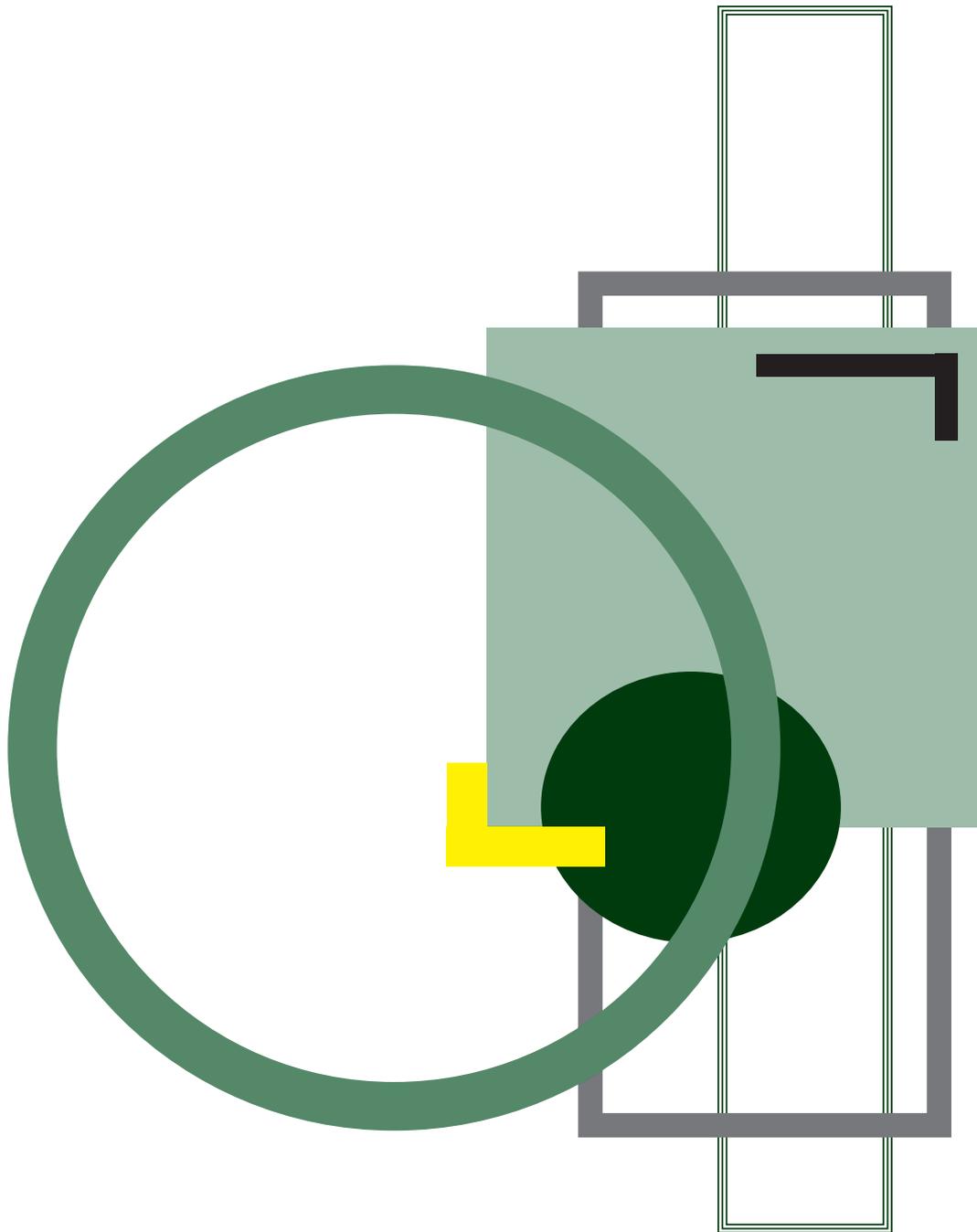


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clarity

From the President



Friends and colleagues,

There is much news to share, but first, how are you? I hope you and those you care about have been spared the worst of what the world is giving us: COVID, humanitarian crises, environmental disasters, and so much more. I'm encouraged by those who are improving lives everywhere by simply communicating clearly. But I'm also reminded – every day – how much better things could be if more leaders used plain language in their crisis communication. So thank you for all you can to improve the world through this work.

Our upcoming conference

The pandemic has required many changes. Last year, we began planning Clarity2020: Access for All – a traditional conference in Washington, DC, co-hosted by Clarity and the Center for Plain Language. That conference has now become a two-part virtual event co-hosted by all three organizations: Clarity, the Center for Plain Language, and PLAIN. This has been my hope for many years – that Clarity and PLAIN could work together on a conference. So despite the circumstances that led us here, I'm delighted about this result. And the Center's involvement completes the partnership!

Visit <https://www.accessforallconference.com/> for details about the conference (and to register for part 1). It starts on October 13 and ends on October 15 – about 4 hours each day. I am eternally grateful for the amazing work that Clarity's Secretary, Dr. Susan Kleimann, is doing as conference chair. And Clarity's conference representative, Dr. Ingrid Slembek, has also been an incredible volunteer. Every time one of them tells me about another speaker or another feature of the conference, I'm excited all over again. I hope to see all of you there.

A new website

For more than a year, our Vice President, Stéphanie Roy, has been working on a redesign of our website. Here is her update:

Julie and I felt that modernizing and humanizing Clarity's website was necessary to enhance Clarity's credibility and to support and increase our membership. We are working hard to rethink the website's design and the content, having two goals in mind : (1) making it more inspiring, rallying and serious, and (2) answering more efficiently our expert members' needs in sharing their knowledge and projects, as well as our non-expert members' needs in finding guidance on plain language.

None of this would be possible without the extremely rigorous and professional work of Kevin Zoschke on UX and graphic design, as well as the valuable work of En Clair team members Elizabeth Robertson, Claire Farnoux and Levon Misirliyan on creating the website's content. We hope members will like it!

Plain language standards

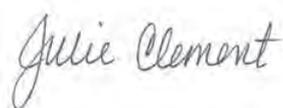
Clarity is heavily involved in the International Standards Organization's Working Group that is developing a multi-language, plain language standard. At least 10 of

the 50-ish members of the Working Group – who represent standards bodies from 13 countries – are Clarity members, as are 4 of the 7 members of the Working Group’s Drafting Committee. Just as importantly, Clarity (along with PLAIN and the Center for Plain Language) has been officially accepted by ISO head office as a Liaison Organization to the Working Group. Clarity’s representative on the Working Group is Justyna Zandberg-Malec, from Poland. Lastly, the Working Group is chaired by former Clarity President, Christopher Balmford. My thanks to the members for their contribution to this important work. You can read more about the ISO plain language project here: <https://www.iplfederation.org/our-work/>

We will soon send information about our upcoming meeting, to be held during the conference. Please let me know if you are interested in becoming a country representative or if you want more information about serving on Clarity’s leadership board.

Until we meet again (in October?), please stay safe, and please keep doing what you’re doing. Plain language has never been more important.

Warm regards,



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Explaining rights to returning citizens



Whitney Quesenbery is the Director of the Center for Civic Design, home of the Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent. She is proud of the Center's work on projects from modernizing voter registration, usable vote-by-mail envelopes, to clear information that easier for people across the country to vote.

Whitney Quesenbery

A few years ago, we were testing new voting information at an adult literacy center. One of our participants was in his early 50s. He read the page with the Voter Bill of Rights slowly and carefully. When he was done, we asked him if there was any new information for him. His reply was, "I think this says I can vote again." It turned out he has been in prison when he was younger and had no idea that California had made it possible for him to vote again. A colleague from the League of Women Voters was working with us, and when he finished the test, she registered him on the spot.

In many parts of the United States, people convicted of a felony also lost the right to vote, often forever. That is now changing as states have passed laws, voted for citizen initiatives, or changed regulations to restore voting rights to more people.

According to the National Conference on state legislatures:

- In 2 states, people with felony convictions never lose the right to vote
- In 16 states and the District of Columbia, rights are automatically restored once someone leaves prison
- In 21 states, it is automatic after they complete probation or parole
- In 11 states, there are additional requirements or procedures, including requiring a pardon or limiting rights of people convicted of a list of specific crimes.

The approaches vary, but the number of people affected can be large. For example, in Kentucky, the 120,000 people whose rights were restored by the Governor's order represented 4% of the population.

There's a lot of information to communicate

It's exciting to see so many states making it easier for more people to vote. But it takes great communication for new laws to have an impact. This is particularly true for restoring voting rights to people who have been in prison, sometimes for many years. Some of the challenges are:

Getting the word out. People who completed their sentences years ago may not hear about the change. Even if voting rights are automatically restored, returning citizens need to know that they have to register and how to do it

Explaining procedures. Taking advantage of the right to vote can be as simple as filling out a voter registration form, or can be a complex process requiring advance approval from one or more government agencies.

Making the information simple and accurate. The laws are different from state to state, making national campaigns impossible. Even within a state, there's a lot of details that need to be explained, sometimes with conditions based on the conviction.

Overcoming fear of breaking the law. They may be afraid of voting when they shouldn't and being prosecuted.

Elections may have changed for everyone while they were in prison.

On top of the specific details about when and how returning citizens can vote again, they may also need to know about changes in elections. Some changes making voting easier, like mail-in voting, early voting, and vote centers. Registration deadlines are relaxed, with options to register on Election Day in more states.

But there are also more requirements for voters to show identification. And they may be asked to prove that they meet all the conditions for registering, especially if they were removed from the voter lists based on notifications to the election department from the courts.

Returning citizens need help, not just legal information

One of the most basic plain language guidelines to speak directly to the reader is critical for these would-be voters. Their challenge is not just understanding the rules, but understanding which rule applies to them. And that means identifying the possible actions, including any exceptions or differences for specific groups of people.

Use questions as headings to help readers see quickly what answers they can find in the document. When faced with an unexpected legal notice about voter registration, they may not even know what questions to ask. For example, in a letter letting people entering prison know that their voter registration was cancelled until they complete their sentence, we suggested these headings after telling them what had happened:

- Why was my name taken off the list of voters?
- Why might this be wrong?
- How do I get my name back on the list of voters?
- How do I get more information?

Make the source of the information clear with contact information, for this vulnerable population. This has to be more than just a web link or phone number. It helps if a letter is signed by a person, not just a department name.

Tell them what actions they can take, must take, and the results of both action and inaction. In too many of the sample forms and letters we looked at, actions were implicit rather than being clear and visible. Contact information is often buried in paragraph format, making it harder to see.

It may take up more space to put the options in a list, but it also helps people more confident in taking action.

If [this information] is wrong, you must let the Voter Records office know. You can:

Call us: [phone number]

Or send us email: [email address]@[countyname.gov]

Or write to: Voter Records Office

Street address

City, ST 99999

Tell us [what needs correcting]. Give us your full name, date of birth, and how to reach you by phone, email address, or mailing address.

Make information - especially dates and deadlines - specific. For example, filling in an exact date of a deadline rather than a phrase like “30 days from the date of the letter.”

Organizing the structure and layout of the information make a difference

In one state, posters in government offices try to explain how to explore voting rights. Most of the space is taken up by a long list of felonies (in all capital letters) with the key information in several sections. Here’s how we re-wrote it.

One of the principles of plain language is to start by understanding the audience. You might notice that we have kept words like “restitution” or “probation and parole” because they are well-known to anyone in this situation, even if they are

<p><i>YOU MAY QUALIFY FOR A CERTIFICATE OF ELIGIBILITY TO REGISTER TO VOTE IF:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• YOU HAVE ONE OR MORE FELONY CONVICTION(S) FROM ANY STATE OR FEDERAL COURT.• YOU HAVE NO PENDING CRIMINAL FELONY CHARGES.• YOU HAVE PAID ALL FINES, COURT ORDERED COSTS, FEES AND RESTITUTION ORDERED AT THE TIME OF SENTENCING ON DISQUALIFYING CASES IN FULL.• YOUR SENTENCE HAS BEEN COMPLETED.• YOU HAVE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED PROBATION OR PAROLE.	<p>→ You might be able to restore your vote Learn more in the RED box below.</p> <p>Do you meet all 4 requirements?</p> <table border="0"><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> You do NOT have pending felony charges.</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> You have completed your sentence, including probation or parole.</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> You paid all fines, court ordered costs, fees and restitution ordered at the time of sentencing on disqualifying cases in full.</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> You were NOT convicted of:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Impeachment• Incest• Murder• Sexual abuse (1st or 2nd degree)• Sexual torture• Sexual crimes against children• Sodomy (1st or 2nd degree)• Rape (1st or 2nd degree)</td></tr></table> <p>Yes, I meet all 4 requirements</p> <p>You can restore your right to vote by requesting a Certificate of Eligibility to Register to Vote (CERV).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visit: paroles.alabama.gov/pardons-restoration-of-voting-rights• Download and complete: ABPP-4 CERV Application	<input type="checkbox"/> You do NOT have pending felony charges.	<input type="checkbox"/> You have completed your sentence, including probation or parole.	<input type="checkbox"/> You paid all fines, court ordered costs, fees and restitution ordered at the time of sentencing on disqualifying cases in full.	<input type="checkbox"/> You were NOT convicted of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Impeachment• Incest• Murder• Sexual abuse (1st or 2nd degree)• Sexual torture• Sexual crimes against children• Sodomy (1st or 2nd degree)• Rape (1st or 2nd degree)
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<p>Before (detail)</p> <p>The list of requirements to vote was in one part of a large poster. The list of actions to take for each situation and the contact details were in another area.</p>	<p>After (detail)</p> <p>To make the information clearer, we created an active personal assessment. Then we identified how someone who met all -- or some -- of the requirements could restore their right to vote</p>				

not easy words. In another project, we decided to use a shorthand term for a sentencing option, saying “AB109 community service” instead of something like “incarcerated in a community-based penal facility” because the former is the way affected people refer to this well-known law. Even without editing all of the legal phrases into plainer form, participants in our usability testing found the overall redesigned poster easier to understand.

Testing with people in this audience, with their specialized experience, is important. Ideally, we would do usability testing in the state where the materials will be used, but finding similar participants is a good start when this is not possible. We reviewed other information from local community organizations and worked with local partners to help us make editing decisions.

Working on complicated information takes collaboration

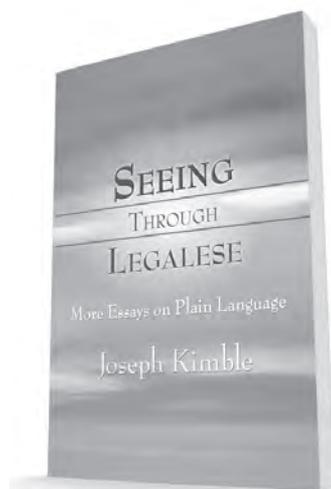
Creating information for returning citizens requires striking a balance between being encouraging and being fully, legally accurate. We’ve been fortunate to work with lawyers who want to communicate rights, not teach people how to read legal documents.

One of the ways we build trust is to start by being sure we understand the law, so everyone on the team has a shared understanding of what must be communicated. Demonstrating from the start that we take this seriously makes the collaboration easier.

We also make it clear that getting to useful, clear information will take some several drafts. Some of our collaborators have turned out to be great editors. Others find writing in plain language harder, so we encourage them to make their comments at any level of legalese that they find comfortable. Then we work on transforming it into plain language. And repeat until we are both happy with a result that tests well.

All that work is worth the time. Even in a challenging, complex legal context, our experience has been that when everyone can see that the information is both clearly written and legally accurate, there are few objections to plain language. And that’s better for everyone.

Our collaborators in this work include Demos, Campaign Legal Committee, Ginny Redish and Antonnet Johnson.



This is Joe Kimble’s second book of collected essays. His first collection was called “superb,” “invaluable,” and “a treasure.” This new one has already been described as “packed with insights” and “worth its weight in gold.”

Available from online bookstores or from Carolina Academic Press (which also offers an e-book).