

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 12, January 2008

My love is like a dead dead doze

Yes, it's official: romantic readers preparing for Valentine's day, make your offers in officialese, the new language of love.

Alan Greenspan, American economist and former Federal Reserve chairman, is renowned for his 'indecipherable, Delphic dialect known as "Fed-speak"'. At one hearing, he said: 'Modest pre-emptive actions can obviate the need of more drastic actions at a later date, and that could destabilize the economy.' Reportedly pleased when 2 newspapers interpreted this in opposing ways, he admitted in a recent interview that when he was at the Fed: 'I would engage in some form of syntax destruction, which sounded as though I were...answering the question, but, in fact, had not.'

But his linguistic style hasn't obviated success in his love life. After his first date (perhaps to see *Helvetica*, a full-length film about a font?) with Andrea Mitchell, a TV journalist 20 years his junior, he asked: 'Would you like to come up and read an essay I've written on the Sherman Anti-Trust Act?' Unable to resist, Mitchell later received an offer of marriage – made, she reports, in Fed-speak. Was he proposing? Mitchell recalls, 'I couldn't figure it out!'

Pikestaff's author spots a link with the recently reported results in the 'first rigorous study into female verbosity', which showed that, contrary to popular belief, men speak more words on average a day (16,214) than women (15,669). [And the quality, think about the quality – Ed.]

Mitchell didn't disclose the words Greenspan used: but if you'd like to take a guess, we'll publish the best in next month's *Pikestaff*. Email us at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk, with 'Fed-speak' in the subject line. We'll send the winner a copy of Martin Manser's *Good Word Guide* (in bookshops at £12.99).

[Sources: CBS News, 16 September 2007: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/09/13/60minutes/main3257567_page5.shtml; *The Week*, 21 July and 22 September 2007; and <http://www.helveticafilm.com/about.html>]

News from Plain Language Commission

Talking turkey: lawyer wins plain-writing contest (shock)

Our thanks to the 16 plucky readers who sent entries for our Christmas competition. We asked you to rewrite this notice spotted in Tesco, including the heading, as clearly as possible.

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

Our winner is a words wizard from Oz: Clive Wilson, of Corrs Chambers Westgarth, a law firm in Melbourne, Australia, who rewrote the text as follows:

A change to our Refund Policy

We usually give you 28 days after purchase to return goods. But if you need to return a gift bought between 1st November 2007 and 24th December 2007, you can return it up to the end of January 2008.

If you need to return goods bought after 24th December, the usual 28-day period applies.

None of this affects any rights you may have under the law.

Merry Christmas!

Clive manages a team that's developing the firm's precedent documents, as well as creating house-style and drafting guides. He says: 'I've been interested in writing and language for many years, and work to develop documents that are legally effective, well-presented and comprehensible.'

We're writing an article for our website that examines the original text and analyses how Clive's version and others tackled it. As a taster, we look at one aspect in our tip of the month, below.

Producing effective information for patients

This annual conference of the Patient Information Forum (PiF) takes place in Manchester on 11 March 2008. The conference aims to answer these questions:

- What makes information effective?
- Why do patients need information?
- What kind of information do they need?
- Who should be providing information?
- In what formats can, and should, information be delivered?
- What have we already learned about giving information?
- Who is responsible for giving information?
- How do we know information is accurate?

Our research director, Martin Cutts, will be presenting one of the 6 masterclasses, entitled 'Producing health information: achieving clarity through the written word'. You can read more, see the full programme and register online at <http://www.pifonline.org.uk/?o=2841>.

Avoid abbreviations, MDU advises MDs, RNs and AHPs

The Medical Defence Union (MDU) has warned doctors that using abbreviations in medical notes can put patients' lives at risk – because they can be misread or have more than one meaning.

A recent US study of 30,000 medication errors, some fatal, showed 5% were linked to abbreviations in notes. For example, a 62-year-old patient on haemodialysis (filtering the blood to remove waste products) was treated for a virus with the drug acyclovir. The order for acyclovir was written as 'acyclovir with HD', meaning haemodialysis (because acyclovir should be given only once a day to patients with kidney problems). But the order was misread as 'TID' (*ter in die* – Latin for '3 times a day') and the patient died.

Meanwhile, a UK audit by Birmingham Heartlands Hospital found cases where abbreviations had caused confusion because they had more than one meaning. For example, 'TOF' can mean 'tetralogy of Fallot' (a congenital

heart defect) or 'tracheo-oesophageal fistula' (a purposely made hole between the airpipe and food tube) – 2 completely different conditions. When presented with a selection of abbreviations, the study authors found paediatric doctors agreed on the meaning of between 56% and 94%, while other healthcare professionals didn't even understand 37% to 69% of them.

Like other types of jargon, abbreviations can be a useful shorthand between professionals. But, as the MDU advises, it's important to use only those that are well known to your audience and are unambiguous. Did you understand our headline for this article? If not (or if you thought by 'MD' we meant 'managing director'), the point is made: more on this in *Pikestaff's* tip of the month for February.

[Source: BBC News, 6 January 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk:80/1/hi/health/7171453.stm>]

Readers write: unabbreviated breathlessness

Reader Michael Galley emailed with this sentence he spotted in the book *International Law*:

In the discussion of the various sources of law prescribed by the Statute of the International Court of Justice, it might have been noted that there is a distinction between, on the one hand, actual sources of rules, that is those devices capable of instituting new rules such as law-making treaties, customary law and many decisions of the International Court of Justice since they cannot be confined to the category of merely determining or elucidating the law, and on the other hand those practices and devices which afford evidence of the existence of rules, such as juristic writings, many treaty-contracts and some judicial decisions both at the international and municipal level.

Don't try reading aloud this 111-word monster in one go, or you may need to call 112 due to being SOB (short of breath).

Linguistic links: plainer law in Scotland

The author of the big-breath law book may find this month's featured website useful: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/02/17093804/0>. Published by the Scottish Government, the site offers an online booklet, *Plain Language and Legislation*, with chapters on:

- what plain language is
- drafting law in plain language
- what drafters in other countries have done
- plain-language techniques.

Call for transparency to supersede coterminosity verbosity

The Local Government Association (LGA), a cross-party organization representing councils in England, has published a 'non-word' list. Sent to councils across the country, the list comprises 100 words that all public-sector bodies should avoid when telling people about the work they do and the services they provide. Words include 'bottom-up', 'cascading', 'coterminosity', 'empowerment', 'incentivising', 'multidisciplinary' and 'visionary'.

LGA chair Sir Simon Milton said: 'Without explaining what a council does in proper English then local people will fail to understand its relevance to them

or why they should bother to turn out and vote. Unless information is given to people to explain why their council matters then local democracy will be threatened with extinction.'

The LGA emphasizes that the list is 'a bit of fun that gets people thinking about how they use language'. You can read all 100 words at <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=7701430>. If you scroll down, you can read people's comments, and, at the bottom, the LGA's responses. The site also links to the LGA's useful plain-English web resource.

As further evidence of its keenness to communicate clearly, the LGA recently commissioned 3 of our writing-skills courses, and several more are planned. Places are by invitation only, but we'd be pleased to provide courses to local authorities, who qualify for a special rate – take a look at our website for more information: <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=26>.

[Source: LGA news release: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=41517>]

Customers praise on-site courses

Ensuring good written communication isn't just the job of the communications department in any organization. Everyone who sends emails, produces reports, writes letters or puts up health-and-safety notices plays a part in making sure readers understand their message.

It's easy to fall into the habit of using shortcuts like jargon and acronyms with colleagues; these can then invade writing for other readers who may not understand the terms. It's even easier to use over-formal language or officialese, particularly when trying to convey authority.

That's why many organizations that care about good communication ask us to design training to help their employees write clearly and confidently all the time. Here's what a couple of them said about our courses.

'Thought you would like to know that everyone on this course came back with very positive feedback; they all thoroughly enjoyed the day and took a lot from it. They were also complimentary of the trainer (you might want to pass this on). It is quite unusual for all delegates to be unanimous in their praise - all credit to the trainer.'

Diane Lee, Head of Conference and Office Services, Financial Services Authority

'The course was very successful – largely thanks to Ruth's excellent presentation skills. We've now included it in our training programme for Marketing and Customer Service staff. Everyone can see the benefits and we're all very keen to practise what we've learnt.'

Lauren Kinsey, Marketing Communications Consultant, Norwich Union Life

Tip of the month: follow due PROCESS to clarify your writing

Writing clearly isn't just about using clear language; other factors are important too. We reflect this in our PROCESS METHOD – a mnemonic (memory aid) for the initials of the 5 steps: purpose, content, structure, style, and revision of everything.

Our in-house and distance-learning courses train participants in this method – and our forthcoming article on the Tesco competition will use this as its structure too. In this month's tip, we look at one aspect of PROCESS: the *content* of your writing.

Our advice

Content means what you have to say: your messages and ideas. Once you've established the purpose of a document – including thinking about what the recipient already knows, needs and wants to know, and expects to get from the document – you can plan the content accordingly. It can be useful to ask yourself these questions:

- Are your points accurate?
- Are they relevant?
- Are they as complete as they can be without overkill?
- Are they defensible – that is, do they accord with your policy and the law?
- Will the readers know what to do next?

Example

We spotted 2 particular content weaknesses in the original Tesco notice:

- It doesn't say whether you need a receipt to return the 'goods purchased as gifts'. Since receivers (as well as buyers) of gifts could return them, they may not have a receipt (even buyers could have lost it). Based on usual shop practice, we expect that in this case you could still return the goods, but only for an exchange not a refund.
- It doesn't exclude any type of products. So you could buy a bag of carrots on 1 November, wait for it to fester, then return it on 31 January (along with any other Tesco food that'd gone mouldy in your fridge). You'd say you didn't like these gifts you'd been given for Christmas, and please could you have your money back – or at least some nice fresh groceries to replace them. [Try this at your local Tesco – Ed.]

One of the skills of rewriting and editing is not to change the basic meaning in the text. If something seems to be missing, or to be illogical, our editors won't add to or change the facts without being absolutely sure – which usually means checking with the customer. We'll normally do this by adding a comment about our concern. Several of the competition entries did change the facts, for example almost half specified that the policy applied to buyers or receivers (not both), and another added information about having a receipt.

Travellers' tales

Good nudes: your clothes are now ready for take-off

Pikestaff reader Martin Baker emailed to say: 'A couple of weeks ago on the way home on a 'one' train, an utterly confusing name for a train company I would add (eg, "the next train to arrive at platform one is the twelve twenty-one one service"), we were advised to "take off all of our personal items when leaving the train". I did think it was a bit cold to be getting naked on the station platform though, so didn't oblige.'

First Great Eastern changed its relatively clear ordinal number to the confusing cardinal 'one' when it merged with 3 other train companies. To avoid confusion (not helped by its trendy spelling in all-lower case) – and to save itself from sounding like Prince Charles – the company itself has resorted to using inverted commas when writing its name. It states on its website: "'one' is the train operator providing services to London Liverpool Street and the East of England..." "one" is committed to bringing a fresh

approach to rail services for the region.' One is not impressed.

Training in tautology

Pikestaff's travel correspondent recently spotted this notice at her local train station: 'Before alighting, customers should take care to ensure that the station platform is immediately adjacent.' So beware any distantly faraway platforms: you could experience an abruptly sudden downward descent, consequently leading to painful injury.

Form in bad shape

Travelling this time by air, our correspondent was disturbed to find herself at a different airport from her luggage. Imagine her peace of mind on being asked to complete a rather complicated Property Irregularity Report (that's 'PIR' to those in the know – as she was after reading it several times in the letter she was given). It's always good to find out whether your luggage is uneven in shape – perhaps that's why it got stuck somewhere in the system.

Clearly in a different universe

The *NewScientist* of 27 October noted: 'The Service Availability section of the UK Driving Standards Agency website tells us: "You can normally book a theory test online 24 hours a day, every day" and continues "Outside these hours you may make a 'pending booking'.'" Then on 15 December the magazine wryly observed that 'at the bottom of the page containing this strange statement are the words: "The text on this page has been approved by the Plain English Campaign for clarity.'"

Catching some zeds

We'd like to remind readers who may have been in hibernation last February that we use 'z' rather than 's' in words like 'organization' because 'z' is the older English form. We use it for all words with a Greek *zeta* root, like the Oxford dictionaries do. If you prefer the 's', it'll never be wrong except in 'capsize'. And of course we'll respect your preference when we edit your documents.

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.

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

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