# Pikestaff

## Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 21, November 2008

### Tip of the month: don't automatically junk the jargon; just explain the technical terms

**The issue**
Last month's tip looked at how to zap buzzwords. As we saw, some people call these 'jargon' but they aren't really.

The word 'jargon' comes from an old French word meaning 'the twittering and chattering of birds'. It came into English in the fourteenth century and was used by Coleridge in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797–8) – 'How they seemed to fill the sea and air/With their sweet jargoning!'. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'jargon' as 'words or expressions used by a particular group that are difficult for other people to understand'. Wikipedia summarizes the difference between buzzwords and jargon as follows: 'Buzzwords differ from jargon; the speaker tries to impress the listener with obscure meanings, while jargon (ideally) has a defined technical meaning – if only to the given specialists…'

Customers often ask us whether including technical terms will stop us accrediting their document with the Clear English Standard. Here's what we say.

**Our advice**
Jargon is often written off as a bad thing. But technical jargon is both necessary and useful for members of a profession or other group to communicate with each other. At its best, it acts as a kind of shorthand, allowing you to express specialist concepts concisely. It therefore improves communication and saves time. The problems start only when you use technical jargon in writing for people who aren't familiar with it, without explaining the meaning.

But we believe it can be a good thing to include technical jargon in documents for the public, so long as it's well explained:

- From a practical point of view, it's impossible to completely replace most technical jargon with plain-English translations that are concise and accurate in meaning.
- From an ethical point of view, exposing the audience to technical jargon can help them to understand more about the field and so give them more strength.

For example, if you visit your doctor, it's useful to have not only a clear explanation of the diagnosis, in layperson's language, but also the medical term. You will then:

- know if your diagnosis is the same as someone else's
- be able to research further in books or on the Web
- feel that the doctor credited you with the interest and intelligence to hear and use the proper term.

**Our approach**

So your document can still achieve the Clear English Standard if it includes jargon – and may be better for so doing – so long as you explain it clearly. Try following these steps:

1. *Decide what to explain*

Think about your audience. Will they understand your jargon? Ideally, ask someone from the target audience. If they'll understand, then go ahead and use it freely. But if they won't, then you'll need to explain it.

2. *Explain the jargon*

Explain each term briefly as you use it, simply and concisely (in just enough detail for the reader to be able to understand your message). This means that the audience gets an immediate explanation of what you mean, without having to look away from the document. If you think your readers would find a more detailed explanation useful, provide a glossary (in plain English) for them to read later.

**Example**
A reader recently emailed to tell us he had received a pension letter from a county council referring to a 'benefits crystallization event'. This is a phrase used by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) – a search for it on HMRC's website reveals 5 pages of results! So the council (and some of our customers) may feel they must use it; this would be OK, so long as they explain it properly.

Often this type of phrase arises to cover a number of possible items that would be long-winded to list every time. For example, in this case, retirement (which may seem the obvious plain-English alternative) is just one type of event when a person's benefits 'crystallize'. A more accurate explanation would be 'any event that results in paying you a benefit'.

You can read more about dealing with technical jargon in an article by Sarah Carr, on our website at http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/TechnicalJargon.pdf.

## Securities and Exchange Commission improves disclosure

We reported in the summer that William Lutz, emeritus English professor and securities lawyer, is leading a project at the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to revamp the way companies provide information to the investing public. The work is already bearing fruit: on 19 November, the SEC voted unanimously to improve disclosure in mutual funds by requiring that funds give investors a concise summary – in plain English – of the key information they need to make informed investment decisions.  The new summary will appear at the front of a fund's prospectus. The Commission also approved amendments to encourage funds to make greater use of the internet so investors can receive more detailed information in a way that best suits their needs.

'Today's action will help mutual fund investors more easily obtain the key information they need – such as the description of the fund's investment objectives and strategies, fees, risks, and performance,' said SEC chair Christopher Cox.  'The summary prospectus will quickly give investors a basic understanding of the fund and will permit them readily to compare one fund to another.  Investors will also have access to more searchable information about mutual funds on the Internet – an important improvement in their ability to comparison shop.'

Andrew Donohue, director of the SEC's division of investment management, added: 'Many investors often find current fund prospectuses to be lengthy, legalistic and confusing.  This mutual fund disclosure framework will provide information that is easier to use and more readily accessible, while retaining the comprehensive quality of the mutual fund information.'

The full text of the new disclosure requirements will be posted to the SEC website – http://www.sec.gov – as soon as possible. In the meantime, you can read more and watch a video on the project at http://www.sec.gov /news/press/2008/2008-275.htm.

## Linguistic links: A Plain English Handbook

This handbook, subtitled *How to create clear SEC disclosure documents*, was published by the SEC in 1998. Famous among proponents of plain English, it shows 'how you can use well-established techniques for writing in plain English to create clearer and more informative disclosure documents'.

The handbook includes a preface by Warren Buffett, American billionaire investor and chief of Berkshire Hathaway.  Here he notes the problems of unexplained technical jargon:

> There are several possible explanations as to why I and others sometimes stumble over an accounting note or indenture description. Maybe we simply don't have the technical knowledge to grasp what the writer wishes to convey. Or perhaps the writer doesn't understand what he or she is talking about. In some cases, moreover, I suspect that a less-than-scrupulous issuer doesn't want us to understand a subject it feels legally obligated to touch upon.

> Perhaps the most common problem, however, is that a well-intentioned and informed writer simply fails to get the message across to an intelligent, interested reader. In that case, stilted jargon and complex constructions are usually the villains.

Buffett concludes with one 'unoriginal but useful' tip:

> Write with a specific person in mind. When writing Berkshire Hathaway's annual report, I pretend that I'm talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don't need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.

> No siblings to write to? Borrow mine: Just begin with 'Dear Doris and Bertie.'

With a Chinese fund manager having recently paid $2.1m at auction for the privilege of lunching with Buffett (more than 3 times the price achieved last year), we'd say you couldn't go far wrong in following his advice. You can read *A Plain English Handbook* at http://www.sec.gov/pdf/plaine.pdf.

## PLAINly great news

In further international good news, the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) has just become incorporated, and its Bylaw registered with the Canadian government. Congratulations to all those volunteers who have worked hard to achieve this.

Incorporation is an important step towards developing the organization further, and the future looks bright for PLAIN. You can read the Bylaw – itself an example of how legal English can be clear – at

http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org
/PLAIN%20Bylaw%20final%20-%2029-10-08.pdf.  And we'd thoroughly
recommend joining PLAIN – at a very modest annual cost (Can$35 or
US$30), it offers access to a range of membership benefits. Read more at
http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/networkindex.html#join.

## Clichés cornered 3

Here's the third in this series, originally written for *The Independent* by our
research director, Martin Cutts.

> **'Cool as a cucumber'**
> It's easy to sniff that clichés are mere thought substitutes – the
> first resort of the vacant mind – but they can help people who
> struggle with words to get a conversation going. And doubtless
> all clichés once seemed new, sparkling and, er, fresh as a daisy.
> So common are similes like 'flat as a pancake', 'cool as a
> cucumber', 'dull as ditchwater', 'plain as a pikestaff', 'good as
> gold', 'bald as a coot' and 'cold as charity' that authors can
> subvert them for punning effect. If cows stray on to the field
> during the village soccer match, it's a 'game of 2 calves'
> (especially if there's a pair of them). If a detective falls ill, he's
> 'as sick as a Poirot'. And if your bread fails to rise, it's as dead as
> a dough-dough.

## Plain Language Commission news

**Customers take gold with Winning Websites**
Congratulations to 2 organizations for achieving gold ratings in our Winning
Website scheme:

- The Financial Services Authority, one of our corporate members, has
  launched a new website, http://www.whataboutmoney.info/. This
  winning website is aimed at 16–24 year olds, to help them better
  understand money issues. It is part of the National Strategy for
  Financial Capability, which the FSA leads, to improve the financial
  capability of consumers in the UK.
- The Community Legal Advice website – at
  http://www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk/index.jsp – offers free,
  confidential and independent legal advice for residents of England and
  Wales. Features include a debt management tool, free legal
  information leaflets and factsheets, a tool for searching for legal
  information from trusted organizations such as Shelter, Help the Aged
  and the BBC, a directory of legal advisers or solicitors with the
  Community Legal Service Quality Mark, and a legal aid calculator.

Awarding the Web version of our Clear English Standard, the Winning
Website scheme has several unique features:

- We continually monitor your site, making frequent and regular checks
  and reporting to you any problems we find.
- When visitors to your site click on the Winning Website logo, the link
  tells them what we monitor and what's excluded.
- As you may want to alter your website often, the logo says we're
  monitoring its clarity rather than giving the impression every detail's
  been checked.
- There are 3 ratings: bronze, silver and gold. You can read about each
  of these standards, and find out more about the scheme, at
  http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=24.

## Electoral Commission makes its mark for clarity

The Electoral Commission is developing a set of UK-wide standards for the design of ballot papers and other voter materials used at elections. The 'Making your mark' project aims to make voter materials more user-friendly, so that people can have confidence that they have voted the way they intended. You can read more about the plans at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/document-summary?assetid=67184.

To help guide and advise the project, the Commission is setting up a virtual 'advisory group' of expert stakeholder representatives. Martin Cutts, our research director, will represent us on this group, with support from associate Ruth Thornton, who's been presenting a series of writing-skills courses for Commission staff in London and Belfast.

Christie Dennehy, Senior Policy Advisor at the Commission, and lead officer for 'Making your mark', said: 'We are particularly keen to involve people who can help us to understand some of the issues and problems with existing materials used at elections, specifically in terms of usability and accessibility.'

We look forward to working with the Electoral Commission on this important project, and will report developments in a future *Pikestaff*.

## Educational miracle follows ego trip via Bournemouth

Last month, we covered the story of Bournemouth Council asking staff to avoid using 19 Latin words and phrases in council communications. We noted that we believe the abbreviations 'eg' and 'ie' are fairly well understood in the UK. Interestingly, we received an email from Annetta Cheek, a US plain-English expert, who advises:

> Regarding eg and ie — in years of teaching writing to government writers, I have found them to be a problem. Most people know they mean 'for example' and 'that is'. Or is it 'that is' and 'for example'? Many people do not know which is which, and use them incorrectly. In some documents, they seem to have been shaken out of a giant salt shaker.

It's a useful illustration of the fact that audiences differ: so always think about who you're writing for and make sure you use language they'll understand.

Plain English Campaign Limited (PEC) expressed support for Bournemouth Council:

> If you look at the diversity of all our communities you have got people for whom English is a second language. They might mistake *eg* for *egg* and little things like that can confuse people. At the same time it is important to remember that the national literacy level is about 12 years old and the vast majority of people hardly ever use these terms. It is far better to use words people understand. Often people in power are using the words because they want to feel self important. It is not right that voters should suffer because of some official's ego.

'Ego', eh? Is that what you use to make Spanish omelette, or has some Latin crept in?

PEC's statement that the national reading age averages 12 (the level of an average 12-year-old), which PEC repeated in a letter to the *Daily Mail* on 7

November, marks a surprising change of mind. Hitherto, PEC has insisted the average is 9–10 (eg, *Mail on Sunday* 3 March 2002), telling the National Audit Office in a fax in 2005, 'It is frightening to realize that the average reading age in the UK is 9.5 to 10 years of age.' Under PEC's influence, some public bodies have been spending a lot of money – much of it with PEC – on trying, and inevitably failing, to write their leaflets at a level that is below functional literacy. Now, suddenly, according to PEC, the national level of reading skill has leapt by 2 whole years in just 3 years. So is this an educational miracle or is the quasi-campaign concocting the facts on the hoof? Though some experts doubt the value of applying reading-age figures to adults, our opinion – based on the National Literacy Trust website – is that the national average is 12–14 years.

[Source: *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 November 2008: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3362150/Councils-ban-elitist-and-discriminatory-Latin-phrases.html]

## Readers write

### Aiming to be objective

Reader Graham Clark emailed about the phrase 'aims and objectives:

> Various organisations are always trotting out their 'aims and objectives'. This has become a cliché, but do they need to say both? Aren't these two things the same, eg, 'my aim is to become a millionaire', 'my objective is to become a millionaire'. To me, aims and objectives seem interchangeable, but perhaps there is a subtle difference which has passed me by.

Our reply touches again on technical jargon:

> Some people use 'aims' to mean the overall goals, and 'objectives' the tactics you use to achieve them: rather like the contrast between strategic and operational management. Here's an example of this usage: http://www.ces-vol.org.uk /index.cfm?pg=123.

> But since the *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'objective' as 'a goal or aim', we think you're right that really they mean the same. The usage above has arisen, we believe, as a piece of technical jargon in management (and, as a Web search suggests, in education). We generally say that there's no problem using such jargon so long as readers understand it (or the writer explains it). But of course often they don't (and they don't)!

### Cheesed off with Tesco's grammar

Tesco features in *Pikestaff* again this month, with reader Allen Green spotting this sign in his local shop: 'Try our range of cheeses' and asking:

> Does 'cheese' take the plural form, given that 'range' implies more than one cheese or are we to assume they have more than one range of cheese – in which case would 'ranges of cheese' be more appropriate? Or again, given that one could also assume they have different varieties of say, Cheddar, within the Cheddar range – the rather clumsy 'ranges of cheeses'.

We replied:

> Wikipedia suggests that as an uncountable noun, 'cheese' means 'a dairy product made from curdled or cultured milk' while as a

countable one, it means 'any particular variety of cheese'. This means that Tesco's 'range of cheeses' is tautological: 'Try our cheeses' would be enough.

## Inglish as she is spelt

Would you welcome a simplified system of spelling, or does our English orthography inspire you with awe? In last month's *Pikestaff*, we looked briefly at this, concluding with a quote from Philip Howard's spelling series in *The Times*: 'Spelling is beautiful. Believe it.' Our bracketed addition – (We do.) – spurred writer Philip Yaffe to email us:

> Spelling is not beautiful. It is a tool. As with any tool, weighing it down with useless complications can only reduce its effectiveness, not enhance it. In writing, the only thing that is beautiful is a well-structured, well crafted text. Judging writing by how well the author masters chaotic spelling is like judging a painting by how well the artist uses poor quality brushes.

But how straightforward would it really be to simplify English spelling? It's hard to see whose pronunciation a new system would follow: for example, President Bush, Sarah Palin and others in the US pronounce 'era' and 'error' identically. And even within the UK, pronunciation differs widely from place to place, as Marie Parker's letter to *The Observer* points out:

> When people say English should be spelt as it is pronounced, the question arises: pronounced by whom? There are Scottish dialects where the 'i' in 'friend' is pronounced 'freend', and where 'igh' or 'ough' are not silent but guttural – 'It's a braw, bricht, moonlicht nicht.'

Perhaps, as Philip Yaffe goes on to suggest, the answer lies in making English spelling not phonetic but rational:

> I am referring particularly to words such as 'rough', 'through', 'though', 'plough', 'light', 'bright', 'sight', 'climb', 'plumber', 'island', 'read' (pronounced both reed and red), etc. English is also riddled with an enormous number of homophones, e.g. 'see, sea', 'by, bye, buy', 'here, hear', 'there, their', 'one, won', 'rest, wrest', 'cell, sell', 'sight, site, cite', 'flee, flea', etc. Other languages have very few of these…If the French can reform spelling – the august Académie Française recently eliminated the virtually useless accent *circonflexe* (^) and made other changes – surely we English-speakers can do likewise.

It will be interesting to watch how this debate develops, especially as youngsters seem increasingly to struggle with English spelling: the starting point for our article in *Pikestaff 20*, which reported university lecturer Ken Smith's call for an amnesty on the most common spelling mistakes. Whatever happens, we'll retain conventional spelling for as long as it's, well, conventional. Plain language aims to communicate the message clearly to readers without distracting them with stylistic features (of any sort) that take their attention off the message. We believe following linguistic convention is important in this respect.

And apart from that, as our spokesperson commented: 'We don't think we're prepared to sacrifice the rich vein of verbal humour that will die if spelling is reformed beyond a few tweaks at the edges. Like Coleridge, though, I'd be happy with 'rime' instead of its later cousin 'rhyme', which the intelligentsia preferred after they'd got rhythm and were trying to be Greek.'

[Sources: *The Times*, 29 September 2008: http://www.timesonline.co.uk /tol/life_and_style/education/spelling_bee/article4801360.ece; and *The*

*Week*, 21 June 2008]

## TEAL me another!

Mispellings have been poring in this month (OK, don't right in).

**Reef not**
A picture in *The Times* of 12 November showed the BBC website on 11 November, with this caption: 'ARMISTICE DAY: WW1 veterans laid reefs at Cenotaph'. Maybe there was coral singing too.

**Manchester's missionary position**
*Private Eye* printed this letter, reputedly from Manchester Council to the residents of a tower block:

> I am writing to advice tenants to take care when they are putting there heads out the window for any reason. There is a damager that you may get struck by some falling missionary.
> Please take care and avoid putting yourself at unnecessary risk by limiting the amount of time you expose yourself out the window.

**Stationary stationery**
A letter from Mike Pringle to *The Daily Telegraph* reads:

> I once pointed out that a cupboard containing pens and paper was incorrectly labelled 'stationary', and was told bluntly by the lady in charge: 'Well, it's not going anywhere, is it?'

But if you spot similar signs, think carefully before you act (though it's fine – in fact imperative – to tell us): members of TEAL (the Typo Eradication Advancement League – see *Pikestaff 16*) are paying a heavy price for their pedantry.

The *Boston Globe* reports that TEAL's founder Jeff Deck and his friend Benjamin Herson have taken their campaign a stage too far by getting out the Tippex and marker pen at the Grand Canyon. They were sentenced to a year's probation and ordered to pay restitution for 'conspiracy to vandalize government property'. In addition to being banned from national parks for a year, the men are barred from modifying any public signs and must pay $3,035 to repair the Grand Canyon sign. Ironically, investigators learned of the vandalism from TEAL's website, which has now been replaced (at http://www.jeffdeck.com/teal/) by 'A Statement on the Signs of our National Parks and Public Lands'.

[Source: *Private Eye* No 1223, 14–27 November 2008; *The Week*, 13 September 2008; and *The Boston Globe*, 22 August 2008: http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2008/08/22/men_banned_from_national_parks_after_vandalism/]

## 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'). Here you'll also find a table that summarizes each month's content.

## Tell a friend

If you think friends or colleagues would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward the newsletter (or any part of 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 Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177

Plain Language Commission — Home