

Restructuring plainlanguage.gov

JOHN ROBB

HF740, WINTER 2016

The Story

In 1996, [plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov) was created was created by the PLAIN organization.

In Fall of 2002, Thom Haller, a **professor** teaching **information architecture**, decided to use the website as a student project at Johns Hopkins University. The students decided the website needed **additional content** to accommodate users. The updated website was launched in 2005.

At the end of his article, Haller explains that “Like all Web products, this one has opportunities for progressive improvement.” I certainly agree.

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/site/aboutArticle.cfm>

Business Goals

Increase adoption of plain language by more government agencies

Have plainlanguage.gov become the trusted source for copywriters and lawyers to find information about plain language

Increase global understanding of the purpose and mission of plain language and its benefits to society

Design Goals

Reorganize the website's content to provide a more intuitive structure that improves findability of the website's wide range of functionality and content

Redesign the home page so that users can quickly see the scope of resources available and find information relevant to their needs.

Implement current design patterns to make the website intuitive and consistent

Standardize the layout and navigation between sections of the website

Scope

~~Original Scope~~

~~Entire Website~~

Revised Scope

Primary & Secondary Structure

Homepage & Primary Layouts

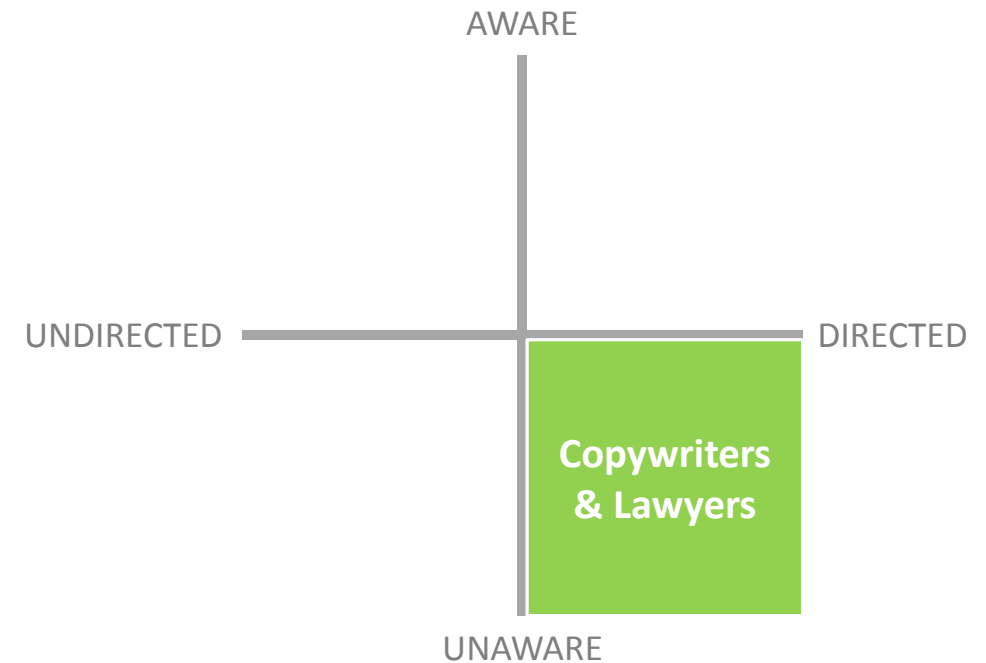
Personas

Copywriters

Looking to understand more about Plain Language

Lawyers

Looking for how Plain Language applies to their occupation and the law in general



Content Audit – Major Issues

Findability (Poor)

- Website Architecture and Navigation hide content from users
- “Search” function is broken (no results are ever shown)
- Links on the rig

Accuracy (Poor)

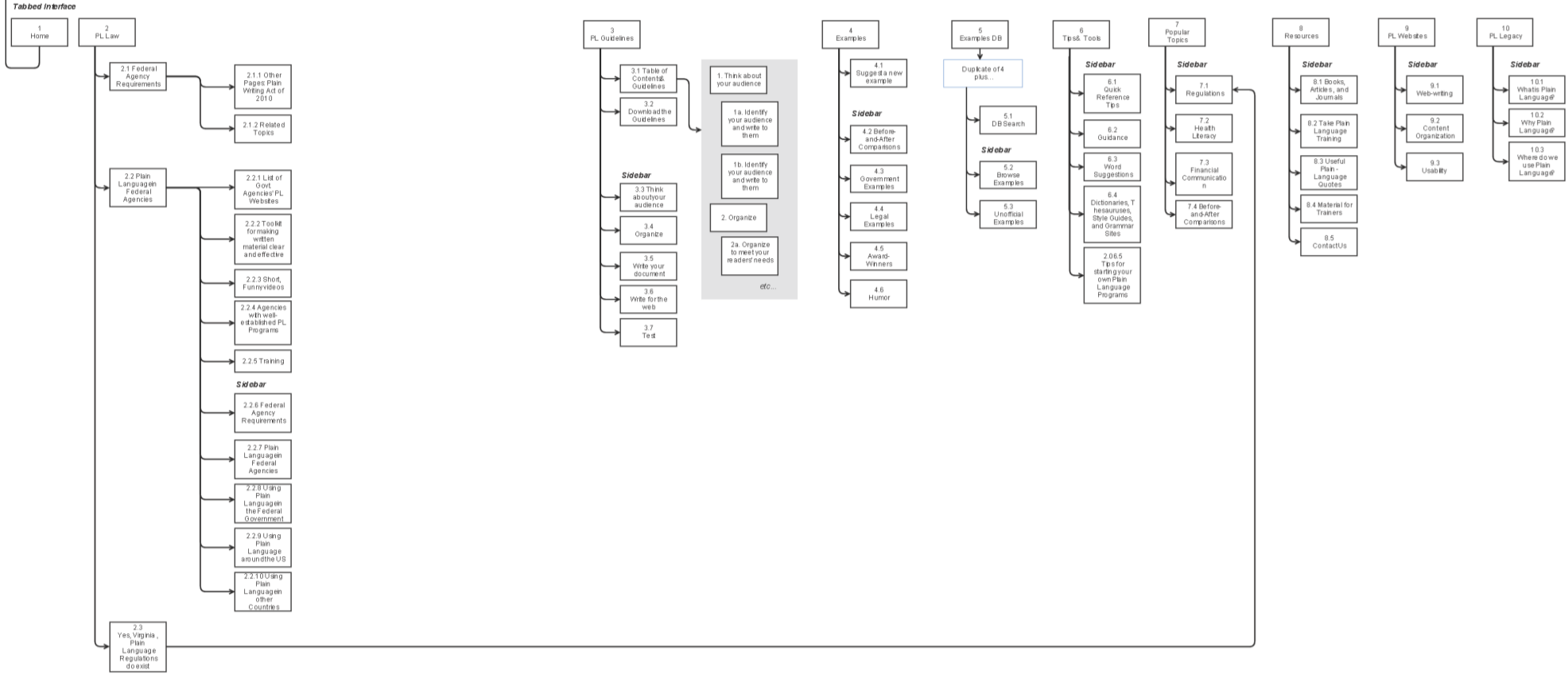
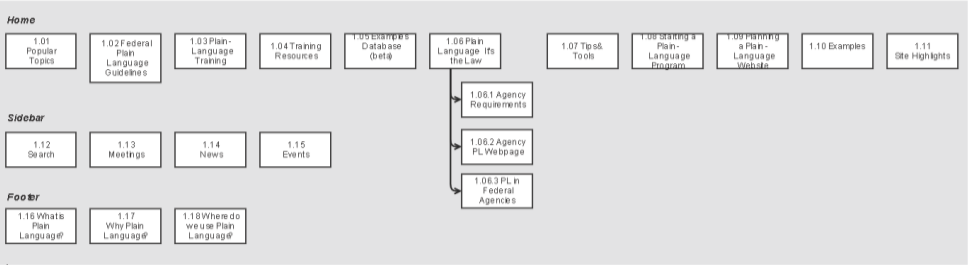
- The event displayed on the homepage is over 2 years old
- The last revision of the Plain Language guidelines was in 2011
- Many links (e.g. all on “examples” page) result in a 404

Usability (Below Average)

- Links are presented within long sentences and paragraphs, inhibiting “information scent” and skimming
- Content that should be on one page is split into multiple pages
- More apparent headers and accurate breadcrumbs could assist in wayfinding

Full content audit in the appendix

Current Site Map



Search

Search

Powered by Google

Meetings

Monthly PLAIN Meeting
(second Wednesday of every month)

Join PLAIN

News

OMB Final PL Guidance

Plain Language: It's the law

Executive Order 13563 - PL and regs

Events

Train-the-Trainer Bootcamp
(September 18, 2014)

Federal Plain Language Guidelines

March 2011 - Rev. 1, May 2011

Plain Language – It's the Law

Agency Requirements

Agency PL Webpage

PL in Federal Agencies

Plain-Language Training

Training Resources

Tips & Tools

Starting a Plain-Language Program

Planning a Plain-Language Website

Examples Database (beta)

Examples

Site Highlights:

Designated Senior Officials and Agency Webpages

We are adding officials and webpage addresses as we get them. If we're missing one, contact us and let us know.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services videos

Watch on YouTube (all links external)

Acronyms | Active Voice | Proofreading | Tables

Download video files

in Flash and Windows Media Player formats

**What is Plain Language? | Why Plain Language?
Where do we use Plain Language?**

[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Privacy and Other Policies](#) | [USA.gov](#) | [HowTo.gov](#) | [Usability.gov](#)

This site is best viewed in IE 7+, Firefox 3+, Chrome, or similar browser

Technical support for this website is provided by the Federal Aviation Administration

PLAIN develops and maintains the content of this site

[External links](#) are shown with a "🔗".

Current Homepage

Plain-Language Training Resources

A wealth of information awaits you. Read a book or journal article. Take a course. Find a persuasive quote on the value of plain language. All this and much more can be found in our resource area.

Books, Articles, and Journals

There are a variety of books, articles, and journals that provide different perspectives on the value of plain language in areas as diverse as science, government regulation, and law. Find useful writing tips and fresh points of view from today's plain language innovators.

Take Plain Language Training

Plain-language training is available in many forms—from traditional instructor-led training to correspondence courses and computer-based training. This page provides links to some of the plain-language training resources we have found. If you know of any resources we overlooked, please let us know.

Useful Plain-Language Quotes

Are you trying to persuade your colleagues or your boss that it's a good idea to use plain language? Try sharing the thoughts and advice of famous (and not-so-famous) people who believe plain language is important.

Materials for Trainers

Do you need to present a training class on plain language? These materials will help you. Or we may be able to come to your agency and present a half-day program free. You must pay any travel expenses. If you're interested, [contact us](#).

Books, Articles, Journals

There are many books, articles, and journals that provide different perspectives on the value of plain language in areas as diverse as science, government regulation, and law. This page provides links to interesting sources that offer useful writing tips and also answer the critics of plain language.

External links are shown with a "⚠️".

[Signs of Intelligible Life](#) ⚠️ describes efforts to encourage scientists to write in plain language.

Sandeep Dave provides advice to legal writers in [Plain Language in Law](#). ⚠️

[Clarity](#) ⚠️ is a worldwide group of lawyers and interested lay people. Its aim is the use of good, clear language by the legal profession. They publish a journal that is free to members. Articles have included *Plain Language in the Political Arena*, *Plain Language Research Projects*, and *Practical Drafting*. Contact kimblej@cooley.edu for membership information. You can find many of their past articles on the Clarity website.

Martin Cutts has battled gobbledegook in Great Britain for 25 years. Here's an [article](#) ⚠️ about that battle.

[The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing](#) ⚠️ has published many important articles on plain language. You can find the table of contents for each volume at the Scribes website.

There are many important books about plain language. Most of them are not available online, but they are well-worth acquiring. Here's a list of [our favorites](#).

Other Pages: Plain-Language Resources

[Books, Articles, Journals](#)

[Plain Language Training](#)

[Materials for Trainers](#)

[Quotes](#)

Related Topics

[Writing Reader-Friendly Documents](#)

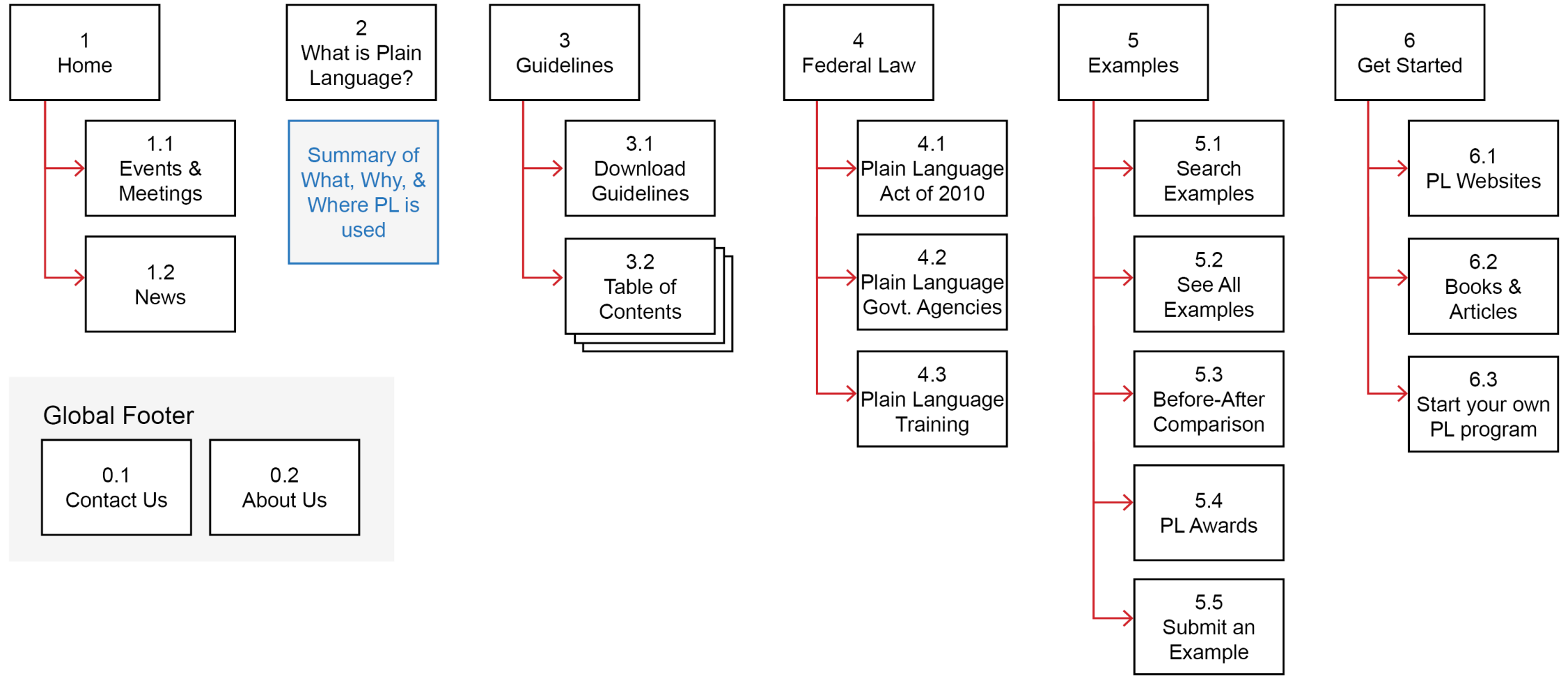
[History of Plain Language in the United States](#)

[Arguments in Favor of Plain Language](#)

New Site Map

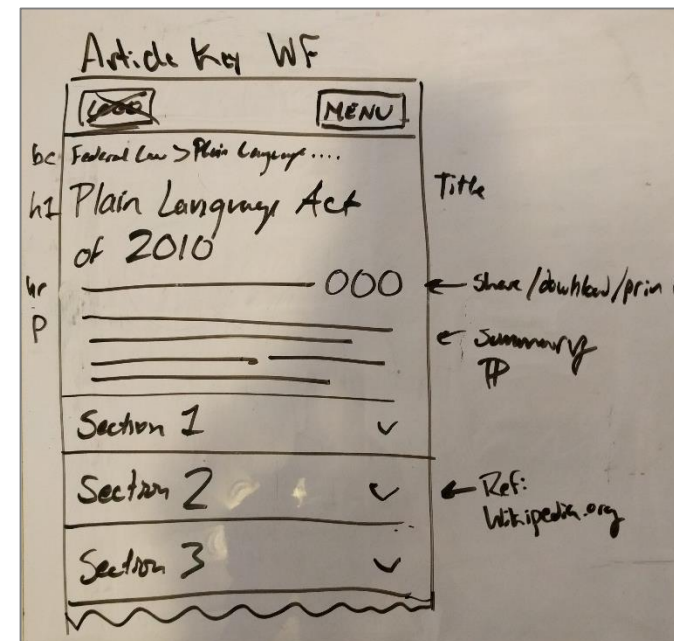
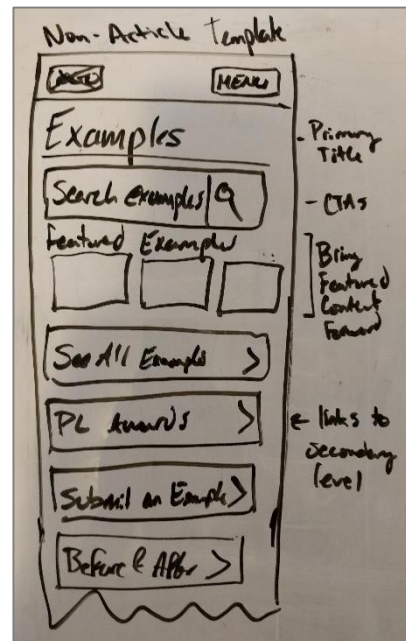
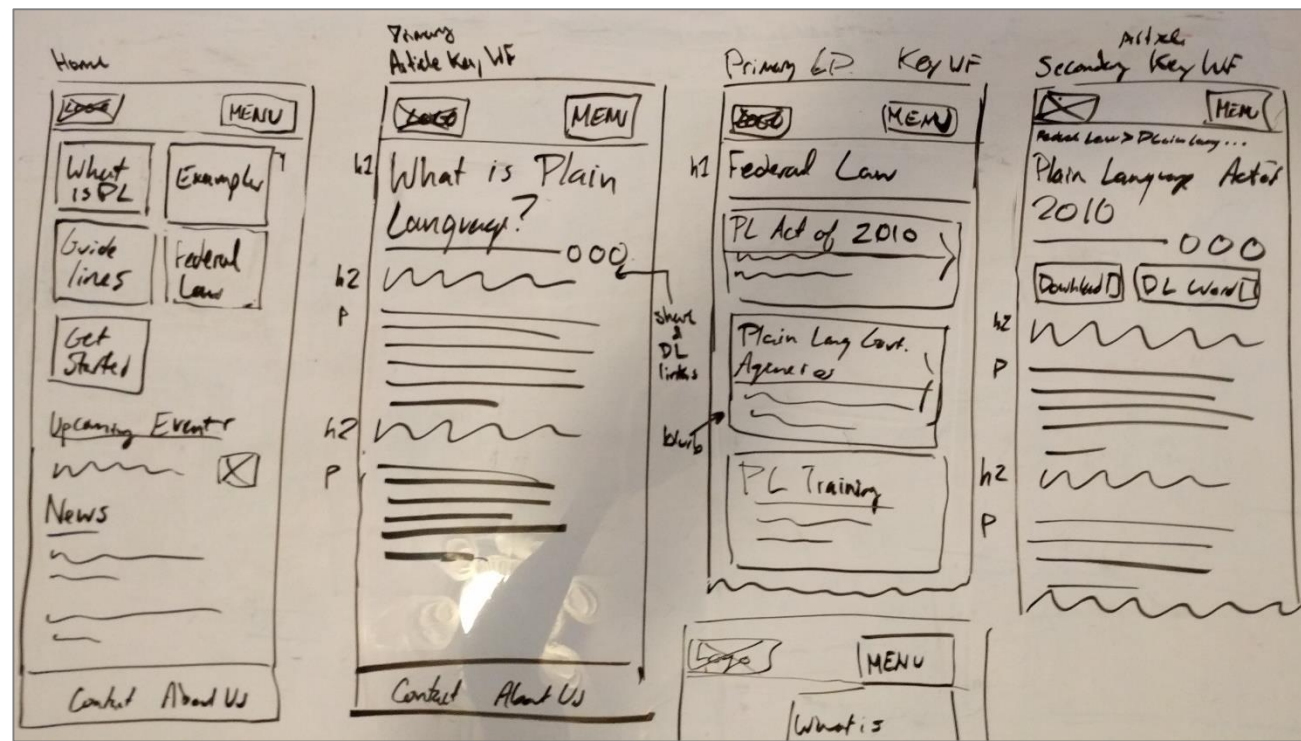
- Eliminates unnecessary pages that don't meet business goals (e.g. "Popular Topics," "Useful Plain Language Quotes," "Usability," "HowTo.gov," "Short, Funny Videos", and more)
- Restructured the architecture so the homepage lies on the primary level with other important primary categories
- Rather than supplying information in tertiary links, important content is pushed to primary pages, using the wireframe template provided.
- The new categories were extrapolated from the personas and probable use cases of the website

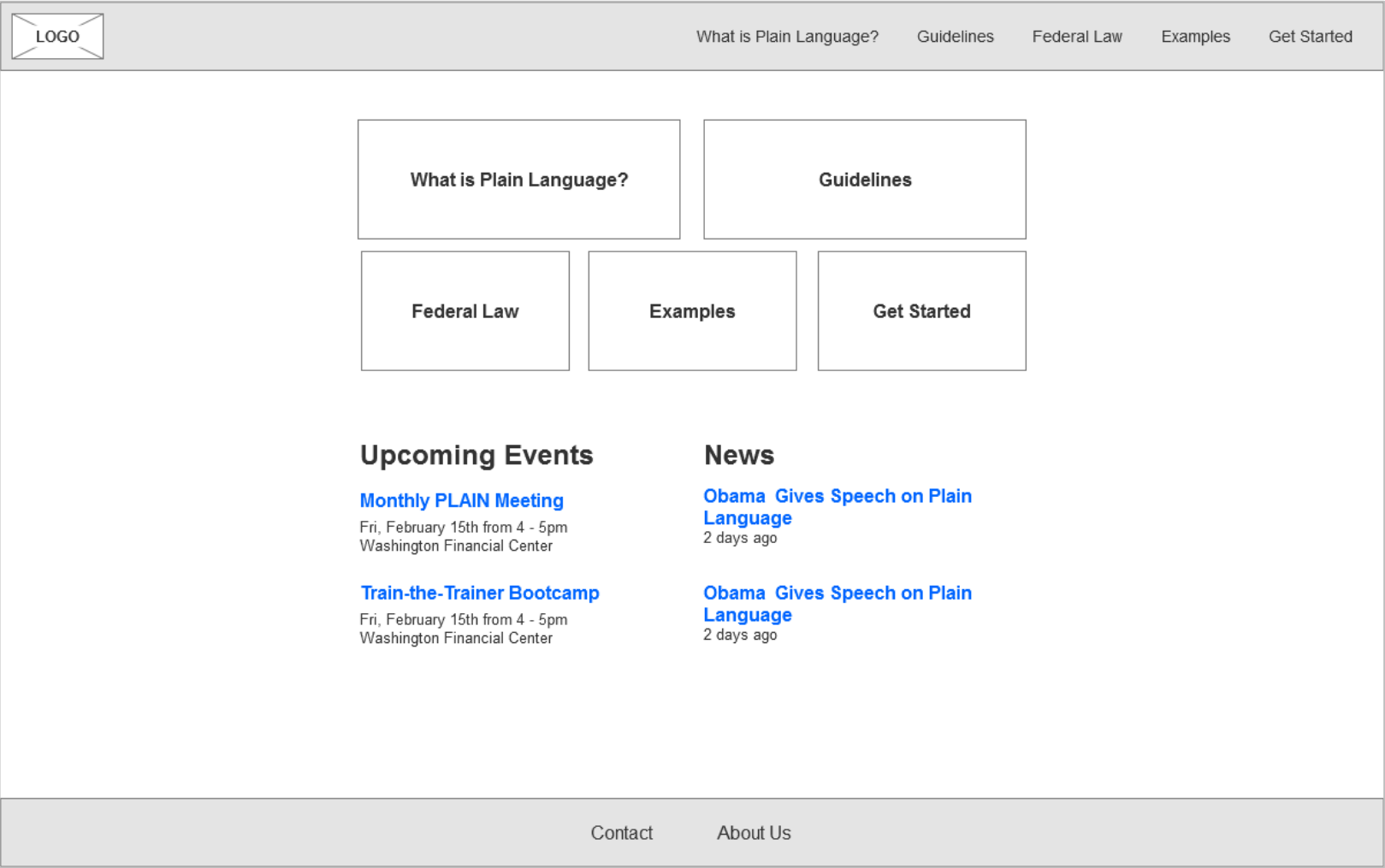
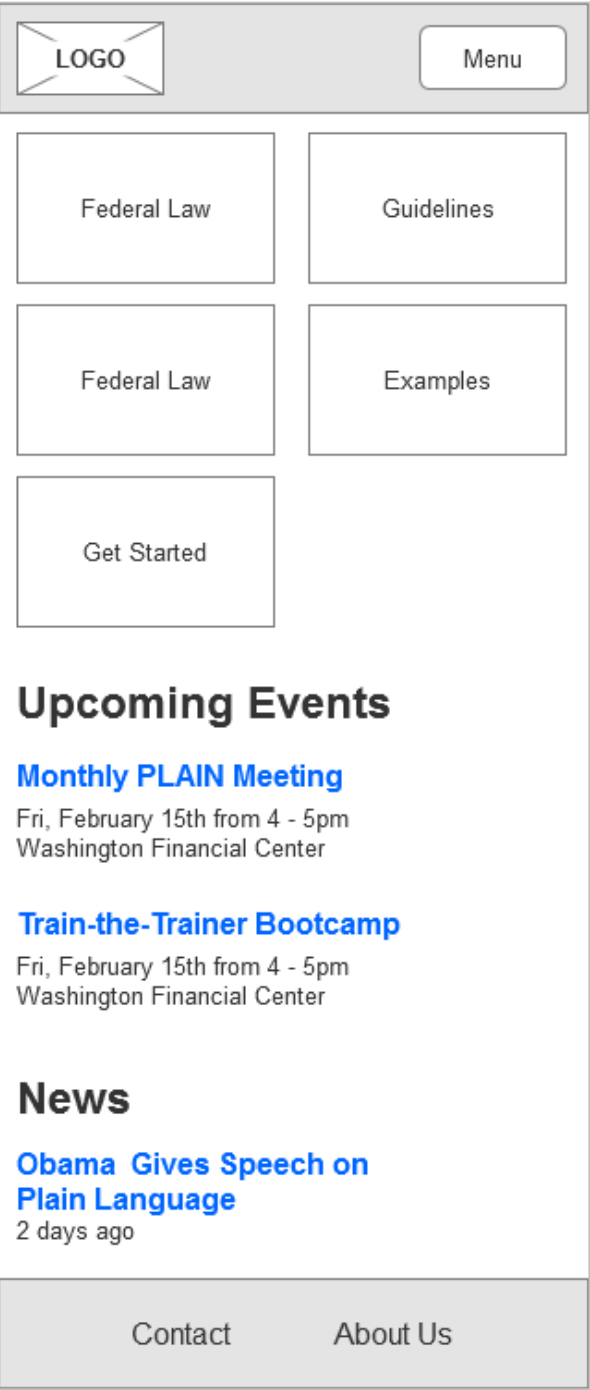
New Site Map



Wireframes

- In order to create a simple interface, I took a mobile-first approach to designing the wireframes
- The revised wireframes include these templates:
 - Home page
 - Primary landing page (with links to secondary articles)
 - "Examples" page
 - Article Template





LOGO

Menu

Federal Law

Plain Language Act of 2010

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Plain Language Gov. Agencies

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Plain Language Training

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Contact

About Us

LOGO

What is Plain Language?

Guidelines

Federal Law

Examples

Get Started

Federal Law

Plain Language Act of 2010

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Plain Language Gov. Agencies

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Plain Language Training

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Contact

About Us

Thank you!

Appendix A

FULL QUALITATIVE CONTENT AUDIT

Qualitative Content Evaluation

Category	Description	Rating
Usability	<p>Links are presented within sentences and paragraphs, making skimming a page impossible. By doing this, a user has to read through a sentence to get the context of a link.</p> <p>The paragraph length and sentence structures are good, but sometimes a header/subheader would help the user better understand their location within the website.</p>	2
Knowledge level	<p>The content is written at a level understandable by everyone. Although audiences will be people with a great expertise in literature (e.g. copywriting), the website needs to set itself as an example of good plain language.</p> <p>The reader needs no prior knowledge to understand the content.</p>	4
Findability	<p>Much of the content is difficult to find, hidden under tabs that might not be obvious.</p> <p>The search function does not work at all, revealing no results no matter what is entered in the search box.</p> <p>Links on the right-rail do not match the information architecture of the webpage, possibly sending the user to a different part of the website.</p>	1
Actionability	<p>There are not clear calls to action, and the tabs and the homepage don't give an indication of the information that exists on the website.</p>	3
Audience	<p>The content is relevant in some ways. Some of the content such as "Humor" examples are not relevant to users looking to learn more about Plain Language.</p>	3
Accuracy	<p>Much of the information is out of date. The event displayed on the homepage is for September of 2014 (over 2 years ago).</p> <p>The last revision of the Plain Language Guidelines was in 2011.</p> <p>Many of the links are dead-ends. All links to external sites on the "examples" no longer work.</p>	1

Strategic Content Evaluation

Category	Description	Rating
Business Value	Some of the content contributes to business goals, but much of it is unnecessary for users. Content that does not support the business goals should be cut.	3
Message	The content supports the idea of using plain language through how it is written, but the structure of the content does not convey this message.	4
Brand/voice appropriateness	The voice is sometimes too fun and playful to convey a meaningful message of where plain language is often used: in government organizations (e.g. the subheader “Yes, Virginia, plain language regulations do exist.”)	3