

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 1, January 2007

We've made a (rather belated) New Year's resolution. We'll be sending you a monthly bulletin with snippets from the UK and beyond about clear writing. Some of them will show why clarity is important for organizations, others will be more light-hearted, and a few will be both.

We'll also give you news about us, and remind you how we can help you and your organization to communicate even better.

Do let us know what you think. We'll be pleased to hear your views, examples, and ideas for future stories. Email us at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Eh, they don't 'alf talk funny up north

It takes a peculiar kind of heroism to stand up in a meeting and say a report is 'incomprehensible to any normal person'. But that's what Cllr Alan Wilkinson of Barnard Castle did when his local parish council was discussing Teesdale District Council's 'sustainability appraisal scoping report for the local development framework core strategy'. Cllr Wilkinson pointed out that its reference to 'involuntary exclusion from the world of work' meant nothing more than 'unemployment'.

Cllr Wilkinson, a retired schoolteacher, said: 'Nobody talks like this; nobody reads books written like this. Frankly it's a turn-off, and it's not surprising that we're having trouble attracting new members.'

Cllr David Wright agreed that the problem was widespread: 'It simply isn't plain English, and if nobody tells them [Teesdale Council], then they will keep on publishing reports like this.'

But Cllr Newton Wood, who sits on both councils, stoutly defended the authors: 'This is just the way council reports are written, and if you want to be a councillor then you need to understand that. If you go to France, they speak French. Here in the council, we speak like this.'

[Source: Teesdale Mercury, 23 November 2006
<http://www.teesdalemercury.co.uk/teesdale-news/story,1182.html>]

We now offer distance-learning courses

Our three distance-learning courses guide you through some of the most important aspects of writing at work, from using plain English to creating good, well-punctuated business letters:

- Course 1: Be Clear, Be Brief, Be Human
- Course 2: Clearer Letters and Emails
- Course 3: Perfect Punctuation

Written by published authors, these are detailed, high-quality courses that require serious study but are fun to do. For more details and to download a

sample, go to www.clearest.co.uk (click on 'E-shop').

Courses 2 and 3 have optional modules giving tutor support. A copy of courses 1-3 is available free to all corporate members when they join or renew their membership.

Managers, get your ducks in a row

A YouGov poll showed that workers have a low opinion of colleagues who use management jargon. Examples include 'think outside the box', 'the helicopter view' and 'get our ducks in a row'. Four in ten (41%) of those surveyed thought jargon betrays a lack of confidence and almost one in five (18%) thought people who use it are untrustworthy or trying to cover something up. Over a third (39%) said jargon causes mistrust in the workplace and makes people feel inadequate. Yet 42% of senior managers surveyed thought jargon is harmless.

Jargon can be a useful shorthand between people who understand it, but it's easy to forget to remove or explain it when writing for those who don't. That's one reason for using an objective editor to review your document.

[Source: Investors in People press release, 6 November 2006:
<http://www.investorsinpeople.co.uk/IIP/Web/In+the+Press/default.htm>]

We offer editing, accreditation and training

Don't forget – as if you would – we're still here to help with all your editing and plain-language training. The number of documents gaining Clear English Standard accreditation has now breasted the 11,500 mark and last year we delivered more than 200 one-day courses.

The Information Commissioner's Office has recently become a corporate member and we've run a series of pilot writing-skills courses for the office. Its chief, Richard Thomas, is renowned in the plain-language field for his booklet 'Plain Language for Lawyers', written when he was legal officer of the National Consumer Council in the 1980s. Mr Thomas also championed plain legal language during his time with international law firm Clifford Chance.

Extraordinary language rendition leaves listeners in a spin

Most jargonauts don't realize their audience won't understand what they write or say. But a few deliberately want to soften or cloak the truth with euphemisms – sometimes called 'doublespeak'. Politicians are often seen as the chief culprits.

The US government has recently been criticized for such phrases as 'an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity' (that's 'hunger' to the rest of us), 'self-injurious behaviour incidents' (suicide), 'imperative security detainee' (captive) and 'debriefing' (interrogation). Its 'extraordinary rendition of enemy combatants' is also a pretty extraordinary phrase.

In the UK, the government has sought to alter perceptions of public spending by calling it 'investment'. On our garage forecourts, cars are no longer secondhand but 'pre-owned', while low-cost homes are called 'affordable housing'. Is this kind of euphemism benign or sinister? Maybe it's what we all have to do from time to time in the face of unpleasant reality.

[Source: American-Statesman, 3 December 2006:

<http://www.statesman.com/insight/content/editorial/stories/insight/12/3/3doublespeak.html>]

Take off, listen up, crash out

As the flight jettied out of Heathrow, its British Airways pilot announced he would like to 'assure passengers of the integrity of BA's operation'. While the other travellers dropped off to sleep under this comforting blanket of jargon, our language-obsessed associate – a nervous flyer at the best of times – wondered what was going so badly wrong in the cockpit that the pilot couldn't just say: 'We'll be making sure you all stay safe.'

Do you have any examples of poor or unclear English, serious or amusing? If so, do let us know and tell us if we may use them in future newsletters. Email pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Some limited business news

On 6 December we became a limited company, [clearest.co.uk](http://www.clearest.co.uk) Ltd, which is also part of our website address (www.clearest.co.uk). Our trading name remains Plain Language Commission and nothing else has changed.

Rolling the credits

Pikestaff is written by Sarah Carr and edited by Martin Cutts.