

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 23, January 2009

Linguistic link: farewell and thanks to Dubya the Grammarian

Outgoing US president and noted word-mangler George W Bush could have been forgiven a parting smirk as he watched the country's 2 top lawyers get their texts in a tangle at the Obama inauguration love-fest. Dubya's rich legacy of verbal roadkill includes our favourite language-related items:

- You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test.
- Rarely is the questioned asked: is our children learning?
- One word sums up probably the responsibility of any governor, and that word is 'to be prepared'.
- If we don't succeed, we run the risk of failure.
- I have made good judgments in the past. I have made good judgments in the future.
- It isn't pollution that's harming our environment. It's the impurities in our air and water that are doing it.
- I believe we are on an irreversible trend towards more freedom and democracy – but that could change.
- A low voter turnout is an indication of fewer people going to the polls.
- We are ready for any unforeseen event that may or may not occur.

For more of the same, visit <http://www.dubyaspeak.com/>. They're arranged in categories, including the particularly fine 'Dubya the Grammarian'. Missing ya already, George.

News from Plain Language Commission

Halifax Bank uses Clear English Standard

Drop in to your local Halifax branch and there's every chance you'll be able to pick up some leaflets bearing the Clear English Standard, which shows they've passed our rigorous test of clarity, good grammar and clear layout. The bank is one of our new corporate members, having joined in September. Membership gives priority treatment and discounts on our services – more details on our website www.clearest.co.uk.

Results of Christmas competition

Last month, we asked you to edit this text into clear English, preserving the good bits and rewriting the bad:

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.

Our thanks to everyone who sent in entries. In this case, it's no cliché to say it was impossible to choose a winner: every text improved the original, which contained a host of stylistic and linguistic problems, including the following:

- Ungrammaticalities – the structure in 'Moving out of home to stay with friends, to rent or even buying a home...' is incorrect, as all our entrants noticed. This needs to say either 'Moving out of home to stay with friends, or (to) rent or even buy a house...' (if you see 'house' as the object of 'rent' as well as 'buy') or 'Moving out of home to stay with friends, (to) rent or even buy a house...' (if you see 'rent' here as intransitive: having no object).
And 'real scary' is terrible ungrammatical too. 'Really scary' would be the correct form, or you could do as our entrants did and edit this down to just 'scary' or change it, say to 'daunting' or 'worrying'.
- Ambiguities – 'somewhere to call home' could mean a place to live or a place from which to make a phone call to your home. Or possibly both, if your housing stock includes Tardises. 'Somewhere to live' is much clearer. And we doubt that having special housing requirements makes life easier.
- A cliché – 'make the leap' (much used by newspapers with stories about trampoliners or amphibians) isn't great style but, more importantly, could be difficult to understand for those whose first language isn't English. We agreed that the simpler 'decide to move' is clearer.
- Inconsistent use of capitals – all headings are in sentence case except for 'Housing and Disabled People', which is in title case.
- A misspelling – 'accomodation'.
- Faulty punctuation – 2 greengrocers apostrophe's in 'the local council's' and 'over 16's', and a hyphen instead of en-dash (a minor error we often see) in 'Visit Homeless UK - use the advanced search...' (Watch out for more on hyphens and dashes in a future *Pikestaff*.)

Of course, style and language aren't the only considerations in writing clearly. As we mentioned in our tip of the month this time last year, we reflect this in our PROCESS METHOD – a mnemonic (memory aid) for the initials of the 5 steps: purpose, content, structure, style, and revision of everything. Several of our entries picked up these aspects of the text;

particularly good suggestions included the following:

- (Content) 2 entrants added in the website address of Homeless UK to save readers having to look for it themselves.
- (Content) One of these also included a phone number for the charity, as another means of making contact.
- (Structure) Another entrant opened the text using a bullet-pointed list:

You could be:

- leaving home for the first time
- disabled
- homeless
- in an emergency or without money.

The items in this list could then be repeated as headings for the 4 sub-sections. We liked these headings because they were parallel – that is, they are all words or phrases that describe the person's situation. In contrast, the original text contains an illogical mix of headings; for example, each paragraph is about housing, so why include the word in the paragraph about disabled people only? And 'Homelessness' is a situation, while 'Emergency accommodation' is a solution.

Because of the equally high standard of the entries, we put the contestants' names in a hat, and are pleased to say that Judi Kennedy-Clarke has won a copy of Martin Manser's *Good Word Guide*. And as a New Year gift we're sending all the others a copy of Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English*.

Writing for the web

One entrant, Bruce Corsino, made the point that 'often, the true "best edit" of any website is to remove 90% of the words'. We'll be looking at writing for the web in *Pikestaff* next month, including recommending resources to help you with this. If you have a favourite book or website on this topic, please let us know so we can include it.

***Oxford Guide to Plain English* used in new US programme**

Writer Kelly Eskridge (<http://www.kelleyeskridge.com/>) is using the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* as a key textbook in a programme developed for managers, Humans At Work.

Humans At Work aims to give people the skills to manage human beings well. It uses facilitated discussion to help them relate concepts to their own experience, then encourages them to apply their new skills in the workplace between sessions. Eskridge is making the content available free under a Creative Commons License (a concept that originated in the US: hence the 's' in 'license'). You can read more about the programme at <http://www.humansatwork.com/>.

Report aims to clarify US disclosure

In more good news from the US, a report has been published of the 21st Century Disclosure Initiative, directed by William Lutz on behalf of the US Securities and Exchange Commission. We reported on earlier stages of this project – which aims to revamp the way companies provide information to the investing public – in *Pikestaff* 18 and 21.

You can read the full report, *Towards Greater Transparency: Modernizing the Securities and Exchange Commission's Disclosure System*, which includes an executive summary, at <http://www.sec.gov/spotlight/disclosureinitiative/report.shtml>.

[Thanks to William Lutz for passing us this link.]

The power of simplicity

It's just possible that clearer and simpler company documents would improve the economic situation. A new survey by Siegel+Gale of 1,214 American homeowners and investors has found that 75% believe complexity has played a major role in the current financial crisis. The survey reports:

Fully 84% of all consumers say they are more likely to trust a company that uses jargon-free, plain English in communications. And 79% say they think it is 'very important' that President Obama 'mandate that clarity, transparency, and plain English be a requirement of every new law, regulation and policy'.

The survey asked how much jargon-free, plain-English explanations and disclosures would affect consumer interest in a number of categories. Consumers reported increased interest of:

- 79% in investing in a financial product
- 73% in selecting a broker or a financial advisor
- 67% in purchasing a life insurance policy
- 63% in taking out a loan
- 63% in applying for a credit card.

'Transparency and authenticity are the new marketing imperatives,' said Lee Rafkin, Siegel+Gale's Global Director of Simplification. 'People are...desperate for institutions and brands that offer simple and honest communications they can understand. That's the clear message.'

More at <http://www.siegelgale.com/dialogue/2009/01/14/president-obama-make-clarity-transparency-simplicity-a-priority-say-the-american-people/>. Now that's what we call a simple link.

[Thanks to Cheryl Stephens for the details.]

Cliché Corner 5: 'What's the USP?'

Acronyms are code, and writing in code is bad manners unless readers have the key. The effect is worsened when acronyms form part of a hackneyed phrase, such as 'What's the USP [unique selling point]?' or 'a bit OTT [over the top]'. So if you need to use acronyms, explain them on first use or provide a glossary. Long before the need to save space in text messages and lonely hearts adverts, Roman soldiers were inscribing SPQR (senatus populusque Romanus – the senate and the Roman people) on their banners, and Pontius Pilate was writing INRI (Iesus Nazarenus rex Iudaeorum – Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews) on the cross at Calvary. The Cold War's most apposite acronym was MAD (mutually assured destruction). Although acronyms usually take capitals, the individual words they comprise need capitals only if they're proper nouns. So value added tax (VAT) and information technology (IT) are written thus. RIP (requiescat in pace – rest in peace) is a rare example of an acronym having the same initials in 2 languages. There should be a word for this – perhaps 'acrobilinguanym'.

[Written by Martin Cutts, this piece was first published by *The Independent*, as part of its Improve Your English feature.]

Readers write

UK usage is up Jacobs Creek

Reader Ken Jones, head of communications for a Birmingham City Council department, wrote with this query about an interesting aspect of apostrophes:

It seems to be generally accepted that the possessive apostrophe should not be used in place names such as Kings Heath, Kings Norton, Queens Park, Bishops Town and Bishops Wood, or even St Albans Cathedral and St Pancras Station. Is there any hard and fast rule on this, or on the use of any other sort of punctuation in place names?

We replied:

According to *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, apostrophes are not needed at all in place names in Australia and the US, thanks to the Geographical Names Board and the Board on Geographic Names respectively.

In Britain, there's no such clearcut solution, and apostrophe use is unpredictable. *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* gives these examples: Kings Cross versus King's Lynn; St Albans versus St Martin's; St Helens (Lancashire) and St Helen's (Isle of Wight). It goes on to advise checking individual names in the *Post Office Guide* or *Oxford Atlas*.

Birmingham has since decided to remove all apostrophes from local street and place names. Martin Mullaney, chairman of the council's transportation scrutiny committee, said: 'The consensus of the city council on the future use of possessive apostrophes in place names is that they should not be reintroduced. This view will, I know, upset a lot of residents... The cost [of reintroduction] would be astronomical.'

The Times (30 January 2009) reports that although the same ban applies in the US, 5 exceptions are allowed including Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. Read more at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article5614962.ece>.

Admiration for corporation's disambiguation quotation

Thanks to reader Julia Buckland, who sent in this quotation from the BBC's style guide: 'It's not enough that everything we write is easy to understand; it must be incapable of being misunderstood.'

Tip of the month: be relatively clear – use the pronoun what's right

The issue

This month, we've had 2 emails about the difference between 'that' and 'which' used as relative pronouns. Here's one, from solicitor John Pare, who had received a legal document containing regular use of 'which'. John writes:

I am inclined to the view that if the words following 'which' merely describe the preceding word, then 'that' is better, using 'which' only where putting a comma before it will not make nonsense of the sentence. We had at least one point where, if you could not be sure whether he [the writer] had intentionally omitted the comma, the sense changed completely between having the comma, and not having it. I once had a report from an engineer where this was the case, and without the comma the sentence contradicted the one either before or after it, rendering

his report entirely inconclusive.

An example that/which illustrates the point

- A. He stopped the second car that was driven by a woman.
- B. He stopped the second car, which was driven by a woman.

For careful readers, these sentences have quite different meanings:

- In A, the phrase 'that was driven by a woman' tells us which car he stopped. Notice the phrase is not separated from the main sentence ('He stopped the second car') by any punctuation. The man stopping cars is looking for a car driven by a woman – maybe he has to wait for 30 cars to pass before the second car driven by a woman goes past.
- In B, the man stops the second car. The phrase ', which was driven by a woman' is additional information. Notice the phrase is separated from the main part of the sentence by a comma.

It's not wrong in fact to write 'which' without a comma in front, but it is unclear. You could write sentence A thus:

He stopped the second car which was driven by a woman.

But now we have only the comma to show its difference in meaning from sentence B. If all writers could be relied on to use the comma correctly, that'd be OK. But, as John mentioned, they often don't and ambiguity results.

Our advice

We give this advice on our courses:

Use these 3 guidelines (they're not rules) in sequence to help you work out when to use 'that' or ',which', or when to use nothing at all.

1. Leave out 'that' if you can do so without causing the reader to 'miscue' or stumble: 'He complained that he was late' = 'He complained he was late.'
2. Prefer 'that' to 'which'. If you can say the sentence with 'that' or 'which' and both sound fine, then choose 'that'.
3. If you need to put a word but 'that' doesn't fit, then use ', which'.

Most users of British English, including journalists on the 'quality' papers, ignore these guidelines. In the US, the topic is specifically taught in schools and colleges, and people seem to be stricter about what's right and wrong.

Commission runs courses for European Ombudsman

We recently ran 2 courses on writing skills for staff of the European Ombudsman, whose office investigates complaints about maladministration in the institutions and bodies of the European Union. In an interview for the newsletter of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association, Nikiforos Diamandouros said:

Among the multitude of approaches to making ourselves more accessible to vulnerable groups is developing simplified language – which doesn't mean simplistic language. I think the UK-based Plain Language Commission is an important initiative that should be emulated across the board by all ombudsmen because vulnerable groups very often are not only disabled people but people who may have limited education, and so their capacity to

generate wooden language written by administrations of all kinds is limited.

In the last 30 years, our team of presenters has gained an unrivalled store of experience by providing more than 3,000 on-site writing-skills courses for government bodies, companies, councils and law firms. Many of these organizations return to us repeatedly, trusting us to pitch courses at the right level, to respect and develop the existing knowledge and skills of their staff, and to provide rational writing and editing methods.

We can tailor courses to meet your writers' needs, which we identify by discussion with you and by studying their writing examples. The style is informal and participative, with practical work, quizzes and group work. As needed, we can devise courses on particular topics. For more on this, visit our website at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=26>.

[Source: *The Ombudsman*, December 2008: <http://www.bioa.org.uk/theombudsman/36.pdf>]

Poo(r) proofreading (probably)

If you do attend one of our courses, we hope you won't need the final category on an evaluation form given to our associate Ian Hembrow at a seminar he attended recently. The form offered 4 boxes: 'Very good', 'Good', 'Less than satisfactory', and 'Poo'.

It was either a typo or the start of a new fashion for candid commentary. How often have you longed for a box saying 'Utter bollocks from start to finish'? [Now when's the next equality and diversity seminar? – Ed.]

And my quote marks have gone south too

Finally, as Valentine's Day approaches, a local paper has this interestingly punctuated hint for singles looking for love:

It is...important not to pour out endless problems, or put out any negative comments, such as 'I'm fat, or I have big ears.'

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

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