

Episode 2: Annetta Cheek

Annetta Cheek I was involved in a project once for a Center for Disease Control and they wanted to put up billboards in inner cities trying to discourage youth from smoking. And, through research, we found that you didn't even want to be grammatically correct on those billboards, because that didn't speak to the reader that you wanted, so you had to speak in their language. And that's really the core of plain language. You have to speak in the reader's language.

Bob Milstein Welcome to Top of Their Game, the show where we speak with the people, making communications clearer, fairer, and just plain better. I'm your host, Bob Milstein, a lawyer and plain language trainer, practitioner, and advocate. Today, I'm excited to speak with yet another legend in the field of plain language advocacy, Dr. Annetta Cheek.

Annetta has been a tireless advocate for plain language. She spent 25 years as a federal employee, witnessing firsthand the US government's failure to communicate effectively. While serving as a government employee, Dr. Cheek was the chair of PLAIN, a federal inter-agency plain language advocacy group. In her role as chair, Annetta administered the group's website and taught courses on plain language to different government agencies. She also spent 4 years as the chief plain language expert on Vice President Gore's National Partnership for Reinventing Government. In 2003, Annetta founded the Center for Plain Language, a non-profit organization dedicated to plain language advocacy. But perhaps Dr. Cheek's biggest success was her work to pass the Plain Writing Act into law. Thanks to her great work, millions of Americans are now receiving easy-to-understand communication from the federal government.

In today's episode, we will talk about how Annetta first developed her passion for plain language, how she managed to persuade government that legislative fix was something worth investing in, and we'll also chat about lessons she's learned as a leading plain language advocate over many decades.

Annetta, thanks so much for joining us.

Annetta My pleasure.

Bob I understand you've been retired for some time now. So, my first question is how many days are you now committing per week to the great and glorious cause of plain language?

Annetta Oh, 2 to 3 because I have to save a couple for my other activity, which is dog training stuff.

Bob I believe pit bulls might be the weapon of choice.

Annetta Yes, they are.

Bob Okay.

Annetta They are my weapon of choice. Their temperament suits me.

Bob I might come back to that a little later. I'd like to learn more about the world of pit bulls and how the pit bull method actually helps in generating legislative change. Perhaps it's a good metaphor.

Annetta Well, perhaps it does. Perhaps it does.

Bob Let's explore that. I want to start at the beginning. Can you tell us a little bit about your early career, what it looked like, and were you always interested in language, communication, plain language, or did that come at a moment?

Annetta Not really. My PhD is in anthropology with a specialty in archaeology. So I started my career doing archaeology. I ran a small consulting firm doing work for the federal government while my husband was teaching — he's also an archaeologist — and I frequently had the National Park Service as a client. So they became interested in me and hired me into the government, into an archaeology policy office, mainly to do training for other federal agencies in archaeology law. And then I also got involved in writing regulations dealing with archaeology and I was always a better-than-average writer. It was just, you know, one of the things I did well, as opposed to many things that I don't do very well. So I started working on archaeology regs and, in the meantime, I had several clients that I trained and one of them hired me away from the Park Service specifically to write regulations and to manage a shop that wrote regulations. And so that's what got me into writing for the government. It was sort of an evolution from archaeology to writing archaeology to writing other stuff.

Bob I'll confess to you at this point that I'm a practicing lawyer. And, therefore, when you talk about being commissioned to write regs, my first question was "Why didn't they get the lawyers to do that?" Is there an obvious answer?

Annetta There is an obvious answer and that is that the lawyers tended to be terrible writers and they needed a writer to help them write well. A writing team in the government typically has three components: It has the subject matter experts — which are frequently engineers, environmental specialists, what have you — lawyers, and the writers. The lawyers are not normally great at writing something that the regulated community can easily understand and comply with.

Bob I'll ask the obvious question: Why do you think that is?

Annetta Law schools. I don't think law schools teach the craft very well in general — there are exceptions — but also the tradition of the law. I think, although it's faded a bit, there's still a lot of the "People don't have to be able to read it. They can have their lawyer explain it to them." I think that's still fairly common, although possibly not as common as it used to be. And I would say that I come from a family of lawyers. My father was a lawyer. My sister is a lawyer.

Bob I'm sorry to hear that.

Annetta Yes. I have a nephew who's a lawyer. My mother-in-law was a lawyer. So I have been exposed to lawyers all my life.

Bob That's a significant genetic challenge.

Annetta Yes, it is. They were most disappointed that I went into anthropology.

Bob When it comes to that difficult form of lawyer writing, how do you deal with the inevitable "yeah, but" that is often put up? "Yeah, but this is complex, this is technical, this is tightly regulated. We've got to get it right."

Annetta Well, that is indeed very common. Usually, it's a process. They don't believe you the first time, but — well, I'll just give an example. My first big project of writing in the government was a regulation. I only got the opportunity because the lawyers had failed to observe required processes and had not given the Office of

Management and Budget enough time to review it and so they had a 6-month downtime where they were twiddling their thumbs. And I appealed to a higher authority, the secretary of the department, and said, "Since nothing's happening here, can I take this opportunity to rewrite this reg?" So mine and I rewrote part of it and I sent it to the lawyers and they came back and they said, "This is not correct. This is not the way the law is." And I said, "Well, how not?" And so they said, "Well, in this section, this is wrong and this is wrong." And I said, "Well, but let's look at what you wrote. This is what you wrote. I'm translating what you wrote." So there was a lot of mulling it over and they finally, very reluctantly, agreed that what they had written was not what they meant. But, because they were writing in their standard lawyerly fashion, it came out wrong. And I had taken what they wrote and translated it accurately and ended up with something that was wrong because they were wrong. And that particular instance was an aha moment for them. And those particular lawyers — I worked on several other projects with them — were always very cooperative, but it's not always that easy.

Bob What was the aha moment for you when it came to getting involved in plain language advocacy?

Annetta Well, I took a class. I was writing regs at the time — and I think I was writing regs that were clearer than your average reg — but someone from another agency that wrote regs came and said, "I just had this class from this wonderful guy about reg writing and you should take it." So I took it. His name was Tom Morawski and he had been a professor of English at the Air Force Academy and was now retired and was doing government contracting. And he was a — I don't know if you'll relate to this since you're not from the US — but he was a Southern Baptist minister of plain language. He was an advocate of something that was close to a religion to him and he was an outstanding teacher and an outstanding writer. And he showed me the error of government's ways of writing regulations and has been a big influence on me in my career.

Bob Speaking of that career, can you take us through the early efforts you made to introduce plain language into US federal government work?

Annetta Well, I wasn't alone. I wasn't in a crowd, but I was in a handful of close-to-zealots and several of them had training from the same guy. So we can maybe use him as the starting point. And a handful of us — literally 5 or 6 of us — started meeting weekly for a while and advocating within our agencies. And then we were joined, fortunately, by a staff officer from the Office of Management and Budget. Now the Office of Management and Budget had the authority to review all regulations and this guy had taken Tom Morawski's class and he became an advocate. So he started sponsoring our meetings and housed them at a OMB building, which of course attracted attention because everybody had to have their regs reviewed by OMB. So the group grew and we gave it a name. At first, it was the Plain English Network — because that worked out very well as "PEN" — and we started meeting monthly and having speakers and it just sort of grew from there. We developed a website that one of the agencies hosted and we got a lot done because we were what you would call a skunkworks. If you know what a skunkworks is? And it's the people in the shed out back that nobody really knows what they're doing. Nobody's funding them. Nobody's telling them what to do and they just turn out projects that they feel are important. And we were sort of like that. There was no funding for plain language. There was just a small but growing number of advocates in the government that were nursing it along in their agencies.

Bob I imagine that those advocates, particularly in the early days, met with significant resistance.

Annetta Oh yes, oh yes, they did. But there are a number of tools that we used before and after. Examples have always been powerful, particularly when you use an agency's examples. And when you find something

that a manager typically has to read and review and you give him a plain language version and say, “Well, now, which of these would you rather have to review when you get 10 of them a month?” And the answer was always obvious and we got a lot of converts that way. When Vice President Gore decided to do an award, he insisted that there always be a before-and-after component because they’re more powerful than just an original plain language document.

Bob Absolutely. What do you say when sometimes the person who acknowledges the improvement still resists because they say, “Well, I get it.” But if I were to give this to my target reader, they would be affronted and they’d take issue.

Annetta That’s right. And sometimes it’s true, because it’s not what you expect from the government, for example. And so you’re not sure about it. You can do user testing to show user preferences. Interestingly, I read one study — I’m not going to remember the reference. They showed some before and after government material and the segment that was most enthusiastic about it were the highly educated readers and the less educated readers were less enthusiastic. And I think that was because it didn’t look right. There was just something wrong with it. I had to deal with this attorney in the White House. We were writing a presidential memo on Gore’s behalf and he couldn’t stand the way we were writing it. And we said, “Well, why?” And he said, “It’s not magisterial.” So to him, government writing should be magisterial. I didn’t know we had that kind of government.

Bob On a similar note, I did read an article where you were interviewed several years ago, where the interviewer quite cheekily gave you a plain language rewrite of the Gettysburg Address. And that rewrite said “It’s time to break free from England because it’s our God-given right to do that. We’re every bit as good as they are, but it’s only fair we explain why we got to do this thing.” So that was put to you. And your response back then was that it’s hard to evaluate writing from that long ago in today’s context, because that was more normal writing back then than it would be now. “On the other hand,” you said, “I think if the government were writing that paragraph today, it would have a lot more words.”

Annetta Right.

Bob Is there not sometimes, indeed often, a legitimate distinction between writing as a rhetorical device to inspire, to move, versus functional information sharing?

Annetta Absolutely, absolutely. And Gettysburg Address was meant to inspire and you write that a different way. The government mostly writes instructions. You know, there’s pamphlets about how to apply. There’s regulations, all sorts of regulations, thousands of regulations about how you’re required to do things. Those are all instructions. And, frankly, that’s where I’ve had most of my experience. When you write instructions, you want to be crystal clear. You’re not trying to inspire. You’re trying to get people to follow your instructions and, if they can’t understand them, they aren’t going to follow them.

Bob And you might also be trying to engage and persuade sometimes.

Annetta Well, sometimes, although regulations ... I don’t think we do too much of that. Maybe in the preambles to the regulations, but not in the regulations themselves. I mean, let’s take a pamphlet about health testing and you’re trying to convince people to be tested for something. Obviously, you’re trying to inspire them to do something and then give them clear direction. So, I mean, you have to have all those things in mind when you write. Some people think that plain language is a list of “do this, don’t do that.” And it’s not.

Plain language is about the reader and what the reader needs and you have to change your writing to suit that reader. I was involved in a project once for a Center for Disease Control and they wanted to put up billboards in inner cities trying to discourage youth from smoking. And, through research, we found that you didn't even want to be grammatically correct on those billboards, because that didn't speak to the reader that you wanted. So you had to speak in their language. And that's really the core of plain language. You have to speak in the reader's language.

Bob Of course, public health and quality of communication was a very big deal during COVID times, as was the need to educate people about why vaccines are something they might want to take.

Annetta Right. And we haven't been very successful at that yet.

Bob No, no. A couple of minutes earlier there, you mentioned Al Gore, which is a signal that the plain language thing generated interest at pretty high levels of government eventually. But there was a fair climb, I'm sure, to get to that point. I was wondering if you could take us to your founding of the Center for Plain Language and what was going on then?

Annetta Well, yes, that was actually after Clinton and Gore had gotten interested in it and the group in the government decided we wanted to put on a conference. And government employees are very constrained in what they can do without their agency's approval and it's very hard to get their agency's approval for certain things like signing contracts, soliciting funds. So the impulse to create the Center for Plain Language was so that we had an outside-of-the-government arm that was a nonprofit that could solicit funds and sign contracts and put on conferences to help spread the word about plain language. We didn't, at first, have the law in mind because we didn't have a law yet. But that worked out very well because, once we got the law, then we had the Center and then we had report cards.

Bob And by "the law," you are, of course, referring to the Plain Writing Act of 2010?

Annetta Right. I believe we founded the Center in 2003. There was an international organization that put on conferences like every other year that's now called Plain — was founded in Canada, but is now worldwide — and they asked us if we wouldn't mind hosting a conference because they wanted to expand. And we were very excited — we being those of us in the government who had gotten involved in this — we were very excited about doing that, but we couldn't do it because we had no method to do it. So that's why we founded the Center so we could put on that conference.

Bob Was the idea of plain language legislation something that was a glint in your collective eyes from early on or was there a moment or an opportunity that you sought to seize?

Annetta I started in plain language about 1994 and that's when we started meeting. The presidential memo came out very late in the Clinton administration — 2000, I believe — and we saw the power of that. And that's when we started talking about maybe we should think about trying to get legislation. So it wasn't right at the beginning, but it was a long time before we got it because, you know, it takes a long time to achieve that kind of action.

Bob I'm actually quite interested to understand a bit more about the making of that sausage and how one does get government decision-makers across the line on such a significant reform. It's not a theoretical question, of course. New Zealand has its legislation, which is a bit of a political football at the moment—

Annetta Right.

Bob —and I know a lot of plain language. People in Australia are certainly keen to explore whether governments at federal or state level might have a similar appetite. So could you tell us a little bit about the process of—

Annetta Well—

Bob —making legislation happen?

Annetta Well, sure. Frankly, there were two of us who were the main people: myself and a guy named John Stolarski, who had been a political appointee at Small Business Administration, an attorney, very devoted to plain language. But, because he had been a political appointee, he knew a number of people on the Hill who were involved in small business. So there's certainly a small business aspect to plain language from the government. It makes it easier on all those small businesses to comply with government requirements, if they're clear. And one thing I didn't know, something like 97% of the businesses in the US are classified as small business. Everybody knows all those huge companies, but, percentage-wise, small businesses are by far the majority. So he knew some people and I was interested in doing this, so I started going to the Hill and talking to people and trying to get them interested. Now, this is not something that my agency would have been happy about. You don't do that kind of thing. I was fairly high up at the time in federal aviation. I was an assistant to the administrator to do plain language specifically, so I wasn't buried deep in the bureaucracy. But, nevertheless, this is not something that federal agencies let their people do, but I did it anyway and we took several stabs at it. I think we had a bill in — or at least partially a bill — in 2006, another one in 2007, and then we hit the jackpot when we found Bruce Braley, who was from Kansas and a trial attorney and very dedicated to plain language, very interested in doing this. And one thing I learned — mainly because the staffers told me as I went around to different offices and tried to get them to back a bill that Braley was going to put forward — they appreciated the fact that I was there, not because I was paid, but because I believed in it and I could make them believe in it because I knew what I was talking about. And that they found that a very powerful approach compared to all of the paid political consultants that they dealt with on a routine basis. So I think it was just a lot of blood and sweat and a lot of trips to the Hill. And, in fact, I retired in, I think, 2007 because the heat from my agency was just getting a little much. They called me in and said, "Now you are one of the few people in the government that is so important that you have to assume that you are working for the government 24/7. You're never off the clock. And they were basically telling me I couldn't take leave for a couple of hours and go up to the Hill because, even on leave, I was working for the government. So I was about to hit 62. I took retirement at the earliest moment, where I would get full compensation, so I could continue going to the Hill and, after that, it was about another 3 years until we got the bill. So it's not a short process. You have to have stamina.

Bob For those who aren't familiar with the legislation, could you say a little bit about its anatomy: the definition of plain language, who it covers, and what they are meant to do to comply with the Act?

Annetta I don't remember the details — I haven't looked at it lately — but it's basically the standard definition about people that are impacted by the Act. It did not, unfortunately, cover regulations. If we had tried to cover regulations, we would have lost the Act. It does not have any penalty for failure to comply. If we had tried to do that, we would have lost it. You know, politics is the art of the possible and those things were not possible. It basically addresses the material that agencies use to deal directly with the public, except for regs, and that the

public needs to understand to get government benefits, in particular comply with government requirements and so on. There were various impositions on the government: They had to have a contact person, they had to have a web page, they had to do an annual report, and training — they had to do training.

Bob What happens if they didn't do the training?

Annetta Not a damn thing. If they didn't do training and their work wasn't any good, then it would show up in the report card and they'd get bad press. And that really was the most powerful thing.

Bob Tell us a bit more about that report card. Was the report card a considered initiative to, if you like, offset the fact that there was a strategic call not to seek legislative teeth.

Annetta Well, yes, definitely. You know, we had the bill, we had the law — which was a great achievement — but we knew that without something, we wouldn't make that much progress. Yes, they had to do an annual report, but agencies have to do hundreds of annual reports. Actually, we had a PR person working for the Center and she suggested a report card and we jumped on that. And the first year that we did it, we didn't really even look at their writing. The Act was only a year old at the time. We thought it was too early to look for real achievement, so we looked just at their administrative compliance. Did they have a point of contact? Did they have a website? Did they do their report? Do they do training? And that's what the first report card was about. And then in the second year, we started looking at products and we quickly figured out that we had to be very narrow in what we looked at. The Center settled on looking at material on websites. We would look at 2 or 3 different agencies — how they were doing on that particular topic — and I think it had a major impact. And then we did the Awards also — ClearMark Awards — which was the carrot part, and those were also influential, probably not as influential as the court card, but federal employees like to get awards.

Bob Could you say a little bit more about the ClearMark Awards and its neighbor, the WonderMark Awards?

Annetta A lot of what the Center did initially was aimed at the government, including the Awards and the report card. Eventually, we broadened it to the private sector and I just saw that they're doing even more of that and they're doing Spanish and French now too, which is great. But, again, it was a tool to help us influence the government. We heard several times, probably many times, from agencies that got bad marks on the report cards. We figured, well, if they're really complaining about the bad marks, maybe if we give them something good, we'll also hear about that and that will motivate them as well. I mean, I remember reviewing those several years in a row. Very interesting process though. And over the years — let's say I reviewed awards for maybe 7 years — you could really see an improvement. Now, this is only a tiny fraction of what the government writes, but it is fraction that is most likely to impact the public. So I think that was a very successful program, just like the report card was. And, combined, they were particularly powerful.

Bob I'm not sure if there's an easy answer to this, but, based on the before's and after's that you've seen over the journey in connection with the Awards, are there any frequent-flyer deficiencies when it comes to the before and are there any bang-for-buck fixes that the rewrites demonstrate when it comes to plain language writing techniques?

Annetta I don't know if I can remember and relate it specifically to the Awards, but to government writing in general, I would say that long sentences and passive voice were a major problem in government writing. I mean, there's still a problem, but you can now find lots of examples of government writing that are free from those issues. The health sector in particular, I think, has been successful in doing a better job and Social

Security also. One of my pet peeves is what we call hidden verbs or nominalizations, where you use a noun instead of a verb. Like instead of “the committee reported,” you say “the committee issued a report.” That’s a nominalization and bureaucratic writing is still full of that.

Bob Harold Evans, who used to be the editor of *The Times of London*, wrote a book in his retirement called *Do I Make Myself Clear?* And he calls them zombie nouns.

Annetta Yes, lots of names, that particular sin.

Bob I know from the training that I deliver, Annetta, that for people who don’t quite get the active–passive thing, it’s no easy thing for them to get it. Do you have any techniques that you use to impart that distinction to them in a way that they can apply practically?

Annetta A fellow early advocate used this example all the time. The active sentence is “Fred swallowed a frog.” and the passive sentence is “A frog was swallowed by Fred.” And then the government version of passive is the one that doesn’t even name the actor: “A frog was swallowed.” For some reason that caught people’s attention and was very helpful in getting them to understand where we were coming from. That, you know, standard way of writing a good sentence: actor, verb, object. Just follow that and you’ll be in good shape. But feel free to use the frog.

Bob I will, thank you.

We’ve walked through quite a few of your significant advocacy roles so far, but I want to turn to one that’s quite current. The ISO in the International Plain Language Standard and the other parts that are going to hang off the resource. Could you tell me a little bit about your role?

Annetta Sure. We haven’t mentioned the International Plain Language Federation yet. I’ve been involved with that for a long time — and that was founded by the Center for Plain Language and Plain International and *Clarity* — and I was chair for a while, on the board a lot. And back in 2010, the Federation published an article in *Clarity* and set out a number of goals. And the first goal was a definition of plain language. And I worked on that with Joe Kimble and Neil James — and several other people — and we published a definition that was similar to the Act and similar to what the 3 organizations have said for a long time and started with Ginny Redish. The one about that readers can find what they need and understand it and use it.

The second goal that we had talked about was a standard for plain language. So once we checked off the first one, we were ready to take on the second one. And you’ll have to ask Christopher Bamford about this, because he’s the one that advocated that we go to ISO to do this. He thought that if we manage to get ISO to do a plain language standard, it would have more impact than if just the still relatively small plain language community did it. So we drafted up a rough draft of a standard and Christopher went off to Standards Australia, I believe, and, much to our surprise, ISO said “yes, sure.” I grew up knowing about ISO because my brother had been involved in more scientific activities that involved a lot of ISO standards and I had always pictured ISO as something that does standards for toasters and wall outlets. And so I was very surprised when I found out that their biggest selling standard has to do with managing organizations. And so plain language standard was not at all unusual for them.

So I was on the drafting committee and Christopher was managing the working group that had been formed and we got it out in relatively good time. It was issued in ’23. Since then, the legal one has come out. We have

the Writing Science for the Public, which is fairly far along. We have a design one. We have the one that earns the first one into organizational requirements. So if organizations want to be certified as plainlanguage organizations, they would follow this other one that we're working on. Because the first one we published was just guidance. We're starting an evaluation one. So there's quite a few. It's been a very active group, a much more active than a typical ISO group, which speaks well for the plain language community. And we started out with 20-some people on our Working Group 11 and we now have almost 150 from around the world. So quite a lot of interest in the ISO community in plain language, which is great.

Bob Absolutely. Just for the people who don't know some of the players here, I'll just backtrack a bit. You mentioned Christopher Bamford. Christopher's my colleague, the founder of our little training business, Words and Beyond. And, as I've indicated, Annetta, he put in an enormous amount of time and effort into trying to help make this happen. But I'm also conscious, having spoken with him about this as recently as 24 hours ago, he always acknowledges your immense role. He says he regards you as the co-sponsor of this initiative.

Annetta Well, probably yes. I was certainly a key on the drafting committee. He wasn't on the drafting committee because he was managing the whole team. So that kept him busy. What can I say? I've experienced an expert at getting people to do things.

Bob It might be the pit bull part of it.

Annetta Yes, possibly. And persistent. That's part of it too.

Bob You talked about part 3 being science writing for the public. Was that a very considered position? Was that, in effect, a concession that peer-to-peer scientific communications is a whole different beast?

Annetta Well, we started out without making that distinction and then we decided that peer-to-peer wasn't totally different. In fact, we say in there that, writing for your peers, you would do well to follow the advice in this standard, but that our primary concern was writing for the public. And it was a very big topic if we were going to include peer-to-peer and we could always do peer-to-peer later if people had the desire to do that.

Bob What's the big picture here so far as all of these moving parts are concerned? What are you hoping will come of this and how will it change the way people write and the commitment organizations will make to that issue?

Annetta Having started in the mid-90s, I can see a lot of change worldwide in the fact that we started with a 20-some member committee and now we have a 150-member committee. And that's sort of typical of what's happened over the years. But still, it's a drop in the bucket. And I think the role of ISO can be very powerful in helping us spread plain language. We do have setbacks, but we will come back because it's the right thing to do. At some point — and I don't really remember whether I said it or Gore said it; it's ancient history now — one of us said plain language is a civil right, referring specifically to government writing. So I think it's the right thing to do and I think it will continue to spread. And the imprimatur that ISO brings will certainly help us with that.

Bob Is the civil right the same as a human right?

Annetta Yes, except I think we were speaking particularly about the government, so we were a little more on the civil rights side. But, yes, I think it is a human right to understand what the government is telling you to do. You can't be expected to do it if you don't understand it.

Bob Earlier you described some of your colleagues who are pioneers in this field along with you as zealots. Perhaps because of that nomenclature, it's often said that the plain language world is a movement. Are you comfortable with that?

Annetta Yes, but it's not the whole picture. It certainly started as a movement. And I think whenever plain language starts someplace new — a new country, a new company, a new industry — I think in its early days, it's a movement. It almost has to be. As it matures, it becomes more of a profession. And I know a lot of people don't like to hear that it's a movement. They want to say it's a profession. Well, it was a movement before it was a profession. It is in some ways a profession now, but wherever it starts new, it starts as a movement. That's the anthropologist in me speaking.

Bob So, given that continuum, where do you think we are in 2025, which is the date of this recording?

Annetta Well, it depends on where we are. If we're talking about Norway, for example, which is one of the leading countries, I think it's gone beyond a movement. In the US in some segments, it's gone beyond a movement and in others it hasn't. You know, it's very variable and I think sometimes it may unfortunately move backwards, so that we need more of a movement when we lose some of it to people that have strange ideas about the world. All I can say is I think it's variable and it changes over time and it will continue to change over time and there will always be a movement aspect to it, I believe.

Bob If Annetta Cheek was seeking to persuade the US federal government in 2025 that they should introduce plain writing legislation, what would her prospects be do you think?

Annetta I think just as good as they were when we did it before. If you were to start today and you got a bill in 5 years, you would have done very well. And, in the interim, you would have talked to a lot of people. You would have written a lot of papers. You would have done a lot of before and after's with material — and this is what we did. And of course, you're talking about Congress. You're not talking about the executive branch, because you get a law in the Congress. So there's still a lot of people in the Congress that are going to listen to you. Everybody in Congress has their pet interests. So you put in the time and you go up there and you have some before and after examples from their area of interest and that attracts their attention. There's lots of sources that tell you about what different congressmen and senators are interested in and you avail yourself of that research. So you try to understand who you're talking to and what is going to appeal to them. It's a long, laborious process. You know, when I said there were two of us, there were two of us going up the Hill, but there were another half dozen people who would respond when I said, "We have to have a paper on such a topic." because it was a particular important senator's issue. So they would get out their examples and their training material and come up with a little paper for me so that I didn't have to do them all, you know, to talk to that particular individual and help convince them. I don't think it would be any different than it was before. It might take a little longer, but — having already had the experience — might come faster.

Bob Annetta, before we close up, I did want to ask you a couple of final issues. One is venturing into personal, but the other is a bigger picture issue. What's something that people would be surprised to learn about you?

Annetta I don't really know. I mean, they now know that I'm an archaeologist. That may surprise some people.

Bob That's pretty cool.

Annetta Um, yeah, yeah. Of course, I think most people know I have pit bulls, although some people will be surprised by that.

Bob Do you compete for show?

Annetta I used to compete in dog sports. I never competed in dog shows where you're showing off how pretty your dog is. But I competed in sports, particularly something called Schutzhund. It's now called IGP, but more people would know it as Schutzhund. Not a large community in the world. It has a little bit of a police dog aspect to it. You have to track. You have some complex obedience exercises and you have some protection exercises. So I did that for a long time with my dogs. I have aged out of that sport, unfortunately.

Bob Getting back to the world of communicating in writing: For someone who's starting out in the world of plain language writing or simply wanting to do a refresher, are there any resources that you'd recommend to them as the obvious, go-to places?

Annetta I'm really like Richard Wydick's little book called *Plain English for Lawyers*. It's a very accessible book. You can get it on your Amazon and it doesn't cost very much. I think it's a great little book. And if you want to read about why plain language is important and how much of an impact it has, then Joe Kimble's stuff on *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please*. I also like Martin Cutt's Oxford handbook. I mean, we could be here all day, so I'll stop with those.

Bob What about writing in general — beautiful writers? Who do you look at as a wonderful stylist?

Annetta Hemingway, I guess. I like Asimov. I really enjoyed Orwell. And Emily Dickinson.

Bob Right. I was a big Asimov fan when I was a young person.

Annetta Yeah.

Bob I went through all his books.

Annetta There was some interview with him in a science fiction magazine — I think they interviewed a bunch of science fiction writers — and he said something disparaging about his own writing, which was sort of amusing, but I thought he was a terrific writer too. Yeah.

Bob Super bright man. Now, finally, I just wanted to ask you to reflect on your legacy. Looking back on an extraordinary career, what do you think you're most proud of in your plain language advocacy life?

Annetta I think the Act and getting the federal government to turn a few degrees toward plain language. The US federal government is a huge ship and turning it takes a lot of energy and I think we turned it. Just a little anecdote: I finished my federal career at Federal Aviation and I was there specifically to do plain language. That's the only federal job I had that was specifically to do plain language and to try to influence the agency. And I got on the elevator and there were two staffers talking and — I didn't know them, they didn't know me — and the one guy said to the other guy, "Boy, this document really needs plain language," which made me feel really good that I didn't know who they were. They didn't know me, but they knew about plain language and they thought it was important.

Bob Music to your ears?

Annetta Yep.

Bob What advice would you give to the next generation of plain language advocates?

Annetta Be consistent and persistent. Particularly persistence.

Bob And if you could go back in time to speak to the younger Annetta Cheek, what sort of advice would you give to her? Same thing?

Annetta Yes, I think the same thing. Be persistent. It's sort of in my nature to be persistent and getting that law passed really required persistence. With so many setbacks for reasons that appeared absolutely illogical, but persistence eventually paid. Sometimes I think I should have retired then — when I got the law passed, I should have retired. I was already retired from the government.

Bob Going out on a high.

Annetta Yes. Going out on a high.

Bob Right, right. Well, maybe that leads to my final question. How would you like to be remembered in the plain language community?

Annetta I think as somebody that got things done for plain language, particularly in the federal government, but now more recently internationally. I've worked hard and I think I've gotten a lot done and I appreciate it when people comment on that.

Bob Well, I think that is definitely going to be happening. Your reputation will last for a very long time in this world and, Annetta, I'm so grateful to you for putting in the time to speak with me today. Thank you so much.

Annetta My pleasure. Hopefully, I'll see you in flesh someday again.

Bob Hope so. Thank you so much.

Whether we call it a movement or a profession or just a plain old commercial venture, Annetta reminds us that plain language is a civil right. And she also helps to inspire those of us who still believe that there are opportunities to persuade governments of all stripes around the world to introduce legislation or regulation that embeds plain language writing principles into public communications. To learn more about Annetta's work, be sure to check out our show notes.

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I'm Bob Milstein, and until next time, go forth and clarify.