

ACERA Project 0805

1. **Project Title:** Plain English for risk communication
2. **Theme:** Communication and Decision Making
3. **Rationale:**

Although it may seem obvious that plain language would improve science and policy, research is needed to determine the best form of plain language and how best to institutionalize it. The reform needs to be evidence-based. However, much of the testing of plain language documents comes from law (e.g., making jury instructions more accessible to jurors; Charrow & Charrow, 1979; Masson & Waldron 1994; Apostol & Peters, 2002). But there are no analogous experiments in the biological sciences or in risk assessment. Many governments and corporations have adopted plain language for their reports; the US Environmental Protection Agency is training staff in plain English editing skills. (See their website <http://www.epa.gov/plainlanguage/>).

We will develop a plain language training package tailored to DAFF, focusing on risk and the biological sciences. Our two major tools will be Lanham (2006) *Revising Prose*, the standard textbook in American universities. It is short and, not surprisingly, very clear with specific useful instructions. We will supplement Lanham with Gopen and Swan (1990) "The Science of Science Writing". We are particularly motivated by their claim (p. 550): "... [Plain language] can produce clarity in communication without oversimplifying scientific issues. The results are substantive, not merely cosmetic: Improving the quality of writing actually improves the quality of thought."

4. **Outputs:** training in plain language communication for a number of DAFF staff, examples of plain language interpretations of scientific policy documents relevant to biosecurity, and reports detailing approaches to disseminating effective techniques in communication documents.
5. **Time frame:** Commencing: 01 January 2008; finishing: 31 December 2008
6. **Project leader(s)**

Title	First name	Surname	Location	Organisation	% Time per year
Dr	Neil	Thomason	Philosophy	University of Melbourne	25%
Prof	Mark	Burgman	ACERA	University of Melbourne	5%

7. **Resources**

Financial years of requested funding		07/08	08/09
Salaries and stipends			\$55 000
Dr Jan Carey (.2 fraction + on-costs, level B, step 2)			\$17 000
Ms Kate Barnard (.2 fraction +on-costs, level A, step 6)			\$14 000
Ms Bonnie Wintle			\$ 4 000
Dr Neil Thomason (.2 fraction + on-costs, senior research fellow)			\$20 000
Travel			\$3 000
Operating and capital			\$2 000
Project Total			\$60 000

8. **End Users**

DAFF employees and users of DAFF reports, including other scientists, policy makers and government and other employees who apply DAFF standards. If the results are widely adopted, this project would benefit stakeholders for many Commonwealth government activities.