Pikestaff 24
Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 24, February 2009

Tip of the month: don't waffle on the web

The issue
In last month's *Pikestaff*, Bruce Corsino suggested that 'often, the true "best edit" of any website is to remove 90% of the words'.

But is there really any difference between writing for print and for the web? Some writers think not. For example, communication consultant Philip Yaffe notes: 'Ever since it became popular, I have been hearing that writing for the Web is different from writing for print. I have always been skeptical of this assertion and now after years of experience I am certain that it is wrong.' And a reader's letter to *Communicator* magazine asserts: 'I've always thought that there is virtually no difference between writing for web and print.'

Our advice
Certainly, most plain-English guidelines are just as relevant to writing for the web as for print. Some experts say that people read differently on screen, as they tend to scan web pages quickly and read less; others argue this is equally true of busy people reading printed texts. Either way, you'll likely have more design features open to you when writing for the web (with hyperlinks possible, and colour at no extra cost), so use these (sensibly) to highlight key words.

Another difference may be that people take a less linear route through a website than a paper text. Eyetracking studies show that web users tend to scan pages in an F-pattern (first a horizontal scan at the top, then a shorter one lower down, and finally a vertical scan of the left side). There are clear implications for web authors, says usability expert Jakob Nielsen: 'Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words that users will notice when scanning down the left side of your content in the final stem of their F-behavior. They'll read the third word on a line much less often than the first two words.'

Finally, think about the practical differences between reading from the page and the screen:

- Bear in mind the size of a typical computer screen: if users have to scroll down to find something, they may never see it.
- Some fonts are more legible than others on the web, working well for different platforms (Microsoft and Macintosh) and browsers (eg Firefox, Internet Explorer and Netscape). We recommend Verdana, Trebuchet MS, Tahoma and Georgia.
- People use search engines to find sites – so write first paragraphs for each page, and particularly your home page, that include the words people will use to search for the things you offer.

Readers' recommended resources
Thank you to Annetta Cheek, Bruce Corsino, Jessica Enders and Ali Turnbull for sending in details of useful books on writing for the web:

- *Hot Text: Web Writing That Works* by Jonathan and Lisa Price (published by New Riders, 2002)
- *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works* by Janice (Ginny) Redish (Morgan Kaufman, 2007)
- *Killer Web Content: Make the Sale, Deliver the Service, Build the Brand* by Gerry McGovern (A & C Black, 2006)
- *The Web Content Style Guide: The Essential Reference for Onlne Writers, Editors and Managers* by Gerry McGovern, Rob Norton and Catherine O'Dowd (Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 2001)

Also, the new edition of Martin Cutts's book, the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (out in September) will have a chapter on writing for the web.

[Source: *Communicator*, Summer 2005 (letter from Malcolm Beaumont)]

Linguistic link: useit.com

Jakob Nielsen is a leading web usability consultant, born and educated in Denmark. Nielsen writes a regular column on web design, Alertbox, and has published several books on the subject. He cofounded and works with the Nielsen Norman Group, a US-based usability consulting company.

Nielsen's website, at www.useit.com, contains a wealth of useful information on web design. Here you can also sign up to receive new Alertboxes when they are published.

Information Commissioner condemns misleading small print

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), the independent body that promotes public access to official information and protects personal information, is calling for an overhaul of privacy and marketing small print. The move follows a survey last month by YouGov, which reveals that half of consumers don't understand what they're signing up to when they fill in online and paper forms:

- 47% of those questioned believe small print is purposely designed to be as woolly as possible and 42% see it simply as a vehicle for companies to make money by selling on customers' details.
- 71% admit to not properly reading or understanding the small print.
- 67% want to see a clearer way of opting out of receiving marketing material.
- 63% per cent want less jargon in small print.
- 62% want a clearer explanation of how their personal information will be used.
- 50% suggested that small print should literally become 'big print' by using larger text.

So the ICO, one of our corporate members, has launched a national consultation on a new Code of Practice designed to help organizations provide small print that's easier to digest. Information Commissioner Richard Thomas said:

> Too many privacy notices involve too much small print and too much confusing gobbledegook. Privacy notices are an important way to inform individuals and ensure that organisations are open about how they use personal information. But no-one should need a magnifying glass or a lawyer to find out what will happen to their information, what their choices are and what their rights are. Too many privacy notices are written to protect

organisations, rather than to inform consumers. What chance do people have if privacy notices are written in complex legalese? How can you make an informed decision without understanding what you are signing up to? Organisations should only collect the minimum of personal information and they must explain what they will do with it in clear, plain language.

[Source: http://www.ico.gov.uk/upload/documents/pressreleases /2009/spbp_pressrelease.pdf]

Ethnic and other personal data: to collect or not to collect?

So organizations should collect only the minimum of personal information: how does this fit with collecting data from people (for example, job applicants and complainants) on their sex, any disabilities, age, sexual orientation, ethnic origin and faith?

One view is that there's only one race – the human race – and that collecting such data divides people into arbitrary groups, deepening rifts instead of uniting the population. In France, the principle of equality enshrined in the Constitution (think 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité') makes it impossible to collect data based on race, or even to count minorities in census data.

But many people believe collecting this data is a prerequisite to improving equality. As Katy Negrin comments on the website of the Open Society Institute's EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP), 'sound minority policy must be based upon accurate information related to minority populations'. And various studies suggest that most people agree this is important. For example, research into patients' attitudes towards healthcare providers collecting information about their race and ethnicity showed that around 80% of patients 'somewhat or strongly' agreed with organizations doing so.

If your organization wishes to collect such data, it shouldn't assume that everyone will feel comfortable providing it. Indeed, the healthcare survey showed that 28% of patients had 'significant discomfort' reporting their own race and ethnicity to a clerk, and 58% were 'somewhat or very' concerned that this information could be used to discriminate unfairly against patients. Negrin advises:

> Involvement of minorities themselves in all aspects of data collection is one crucial means of addressing some of the inherent problems of ethnic data collection and ensuring safety and proper utilisation of such data for developing and implementing sound minority policies.

We believe it's also good practice to:

- explain clearly why you want the information and what you'll use it for
- offer a get-out clause to people who object to providing this type of data.

[Sources: http://www.eumap.org/journal/features/2003/april/oldilemma and http://www.france24.com/en/20081218-promoting-ethnic-diversity-through-social-criteria-france-sarkozy-yazid-sabeg]

Readers write

Phew…er

Peter Neill wrote with a tricky grammatical question:

> My local leisure centre has amongst its rules: 'If there is less than two people attending a class, the management has the right to cancel the session.' I mentally changed it to: 'If there are fewer . . .' but then I got to thinking that fewer than two is one, so maybe it should be 'If there is fewer than two people . . .' I know that it could be changed to 'If only one person attends a class . . .' but what do you think? Singular or plural?

We agree that the neatest solution, as Peter suggests, is to rephrase the sentence (which also reduces its complexity and number of words). But if you had to use 'is' or 'are', we think 'are' is the correct choice, given its closeness to the plural noun 'people'.

A good way of checking what other people would do in tricky situations like this is to search the British National Corpus (BNC), and Yahoo News (on which writing standards are generally higher than on the web in general, as it contains only edited articles). The BNC has no instances of 'is fewer than two', and only one of 'are fewer than two'. The numbers are the same on Yahoo News (the example is a different one). Searching the web more generally (using Yahoo), we got 1,690 hits for 'is fewer than two' and 18,300 for 'are fewer than two'.

These results suggest that writers usually avoid the construction, but that where it is used, people are generally happier with the plural.

Transtlantic translations
In the meantime, a US reader – 'permanently scarred and self-conscious' after last year believing he'd contracted the FROM virus (see *Pikestaff 17* and *18*) – emailed with a fresh crisis: 'When I wrote this sentence today – "The total budget request for 2009 is not different than 2008" – my grammar-checking software asked me to change 'than' to 'from'. What's your guidance?'

We replied: 'Do not fret: as before, we can reassure you that your usage is absolutely fine in US English. *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* says that "…the use of different than…is standard in American English, according to *Webster's English Usage* (1989)".'

American and British English differ not only in spelling and vocabulary – for example 'center' versus 'centre', and 'sidewalk' versus 'pavement' (which incidentally is used in American English, but to mean what Brits would call 'road surface'). As American Pie, which specializes in 'translating in either direction between British and American texts' notes:

> British and American English are slowly but surely becoming more and more distinct. The differences are no longer limited to different spellings of the same word. Whole writing styles need to be adjusted for the different audiences on each side of the Atlantic and elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

There'll be more on the differences between American and British English in a future *Pikestaff*. If you've any material we could use – serious or amusing – please email pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

[Source: http://www.americanization.com/language.html]

Plain Language Act reintroduced

In the United States on 10 February, Representative Bruce Braley

reintroduced the Plain Language Act of 2009. This bill would require the federal government to write documents like tax returns, grant application forms, websites, and pension forms in simple, easy-to-understand language. As we reported in *Pikestaff 14* and *15*, the bill attracted support from both the Democrats and Republicans in 2008, and was passed by the House of Representatives by a vote of 376-1; but the Senate didn't act on it.

Braley said:

> As Congress debates the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act this week, it's appropriate to renew the effort to make government documents easy to understand so people can track how their taxpayer dollars are being spent. Writing government documents in plain language will increase government accountability and will save Americans time and money.
>
> Anyone who has done their own taxes knows the headache of trying to understand pages and pages of confusing forms and instructions. There is no reason why the federal government can't write these forms and other public documents in a way we can all understand. We need to pass this bill to make it easier for Americans to work with and understand their government.

As the website of the Center for Plain Language comments, 'this bill would be a great help to consumers and business'. If you'd like to support the Plain Language Act, you can find a sample letter of support, and information on where and how to send your letter, on the Center's website at http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org/events/index.html.

News from Plain Language Commission

Plain language in law
We recently received an email from the communications officer at a local council:

> I've been trying to find something to counter the argument, mainly used by our policy and legal people, that specific parts of government acts should be written as they are published and not translated into plain English. I have so far been unsuccessful in my quest to find anything. Have you uncovered anything that proves changing such text into plain English does not affect the statements legally?

We replied:

> As you suggest, it's not good to send people raw chunks of law to digest, but it is important not to assume that a translation into plain English is legally watertight unless it's been checked with a lawyer. There are lawyers that specialize in such work – the association Clarity may be of use here (http://www.clarity-international.net/).
>
> There is plenty of evidence that plain-English translations approved by lawyers are fine; a useful source here would be Professor Joe Kimble's work on legal writing – see http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/.
>
> An alternative approach is to send the actual text (making it clear that this is the original, for example using quote marks), with a plain-English translation, pointing out that this is a paraphrase and advising readers to get advice from a solicitor or

citizens advice bureau if need be.

We also suggested that the council may like to consider hosting our seminar 'Clarity for Lawyers'. We have run this course for numerous solicitors' firms and local councils. A half-day seminar for up to 12 people costs £750, plus travel expenses and VAT, and one-day versions are also available.

At your service
You probably know that we provide editing, accreditation and training services: find out more on our website at http://www.clearest.co.uk/. But we also offer other specialist services that use our English-language skills to improve business communication. For example, we can:

- develop a style guide for your organization (more in a future *Pikestaff*)
- assess the readability of your (printed or online) text, to give you an idea of how easily your readers will understand it.

Are there other things you wish we could do for your organization? If you've any ideas for new services that you'd find useful, please pass them on!

Slips and trips

In a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, Michael Reeves writes:

> We are informed that 'when men are stressed, they are more likely to crave alcohol than women'. Among the highly stressed men with whom I have worked, most would appear to crave both.

On an unrelated note, we hope, we were interested to read an annual report praising the skills of the organization's volunteers, 'men and women willing to drop everything at a moment's notice to deal with an emergency in their community'.

And the UK seems set to face a different type of emergency, as noted in an advert for Healthcare Events' conference on older people's falls: 'Falls will be introduced in January 2009 as a new stream of the National Patient Safety First Campaign.'

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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