

## Foreword by Martin Cutts of Plain Language Commission to the seventh edition of the *Good Word Guide* (ed. Martin Manser), published by Bloomsbury (2011)

Miscommunication is the spice of history. James Hutton, the great eighteenth-century geologist, discovered that the Earth must be many millions of years old instead of originating in 4004BC as biblical scholars insisted; but his writings were so obscure most readers didn't get the point. In the nineteenth century the disastrous Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War occurred mainly because vague and confusing written orders became garbled even further as they rose up the chain of command. And in the twentieth century the politician and linguist Enoch Powell confessed that he'd not wed his sweetheart fifty years before, because she'd misunderstood his high-flown marriage proposal; so the pair drifted apart and met other people instead.

There's a battle between those who think that the essence of clear communication – which is putting the right words in the right places and punctuating sentences properly – is important, and those who couldn't care less. The *Good Word Guide* is right to be in the first camp. Being loose and creative with meaning and punctuation is fine for some purposes – in songwriting, for example – but when it comes to most professional tasks, standard English is still the best tool to suit the largest audience. Even academics who take the 'anything goes' line tend to use standard English in their own writing.

Too few professionals in business and government bother to check their writing before sending it to their readers. Here, for example, is a sales email to thousands of companies from a British firm:

**'Rather than spending £35,000 twittering, perhaps Lincolnshire should focused on sorting out the complaine, quality and finctionality of thier own site as it was the greatest faller, dropping 254 places, scoring 3.77.'**

English is full of words that sound similar but have different meanings. This email confuses 'ensured' with 'assured' and 'weather' with 'whether', as well as spelling several words wrongly. There's also the strange use of 'yourself' to mean 'you':

**'I have spoken to the branch and they have ensured me they will get the paint to yourself this week. I have made a note to clall them on wedensday to check weather this has been done yet or not. I hope this is okay but if you have any problblems come back to me.'**

One error that's rare in newspapers and books is common on the web, perhaps because it's often left uncorrected in schools and universities. This is to mark a sentence boundary with a comma instead of a full stop or semicolon. In this example, bullet points mark the places where extra full stops or semicolons should be:

**'Thanks for all of this, • I am happy with all the points you have made • they make perfect sense. You need a purchase order from 1 May • at the moment you can just submit an invoice for payment.'**

Even the secretarial staff at 10 Downing Street have caught this bug. They responded to an artist's letter in the 1990s about Humphrey (the resident cat) by getting most of the punctuation wrong – all the commas should have been full stops or semicolons:

**'Thank you for your recent letter addressed to the Prime Minister, I have been asked to reply. Your portfolio of pen portraits was very impressive, however we already have a portrait of Humphrey hanging on the walls of the Cabinet Office. An artist sent it in two years ago, she copied his likeness from press photographs.'**

Of course, an interest in words too often declines into obsessive pedantry in which old rules and conventions are observed and prescribed long after any reason for them has gone. One of the strengths of English is its willingness to embrace change – new words emerge, new usages thrive, new norms are established. So linguistic chafing is inevitable as the old gives way to the new. But if we lose the distinction between full stops and commas, people will often misread the text and meaning will become unsure.

The *Good Word Guide* is a rare stock of riches for writers and speakers, and will help sticklers to decide at what precise point to pin their flag. It could help people like the soccer manager who said he was ‘under no disillusion’ about his team’s plight near the relegation zone; the cricket commentator who always says ‘risqué’ when he means ‘risky’; and the politician who informed a Paris press conference that the French president had been ‘prevaricating’ – accurately translated into French as ‘lying’ – when merely ‘procrastinating’ was meant. The book could even help all those radio and TV reporters who misuse ‘refute’ to mean ‘deny’ – which matters, because they are helping to extinguish the word’s special meaning, ‘to disprove’.

Whatever you write, the book will help you do it correctly and precisely. It may also help you be clear for your intended audience, which is the goal of ‘plain language’ writing and editing. Plain language can be described as: ‘The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the intended meaning at first reading.’

This reference to ‘essential information’ means that businesses like ours, Plain Language Commission, are far less concerned about novels, poetry and journalism – whose appeal will live or die by market forces – than the clarity of government, legal, medical and business English in web and print documents meant for the public. For those, we recommend mainly familiar words (but with technical terms such as ‘endometriosis’ and ‘vasovagal syncope’ explained where necessary) and an average sentence length of 15–20 words. If the reading-age level can be kept to 12–14 years (US grade 7–9), that will often help.

Lack of clarity can endanger lives. At the inquest into the July 2005 terrorist attacks in London, the assistant deputy coroner Lady Justice Hallett complained of the emergency services’ ‘ludicrous use of English’ that had caused delay and confusion. She said job titles were so obscure that, ‘When it comes to managing incidents, people don’t understand what the other person is.’ She criticized the kind of management jargon that called a portable incident room a ‘conference demountable unit from a management centre’.

There’s still too much inflated writing around, and regrettably schools and universities often encourage it as a mark of education. Only graduates write things like this:

**‘The fish exhibited a 100 percent mortality response.’ (In other words, ‘All the fish died.’)**

**‘The physical condition of a property is the fundamental determinant of its quality.’ (In other words, ‘A property’s quality depends mainly on its condition.’)**

**‘Ironically, the expansion of virtual networks have [sic] appeared to render some aspects of social life increasingly anachronistic, so much so that people find ways to reconnect in real-time and real-pace [sic].’ (In other words, ‘Facebook is too faceless: it’s good to have a coffee and chat for a change.’)**

And it takes many years of learning to produce swampy officialese like this, from a public body in Northern Ireland:

**'To the contrary the Commission envisages that in documenting the case for filling any particular posts employers will be required to demonstrate that their actions in avoiding redundancies are justifiable having considered the relevant data and statistical analysis of options under consideration to demonstrate that the decisions they are adopting are a proportionate means of achieving the aim of filling a vacancy and avoiding a redundancy.'**

Job descriptions often belie an organisation's public statements about the value of clear communications. An advert for a 'reputation manager' at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said the role required:

**'Maintenance and development of the UK narrative around FCO and its value proposition, using insights from research and evaluation as well as knowledge of the evolving FCO strategy to inform resonant messaging.'**

While the job summary for a £75,000-a-year 'head of culture and performance' at the Care Quality Commission implied a working life fraught with jargon and waffle:

**'To achieve in this area the successful candidate will work closely with the directors to ensure that a significant shift in culture is sustained and directly impacts on the organisations [sic] performance. They will embrace initiatives to shape the organisations [sic] success by means of focused leadership, empowerment and values and ensure that key messages are communicated to promote reputation and culture. Other responsibilities will include talent management, performance management, development of a dashboard of human capital metrics and a detailed strategy for employee branding.'**

Puncturing inflated writing by using plain words and short sentences is not, as some may think, dumbing down, but clearing up; and it's good and worthwhile work that will be helped by this book. As Lord Denning, famed for his lucid legal judgements, once put it: 'It is better to be clear and brief than to go drivelling on.'

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