

# Pikestaff

## Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 15, April 2008

### Plain Language Act passed in US House

We reported last month that a US House of Representatives committee had passed a bill requiring federal agencies to use plain language in all new, commonly used forms (like tax returns, grant applications and pension forms). The bill has since been to the full House, where it was passed as the Plain Language in Government Communications Act, with 376 in favour and just 1 against (a Republican named Flake). The statement Flake released on his decision said merely: 'Bad bill. Voted no.' Can't say plainer than that, though it'd be nice to know why.

The Senate version of the bill has also been passed by the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, which means it will go to the full Senate for a vote soon. Representative Bruce Braley, who introduced the bill in the House of Representatives said: 'The Senate committee's passage of the Plain Language Act today is a sign of growing momentum for legislation that will make the government more accessible and accountable to American taxpayers. There's no reason why the federal government can't write forms, letters, and other public documents in a way we can all understand.'

Not yet decided is how writers of government communications will know whether they've used plain language. The Act states that agencies can follow either of 2 well-known US plain-language style guides, or their own if it's consistent with these and the recommendations made under the following section:

Within six months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Comptroller General shall evaluate existing guidance for agencies on writing in plain language...and provide to the Office of Management and Budget, the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the House of Representatives, and the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the Senate a report providing recommendations on:

- (1) plain language guidelines; and
- (2) best practices for plain language.

Some readability experts hope the recommendations will include a target grade level, using a readability formula, for government communications. Other suggestions for useful guidance cover clear design (including features such as type face and size, layout, and use of visuals such as charts and graphs), as well as before-and-after examples to illustrate best practice.

[Sources: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h110-3548>; <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2008/roll185.xml#N>; <http://flake.house.gov/News/DocumentSingle.aspx?DocumentID=88571>; and <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-2291>]

### Blessed success redresses UK's otherwise lesser progress

**Northern Ireland Personal Current Account Banking Market  
Investigation Order**

Here in the UK we may not yet have a plain-language law but we're still making progress, if only in breaking records for the number of modifiers: a whopping 8 words describe 'Order' in the title above. (We'd usually recommend no more than 2 or – at a push – 3 modifiers per noun in documents we edit. So we think it'd be clearer to call it: Investigation Order on the Market for Personal Current Bank Accounts in Northern Ireland.)

In May 2005, following a *Which?* super-complaint, the Office of Fair Trading asked the Competition Commission to investigate and report on the supply by banks of personal current accounts (PCAs) in Northern Ireland. The Commission concluded that there were 3 features of this market that prevented, restricted or distorted competition:

- (a) banks have unduly complex charging structures and practices;
- (b) banks do not fully or sufficiently explain their charging structures and practices; and
- (c) customers generally do not actively search for alternative PCAs or switch bank.

The Commission's report goes on to recommend a range of remedies, including:

**Remedy (a): Easy-to-understand terminology and descriptions of PCA services.**

Banks operating in Northern Ireland must satisfy the BCSB [Banking Code Standards Board] that all information provided to customers when choosing a PCA, when opening a PCA, on statements, and when pre-notified of charges and interest payments, is easy to understand. The banks must ensure that all such communications are:

- (i) certified by an independent organization specializing in plain English; or
- (ii) otherwise tested with customers and found to be easily understandable.

As a result, the Northern Ireland PCA Banking Market Investigation Order comes into force in Northern Ireland on 1 July this year. It is expected to come to the mainland later. So if you work for a bank, do get in touch – we may be just the independent organization specializing in plain English that you're looking for, and we're already working with several high-street banks to help them comply.

You can read the original report at [http://www.competition-commission.org.uk/rep\\_pub/reports/2007/fulltext/527.pdf](http://www.competition-commission.org.uk/rep_pub/reports/2007/fulltext/527.pdf), and the investigation order at [http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared\\_oft/monopolies/NI-PCA-banking-IO.pdf](http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared_oft/monopolies/NI-PCA-banking-IO.pdf).

**Small Print Bill**

Nottinghamshire MP Nick Palmer has launched a more modestly modified bill to require a minimum size of print in adverts and contracts. His Small Print Bill is backed by such organizations as the RNIB, Age Concern, Help the Aged and the Trading Standards Institute.

Palmer said: 'The very phrase "small print" has become a metaphor for misleading advertising, and it is time action was taken.' You can follow the progress of the bill at <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/smallprint.html>.

[Source: <http://www.epolitix.com/EN/Legislation/200802/348dc63f-2df6-43cc-9d81-1ea133555b47.htm>]

## Readers write

### Apologies for apostrophe oversight

Thank you to Oliver Figg, Adrian Ince and Sean McSweeney, who spotted our slip in last month's tip of the month on apostrophes. We wrote:

**It's** is only ever short for 'it is'; its means 'belonging to it'.

The eagle-eyed trio quickly pointed out that **it's** can be short for **it has** too, one of them giving this example: 'it's escaped your notice!' Indeed it had – and we'd like to apologize for this oversight, caused by lack of oversight.

Talking of contronyms, one of our associates, Ruth Thornton, emailed with a rather good example from the TV show *The Apprentice*. Barrister Nicholas de Lacy Brown, one of the contestants, had listed his bar result as 'outstanding'. 'Excuse my ignorance,' enquired Sir Alan Sugar ominously, 'does that mean you haven't got it yet?'

[Source: *The Guardian*, 27 March 2008: <http://www.guardian.co.uk:80/media/2008/mar/27/television>]

### Linguistic links: The Apostrophe Protection Society

Readers keen to preserve the apostrophe (in its natural habitat only, of course: overbreeding can be as undesirable as extinction) may enjoy this link to the Apostrophe Protection Society:

<http://www.apostrophe.fsnet.co.uk>. The society promotes 'the correct use of this currently much abused punctuation mark in all forms of text written in the English language'.

Journalist John Richards formed the society when he retired in 2001, hoping he'd find a small number of people who were also irritated by apostrophe misuse. He takes up the story: 'I didn't find half a dozen people. Instead, within a month of my plaint appearing in a national newspaper, I received over 500 letters of support, not only from all corners of the United Kingdom, but also from America, Australia, France, Sweden, Hong Kong and Canada!'

The website includes:

- the rules on correct apostrophes, according to Richards
- photos of signs with missing or wrong apostrophes
- links to other useful websites – including similar societies in other countries, such as the catchily named *Apostrophen-Katastrophen* in Germany
- a message board for those who wish to discuss apostrophes (yes, such people exist).

In Richards' words: 'The little apostrophe deserves our protection. It is indeed a threatened species!' And anyone who uses 'plaint' deserves all the help he can get.

### Champions challenged for supremacy in sesquipedalianism

In *Pikestaff 14*, we asked: which profession prevails in piffle production? This month we have some new contenders:

- bankers – with NatWest Bank now providing Personal Relationship Managers (perhaps for customers whose alimony-induced overdrafts make them consider reconciliation?)

- traffic wardens – who, as *The Times* reports, have been renamed ‘civil enforcement officers’
- council officers – who, in papers on the proposed reorganization of Northamptonshire County Council, warn that senior staff should ‘make sure [that they] know the taste of strawberry – develop pride in the brand, or leave’. More on this fruity framework in next month’s *Pikestaff*.

The old contenders – travel organizations – are still in the running, however, with Heathrow’s new Terminal 5 suffering ‘baggage performance issues’. And a reader’s letter to *The Independent* remarked on an appositely ambiguous advertisement, which proclaimed: ‘Heathrow Terminal 5. From here you can see tomorrow.’ The reader, Andrew Loutit, comments: ‘Presumably this is because the paying customer will still be there?’

Not to be outdone, the teachers are at it again, with a good old run-on sentence (and wrongly spaced slash) in the update on the literacy parents’ evening mentioned in last month’s *Pikestaff*.

As mentioned in a previous newsletter this will take place next week and the focus will be upon the teaching of reading, spelling and handwriting. We are keen to tailor the evening to your expectations / preferred outcomes, however, this time I have remembered to attach [and again make] a slip!

If only they’d read our tip of the month...

[NatWest leaflet *Personal Current and Savings Accounts* (NMT0818S); *The Times*, 18 and 31 March 2008; *The Sunday Times*, 31 March 2008; and *The Week*, 5 April 2008]

## Tip of the month: avoid (semi)colonic irritation

### The problem

In *Pikestaff 6*, we covered the modern ill of run-on sentences, as in the excerpt above. Run-on sentences join 2 or more complete sentences without the right punctuation or a conjunction (joining word, such as ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘or’, ‘when’, ‘if’ and ‘although’ – but not ‘however’). We advised that one way to remedy a run-on sentence is to replace the comma with a semicolon. But where is it right to use this handy little punctuation mark?

### Our advice

The semicolon is used to:

- join 2 complete sentences into one when they are closely related
- separate items in a list where commas can’t do this clearly (for example when the items are phrases, contain commas themselves or could mistakenly be run together with preceding or following items).

Of course, these days it’s also part of a cheeky emoticon, signifying a wink from the writer: look out for more on emoticons in a future issue of *Pikestaff*.

### Examples

A semicolon would be a good way of correcting the run-on sentence above, which comprises 2 closely related sentences. (We’ve corrected the slash spacing too: in English, a space is placed before and after the slash only to mark a line break when quoting from a poem.)

We are keen to tailor the evening to your expectations/preferred outcomes; however, this time I have remembered to attach a slip!

And here's an example of using a semicolon to separate complex items in a list:

#### *Before*

In the most severe winter since records began, 7 people lost their lives, £2 billion of damage was caused, 28,000 homes were snowed in, and 70,000 were without water supply, thousands were without power, road and rail links were closed, the Strelsau Underground shut 13 stations, and Rail Ruritania estimated repair work at £16 million.

#### *After*

In the most severe winter since records began, 7 people lost their lives; £2 billion of damage was caused; 28,000 homes were snowed in, and 70,000 were without water supply; thousands were without power; road and rail links were closed; the Strelsau Underground shut 13 stations; and Rail Ruritania estimated repair work at £16 million.

Next month's *Pikestaff* will look at uses of the colon, and the (sometimes subtle) differences between the semicolon and colon.

## Vive le point-virgule!

*The Guardian* reports that 'an unlikely row has erupted in France over suggestions that the semicolon's days are numbered; worse, the growing influence of English is apparently to blame'.

A French committee for the defence of the semicolon – 'le point-virgule' (literally, 'the full-stop comma') – appeared on the web (perhaps they could run exchange visits with the Apostrophe Protection Society?). And an April Fools' joke on a leading internet news site claimed that President Nicolas Sarkozy 'had just decreed that to preserve the poor point-virgule from an untimely end, it must henceforth be used at least three times a page in all official correspondence'.

*The Guardian* looked into which writers love – and hate – the semicolon: is it 'an elegant pause' or merely a 'pretentious comma'? Here's a selection of their comments:

### **Semicolon supporters**

- 'One immediately recognises a man of judgment by the use he makes of the semicolon.' (Henry de Montherlant, 20th-century novelist, essayist, playwright and academic)
- 'Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines further on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath.' (Lewis Thomas, late US physician and educator)
- 'If the semicolon is one of the neglected children in the family of punctuation marks these days, told to stay in its room and entertain itself, because mummy and daddy are busy, the apostrophe is the abused victim.' (John Humphrys)
- 'I like them – they are a three-quarter beat to the half and full beats of commas and full stops. Prose has its own musicality, and the more notation the better. I like dashes, double-dashes, comashes and double comashes just as much. The colon is an umlaut waiting to jump; the colon dash is teasingly precipitous.' (Will Self, who doesn't explain what comashes and double comashes are)

- 'You practically do not use semicolons at all. This is a symptom of mental defectiveness, probably induced by camp life.' (George Bernard Shaw to TE Lawrence, on *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*)
- 'I love it so much, in fact, that I am currently writing a story made up of only semi-colons; it is quite a challenge, but I believe in it very much.' (George Saunders)

### Point-virgule opponents

- 'A parasite, a timid, fainthearted, insipid thing, denoting merely uncertainty, a lack of audacity, a fuzziness of thought' (François Cavanna, writer, cartoonist and satirist)
- 'No semicolons. Semicolons indicate relationships that only idiots need defined by punctuation. Besides, they are ugly.' (Richard Hugo)
- 'If you really want to hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be a homosexual, the least you can do is go into the arts. But do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites, standing for absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college.' (Kurt Vonnegut)
- 'They are more powerful more imposing more pretentious than a comma but they are a comma all the same. They really have within them deeply within them fundamentally within them the comma nature. (Gertrude Stein, who didn't like commas)

An alternative view comes from Irvine Welsh: 'I've no feelings about [the semicolon] – it's just there. People actually get worked up about that kind of shite, do they? I don't fucking believe it. They should get a fucking life or a proper job. They've got too much time on their hands, to think about nonsense.'

Time to stop sitting on the fence, Mr Welsh.

What do you think of the semicolon? If you've time on your hands, do let us know: email us at [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

[Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/04/france.britishidentity>]

### No 5-star service for royal stiffed by staff member

Talking of rude words unasterisked (*The Guardian's* style, as we discussed in *Pikestaff 13*), the *Daily Mail* has gone to the other extreme, becoming the epitome of coyness as it reports the story of an attempt to blackmail a British royal:

He [a royal aide] said the incident took place on the kitchen floor of his £650,000 flat during a party with a lap-dancer known only as Cindy, adding: 'He gave me a \*\*\*\*\*, sweetheart, I never touched him.'

...On other parts of the tapes, D [the aide] makes a series of 'scandalous and disparaging remarks' about other members of his employer's family, including how one unnamed royal 'waved his \*\*\*\*\* at him' in a toilet, the jury was told.

Bleeping out parts of words is unclear, as the reader must guess what the writer means from the remaining letter or letters; but bleeping out the whole lot is even more puzzling.

And anyway, what's wrong with waving one's crown at one's manservant (even in the latrine)?

## Write with style with StyleWriter

StyleWriter is an editing software package that has been designed by writing experts: journalists, editors and business-writing tutors. It takes up where simplistic grammar and spell checkers stop and helps you write clear English by identifying words and phrases in your writing that get in the way of clarity and lead to poor style.

We reviewed StyleWriter last October, in *Pikestaff 9*, and published a news story about it in *Pikestaff 3*. Los Angeles County joined the ranks of organizations using StyleWriter to help staff write clearly, when it invested \$210,000 in a corporate licence. The *Los Angeles Times* jokingly called the investment 'an enterprise-wide solution for streamlining content, where the end product is improved by its interface' (language that StyleWriter rates as 'dreadful' on its style index).

The software:

- works from within Microsoft Word or WordPerfect
- runs at the click of an icon
- shows you where and how to edit your text
- includes help screens for further background
- creates an audit of style statistics for every document checked
- allows organizations to add their own house-style rules.

Here's what some users have said:

- 'StyleWriter's the best thing since sliced sandwiches.' (Radio journalist)
- 'I'm from the *Wall Street Journal* and need a copy of StyleWriter.'  
'Do you want to review the package?'  
'No – I need it for everything I write.' (Press journalist)
- 'After two months using StyleWriter, I wish to congratulate you on this splendid and useful application. Worth every penny I paid for it!' (Freelance writer)
- 'It's time you brought out a Macintosh version.' (Ed)

StyleWriter is available as a single-user licence for £110 plus VAT; there are discounts for buying 10 or more licences. You can also try the program for 30 days for £20 + VAT, which is refunded if you buy at the end of the trial. See <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=17> for more information, frequently asked questions and screen examples.

## 'A man of style, and great substance'

So reads the title of *The Statesman's* obituary of plain-language proponent **Jyoti Sanyal**, who died on 12 April in Kolkata (Calcutta), India. The obituary describes Jyoti's work at *The Statesman*, and as a fearless and inspiring teacher of journalism:

Jyoti Sanyal...was the man who wrote *The Statesman Style Book*. Mercurial and acerbic, Jyoti favoured a personal style that rubbed many people the wrong way. It wasn't enough to correct someone who, in his view, was talking nonsense; he did so with a raised eyebrow and a sneer that was intended to leave his victim in tatters.

This treatment was fairly dished out in equal measure to his bosses, his colleagues and sometimes his subordinates.

Yet, Jyoti always had time for the young journalist who wished to learn.

He would sit the person down, explain why he or she must avoid circumlocution, and warn of the perils of learning the language from Government Press releases.

Indeed, Jyoti was convinced many of the ills of Indian English flowed from the tortured sentence-construction imposed upon us by the Victorian baboos who ruled us – and gave us our writing style – from Writers' Building.

*The Statesman Style Book* is a 577-page compendium. It tells journalists how to write and, equally, how not to write. If all journalists on our staff followed it, we would possibly be the best-written, best-edited newspaper in Asia.

Once work on *The Style Book* was over, Jyoti opted to take a leave of absence from *The Statesman* and went to head the Asian College of Journalism in Bangalore. After three years, he resigned from *The Statesman* saying he enjoyed being a teacher. When ACJ changed owners and moved to Chennai, he joined another journalism school in Bangalore as its head.

We got to know Jyoti only in his later years, when he set up Clear English India in Kolkata (<http://www.clearenglish.in/>), which we sponsor. Our research director, Martin Cutts, wrote the foreword to, and edited, Jyoti's book, *Indlish*. Published in 2006, the book was very well received and sold out quickly, being reprinted in 2007. Jyoti spoke at the plain-language conference in Amsterdam last November.

Responding this week to the news of Jyoti's death, Martin wrote: '[Jyoti] was in genial and mellow mood at the Amsterdam conference, where his talk was among the best. Speaking without notes or visual aids, he held the audience captive with his fluency, simplicity and charm, and he certainly knew his stuff...This is indeed a grievous loss to the cause of plain language in India.'

You can read:

- *The Statesman's* full obituary at <http://www.thestatesman.net/page.arcview.php?clid=2&id=226119&usrsess=1>
- other tributes to Jyoti Sanyal at <http://srramakrishna.blogspot.com/2008/04/angry-man-called-jyoti.html> and <http://wearethebest.wordpress.com/>
- more about *Indlish* on our website (click on 'Books').

## 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 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**

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

---

[Plain Language Commission — Home](#)