

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 26,
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Plain Language Commission news

New articles on clear writing and speaking

Our research director, Martin Cutts, is writing a series of 3 articles for *The Ombudsman*, the newsletter of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association (BIOA). In the first – now on the Articles page of our website (www.clearest.co.uk/files/LongSentencesMeanHardLabour.pdf) – Martin offers tips on writing clearer letters, in particular keeping sentences short. Though the articles relate to Ombudsman work, they're relevant to many kinds of public writing.

In another article published on the website of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), our associate Sarah Carr looks at the art of plain speaking and asks: 'You may be used to writing in plain English, but can you speak plainly too? If not, you risk confusing or boring your listeners.' Read the full article, which draws on examples from the Romans to modern politicians – including Barack Obama – not to mention Jack Sparrow, star of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, on our website or at <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=9534169>.

Plain-language wizards to confabulate in Oz

Australia's Plain English Foundation is hosting the seventh 2-yearly conference of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) from 15–17 October 2009. Aimed at government, industry and plain-language practitioners from Australia and around the world, the conference will focus on how plain language is improving services and saving money in government, industry, the law, medicine, engineering and finance. The conference title – Raising the Standard – reflects the ongoing work of the International Plain Language Working Group, which is looking at plain-language standards, the development of a plain-language institute, and accreditation and training for plain-language practitioners.

Martin Cutts plans to represent us there. For more information, including the call for papers (deadline 29 May), visit <http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/tabid/3276/Default.aspx>.

Less is more with 5-word speeches

The Webby Awards honour excellence on the internet. Established in 1996, the Webbys are presented by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, a 550-member 'body of leading Web experts, business figures, luminaries, visionaries and creative celebrities' [and shrinking violets – Ed].

Webby winners must limit their acceptance speeches to 5 words, to keep the awards event 'vibrant and exciting'. Here are a few from the most recent ceremony in New York:

- Had we lost, we'd sue. (ABA, law journal)
- We enjoy sleeping with you. (Ikea Mattress)
- Me, me, me, me, me! (Steven Colbert)
- No shit! We beat Facebook? (Flock, social web browser)

- TV? Online? Never happen, kid. (ABC.com full episode player)
- Thanks, in 72-point Helvetica. (Veer, Type City – for best use of typography)
- Bloody marvellous! Drinks? My hotel? (Adobe Type+motion)
- Five words is not enough. (Lorne Michaels)
- We're auctioning word 5. (People's Voice)

The complete list of speeches is at: www.webbyawards.com/press/speeches.php.

Do as we say, not as we do

Last month's *Pikestaff* reported that the Local Government Association (LGA) had published a list of 200 words that 'public bodies should not use if they want to communicate effectively with local people'. The software company Sitemorse examined the LGA's own website (intended for the public), and found the banned words in abundance, including 'worklessness' (nearly 100 times), 'spatial', 'framework' and 'initiative'.

But Sitemorse itself is hardly the epitome of clear writing, as this excerpt from its own website shows:

[Sitemorse] allows management to see key vulnerabilities that impact online experience and regulatory / brand compliance, and provides technical staff with the exact detail of issues (down to the line in the code). We also offer industry-leading auditing tools to significantly improve Search Engine Optimization.

[Source: <http://www.sitemorse.com/news.html?id=1340084897>]

Tip of the month: practise nominalization avoidance...

The issue

Like 'optimization', which derives from the verb 'to optimize', many nouns are formed from verbs, for example 'preparation' (from the verb 'to prepare'), 'decision' (from 'to decide') and 'application' (from 'to apply'). The technical term for this sort of noun, made from a verb, is a nominalization (which is itself a nominalization, from 'to nominalize', meaning to convert into a noun). Nominalizations (also known as deverbal nouns) tend to make writing (and speaking) long-winded and dull.

Examples

Official writing often uses these nouns, rather than their equivalent verbs, to carry the meaning, for example:

- to be in agreement – rather than 'to agree'
- to conduct an analysis of – to analyse
- to undertake a review of – to review
- to carry out work – to work
- to have an effect on – to affect
- to give consideration to – to consider.

Our advice

First, learn to spot your enemy. They are abstract rather than concrete, that is, they refer to intangible things, rather than material objects. They often end in -ion.

Second, use the underlying verb if you can.

Using verbs instead of nominalizations helps your writing:

- to sound stronger and livelier

- to be easier to read
- to have fewer and shorter words.

...And go easy on verbing your nouns

Just as verbs can be turned into nouns, so nouns can become verbs: a trend in modern English. During his recent visit to Baghdad, Barack Obama announced: 'It is time for us to transition to the Iraqis.' And several letters to *The Daily Telegraph* report incidents of nouns verbed:

- Problems arise when people verbify a noun because they have forgotten that the relevant verb already exists. The result: being obligated to do things, trialling prototypes, decisioning on "issues", signaturing documents and generally impacting the dialect of the tribe. (Tony Eaton)
- A splendid example of a verbed noun came in *Time*, describing concrete flower beds in Iraq as having been "repurposed" as anti-car-bomb guards. (David Tattersall)
- I went to see my doctor with a vast array of ailments that I thought impossible to augment. Having to check in by computer, I was confronted with the injunction "Arrive me". I was then suffering from apoplexy as well. (J F Bailey)
- I have just been booking a ticket with a national bus company, speaking to a man who told me what bus I would be on once I had "departured" from Taunton. (Meriel Thurstan)

[Sources: MSNBC, 7 April 2009: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30087747/#storyContinued>; and *The Daily Telegraph*: 12 October, 2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/3561654/Letters-to-The-Telegraph.html>]

NHS needs information revolution, say Tories

David Cameron, leader of the UK Conservative Party, has called for an 'information revolution' in the NHS to raise standards and help prevent events like those at Stafford Hospital – where the Healthcare Commission (since replaced by the new Care Quality Commission) found that as many as 400 deaths could have been prevented and may have resulted from poor care.

Speaking to 'Cure the NHS' campaigners in Stafford, Mr Cameron called for a 'full-scale, root-and-branch' inquiry into what went wrong at the hospital, and pledged that a Conservative government would, in his words:

- end Labour's culture of top-down targets and tick-box adherence
- tackle the "closed culture" which allows problems in hospitals to be kept secret
- put key information on care standards and patient safety fully in the hands of the public
- give people improved means of reporting bad practice as it occurs
- allow patients to check a hospital or GP's care record before they are treated.

The Patient Information Forum comments: 'The report highlights the increasing political importance of health information – whether that's information about services and performance or information about health and wellbeing.'

See the policy paper, *An NHS information revolution to save lives*, at http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2009/04/~~/media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/NHSInformationRevolution.ashx.

Readers write

William Webber, a retired primary school headteacher, wrote after being introduced to *Pikestaff* by his son:

Having undergone a pre-war grammar school education, I can only cry in anguish at the deterioration of standards of spoken English of those in our communication networks. I define those as any whose prose is presented in print, on radio, television and especially in our education system. I choose just one of many: the personal pronoun. I would estimate that all those involved in direct presentation would have learnt (and, as in my day, 'inwardly digested') the difference between the direct and indirect forms and therefore must have chosen to regard 'me' and 'I' as interchangeable. The incorrect usage still jars after almost thirty years of retirement!

Is it a form of 'dumbing down': a rot that appears to be creeping through formerly hallowed standards?

Our agony aunt replied:

I can understand your frustration over standards of English grammar these days. We try hard to take a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to language, but it's not always easy to accept forms that contravene traditional rules.

On the blurring of 'I' and 'me', Fowler [of *Modern English Usage* fame] reports various examples from Shakespeare, Dickens, Pepys and Austen, so perhaps it is an older problem than we might think. Slips are, inevitably, commoner in speech than writing.

I think that many people in the past learned about English grammar through studying Latin; it's a shame that this is no longer taught in most schools. Many teachers these days have probably not had a sound education in grammar themselves. Because of this, and perhaps also because children are encouraged to express themselves freely without correction, errors aren't being picked up at school. At a recent parents' evening at my daughters' school, I was disturbed to learn that KS2 [junior] SATS materials now endorse 'however' as a conjunction, as in statements like 'I hope this answers your questions, however, if you have any concerns or wish to discuss the matter, please contact me.' [That comma before 'however' should be a semicolon or full stop.]

Are schools are to blame for poor standards of grammar? Is the problem really worse than it used to be? Does the disappearance of Latin from the curriculum have you crying 'Eheu!' or 'Euax!?' Maybe you have specific examples of youngsters' errors going unchecked, or schools promulgating error-strewn materials. Do email us with your views and evidence, as we're planning a feature on young people's language.

Linguistic link: Sounds Familiar?

This website, published by the British Library, asks:

Do you call a 'bread roll' a cob, batch, bread cake, barm cake or scuffler? How do you pronounce the words cup and plant? And

are you sitting or sat at this computer? The UK is a rich landscape of regional accents and dialects, each evidence of our society's continuity and change, our local history and our day-to-day lives. This site captures and celebrates the diversity of spoken English in the second half of the twentieth century.

The site allows you to listen to 76 sound recordings and over 600 short audio clips from 3 collections of the British Library Sound Archive: the Survey of English Dialects, the Survey of Anglo-Welsh Dialects and the Millennium Memory Bank. You'll hear:

- Londoners discussing marriage and working life
- Welsh teenagers talking with pride about being bilingual
- aristocrats chatting about country houses.

You can also explore the history and evolution of accents, and read case studies on 3 specific varieties of contemporary English:

- received pronunciation
- Geordie dialect
- English as spoken in the UK's minority ethnic communities.

A UK map allows you to listen to accents from different regions, and you can even contribute your recordings and language investigations to the site, as part of the library's Sound Archive's ongoing survey of speech patterns across the UK. Visit <http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/index.html> to have a go.

If you're gagging for a laugh...

...Check out these language-related April Fool's Day jokes.

Obama rebranding

In a rip-take of political euphemism, comedian John Oliver appeared on US television posing as an expert 'linguist' who explains that 'now, more than ever, America needs to be swaddled in a blanket of impenetrable jargon – to be literally confused into reassurance'. Examples of new phrases for old include 'overseas contingency operation' to replace 'war on terror', and, for 'obesity epidemic', 'enhanced biological jollification'. See the 3-minute video clip at <http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=222760&title=Obama-Rebranding>.

Department of Education to retire the semicolon

Meanwhile, Locus magazine announced a regulation that would require all agencies of the United States Government to stop using the semicolon in official documents:

According to the Office of Management and Budget, eliminating the semicolon will save the government \$1.2 million over the next four years in ink, paper, secretarial and proofreading costs. "Nobody knows how to use the darn thing anyway," said Assistant Undersecretary for Punctuation Agnes Penn Stickney, "and it's taking up perfectly good space in the home row of the nation's keyboards."

The report added that the @ sign would be moved down 'from its awkward position above the "2" on the keyboard' and installed in the space vacated by the obsolete semicolon.

Oxford proposes a leaner alphabet

Canada's *National Post* reported that Oxford University Press (OUP) is considering axing the letters Q, U, M and W. David Stover, president of OUP

Canada, declared:

As U. S. President Barack Obama said, we just haven't come far enough in finding the efficiencies to compete on the world stage. He was talking about cars, I'm talking about letters, but I think the principle is the same. Efficiency is our mantra here at Oxford University Press, and the role of every letter is always under constant evaluation.

[Sources: http://www.locusmag.com/2009/April1_Semicolon.html and <http://www.nationalpost.com/most-popular/story.html?id=1449684>]

How mondegreen was my valet?

When someone mishears a phrase that sounds very like another, that's a mondegreen. The term was coined by the American author Sylvia Wright in *Harper's Magazine* of November 1954. Wright described how, as a youngster, she'd misheard the final line of the first stanza of 'The Bonnie Earl of Murray' (a 17th-century Scots ballad, anonymous):

Ye Highlands and ye Lawlands,
Oh, where hae ye been?
They hae slain the Earl of Murray,
And Lady Mondegreen.

The last line is really 'And hae laid him on the green'. Wright asserted that 'the point about...mondegreens...is that they are better than the original'.

Would the audience of the late journalist Auberon Waugh have agreed? Waugh was once invited, via his answerphone, to address the Foreign Press Association in London:

The subject they suggested, as left in the message, was Breastfeeding. Waugh duly turned up and gave his talk. The audience looked bemused, but applauded politely. The chairman then thanked him with the words, "Interesting talk, Mr Waugh. Actually we were hoping to hear a bit more about Press Freedom".

[Source: *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/3559040/Letters-to-the-Telegraph.html>]

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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