

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 2, February 2007

Thanks to all who emailed us with comments on *Pikestaff 1*. Some people asked why we used 'z' not 's' in words like 'organization', a few thinking we'd 'gone American'. In fact, '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 we'll respect your preference when we edit your documents.

'Improve Your English' features in The Independent

The Independent newspaper is basing five worksheets on Martin Cutts' popular book, the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*. Its 'Improve Your English' promotion starts on Saturday 10 March, with giveaways of the *Oxford A-Z of Grammar and Punctuation* on that day, and the *Oxford A-Z of Spelling* on the Sunday. For the rest of the week (12-16 March) daily worksheets and lively articles (mainly by *Independent* journalists) provide a 5-part guide to using English in the electronic age: at home, at work, and on the go.

Order your copies of the paper now! The *Oxford Guide to Plain English* is also available in bookshops and from our e-shop, www.clearest.co.uk.

Unclear language sells businesses short

Two-thirds of respondents to a survey on the barriers that 18- to 30-year-olds face in setting up their own businesses named 'off-putting language'. Neglecting plain English means young people are unclear about the business models they could use to be their own boss. The research found they want to see language that inspires or motivates – everyday phrases such as 'being my own boss', 'making money for me' and 'using my own ideas'.

Freelance UK says: 'Government and lobbyists pushing for higher rates of self-employment in the UK should heed the warning; the more jargon – the more likely youngsters are to switch off from their business dream.'

It seems jargon makes customers switch off too. Research by the University of Texas at San Antonio has shown that more complex language can make adverts less memorable.

[Sources: Freelance UK, 12 October 2006: <http://www.freelanceuk.com/news/1930.shtml>

Tina M Lowrey, The Relation Between Script Complexity and Commercial Memorability: <http://faculty.business.utsa.edu/tlowrey/flesch0624final.pdf>]

We're launching our updated Winning Website scheme

Websites should be just as easy to read and use as documents bearing the Clear English Standard. That's why you can ask us to clarity-check your site and, if it meets the criteria, display the web version of the Standard. This shows your customers you've put your site through a demanding external

check of language and layout.

An important feature of our updated scheme is that the Winning Website logo will state what rating we've given the site: bronze, silver or gold. A clickable link will explain what these ratings mean to your visitors. Another feature is that we'll continually monitor your site, reporting to you any problems we find. As you may want to alter your website often, the logo will say we're *monitoring its clarity* rather than give the impression we've already checked every detail. To find out more, visit www.clearest.co.uk and go to 'Accreditation'. We're updating the website too, so the new scheme may not be on the site until 12 March.

Rice is nice – compared to through-put maximization

A civil servant put up a prize of \$1,000 – of his own money – for the member of the public who could best explain a choice chunk of transport jargon in plain English.

Doug MacDonald, secretary of the Department of Transportation in Washington (US) realized that while 'through-put maximization' – moving the maximum number of vehicles through a stretch of highway at maximum speed – might sound good to transport(at)ion jargonists, many others didn't understand it.

A local writer won the prize with this entry: 'Imagine rice flowing through a funnel. If you put it in all at once, the funnel clogs and little, if any, comes through. But pour the rice more slowly and it flows more smoothly.'

'The winner was so clear,' said MacDonald. 'Once I read it and thought about it all night, I realized it was perfect.'

[Source: *Seattle Times*, 29 December 2006:
http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2003500083_macdonald29m0.html]

Brush up your writing skills with our range of courses

We can help with all your plain-language training. As well as our popular one-day on-site courses, our distance-learning courses now mean you can learn at your own pace, where and when you choose. The three 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. For more details and to download a sample, go to www.clearest.co.uk and go to 'E-shop'.

Remember, all corporate members are entitled to one copy of each of the three distance-learning courses. If you haven't claimed your free copy yet, please send us the name of the person who'll be the licence holder for each of them.

Talking of corporate members, we'd like to welcome two new ones: Blyth Valley Borough Council; and Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust. Corporate members get great discounts on many of our services, including 10% off all on-site courses and 20% off all document and website accreditation. You can read more about the benefits of corporate membership on www.clearest.co.uk or call Martin on 01663 733177 to discuss your needs.

Devil of a disclaimer

Many organizations include disclaimers on their websites and at the bottom

of emails, warning of horrible legal consequences that could befall them or the reader should things go wrong. Often they're not too clear, but this one from the Derbyshire Guide website (<http://www.derbyshireguide.co.uk/>) leaves the reader in no doubt that it's worth complying:

'This information is provided to the best of our knowledge. We have collected and collated it in good faith but we are not responsible for its accuracy and anyone intending to make use of this information is advised to check it out.

'Well that's the legal stuff sorted.

'Should you decline to comply with this warning, a leather winged demon of the night will soar from the deep malevolent caverns of the white peak into the shadowy moonlit sky and, with a thirst for blood on its salivating fangs, search the very threads of time for the throbbing of your heartbeat. Just thought you'd want to know that.'

Goody, but we're still green over Jade

One of our associates, Ruth Thornton, is now a prize-winning author! The *Adult Learners' Writing Guide* (Chambers, 2006) won 'highly commended' in the HRH The Duke of Edinburgh English Speaking Union English Language Award 2006. That brings to 8 the number of books written by Plain Language Commission's team and taken on by external publishers. Also, Christina Gleeson has just finished editing a spelling guide for Chambers, and Martin Cutts has edited Jyoti Sanyal's *Indlish – The Book for Every English-Speaking Indian* (Viva Books, 2006), which has already been reprinted several times. We've also written lots of journal articles between us. Our experience as authors gives you a level of quality assurance in our editing and training that's missing from many of our competitors.

Still a long way to go, though, before even our combined sales top Jade Goody's autobiography, which has sold more than a million in hardback.

Stockport clears up its communications

Research showed that better council communications made Stockport residents happier with its services. So Stockport Council declared October 2006 'Communications Month' – a campaign aimed at helping all employees to become better communicators. One initiative, Junk the Jargon, invited employees to put forward the senseless phrases, terminology and unexplained abbreviations they would like banished from council publications and websites. A top ten of the most 'popular' suggestions was compiled, featuring classics like 'thinking outside the box' and 'horizon scanning'. The corporate marketing team has since cleared the council's internet and intranet sites of the jargon collected.

Other activities included a Low Email Day, and raising awareness of internal training courses on writing letters and presenting information effectively. The campaign improved employees' communication skills, and the council is now working hard to make sure clearer communications stay at the heart of all it does.

[Source: Many thanks to Tim Green, Internal Communications Co-ordinator at Stockport Council, for sending us this news.]

Somewhat incomprehensible nomenclature

A few readers asked: 'Why *Pikestaff*?' Well, in British English, something's said to be 'as plain as a pikestaff'.

But what's so plain about pikestaffs? The saying may have started as 'as plain as a packstaff', the pole that pedlars used to carry their pack – no doubt similar to a pike handle. Pikes had removable staffs so the wood could be replaced when broken, and the weapon transported easily. A pikeman could also use the staff alone, without the relatively valuable point, to display his victim's head. Wat Tyler and others suffered this fate after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

So a pikestaff was probably considered plain because it was just a big stick. Another plausible explanation is that pilgrims carried one to announce plainly their devotion.

Contribute

Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Back issues

You can see *Pikestaff 1* at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/newsletter/newsletter.php?id=1>.

Tell a friend

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

Rolling the credits

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