

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 22,
December 2008

Competition: the proof of the (Christmas) pudding is in the editing

We're offering a copy of Martin Manser's *Good Word Guide* (in bookshops at £12.99) to the reader who sends in the best edit of this piece of turgid text from the website of Connexions South Central. To give you a few clues, there are ambiguities, ungrammaticalities, clichés, a misspelling, longwindedness and faulty punctuation.

Everyone needs somewhere to live. If you don't have much money, are leaving home for the first time or have left home in a hurry, it can be difficult to find somewhere to call home.

Moving out of home

Moving out of home to stay with friends, to rent or even buying a house is a big change in your life which can be exciting, fun and daunting all at the same time with a mass of responsibilities to match. To discover what you're letting yourself in for before you decide to make the leap, please visit this section.

Housing and Disabled People

If you have a disability you may have special housing requirements that help make life easier. You may also be entitled to extra financial help to enable you to live independently. There are several organisations that work to ensure that your needs are met. To find out more information, please visit this section.

Homelessness

Being homeless or being threatened with homelessness is a real scary thing. Whatever the reason, there are steps you can take to ensure that you do not end up on the streets. To find out how, please visit this section. Visit Homeless UK - use the advanced search facility to find accommodation in your local area.

Emergency accommodation

If you are under 16, Social Services have a duty to provide emergency accommodation for you. The local council's have a duty to help with emergency accommodation for over 16's. To find out more information or how to get advice on emergency accommodation, please visit this section.

To enter, edit the text into clear English, preserving the good bits and rewriting the bad, and email the result to pikestaff@clearest.co.uk, with 'Connexions' in the subject line, by 9 January. We'll announce the winner in *Pikestaff 23*.

Plain Language Commission News

Leading charity publishes plain-English review

There's no need for rewriting for Norwood, a UK charity that supports Jewish children, families and adults with disadvantage or learning disabilities. For the first time, the charity has published its Annual Review in plain English only. In previous years, Norwood has produced 2 versions: one in easy English, for its service users, and another in conventional language, for all others. But this year's single version – in plain English – makes sure that what Norwood does is more accessible to all. The review is illustrated with symbols to increase accessibility.

We were pleased to award the document the Clear English Standard, showing it's passed a rigorous check for clarity, grammar and layout. And this isn't the first award for Norwood in 2008: earlier in the year, the charity was awarded 'Positive about Disability' recognition from the government.

Norma Brier, Norwood's Chief Executive said:

It is an exciting innovation for us to be producing our Annual Review in plain English only this year so that we can be more accessible to those who use our services. We believe it is a first for a major charity to take this route and we are very proud that Norwood is breaking the ground in this way. Norwood is evolving and developing our services for the future. Our plain-English Annual Review is a clear sign of our commitment to putting the needs of the people who use our services at the core of what we do.

You can:

- read Norwood's press release about its Annual Review at <http://www.norwood.org.uk/contact-us/pr-media/Latest+News/2008/2008-norwood-news/nw-ar08.htm>
- see the Annual Review 2008 online at <http://viewer.zmags.com/showmag.php?mid=wrsdpd#/page0/>
- find out more about the charity at <http://www.norwood.org.uk/>.

Tip of the month: Don't equivocate – disambiguate

The issue

When we check documents for clarity, we try to get rid of ambiguities. Sometimes – as in the competition text above – it's easy to work out what the writer meant. But if we can't be sure, we'll always add a comment to check.

The Oxford Companion to the English Language defines ambiguity as 'actual or potential uncertainty of meaning, especially if a word, phrase or sentence can be understood in two ways'. Although many ambiguities arise from incorrect grammar or wording, there are 2 types of ambiguity that can be present in perfectly correct sentences:

- lexical ambiguity, arising from an individual word with more than one meaning, for example 'bear', 'lead' and 'cleave' (see our feature on contronyms in *Pikestaff 14*)
- grammatical ambiguity, arising from a sentence structure with more than one meaning, such as 'They are cooking apples', 'They're running the marathon' and 'They can fish'.

As *The Oxford Companion* points out, 'Many statements are ambiguous in isolation, but clear in context or are amenable to logical analysis...In conversation, ambiguity can usually be resolved by asking, 'What do you mean, X or Y?', but in reading there is no one to ask and, unless the term is marked so as to designate the meaning intended, it may be impossible to

distinguish one meaning from another.'

Our advice

1. It's easy to miss an ambiguity in your own writing, because you know what you mean. If you can, leave some time between writing and checking your document, so you can see it more objectively. Ideally, ask someone else to read it through for you too.
2. Be especially careful about words that have another, more specific meaning in the subject area you're writing about. For example, when we edit housing documents, we'd usually change 'let' (in the 'permission' sense) to a clearer synonym, for example 'allow', 'permit', 'consent to' or 'agree to', so readers didn't interpret it as 'rent out'. The same would apply to 'address' and 'deliver' (meaning 'tackle' and 'achieve') in a document about postal services.
3. Take particular care if you're writing headlines. Their compactness makes them particularly prone to ambiguity, sometimes to amusing effect (intentional or accidental). Here are some examples from newspapers:
 - MacArthur flies back to front (referring to the US general during the Korean War)
 - Passengers hit by cancelled trains
 - New vaccine to contain rabies
 - Bridge held up by red tape
 - Man, minus ear, waives hearing
 - Kids make nutritious snacks
 - Panda mating fails; vet takes over.

There are plenty of websites that list more ambiguous headlines, for example <http://www.funny2.com/headlines.htm>, <http://funnies.paco.to/Headlines.html> and http://www.witty-quotes.com/headlines_1.html.

Examples

Two *Pikestaff* readers recently sent us examples of ambiguous English. Here we analyse what's made them ambiguous and suggest simple solutions to clarify them. There are usually several ways to remove the ambiguity, so you may spot others.

Example Dave Brown wrote: 'On a recent driving course I was castigated by the instructor for straddling the white line dividing the road on the approach to a roundabout. My protestation that I was merely following the signed instruction to "Use both lanes for Chesterfield" was not well received.' Reassuringly, he adds '(That isn't really true. I may be a pedant but I'm not a stupid pedant. But it is a stupid sign.)'

The problem The ambiguity arises from the sign being addressed to road users in the plural, rather than to each individual, and so saying 'both'.

A solution It would be clearer to address the sign to individual road users, saying 'Use either lane for Chesterfield'.

Example Marie Dunne wrote: 'As a native of Northern Ireland, I'm deeply concerned. The paragraph below is taken from...a prestigious, glossy, widely distributed publication...An article...explaining the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill opens with the following: "A duty is set for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to promote an integrated health system in Northern Ireland, aimed at vastly reducing the health inequalities, such as life expectancy, that exist between people in the province."' Says Marie: '...to quote one of the many catch-phrases from Dad's Army's Private Frazer, "We're doomed!"'

The problem The verb 'reducing' is a bad choice here; although the writer

intends its object to be 'the health inequalities' only, it can be read as applying to 'life expectancy' too.

A solution The simplest solution is to add 'in' before 'life expectancy', or you could change the verb to something more positive like 'tackling' or 'dealing with'. And we reassured Marie, in similar Dad's-Army style: 'Don't panic!'

I'm a celebrity: get me out of the library!

How would fans feel about the next series of the popular jungle challenge being held in the local library rather than down under?

Previous issues of *Pikestaff* have mentioned the problem of declining linguistic standards, especially in the younger generation. *Independent* columnist Philip Hensher claims it doesn't help when illiterate celebrities portray reading as uncool, as *The Week* reports:

In his latest evangelical cooking crusade, Jamie Oliver went up to Rotherham to teach nutrition to the natives and lecture them on their poor cooking skills...Yet while on his rounds, the celebrity chef was quite happy to tell a young mother who felt she lacked the reading skills to go to catering college that he himself had never read a book in his life. Weird, isn't it? Here is a man on an educational mission who is proud to display his own illiteracy...Oliver is not alone. Many other celebrities, from Noel Gallagher to Posh Spice, have happily boasted of their aversion to reading. When Victorian philanthropists toured South Yorkshire, they left behind a legacy of libraries, concert halls and museums. Maybe it's time for a new Lady Bountiful to descend on Primrose Hill and 'teach smug, overpaid celebrities how to read a book'. It would make a rather good Channel 4 series.

A recent survey of the top reads for those aged 11 to 14 shows that many young people are uninterested in reading books: top of the poll was the celebrity magazine *Heat*, followed by the teenage magazine *Bliss*, and song lyrics online. The Harry Potter stories, which came fifth, were the first books on the list. The most hated reads were homework, Shakespeare and books with more than 100 pages.

Yet Shakespeare featured as a favourite author in a nationwide poll of adults, coming in at number 5. The Bard was beaten by Enid Blyton, who topped the poll (selling 8 million books a year, 40 years after her death), Roald Dahl, JK Rowling (apparently popular with all ages) and Jane Austen. As for the least popular, perhaps a good clue lies in the books left behind in hotel rooms: Travelodge reveals the 3 books most often abandoned in its rooms are John Prescott's *Prezza: My Story: Pulling No Punches* in the top slot, followed by *My Booky Wook* (by Russell Brand) and Cherie Blair's autobiography. Other authors whose books feature in the top 10 include Piers Morgan, Katie Price, Alvin Hall and – more surprisingly – Ian McEwan.

Paul Anstey, Travelodge Operations Director, said: 'Annually 7,000 books are left behind in Travelodge hotels, the most popular being autobiographies, chick lit and thriller books. This summer we have found a number of money-saving books, revealing just how much the credit crunch is taking hold.' Other findings from the survey of 336 Travelodge hotel managers revealed the following:

- At Southend on Sea Travelodge, guests left behind 12 copies of *The Cell* by Stephen King. Also found was a copy of *The best 50 lovemaking positions for the over 50s*.
- At Southampton Eastleigh Travelodge, one customer left behind books

entitled *How to be a gentleman in seven days* and *The Kama Sutra for Dummies*. [Is this about blow-up dolls? – Ed]

Another title you may wish to avoid when choosing books as gifts is Jake Chapman's *The Marriage of Love and Squalor*. Launching his debut novel at Foyle's in London, Chapman said:

Reading it is rather like sucking a lemon. What I've done is a terminal misuse of a metaphor, making it very difficult for the book to be understood. I've always been turgid, dark and venturing on the suicidal. This is not something fresh and bouncy, and if someone's thinking that's what it is they shouldn't read the book. Actually, maybe no one should read it at all. Yes, don't read it.

Nothing like self-promotion (ambiguity intended).

[*The Week*, 1 November 2008; *The Week*, 5 April 2008; *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 August 2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2580093/Enid-Blyton-beats-Roald-Dahl-and-JK-Rowling-to-be-voted-Britains-best-loved-author.html>; *InfoPlus* (ISTC newsletter), November 2008; and *The Week*, 22 November 2008]

Linguistic links: National Year of Reading

It might be nearly over, but did you know that 2008 has been the National Year of Reading. [So will 2009 be the National Year of Slough? – Ed] It describes itself as 'a year-long celebration of reading, in all its forms', which aims to 'increase awareness of the many values of reading – anything, anytime, anyplace – for children, families and adult learners alike'. The initiative is managed by a consortium of organizations that promote reading, led by the National Literacy Trust and The Reading Agency, and on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. You can visit this website of the National Year of Reading at <http://www.yearofreading.org.uk/>, which includes Wikireadia, the first online good-practice guide for anyone supporting readers.

Clichés cornered 4

Here's the fourth in our series on clichés, which our research director, Martin Cutts, wrote for *The Independent*. We'll feature the fifth – and last – piece in January's *Pikestaff*.

'Blue-sky thinking'

Business clichés may be the comfort food of corporate America but they're widely used here too. I rather like the more expressive ones: 'thinking outside the box', 'picking the low-hanging fruit', 'blue-sky thinking' and 'eating your own dog food' (ie, using your own products). Others seem to overstrain for effect: 'pushing the envelope' (test-pilot jargon – 'exceeding the limits'); 'it's the elephant in the room' (something obvious that no-one dares mention – like a pungent fart); and 'let's boil the ocean' (attempt the impossible). If you're in a soft job, macho clichés are pretentious and best avoided, eg 'I wouldn't die in a ditch for it'; 'she's on the frontline/at the coalface'; and 'we're caught between a rock and a hard place'.

Anti Ambiguity's agony column

Thanks to associate Christina Gleeson, who sent in these examples of not-very-ecclesiastical English, taken from church newsletters:

- Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.
- Don't let worry kill you off – let the Church help.
- For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.
- Next Thursday there will be tryouts for the choir. They need all the help they can get.
- A bean supper will be held on Tuesday evening in the church hall. Music will follow.
- At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What Is Hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice.
- Eight new choir robes are currently needed due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.
- The eighth-graders will be presenting Shakespeare's Hamlet in the Church basement Friday at 7 PM. The congregation is invited to attend this tragedy.

Christmas wishes to you

As usual, instead of sending cards to our customers, we'll be making a donation to support the education of children in Peru and India through Plan International.

We wish readers of all religions and none a very happy Christmas, and a successful year ahead. And if your prezzies include a book you'd rather leave in a hotel, we've a useful line for your thank-you note, courtesy of Benjamin Disraeli. When an aspiring writer sent him an uninteresting manuscript, Dizzy (as his friends called him, blissfully unaware he would one day share the moniker with the orange cement-mixer in Bob the Builder) liked to reply: 'Many thanks for your book. I shall waste no time in reading it.'

Contribute

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

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