

# Pikestaff

## Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 11, December 2007

### Christmas competition: let's talk turkey

It's the giving time of year, so we're giving you a challenge and – for the best entry – a book prize. We're asking you to rewrite a short seasonal text – a notice spotted in Tesco:

#### *Seasonal Gift Refund Policy Amendment*

Any goods purchased as gifts from the 1st of November until 24th December 2007 can be returned up until the 31st January. Our policy of the 28 days period will be re-applied on all goods purchased after 24th December 2007. Your statutory rights are not affected

To enter, rewrite this in clear English (resolving any ambiguities by inspired guesswork) and email the result to [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk), with 'Tesco' in the subject line. Your prize will be a copy of Martin Manser's *Good Word Guide* (in bookshops at £12.99). We'll announce the winner in *Pikestaff 12*.

### Getting fruity in the vegetable aisle

Talking of Tesco, *the Independent* of 7 October notes that the retail giant is 'learning about the extent to which Britain and America are, as Oscar Wilde observed, divided by a common language'. Now that Tesco has opened its first stores in the US, it's having to learn a new vocabulary. For when American supermarket workers talk about 'shagging' in the new stores (aptly called 'fresh & easy'), it's not 'some untoward act in the vegetable aisle' – just pushing a line of shopping trolleys from one part of the store to another.

### Kicking a footie man when he's down

Following *Private Eye's* piece exposing the Plain English Awards scandal (see <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/PlainEnglishAwardsScandal.pdf>), we wrote to the comedian Lenny Henry, urging him to withdraw from presenting this year's awards. But *Tis* wasn't successful, and he went ahead with the ghastly charade. Steve McClaren, recently sacked as England manager, took most of the sparse media coverage, bagging this year's Foot in Mouth award. Which must have troubled him deeply as he sunned himself in some Caribbean hideaway with a multi-million payout from the (very sweet) FA. He'd allegedly said of a Manchester United player: 'He is inexperienced, but he's experienced in terms of what he's been through.' Not the most lucid statement ever, but he probably just meant: 'Wayne Rooney is still very young but he's played in a lot of big soccer matches.'

Nobody ever employed McClaren for his silky syntax or versatile vocab, so in this case it seems unfair to condemn a single sentence out of context. Even people who specialise in clear writing accept that coherent speaking is much harder, especially under pressure. We wonder which is worse: to misplace a few words in an interview, or to run a 'competition' in which you somehow fail to disclose that so many of the 'winners' have been your own customers.

It's a tough one.

## Our customers are **all winners!**

Congratulations to all our customers whose hard work has been recognized during 2007. Following some surreptitious surfing by *Pikestaff's* marketing correspondent, we can reveal that no fewer than 29 of our customers have won awards or commendations in 2007. Here we list just a few examples of why our customers are celebrating this year. We hope to publish a full list, and more details, on our website in the new year.

- The Audit Commission praised Catalyst Communities Housing Association Ltd, part of the Catalyst Housing Group, commenting that 'residents can easily see what they can expect, from the bright well presented literature and the clearly signposted website'.
- In the Contact Centre Association Excellence awards, the Charity Commission was shortlisted for Best Customer Focus in Sector: Public Sector.
- Hampshire County Council became the first county council in England to receive a Housing Performance Award from the Audit Commission for its Supporting People programme.
- The Housing Corporation recognized Harvest Housing Group as an organization with a strong neighbourhood focus, awarding it the maximum 4 green lights.
- Health Scotland's website – <http://www.healthscotland.com/> – received the Best Compliant/Accessible Website award at the inaugural Drum Awards for Digital Industries.
- Lancashire County Council's What Now? email service scooped the prize in the Imaginative Use of Technology category of the BT/Telephone Helpline Association awards. Provided by the council's Youth and Community Service, the email service offers no-nonsense essential information for young people.
- Reuters' Africa website – <http://africa.reuters.com/> – won the best website award at the Diageo Africa Business Reporting awards 2007.
- The Audit Commission judged that Russet Homes' housing management services are good, with information for residents being a positive feature.

## Make up your own mind

That's the name of the McDonald's website 'set up for you to find out anything you would like to know about McDonald's food, business, people and practices'. The site links to a petition, launched earlier this year, to change the dictionary definition of 'McJob'. Through this, McDonald's is urging 'the UK's dictionary houses to change the definition of McJob to better reflect the reality of service sector jobs'. The petition reads: 'McJob is currently defined in the dictionary as "an unstimulating, low-paid job with few prospects, esp. one created by the expansion of the service sector." This definition is out of date, out of touch with reality and most importantly is insulting to those hard-working, talented and committed people who serve the public every day in the UK.'

We can see their point, but we've made up our own mind. Dictionaries describe – not prescribe – usage (though many do give guidance on what's currently 'correct'). Language evolves, and usually defies attempts, however well meant, to control it. As *Wikipedia* comments, 'dropping the entry for "McJob" would be a precedent for bowdlerising definitions of other derogatory terms'.

Indeed, McDonald's isn't the first interest group to challenge dictionaries on

unflattering slang. Last year, the Potato Council complained that the definition of 'couch potato' suggested the carbohydrate was unduly calorific, and so reduced sales. The Council campaigned for the term to be replaced by 'couch slouch', and even held protests outside the head office of dictionary publisher Oxford University Press – but got nowhere.

First used in the United States in the 1980s, the word 'McJob' was popularized by Douglas Coupland's 1991 book *Generation X*. It appeared in the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in March 2001. *Wikipedia* includes a whole entry dedicated to 'McWords' (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McWords>), where it lists a range of McVocab for your delectation. We're lovin' it.

[Sources: *Warrington Midweek*, 20 November 2007; *TIME*, 5 June 2007; BBC News, 23 May 2007: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6683365.stm>; and McDonald's websites: <http://www.makeupyourownmind.co.uk> and <http://www.changethedefinition.com/>]

### **Tip of the month: if you want your writing to be simply the best – better than all the rest – then test!**

This tip'll help you Turner few heads – or a new leaf – in 2008.

In *Pikestaff 9*, our tip of the month explained how to use readability statistics to check the clarity of your writing. As we pointed out, these are useful but limited. If you've the time and the money (though it needn't cost much), there's nothing like testing your document on some members of its intended audience to find out how clear it really is. And research has shown that such testing doesn't need to be elaborate or to involve quantitative data that's statistically watertight. People who aren't specifically trained in research methods can test a document effectively using basic qualitative methods and common sense. Here we give you a seasonally significant number of hints on doing this.

1. Make the most of any existing groups of typical readers, for example user groups or customer panels.
2. Use family and friends if you like, but ask yourself whether they're really representative of the target audience, and whether they'll feel able to be honest about your writing.
3. Make sure people aren't out of pocket for taking part – pay a small fee or at least their expenses.
4. Use interviews, focus groups or questionnaires to find out how easy the text is to understand, how fast it is to read, and how much people like it.
5. Be specific about what you ask people to do, and how much influence they really have. Otherwise, especially if your message is an unpopular one, people may debate this rather than the clarity of the text.
6. Dissuade people from being pernicky about small points of style that don't affect how easily they understand the text.
7. Make sure people know you're testing the text, not them. Tell them your organization is responsible for how easy or hard it is to understand.
8. Ask people to point out the difficulties they think others may have in understanding the text.
9. Give people a chance to tell you any problems privately, for example by writing them down.
10. Remember to thank people, perhaps acknowledge their contribution in the document (if they would like you to), and give them feedback on how their involvement helped to improve the document.
11. Make sure you act on the results of testing. As we reported in last

month's *Pikestaff*, the Scottish Elections Review found a study of the new ballot paper had been ignored. Since this study found that 4% of voters – a figure identical to the level of spoilt papers – were too confused to correctly use the ballot paper, this problem could have been averted by using the results of testing.

12. If you can't act on people's suggestions, make sure you have a good reason, and explain this.

[Source of research evidence: E Kempson and N Moore, *Designing Public Documents: a review of research*, Policy Studies Institute, 1994]

## Linguistic links: habeas corpus

This month, we're recommending the British National Corpus (BNC) website at <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>. You may remember we mentioned it when talking about *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (by Pam Peters), which uses it.

A corpus is a collection of samples of written and spoken language. The samples in the BNC comprise 100 million words from a range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century. The written part of the BNC (90%) includes, for example, extracts from regional and national newspapers, specialist periodicals for all ages and interests, academic books and popular fiction, published and unpublished letters and memos, and school and university essays. The spoken part (10%) includes unscripted informal conversation, recorded by volunteers of different ages, regions and social classes, and spoken language collected in all kinds of different contexts, from formal business or government meetings to radio shows and phone-ins.

On the home page, there's a search box. Type in the word or phrase you're interested in, and you'll get a list of up to 50 randomly selected instances headed by a note of the total frequency of the word or phrase. This is really useful for:

- quickly and easily seeing if a word occurs in the BNC
- checking the spelling of a word
- comparing different variants to see which is more frequent.

Since one of the plain-English guidelines is to use familiar words and phrases, this is a great way of deciding which word or phrase would be better to use in your document.

Have you found any useful language-related websites? If so, do share them: email [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

## Free-range gobbledegook

### Seasonal bird that's hard to swallow

Did you know that gobbledegook (also spelt 'gobbledygook') is a slang term that echoes the sound of a turkeycock? Its use to mean obscure writing was first promoted by Maury Maverick, a Texan congressman, in 1944, but, according to *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, the word is probably older. Lest we put you off your bread sauce, though, we'll let a more salacious meaning rear its ugly head in private only.

### For patient patients only

We've spotted a prime example of gobbledegook this month – in a flyer for a conference, Patient Involvement and Empowerment. It contains this

stupendous 96-word sentence:

With keynote opening addresses from Neil Betteridge, National Patient and Public Champion for the 18 Weeks Delivery Programme and Chief Executive of Arthritis Care on the national developments in patient and public involvement, and Elaine Hanzak on her personal journey towards finding meaning and empowerment, the conference explores how organisations are overcoming common challenges to improve patient engagement including, empowering patients to develop good ideas for service improvement, enabling patients to control their pathway, supporting patients with education and training to build capacity for involvement, working openly and collaboratively, and involving those who are usually excluded.

What a pity Mr Betteridge's job title is a concise 17 words: another 4 and they could have hit the 100 mark with this whopper.

### **Twelve lords a-drivelling**

In *Pikestaff 10*, we commented on Parliament's silly language. Rosemary Behan has now spoken out against MP-speak in *The Times*: 'Please can we stop "moving forward" and "actively reaching out"? Can we, instead, "resolve to build a consensus" on one thing that really matters? Can we start speaking English?'

Perhaps the 3rd Baron Lord Selston can shed some light on the problem. The *Daily Mail* of 5 December reports that in the House of Lords he announced that, through deep research, he had put his fellow peers into 4 categories: 'Bought their way in, wormed their way in, screwed their way in – and "How did they get in?"

There may also be a few – just a few – who waffled their way in.

### **Promoting happy holidays for all our readers**

Many companies send glossy cards and branded merchandise to celebrate Christmas and promote themselves. A recent survey by Source-e, a company selling such stuff, showed that respondents had all kinds of promotional items on their desks, ranging from the ordinary to the bizarre. Traditional items included pens, calendars, Post-It notes, calculators and diaries, while more unusual items were furry sheep, whales and plastic ducks, the Connect 4 game, sweets, lip balm and nail files.

This year, instead of sending cards to our customers, we'll be making an extra donation to support the education of children in Peru and India through Plan International.

Happy holidays to all our readers; *Pikestaff* will be back next year.

### **Contribute**

Have you recently come across any rampant rhubarb or troublesome tripe? If so, we'd love to hear from you. Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

### **Back issues**

You can see back issues of *Pikestaff* on our website (click on 'Newsletter').

## Tell a friend

If you think a friend or colleague would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward it to them.

## Spread the word

We're happy for you to use any of our articles to promote plain language, provided you acknowledge *Pikestaff* as the source.

## Rolling the credits

*Pikestaff* is written by Sarah Carr and edited by Martin Cutts.  
Published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd).  
[mail@clearest.co.uk](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk) Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177

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