

Pikestaff

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'Master of the rules but also a proponent of flexibility'

Bill Sabin, author of *The Gregg Reference Manual*, died in Maine, US, on New Year's Day. The website of McGraw-Hill, which published Bill's book, notes:

That Mr. Sabin had an unwavering personal commitment to his craft is the foundation of his legacy. He was a highly consulted authority on the written word, and he truly enjoyed interacting with his community through the "Ask the Author" section of his Web site. Mr. Sabin delighted in finding practical and straightforward solutions to seemingly impossible writing conundrums. It was not uncommon for Mr. Sabin to call up those who sent him queries about grammar or style to engage them in lively conversation. His conversations with his readers sparked ideas that he incorporated into revised editions of *The Gregg Reference Manual*.

Bill was a great advocate of plain language, and attended the 2005 conference of the Plain Language Association InterNational in Washington DC, where he gave an awe-inspiring yet humbly delivered speech that's still talked about today. McGraw-Hill goes on to mention Bill's 'extraordinary sense of humor and gift for storytelling', a theme that's picked up in his obituary:

Bill was master of the rules but also a proponent of flexibility. If anyone presented him with a complex grammatical dilemma, he would quietly suggest that the same idea could be expressed a simpler way. For an analogy to good writing, he often told the story of the visitor to New York who gave the cabbie the exact fare but no tip. When the taxi driver still held out his hand expectantly, the visitor inquired, "Isn't that correct?" To which the cabbie replied, 'It's correct, lady, but it ain't right.' Bill insisted that good writing had to take into account more than what was merely correct.

One of Bill's anecdotes focused on the challenge of managing 5 children when his wife was out of town: he recommended paper plates, meals of peas and corn niblets with cocktail sticks as cutlery, and the 'back-to-front' meal that started with dessert (see if anyone is hungry after the first course) as handy techniques for lessening labour and occupying offspring.

Bill Sabin finished the 11th edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* shortly before he died. It is expected to be published in 2010.

[Sources: <http://www.mhhe.com/business/buscom/gregg/> and http://www.mhhe.com/business/buscom/gregg/William_A_Sabin.pdf]

Tip of the month: don't dangle your partner by his participles

The issue

In *Pikestaff 18*, we quoted this letter to *The Times*:

Sir, I was most interested in Mark Henderson's article on the fact that men think differently (June 20). Especially fascinating was that "men are more proficient at visualising objects when rotated in space". I am now trying to work out a way of rotating my husband in space in the hope that he will be able to visualise such objects as an iron, an ironing board and a dishcloth.

It's a type of dangling construction – 'when rotated...' – that makes this sentence ambiguous. *The Gregg Reference Manual* notes:

When a sentence begins [or ends] with a participial phrase, an infinitive phrase, a gerund phrase, or an elliptical clause (one in which essential words are missing), make sure that the phrase or clause logically agrees with the subject of the sentence; otherwise, the construction will "dangle."

Examples

Here's an example of each type of dangling construction that Bill Sabin mentioned above:

Participial phrase: Stashed away in the attic for the past hundred years, the owner of the painting has decided to auction it off.

Infinitive phrase: To obtain this free booklet, the enclosed coupon should be mailed at once.

Gerund phrase: By installing a computerized temperature control system, a substantial saving in fuel costs was achieved.

Elliptical clause: When four years old, my family moved to Omaha.

Our advice

Add in the doer of the action if you can, or else rewrite the sentence using a different construction. Of course, this assumes you've noticed the ambiguity yourself. As it's notoriously difficult to proofread your own work, try to get someone to read through any important documents you write.

Adding the doer to the examples above would produce these revised versions:

- When objects are rotated in space, men are better at visualising them.
- The owner of the painting that has been stashed away in the attic for the past hundred years has decided to auction it off.
- To obtain this free booklet, mail the enclosed coupon at once.
- By installing a computerized temperature control system, we achieved a substantial saving in fuel costs.
- When I was four years old, my family moved to Omaha.

[Source: *The Times*, 20 June 2008: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article4182150.ece>]

Plain Language Commission news

Welcome to Consumer Focus Scotland

We're pleased to welcome as our newest corporate member Consumer Focus Scotland, the new organization working to secure a fair deal for consumers across Scotland. Read more at <http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk/en/content/cms/scotland/scotland.aspx>.

Corporate membership brings many benefits including 20% discount on our accreditation of documents with the Clear English Standard and 10% discount on our in-house courses.

Producing Effective Information for Patients: The Key Issues

This was the title of this year's Patient Information Forum (PIF) conference, held in Manchester. Our associate Sarah Carr attended the day, which included sessions on:

- lessons from the Information Accreditation Scheme
- improving diversity in patient information and access
- information prescriptions
- health literacy.

The Information Accreditation Scheme is being developed by the Department of Health, with the help of VEGA Group. It will allow organizations that produce health information to apply for accreditation – not for the individual leaflets and so on that they produce, but for the processes and systems involved in their production.

Version 5 of the draft standard (which you can download at <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare/PatientChoice/BetterInformationChoicesHealth/Informationaccreditation/index.htm>) is being tested with 40 organizations from the voluntary, public and commercial sectors. This includes a requirement that 'the information producer shall describe the processes it uses to make sure information is well designed, easy to read and use' (which itself is ungrammatical: there should be an 'and' before 'easy'). The accompanying guidance suggests that organizations should include in their descriptions the processes they use to:

1. identify what languages are appropriate to the target audience;
2. identify and include any specific navigation aids such as contents lists, indexing and search facilities; and
3. make sure you use good design principles including the use of plain language.

But it's a pity that the examples given as 'good writing' later in the document include wordy phrases like these:

- 'Smoking has been shown to be a contributing factor in many conditions.' ('Smoking contributes to many illnesses.')
- 'In recent NICE guidance it was stated...' ('Recent NICE guidance stated...')
- 'It is our view that...' ('We think...')

The Department of Health expects to start the scheme later this year; it will be run by an independent supplier, with 6 certification bodies working to the UK Accreditation Service. There'll be more detailed guidance for organizations wishing to apply, including case studies, a portal to share ideas, and a self-assessment tool. Organizations gaining accreditation will hold it for 3 years, possibly with a check after 18 months, at an estimated fee of £2,000–3,000.

If your organization is planning to seek accreditation, why not ask us to help you fulfil the plain-language part of the standard? We're also ideally placed to complement the scheme's accreditation of systems and processes by accrediting – with our Clear English Standard – individual health information leaflets.

Clear English Could Be a Big Winner in the Facebook Affair

That headline from *The New York Times* of 18 February opened a piece commenting on the 'fierce reaction by Facebook users' when *The Consumerist* noticed that a new agreement stopped users cancelling Facebook's rights to their content when they removed it from the site. With Facebook's user agreement saying it can 'use, copy, publish, stream, store,

retain, publicly perform or display, transmit, scan, reformat, modify, edit, frame, translate, excerpt, adapt, create derivative works and distribute (through multiple tiers)' all the words and pictures created by its users, people began to imagine situations like 'that coffee table book with your frat party photos appearing in bookstores the day you are up for partner at the law firm'.

The *New York Times* believes the furore 'may indicate a new and useful sensitivity to legal fine print', and has led to Facebook reverting to the old version of the agreement until it drafts a new one. Facebook's chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said: 'We think that a lot of the language in our terms is overly formal and protective.' The new version, he promised, 'will be written clearly in language everyone can understand'.

This may be good news: last year, BBC3 commissioned us to report on the readability of Facebook's Principles and Terms of Use. We used our specialist software and skills in analysing style and language to assess the clarity of this text. The report was used in a documentary ('Mischief – Your Identity for Sale'), shown at 9pm on 11 September 2008. Read more at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/Facebook.pdf>.

According to the newspaper, there are 2 reasons for people becoming concerned 'about legal mumbo jumbo now when they have been ignoring fine print in warranties and bank agreements for decades':

- 'The Internet changes the balance of power. Now, only a few people need to read something and figure out what it means to alert millions more.
- 'Moreover, Facebook is sensitizing people to privacy because it is a storehouse of real secrets in a way that few other sites are. (You might not care if someone finds out you are shopping for a blender, but the photo of you splashing in the fountain with the guy you met in the bar last night is for your girlfriends' eyes only!)

The article concludes: 'If Mr. Zuckerberg can follow through with his promise to rework Facebook's terms into a plainspoken "Bill of Rights and Responsibilities," and if Facebook users start to demand the same clarity of the other companies they deal with, it just might set an important new precedent for the lawyers to follow.'

[Sources: <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/18/facebook-to-defend-english-from-the-lawyers/> and <http://consumerist.com/5150175/facebooks-new-terms-of-service-we-can-do-anything-we-want-with-your-content-forever>]

Linguistic link: Health Literacy Group

Funded by the Department of Health and the Department for Innovations, Universities and Skills, the Health Literacy Group is free to join. It's a group of health and education academics and practitioners, service providers and service users 'committed to raising the profile of Health Literacy as a remediable cause of Health Inequalities in England, and to developing and undertaking research to achieve that'. (Pity about the capitalitis, but you can't have everything.) The group is also keen to link with others with an interest in health literacy, in the UK and abroad.

Visit <http://www.healthliteracy.org.uk/> to find out about why health literacy matters, government policy on this, and ongoing projects, including a PhD studentship in Health Literacy at Manchester University (closing date 6 April).

Readers write

Wot no link?

Thanks to reader Geoff Carr for pointing out that we'd forgotten to include a link in last month's article 'Ethnic and other personal data: to collect or not to collect?' To read more about the research we mentioned into patients' attitudes towards healthcare providers collecting information about their race and ethnicity, please see <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1490236>.

Ruth's recommended resource

Thanks to associate Ruth Thornton for suggesting an additional book on writing for the web:

- *Don't make me think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* by Steve Krug (published by New Riders, 2005).

You can look inside this book at Amazon (http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/reader/0321344758/ref=sib_dp_pt#reader-link).

It's still all Greek to uz!

Another reader emailed to ask: 'I just wondered why you used the spelling of 'organization' and 'specializes' throughout your last newsletter.' As longer-term readers of *Pikestaff* will recall, 'z' in words like 'organization' is the older English form. We use it for all words with a Greek zeta root, as the Oxford dictionaries do. If you prefer the 's', it'll never be wrong except in 'capsize'. And we'll always respect a customer's preferences when we edit their documents.

Jargon buster debunks bank-speak

Research commissioned by the Irish National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in partnership with the EBS Building Society has found that:

- 89% of respondents would prefer banks to use more plain English
- over 20% of people would switch to a different bank if it provided more user-friendly information.

'For the last 6 months Irish people have been bombarded with complex financial information,' said Inez Bailey, director of NALA. 'Lack of plain English and the regular use of fancy jargon is one of the greatest barriers to understanding financial information.' As a result, NALA and EBS have published the *A-Z Pocket Guide to Financial Terms*, which defines over 500 words and phrases such as 'sub-prime lending' and 'recapitalisation'.

The guide is available free on EBS's website at <http://online.ebs.ie/internet/pdf/files/public/6849ebs131.01.09nalaplainenglishbooklet.pdf>.

[Source: *Independent.ie*, 20 February 2009: <http://www.independent.ie/national-news/jargon-buster-debunks-bankspeak-1646886.html?service=Print>]

Listlessness at LGA

The Local Government Association has attracted much publicity since 18 March, when it published a list of 200 words that 'public bodies should not use if they want to communicate effectively with local people', with alternatives. Words included on the list include:

- taxonomy
- re-baselining

- mainstreaming
- holistic governance
- contestability
- predictors of beaconicity
- synergies.

LGA chairman, Margaret Eaton, said:

The public sector must not hide behind impenetrable jargon and phrases. Why do we have to have 'coterminous, stakeholder engagement' when we could just 'talk to people' instead? During the recession, it is vital that we explain to people in plain English how to get access to the 800 different services that local government provides with taxpayers' money.

The list has been heavily criticized, though, as shown by these comments left on the LGA's website:

- 'I think that your list shows a fairly poor understanding of the language and assumes that it is right to treat the public as ignoramuses.'
- 'I agree with a substantial percentage of these but there are plenty of valid words and phrases included.'
- 'I too am concerned that while a fair few of the words highlighted are unnecessary jargon, the majority are perfectly acceptable for use.'
- 'Whilst I applaud your attempts to make sure that local government remains accessible and comprehensible I think that, in some cases, the alternative that you suggest actually alters the sense of the original. The most glaring example is 'resource allocation' for which you propose 'money going to the right place'. Resource allocation is the principle of allocating money to a function or service, but 'the right place' is a value judgement which may be implied but is certainly not given – just ask a budget holder whose 'resource allocation' has been reduced!'
- 'Absolutely ridiculous! The simplified words and the alleged jargon don't mean the same. For example social exclusion is not the same as poverty!'
- 'The LGA is constituted to implement the Sustainable Communities Act 2007...With the words 'Sustainable' and 'Sustainable communities' on the banned list, is the Act soon to be re-worded 'Long term environmentally friendly Communities Act'?''
- 'Can we please just use common sense, and concentrate on communicating clearly and concisely? So words should not be 'banned', unless they really do not have a commonly understood meaning. Words that have a specific meaning should be acceptable, if they concisely express ideas which would otherwise require a longer explanation to say the same thing.'

We'd add that it's rather a cop-out to provide no alternatives for 42 (over 20%) of the 200, instead commenting just 'why use at all?'.

We agree that words should not be banned, but we'd rarely add any 'unless'. Writing clearly is about making your meaning plain to your audience. Banning words out of context is at odds with this principle of plain language; there'll always be times when even unusual words are the right ones for an audience that understands them.

Sources: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=1716341> and <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=1720291>]

Ambiguity corner

So chocolatey, they're obscene

Pikestaff readers whose early-morning duties include preparing kids' packed lunches may be familiar with the individually wrapped Fabulous Bakin' Boys' Triple Chocolate Cupcakes (that's the cakes that are individually wrapped, by the way, not the boys). But best not let your little darlings examine the box too closely: as *Private Eye* reports, 'The suspicion is that a disgruntled creative typeset the boxes...as they read "4King Cupcakes".'

Perhaps the disgruntled had visited the Bakin' Boys' website, where 'Dr Smiley' hands out ambiguously entitled 'prescriptions for grumpiness'.

Past tense

One of our spies spotted this case of a missing apostrophe that rather changes the meaning. The van, belonging to Ryder of Warrington, proclaims: 'Were ahead for sales, service and parts'.

Another person for whom apostrophe loss would be bad news, as his father noted in a letter to *The Times*, is Dr De'ath.

But apostrophes don't solve all ambiguities. At the crescent in Buxton, Derbyshire an ancient building boasts the stone-cut sign ST ANN'S WELL. Had she ever been ill, the town's famous spring water would doubtless have cured her.

Take this on board

Karen Hampson sent us a photo she'd taken of an exhibit in a museum in Tanzania. Showing several large stones with holes in the middle, it's entitled 'Bored stones'. Karen concurs: 'So tedious being a rock ...'

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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