

The Problem With 'Plain Meaning'

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I was at the beach recently and passed a sign that read "Swimmers Only Between Flags." Being a lawyer, I couldn't simply nod knowingly at the sign and keep walking. Instead, I thought, "Well, that is ambiguous." Did it mean that swimmers were only allowed between the flags and not outside them or that only swimmers were allowed between the flags (and not, for example, surfers or boogie boarders)? I mentioned it to my wife, who told me to make sure I put sunscreen on the kids. But, the sign stuck with me that day, and it came up again when I read the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision in *Abramski v. United States*, a decision that involved competing interpretations of the "plain meaning" of a statute regulating the purchase of guns.