

Pikestaff 13

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This asterisqué bleeping makes readers swear

RL Trask, in *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation* (1997), writes: 'The asterisk is occasionally used to mark footnotes...It also has one other rather curious use: it is sometimes used to replace a letter in writing a word which is felt to be too coarse to be written out in full, as in f**k. This is a usage mostly found in newspapers and magazines, in which writers are often careful to avoid offending their very broad readership.'

The practice is sometimes called 'typographical bleeping'. For example, in *The Times* of 17 December, sports columnist Simon Barnes refers to the England soccer manager Capello's 'immunity to bulls***' and, in a separate comment on cricket, writes 'talking b*****ks'. This is in line with the newspaper's style guide: "'Four-letter words" and profanities should be avoided because they upset many readers. However, in direct quotes and where they are essential to the story, style obscenities thus with asterisks; f**, f**ing, c** etc.'

Pikestaff asks: if authors want to use curse words like b*****ks and bulls***, why do they p*****foot around using asterisks? The practice makes us swear – literally, because the reader has to insert the letters that the author is evidently too prudish to pen. Donkey's years ago, Katharine Whitehorn wrote in *The Observer* about a despairing engineer of limited vocabulary who'd declared of a faulty appliance in her house: 'The f**ing f**er's f**ing f**ed!' Except she used his words unexpurgated for their full, glorious effect.

Our approach? Always ask yourself whether the rude words are really necessary – in most business writing, they won't be, so write something else. But if a bit of low Dutch or Anglo Saxon really is *le mot juste*, then use it, without asterisks. It's plainer because it doesn't compel the reader to guess what you mean: the 4-letter c-word in *The Times*' style guide is ambiguous (it could represent at least 3 different words).

The Guardian, which owns *The Observer*, agrees with us, its style guide advising:

- First, remember the reader, and respect demands that we should not casually use words that are likely to offend.
- Second, use such words only when absolutely necessary to the facts of a piece, or to portray a character in an article; there is almost never a case in which we need to use a swearword outside direct quotes.
- Third, the stronger the swearword, the harder we ought to think about using it.
- Finally, never use asterisks, which are just a copout, or as Charlotte Brontë elegantly put it: 'The practice of hinting by single letters those expletives with which profane and violent people are wont to garnish their discourse, strikes me as a proceeding which, however well meant, is weak and futile. I cannot tell what good it does – what feeling it spares – what horror it conceals.'

* This is an example of an asterisk marking a footnote. Trask's book was published by Penguin in 1997. We recommend it to our customers, but we don't recommend footnotes: they're best avoided if you can, as it's distracting for the reader to have to flit around in the document.

[Sources:

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/tools_and_services/specials/style_guide/article986733.ece; and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide/page/0,,184832,00.html>]

What a difference an edit makes

To your customers, your letters and emails are some of the most important documents they get. If they are well expressed, they give a favourable impression of your organization. But if they are poor – with grammatical errors, jargon, weak punctuation and misspellings – they can damage your reputation. So whether your team is dealing with complaints, enquiries or legal matters, its letters and emails need to be consistently good.

We recently edited 41 standard letters for Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH), a corporate member of ours. Here we interview Vicki Head from the organization's corporate communications team.

Pikestaff You are the largest registered social landlord in Wirral, embarking on an ambitious £150m programme to improve all your homes to the government's decent homes standard by 2010. With over 13,000 homes, that's an enormous task. How important is it to you to have an open dialogue with your residents, and for you and they to fully understand what the other is saying?

WPH We are committed to communicating effectively with our customers, and 1 of our 7 values is to involve tenants in a clear, open and accessible way. One way of achieving this is to ensure the information we give our customers is clear, easy to understand and free of housing jargon. It is only by communicating effectively that we can build a successful partnership with our customers.

Pikestaff As a corporate member of Plain Language Commission, you are obviously committed to ensuring that the written language you use is accessible to all your readers. How do you think this attitude and investment contributes to your success as an organization?

WPH It is essential. If we don't communicate clearly with our customers, we won't be able to provide the service they want. Working in partnership with our customers and getting their views on the service we provide are vital if we want to continue to grow and develop.

Pikestaff You have recently used our LetterCheck service. What prompted you to do that with these letters, and what benefits have you seen as a result of making the changes that our editor recommended?

WPH We wanted to ensure the letters were clear. We did this only recently so we expect to be able to compare the different versions meaningfully in a couple of months [more on this, we hope, in a future *Pikestaff*].

Pikestaff What would you advise other organizations facing the same communication challenges in the next 2 years to do?

WPH Consult your customers to find out how they want you to communicate with them. And make sure the information is clear and easy to understand.

You can read more about our LetterCheck service at <http://www.clearrest.co.uk/?id=16>. This service gives you detailed editing

suggestions on paper or in Word (using 'track changes') on all your standard-form letters. If we don't find any problems, we'll say so and reduce our charges to reflect this. We can also examine a sample of your team's one-off letters, comment on them, and repeat the exercise when needed. This helps to maintain standards and identify difficulties that can be resolved through one-to-one or whole-team coaching. For more information, please email us at mail@clearest.co.uk, or phone 01663 733177.

Episcopal obscurity bedevils Canterbury's tale

Martin Cutts on the row about the archbishop's 'unclarity'

Seldom are British headlines hogged for days by religious figures but the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, achieved this feat for his comments on 7 February that the adoption of certain aspects of *sharia*, the method of law applied in some Islamic states, was 'unavoidable' in Britain. *The Sun*, along with many other papers, wasn't happy: 'What a burka' screamed its headline. Trevor Phillips, head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, called Dr Williams 'muddled and unhelpful'.

Public anger at his remarks, made first in a BBC interview and then in a lecture to about 1,000 people at the Royal Courts of Justice, reportedly 'horrified' the archbishop, who is spiritual head of the Anglican (established) Church. He opened the church's national assembly a few days later with an apology: 'I must, of course, take responsibility for any unclarity in either that text [the lecture] or in the radio interview, and for any misleading choice of words that has helped to cause distress or misunderstanding among the public...'

Any feelings of endearment that may arise towards a man who apologizes for 'unclarity' – a word absent even from the 3,800 pages of the *New Shorter Oxford* – must be tempered by his double use of the weasel word 'any': 'any unclarity'; 'any misleading'. This is equivalent to the formulaic railway announcement: 'We are sorry for the delay and any inconvenience this may cause.'

Yet there might be a lesson here for public figures. The 19th-century school inspector and poet Matthew Arnold put it well: 'Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can.' Dr Williams' 6,000-word lecture obeyed the first half of the rule but not the second. In paragraphs that often run to more than 350 words, his lecture uses terms like 'concretisation', 'systematic abstract universalism', 'coterminous', 'counterintuitive', 'determinations', 'undergirded' and 'actuality of human diversity'. It must have made for hard listening, and thousands of people have downloaded it for some hard reading. It includes obscure statements like '...we might recall that, while the law of the Church of England is the law of the land, its daily operation is in the hands of authorities to whom considerable independence is granted'. Anyone reading that from afar would take it to mean that people in Britain are governed mainly by canon or Christian law.

In 1996, Lord Justice Scott's report on an arms-sale scandal, which ran to 1,806 pages and more than a million words, was widely criticized for lacking a summary of main points. The judge disdained summaries, believing that people should read every word. The result was confusion as to his findings, and unfairness – the Opposition front bench got only 2 hours to read the report before the Commons debate, which doubtless helped the Government of the day to save its skin by a single vote.

So the archbishop would have done well to follow the plain-English principle that if you have a detailed argument to put, you should start by summarizing your main points. Then you are unlikely to be so easily

misrepresented or misunderstood. 'Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, then tell 'em, then tell 'em again.'

At the very least, providing a summary may dissuade others from doing so. Here, for example, is David Aaronovitch's summary of Dr Williams' speech (*The Times*, 12 February):

There are lots of religious people in Britain who look to religious precepts in their solving of domestic and contractual problems, and in directing their behaviour. This is "unavoidable". Some of these solutions are recognised in English and Scottish law, and some of them aren't. Where they aren't, we run the danger that [these] people will both feel and be marginalised.

Not only that, but with a non-hierarchical religion, such as Islam, we risk this marginalised legal process being controlled at a local level by "primitivists" and not by wise authorities: a bit like, say, the bishops of the Church of England. If we handle this right, we could have sensible Sharia courts with legal standing, and if we handle it wrong we could have a lot of bongo-brains exercising real power, but outside the law. And we won't like that.

Before Henry VIII, the Bible was available only in Latin. Scholars like William Tyndale were first strangled and then burnt (just to make sure), with the full approval of Dr Williams' ancient predecessors, for daring to translate it into (relatively) plain English. In his next public statement, the archbishop really ought to give some of Tyndale's writing techniques a modern workout. To this end, we've sent him a complimentary copy of our distance-learning course, 'Be Clear, Be Brief, Be Human', <http://www.clearest.co.uk/index.php?id=27>. We hope the archbishop, who so loves his double negatives, will not dislike it.

[Source: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575>]

Readers write

Zee what we zed

Following our reminder in *Pikestaff 12* about why we use 'z' rather than 's' in words like 'organization', a reader emailed to ask whether its being the older English form is really a good reason to do this. Certainly, it's natural that language evolves over time, and we don't believe in sticking with tradition where there's a more modern and clearer way.

In fact, the 'z' form is more widespread in British English than people may think, with data from the British National Corpus (BNC) showing a ratio of just 3:2 in favour of the 's' spelling. It's also the first form given in many British dictionaries for words deriving from the Greek and Latin suffixes, '-izein' and '-izare', and part of the house style of Oxford University Press. There are phonological and etymological arguments for using the 'z' form, 'z' representing better the sound of the suffix, and correlating better with the Greek and Latin forms of the suffix.

There are some words – like 'surprise' and 'analyse' – that can't be spelt with a 'z'; these derive from French rather than the classical languages. But in the US, some dictionaries now spell some such words with 'z' – so, 'surprize' and 'analyze'. It's rare in British English though, so if you want to follow our style, you need to remember the exceptions. 'Capsize' is the only word that can't be spelt with an 's'.

If all this hasn't made you feel like taking a zizz, you can read more about

the topic in the corpus-based *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (by Pam Peters), pages 298–9. There, the arguments in favour of the 'z' form lead Peters – like us – to conclude that 'the systematic use of **-ize** spellings recommends itself on distributional and phonological grounds'. In our editing work, of course, we follow the customers' house style.

Reader reports they disagree

Another reader balked at our use of 'them' in our regular 'Tell a friend' note: 'If you think a friend or colleague would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward it to them.' She felt that the plural pronoun ('them') didn't agree with the singular noun phrase ('a friend or colleague'). In fact this usage has been established since the 16th century and, more important, makes the statement feel more inclusive and less impersonal than using 'him', or 'him or her'. Many dictionaries, style guides and research studies support its acceptability, leading Pam Peters to conclude: 'The appearance of singular **they/them/their** in many kinds of prose shows its acceptance by English writers generally. It recommends itself as a gender-free solution to the problem of agreement with indefinite pronouns and noun phrases.'

However, in the interests of reader power we're going to assume that you have more than one friend or colleague, so we've altered the controversial sentence in line with a technique we recommended in *Pikestaff 4*: using the plural.

Linguistic links: our new Plain English Lexicon

Are you unsure whether people understand the legal use of 'determine' to mean 'terminate'; whether 'perpetrator' is easier than 'wrongdoer'; or whether 'while' is more common than 'whilst'? It's often hard to know what words your readers are likely to understand or to see regularly. Now, our unique *Plain English Lexicon* enables you to make informed decisions about the familiarity and frequency of 1,200 words that sometimes occur in public-information documents. The lexicon draws on 2 important pieces of research evidence: the US *Living Word Vocabulary* and the BNC, which we mentioned above.

In her foreword to the lexicon, Christine Mowat, past chair of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN), describes it as 'an ingenious new tool' and a 'fine gift to our field'. You can download it free of charge at <http://clearest.co.uk/?id=46>. If you have comments on the lexicon, including suggestions for words to include, we'd be pleased to hear them.

News from Plain Language Commission

This month, our website also features 2 new articles written by members of our team:

- **Writing by numbers: are readability formulas to clarify what karaoke is to song?**

The pros and cons of readability formulas are hotly debated among plain-language experts. Our research director Martin Cutts presented a paper on this topic at the recent conference of PLAIN in Amsterdam. Martin's workshop looked in detail at the shortcomings of readability formulas. You can read his article on this at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/WritingByNumbersKaraoke.pdf>. For those in a rush [he does go on a bit – Ed], there's a summary at the start and we hope a shorter version will be published in the next issue of the plain-language journal *Clarity*, due out in May.

- **Talking turkey at Tesco: chewing the fat about a retail notice**
In *Pikestaff 11*, we announced a Christmas competition: to rewrite a short seasonal text, a notice spotted in Tesco. See *Pikestaff 12* for details of the winning entry from lawyer Clive Wilson, of Corrs Chambers Westgarth, Australia. In this article, our associate Sarah Carr uses the PROCESS METHOD as a framework to examine the original text, and to analyse how the winner and others tackled it. See <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/Tesco.pdf>.

Martin also features in an article, 'Housing jargon needs to be plain English', on Northern, Midland and Southern Housing's website. That one's at: <http://www.housingexcellence.co.uk:80/news/housing-jargon-needs-to-be-plain-english-1588-12.html>.

Tip of the month: avoid abbreviations, MDU advises MDs, RNs and AHPs

The problem

In last month's *Pikestaff*, we reported that the Medical Defence Union (MDU) had 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. We asked whether you understood the headline for the article, reproduced above. By 'AHPs', we meant allied health professionals, 'RNs' are registered nurses, and 'MDs' are those who have a doctorate in medicine (from the Latin name for their higher degree: *medicinae doctor*).

But of course – as we mentioned in *Pikestaff 12* – 'MD' can also mean managing director. And Maryland, million dollar (as a unit of measurement) and muscular dystrophy – plus 130 other things, according to Abbreviations.com. The website also lists 9 possible meanings for 'MDU', 49 for 'RN' and 7 for 'AHP'.

Like other types of jargon, abbreviations can be a useful shorthand between professionals. So long as your reader understands them, they communicate your message concisely. But it's important to use only those that are well known to your audience and are unambiguous.

Our advice

When you first mention an abbreviation, ask yourself whether your readers will understand it – or even better, ask them! If they won't, write it out in full the first time and put the abbreviation in brackets after it. Next time, use just the abbreviated form. If you're writing a longer document that readers may not read from the beginning, write it out at the start of each section.

Example

'The Trust employs community psychiatric nurses (CPNs). CPNs work with...'

[Source: <http://www.abbreviations.com/>]

BBC viewers no shrinking violets on shrinking legibility

As we noted in our last tip of the month, writing clearly isn't just about using clear language; other factors are important too – including making your words legible.

Large numbers of BBC viewers complained to the corporation after it changed how it presents closing credits. The *Daily Telegraph* reported: 'To the fury of many licence-fee payers, it [the BBC] decided to squeeze the closing credits into one corner, with trailers for upcoming programmes filling the rest of the screen. Viewers attacked the new policy as "nonsense",

saying the credits were now so small that it was impossible to read them.'

Roly Keating, the controller of BBC2 and acting controller of BBC1, has said the corporation:

- has asked producers to increase the font size of the credits
- is considering publishing the closing credits on the internet for viewers who can't read them on screen
- knows the new policy has led to 'shrinking legibility'.

[Source: *Daily Telegraph*, 28 January 2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk:80/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/01/25/nbbc125.xml>]

Sic jokes

If all those obscure abbreviations and asterisked obscenities have left you feeling fragile, why not restore your rude good health by consuming some appetizing Activia, which 'improves slower digestive transit'. (McVitie's may find this useful if its lorries break down.)

The website explains: 'Digestive transit is the time it takes for food to pass through the digestive system. A slower digestive transit is when it takes longer to complete this journey. This can sometimes leave you feeling a little sluggish or bloated. Its [sic] surely better not to just put up with these feelings – give your transit a helping hand [infelicitous image] by taking up the Activia New You Plan.' Some things are best kept enematic.

But what if achieving the 'New You' requires more Botox than Bifidus? Fret not, for a local school has announced the following: '4.30–6.30pm: Head's Parent Surgery'.

If, however, you'd rather just have a nice cup of coffee, you may like to invest in a 'total beverage solution' from Cafobar, whose website explains 'the origins of coffee and how it found it's [sic] way to Europe'. Specialities include 'Instant Soluble Coffee Machines' (poor value if yours dissolves on first use) and 'In-Cup Drinks Machines' (a bit on the tiny side?). And for short-staffed healthcare organizations open to innovative workforce solutions, 'mobile drinks trolleys such as the Zenith Ward beverage system allow hot drinks to be dispensers in hospital wards and in similar environments'.

Coming full circle, the (Italian) Gaggia Traditional Espresso Machine allows 'your creativity to run wild', while the (Norwegian) Scanomat Drinks System offers an 'advanced whipping system'. Surely some correction needed there.

Next month in *Pikestaff*, it's time for some top tip's on the apostrophe and it's use's.

[Sources: <http://www.activianewyouplan.com/about.php>; and <http://www.cafobar.co.uk/>]

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 friends or colleagues 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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