Good News for U.S. Citizens
by Thom Haller

As a Washington, D.C., resident, I often begin my morning reading the Washington Post. Today, I spotted a quote from a disenfranchised citizen. “Government seems disconnected,” the paper reported. “It doesn’t seem to address the people.” Here’s some good news. News about hope and change.

President Signs Plain Writing Act
In late September, the 111th Congress passed the Plain Writing Act of 2010. The purpose of this act is to improve the effectiveness of federal agencies and their accountability to the public by promoting clear communication that we can all understand and use. The President signed this act into law on October 13.

The act does not provide for enforcement, so perhaps we can only hope the government promotes clear communication. But I envision more. I suggest that hope is inherent in how the legislation defines plain writing. It says, “The term plain writing means writing that is clear, concise, well-organized and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience.” I see hope for users of government documents.

Why This Matters to Us
This focus on crafting writing so that it is appropriate to the subject, field and intended audience is central to our work as information architects, content strategists and writers. We consider the material that best meets the needs of our audience. We analyze the language of the field and how different audiences respond to labels. We offer hope for users of government documents who want to understand choices, do what they want to do and get on with the rest of their lives.

What This Means for Citizens
The act creates change because it encourages government writers to think differently about their content and direct information toward their readers. It’s a shift – a major shift.

In my 15 years of teaching government writers how to shape content, I am always delighted by the “aha” moment – that shift when writers recognize the “someone” they are writing for.

“I get it,” they say to me. “The doctor really won’t want to sit and read the fraud manual from front to back. I’ll tell you what I understand now,” they tell me. “I now envision someone wanting to get a job done. I now see my job as helping them.”

Helping others – that’s the work we do. With the Plain Writing Act of 2010, government writers now have a legally recommended structure for addressing citizens and asking, “How can I help you see connections?” We have a vehicle for creating change.