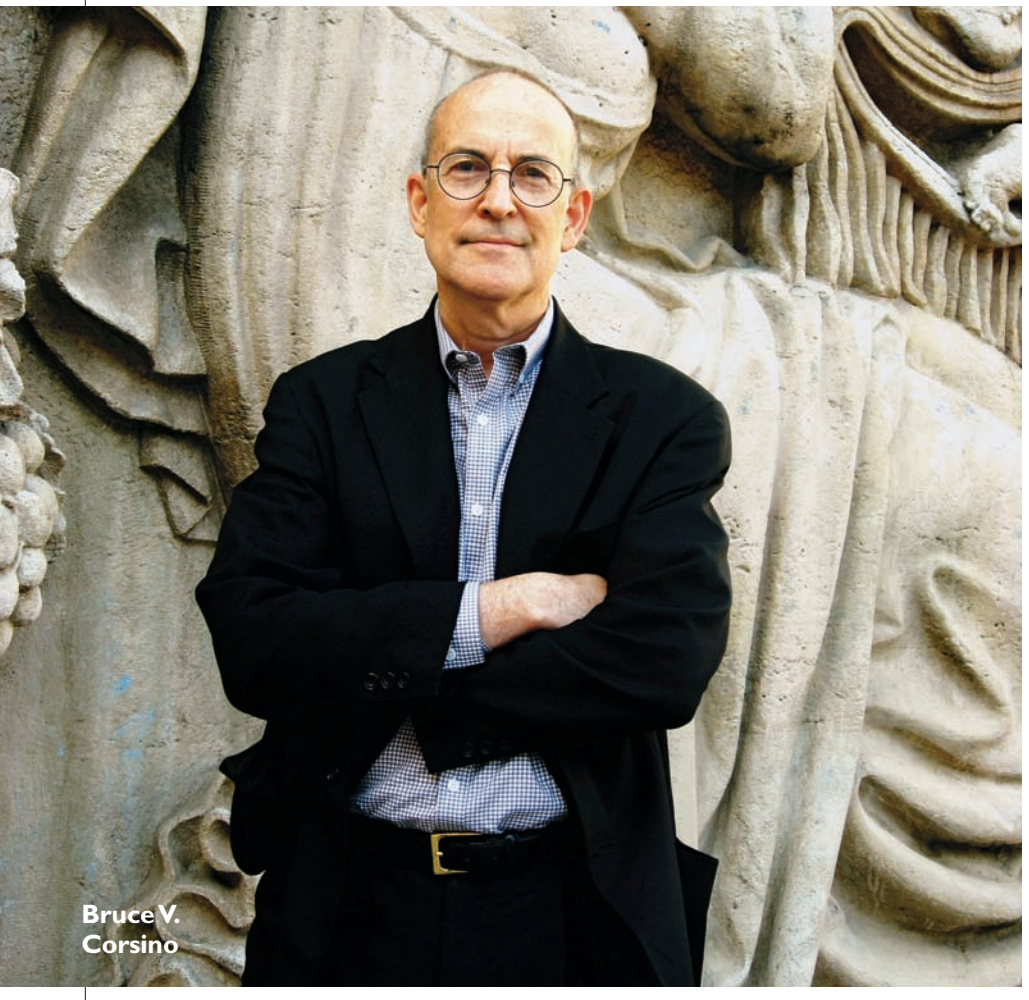
ALUMNI

Plain Speaker

Bruce Corsino promotes "usable, efficient, and transparent" writing inside government and out.



Bruce V. Corsino

IMAGINE *understanding* your tax form instructions the first time you read them. What if all federal rules, safety warnings, and applications were clearly spelled out? While we're at it, why not extend that efficiency to the texts in car manuals, mortgage applications, banking terms and conditions, shareholder policies, utility bills, food and drug labels—and even legal contracts? Such dreams can come true, maintains Bruce V. Corsino, M.Ed. '80, through the adoption of "Plain Language."

As head of the Plain Language Program at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Corsino pushes for "usable, efficient, and transparent" writing throughout the government so readers can more quickly find, digest, and act on essential information. "There is no greater daily frustration for the American people than dealing with legalese and hard-to-read financial terminology," he asserts. "One ripe and fertile example is how the mortgage industry helped create the current financial crisis by creating forms and documents that were not easy for borrowers to understand." Plain language, he reports, is gaining popularity across the country because it makes sense: it boosts compliance, safety, *and* customer satisfaction. It also reduces costs and time associated with confusion and miscommunication.

This approach first gained momentum in the late 1990s when President Clinton directed agency and executive leaders to use clear language in all new documents and Vice President Al Gore '69, LL.D. '94, who monitored this initiative, created the "No Gobbledygook" Award. Plain language has since come to embody a social and consumerist movement that also has wide pragmatic allure for businesses and legal professionals intent on efficiency. In fact, some 36 states have passed plain language legislation, and now a federal law is a possibility.

Corsino, a trained psychologist and medical ethicist and retired colonel in the U.S. Army medical department, points also to what he sees as the larger context: plain language as a critical means of increasing access to fairness and justice. "It's the civil-rights aspect of this that appeals to the militant in me," he says. "If we don't use plain language techniques to improve and clarify such things as jury and electronic voting-booth instructions, then the rights of defendants and voters are put at risk. These are but a few of many plain language civil-rights issues worth fighting for."

Several court cases have borne this out. One involving Medicare communications and another related to customs and immigration forms (deemed too difficult to understand), have focused attention on plain language as a national issue. In 2008, the House passed a proposed federal Plain Language Act requiring each executive agency to use it in any new public document. Barack Obama, J.D. '91, and Hillary Clinton were among the bill's Senate cosponsors, but a scheduled vote was put on hold, partly because of the economic crisis. Similar acts, introduced early in 2009 in both chambers, are now under consideration.

Whenever the law *is* enacted, Corsino

Photograph by Junko Ito

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plans to dash down the street from FAA headquarters to the U.S. Department of Education to promote plain language as "an essential required skill that should be a viable part of every English curriculum across the United States, a language skill that human beings learn along with writing poetry and prose. We've already got state laws," he says, "but a federal law is a nice thing to have when I start marching around."

It was while walking through hospital wards practicing life-support management in intensive-care units in Virginia that Corsino fully recognized the deep, emotional power of plain language—and important linguistic nuances. Many treatment teams, he reports, approached distraught relatives of comatose, terminally ill patients with a question phrased like this: "We've done all we can. Knowing that, would you please describe how you'd like us to manage the breathing machines for your loved one?" That sounds clear and compassionate, but Corsino says the wording is wrong and potentially harmful: it can make families feel as if *they're* responsible for the patient's death. "An entirely different emotional reaction develops," he explains, "when we say to families, 'Please tell us what you know about what your loved one would have wanted.'"

While working as a psychologist and training interns and residents to conduct suicide evaluations, he'd have them ask, "How often do you have thoughts of harming yourself?" That's better than the more typical, "Do you have thoughts of harming yourself?" he says, because the latter "stigmatizes the patient for thoughts of self-harm, and—because it is likely to be answered with a yes or a no—it does little to elicit any further response from the patient. In my world, every word counts, perhaps to a fault."

Building on his experience with patients' families, Corsino helped write federal health-ethics laws and wrote guidebooks about informed consent and advance directives published by the National Center for Clinical Ethics (part of the Department of Veterans Affairs). And when he decided to make a career change from medical ethicist to self-described "plain language militant," he focused on his passion for language: he became a speechwriter at the Pentagon before join-

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TURN TO PAGE 69

HARVARD MAGAZINE

A Special Notice Regarding Commencement Exercises

Thursday, May 27, 2010

Morning Exercises

To accommodate the increasing number of those wishing to attend Harvard's Commencement Exercises, the following guidelines are proposed to facilitate admission into Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement Morning:

• Degree candidates will receive a limited number of tickets to Commencement. Parents and guests of degree candidates must have tickets, which they will be required to show at the gates in order to enter Tercentenary Theatre. Seating capacity is limited, however there is standing room on the Widener steps and at the rear and sides of the Theatre for viewing the exercises.

Note: A ticket allows admission into the Theatre, but does not guarantee a seat. Seats can not be reserved. The sale of Commencement tickets is prohibited.

• Alumni/ae attending their major reunions (25th, 35th, 50th) will receive tickets at their reunions. Alumni/ae in classes beyond the 50th may obtain tickets from the Classes and Reunions Office, 124 Mt. Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

• Alumni/ae from non-major reunion years and their spouses are requested to view the Morning Exercises over large-screen televisions in the Science Center, and at designated locations in most of the undergraduate Houses and graduate and professional Schools. These locations provide ample seating, and tickets are not required.

• A very limited supply of tickets will be made available to all other alumni/ae on a first-come, first-served basis through the Harvard Alumni Association, 124 Mt. Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

Afternoon Exercises

The Annual Business Meeting of the Harvard Alumni Association convenes in Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement afternoon. All alumni and alumnae, faculty, students, parents, and guests are invited to attend and hear Harvard's President and featured Commencement Speaker deliver their addresses. Tickets for the afternoon ceremony will be available through the Harvard Alumni Association, 124 Mt. Auburn Street, sixth Floor, Cambridge, 02138.

—Jacqueline A. O'Neill, University Marshal

ing the FAA (one of the first agencies to adopt plain language as official policy, beginning in 1999).

Corsino's predecessor, Annetta Cheek, started the plain language effort—critical to an agency in charge of aviation safety, which largely depends on people understanding and following written policies, instructions, and emergency procedures—and went on to promote it throughout the federal government. During the last two years, Corsino has worked to greatly expand the program, building on the connection between clinical ethics and plain language. "In ethics, we speak of the beneficence as a virtue and principle of 'Do good' for patients," he says. "I borrow that idea to solidify in all writers their ethical covenant with, and responsibility to care for, readers."

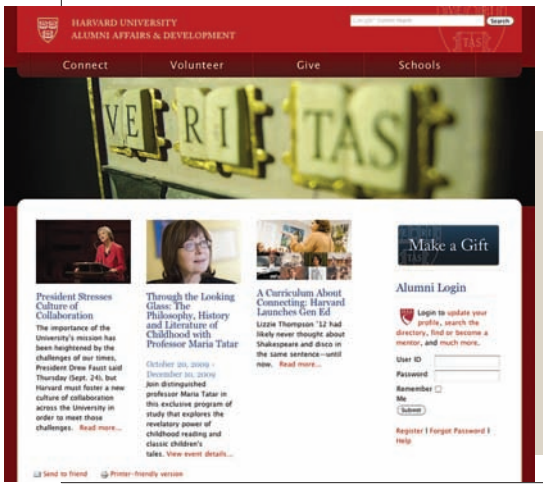
Among his accomplishments to date, Corsino has led plain language revisions of at least 10 major FAA documents, on topics ranging from privacy and security to air-traffic control, and has helped the European Aviation Safety Agency build its own plain language program. He will lead a presentation on plain language ethics at the international plain language conference in Lisbon later this year. More than 500 writers, engineers, attorneys, and other staff members have taken a course he created in which students learn both specific techniques—replacing "promulgate," "utilize," and "due to the fact" with "issue," "use," and "because," for example—and general principles, such as "*More* is not necessarily *better*." "In grade school," Corsino explains, "we need kids to write six paragraphs, not six words, about what they did on their summer vacation—that's an essential training experience to help young people become functional, fluent citizens. The problem is, students later on have almost no chance to consider if and when six words might actually be *better* than six sentences." He counts himself lucky that at Harvard (where his program at the school of education let him take courses in psychology and at the medical school) he had professors who insisted on parsimonious use of words: "Their sense that clear thinking precedes clear writing moved me to impose a discipline and self-consciousness on my work."

Corsino is an active member of The Plain Language Action and Information Network, a group of federal employees who have met for more than a decade. Its website (www.plainlanguage.gov) is run from his office, and offers information, resources, news articles, useful contacts, and dozens of authentic "before and after" writing examples, some of which are quite funny in a Kurt Vonnegut Jr. sort of way.

Some critics might accuse plain language of playing a role in an overall decline in language use in American society, and in the "dumbing down" of texts. But Corsino is careful to say that plain language has very specific applications: it is not an effort to quash creativity, literary wit and elegance, or artistic expression. "We're not saying, 'Get rid of poetry, get rid of rhetoric!' There's a place for all of these things. Plain language is a very narrow skill for a unique purpose—when you need to be clear about something that people really need to understand."

He is also clear about what he can accomplish in government, and in one six-hour course. "I know that nobody wants to go home after they've had a hard day at work and start thinking about past participles," he says, "so I have to create an experience that's short and effective."

His final message to students? "Ineffec-



BRAND-NEW. Harvard's alumni website has a fresh look, user-oriented navigation, and a new home at alumni.harvard.edu. (Alumni post.harvard.edu e-mail addresses have *not* changed, but links to post.harvard should be updated.) The new site offers tools for contacting fellow alumni and all parts of the University; ways to participate in the alumni community through Harvard Alumni Association activities; information on Harvard club events (such as faculty talks) and travel opportunities; and more.

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tive government writing is characterized by two qualities: the absence of pronouns and the overuse of passive-voice sentence constructions. If you can change those two things, your work will be vastly improved and America will be a better place." In the end, Corsino says, he is a realist, "content to create cultural change—even if it's only one paragraph at a time."

—KRYSTEN A. KECHES *and* NELL PORTER BROWN

Harvard Serves

DURING APRIL, the extended University community—in Greater Boston and around the globe alike—are invited to participate in the Harvard Alumni Association's public service initiative, "Harvard Serves." Inspired by President Drew Faust's exhortation to apply "our knowledge to help advance the well-being of people in the world beyond our walls," the HAA hopes to mobilize all 300,000 alumni worldwide, as well as faculty and staff members and students, to volunteer time and efforts in their own communities.

Events will be organized through local Harvard clubs, Shared Interest Groups, and individual classes; organizers will choose one or more dates during the month of April for their service opportunity. Anyone with suggestions about local community organizations in need of volunteers, or eager to get involved with planning these events, should e-mail harvardserves@post.harvard.edu. A full list of service opportunities and specific dates of projects and their locations will be available at alumni.harvard.edu on March 1.

Veterans Day Salute

On November 11, during a solemn service in Memorial Church at which both President Drew Faust and General George W. Casey Jr., Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, spoke, Harvard honored its military veterans (approximately 1,200 alumni have died in war); its students serving or training to serve in the armed forces (close to 150 veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq are now enrolled); and in particular the 16 alumni who earned the nation's highest military award, the Medal of Honor, for actions "above and beyond the call of duty." As part of the service, a plaque commemorating the medal's recipients, installed near the altar, was unveiled, dedicated, and presented to the University by the Harvard Veterans Alumni Organization (HVAO; www.harvardveterans.org). At present, the plaque bears only 10 names, but news of its imminent dedication (see "Above and Beyond," November-December 2009, page 69) prompted relatives of six more alumni recipients to contact HVAO, enabling ceremony organizers to distribute information about all 16 men at the service and to announce that the additional names will be added to the plaque by Veterans Day 2010.

The newly discovered recipients are: Charles E. Phelps, Law School 1852-53, and Horace Porter, Lawrence Scientific School 1854-55, LL.D. 1910, who rallied Union troops at the battles of Spotsylvania and Chickamauga, respectively; Henry S. Huidekoper, A.B. 1862, A.M. '72, for his leadership at Gettysburg; Claud A. Jones, Graduate School of Applied Science 1912-13, for rescuing fellow crew members trapped in the "fire rooms" of their ship after the boilers exploded during a hurricane; Pierrepont M. Hamilton '20, A.M. '46, for persuading an enemy garrison in North Africa to surrender during World War II; and Robert C. Murray, of the M.B.A. class of 1970, who threw himself on a grenade in Vietnam to save the lives of his men. More information about all 16 recipients appears at www.advocates-forrotc.org/harvard/honor.html; for more about the service, visit www.harvardmag.com/veterans-day-salute.

D. MYLES CULLEN/COURTESY OF THE U.S. ARMY

In Memorial Church, General George W. Casey Jr. views the plaque commemorating the Harvard dead of the Vietnam War, among them his father, George W. Casey '45.

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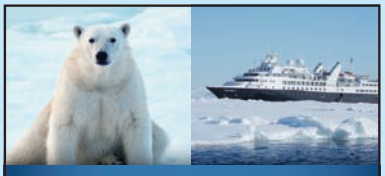

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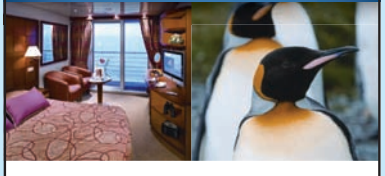

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