

# How Writers Create Illiteracy

by **Sally McBeth**

**A dozen or so years ago, an East End Literacy student came to his tutor in a panic with a letter that said,**

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## NOTICE OF TERMINATION

We hereby give you notice to deliver up vacant possession of the premises known as 13 Blevins Place #1324 and being in the City of Toronto, in the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto which you hold of us as tenants, on the 31st day of January, 1992, because:

You have ceased to meet the qualifications required for continued occupancy of subsidized public housing operated on behalf of the Government of Ontario or an agency thereof, namely, Ontario Housing Corporation.

The following are the particulars:

You have failed to furnish the Annual Income and Family Unit Household Review Form.

You need not vacate the premises pursuant to this Notice, but the Landlord may regain possession of the premises by making application for a Writ of Possession to the Ontario Court of Justice—General Division, which application you are entitled to dispute.

DATED this 18th day of October, 1991.

[Illegible signature]

For Housing Manager  
District '1'

An Agent for Metropolitan Toronto Housing  
Authority

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In my 20-odd years at East End Literacy, I've seen dozens of letters like this in the hands of adult literacy learners. Letters from welfare, letters from the Children's Aid, letters from school principals, letters from the Board of Health—a whole host of strange, distant, fearsome, obtuse messages from the agencies that frame the lives of the urban poor.

This letter, however, I found so wonderful that I have kept it all these years. I use it to introduce the issue of plain language in the workshops and presentations I give as Manager of Clear Language and Design. I like this letter because it lights up a crystalline moment of functional illiteracy. The student understood that he was going to be evicted in January. But he did not understand why. And he could not read far enough to find out if there was anything he could do about it.

That's not likely what the person who wrote the letter wanted to happen. Because what the letter really says is this:

Send us your Annual Income and Family Unit Household Review Form right away, or we will take steps to evict you. You have the right to appeal your eviction.

And if the letter actually had said that, the moment of functional illiteracy would probably never have happened.

Instead, what happened was this: we referred the tenant to the nearest community information centre, whose staff advocated for him, helped him with the needed forms, and solved the problem. That's about half an hour of intervention and referral work at the literacy centre, and maybe a couple of hours more staff time at the information centre, calming the tenant down, getting information, making phone calls, filling out forms, and so on.

Now here's my question:

Was the paid staff time of two community agencies expended to help this particular tenant solve a problem created by his illiteracy? Or was it expended because Mr. or Ms. Illegible, writing on behalf of "Housing Manager District '1'," chose to write a letter that was difficult and misleading? Did Illegible, in fact, **create** a moment of functional illiteracy?

I rather think that is what Illegible did. We are all capable of creating moments of functional illiteracy. That's why East End Literacy launched Clear Language and Design. We believe plain language is a way of getting people to stop adding to the adult literacy problems that Canada already has.

This is different from saying, "Plain language is a way to help less educated, marginalized Canadians and recent immigrants understand and act on important public information." Certainly plain language consultants do help people access information. But this way of looking at plain language puts the emphasis on the reading problems of those at the receiving end of public information.

What about the writing problems of the people who send the messages? What kind of deficits do they have? How can we help them? What, for example, was Illegible thinking?

We can safely assume that Illegible was not thinking about—had no mental picture of—the recipient of this letter. Illegible likely did not know that more than half of the heads of household in public housing are functionally illiterate.

The writer, or writers, were not thinking about this audience. They were more likely thinking of a more immediate audience of managers and co-workers, than they were about the tenants themselves. Illegible's consciousness was likely cluttered with thoughts like: "What will the legal department think of this letter," and "How can I make sure they will approve it?" That kind of thinking leaves the true audience, the threatened tenant, out of the picture.

It takes a major shift in corporate culture to change this mindset, and I'm happy to say that letters this horrible no longer issue forth from Toronto's public housing landlord, thanks to several dedicated people. During the mid-nineties, Elaine Gaber-Katz joined the staff of the then Metro Toronto Housing Authority and did much to raise consciousness of the plain language issue.

Later, the structure and management of public housing changed significantly. For several years Clear Language and Design has been helping the new organization, called Toronto Community Housing, by training staff and revising communications to tenants. This progress is thanks to the leadership of CEO Derek Ballantyne and the

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Vice President of Corporate Communications, Jennifer MacLean.

"I am convinced that attention to plain language pays off," says MacLean. "For the author, writing in plain language forces rigour and clarity into both the thinking and writing processes. For the reader, the guesswork is gone.

"In our world, where we're communicating about issues that affect people's tenancy we can't afford to have the message lost in transmission."

When messages get 'lost in transmission,' it's often not because the reader has a literacy problem. It's because the writer, through lack of awareness and skill, has created illiteracy. Helping people develop that awareness and skill is really what plain language is about.

That's why the plain language approach is gaining momentum all over the world. California has a plain language

code for state agencies and a Governor's Clarity Award (yes, Arnold is all in favour of plain language). India's Prime Minister recently issued a statement promoting clarity and an end to the endless, confusing acronyms. In Europe, plain language pioneer Martin Cutts has been working with the new European Union to clarify Eurolaw. Web design guru Jakob Nielsen has just published his findings on the online reading behaviour of lower-literacy users ([www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)). Clarity, an international association of judges, lawyers and legal drafters dedicated to simplifying legal language now has representatives in Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Hong Kong, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, the U.K and the U.S.

And that's just a sample of what's going on. There will be a lot more to report this fall, after the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) holds its fifth international conference in Washington DC. If you'd like to find out more about what's happening in the plain language movement worldwide, go to [www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org). ■

**Sally McBeth** manages Clear Language and Design, an editing and consulting service founded by Toronto East End Literacy in 1995.