

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 3,
March 2007

Tip of the month: aVoid craZy CAPITALS

Several readers have asked for clear-writing tips in each issue. This month we give a quick guide to the consistent use of initial capitals.

The problem

Should writers give Initial Capital Letters to Anything or Anyone Important? There's a temptation to reflect the social pecking order by writing, for example, 'Managers' but 'staff'; 'Doctors' but 'patients'; and 'Officers' or 'Councillors' but 'the public'.

As well as looking a bit pompous, capitalizing all these words can slow the reader, according to writing research. WRITING IN ALL CAPITALS IS WORST, But Even Title Case Is Harder To Read than sentence case, which capitalizes only the first word and those words that really need it.

An example

A client recently told us it had been asked to capitalize 'Direct Debit' and 'Bank and Building Society' throughout its public leaflets because this was a rule of Bankers Automated Clearing Services (BACS). We thought this would make the leaflets less readable, so we discussed it with BACS, which eventually agreed that only the title 'Direct Debit Guarantee' needed capitals.

Our advice

1. In general, capitalize only the first word in a sentence, and proper nouns (names of people, places, institutions and documents).
2. For job titles, we recommend using capitals only when you're referring to a specific person, for example 'the Chief Executive'. Otherwise, use lower case – such as 'housing officers' and 'doctors'.
3. We suggest using lower case for names of benefits and taxes. Try to use lower case for strategies and policies too, but it's OK to use capitals for the title of a strategy or policy document.
4. Check a published style guide for more detailed guidance on what to capitalize.
5. If in doubt whether to capitalize, don't do it!

Jobseekers err but medics set their pants on fire

Research commissioned by the BBC found that 47% of all CVs received by recruitment agencies contained basic grammatical and spelling mistakes.

Common errors included:

- confusing 'there' and 'their'
- using apostrophes wrongly
- misspelling 'curriculum vitae', 'liaison', 'role' and 'personal'
- using capital letters incorrectly.

Pikestaff's writer wasn't surprised to read that 70% of firms said female

applicants were less error-prone than men. [Just wait till they've got the job – Ed.] Applicants aged 21–25 made the most mistakes. Marcia Roberts, of the Recruitment and Employment Confederation, commented: 'Candidates who make errors run the risk of missing out on being short-listed for a job.'

Another good tip was to stick to the truth: *The Week* reports that 234 Oxbridge applicants plagiarized the same application form from the internet. Sifters smelled a rat when one in 20 would-be medical students claimed to have been interested in science 'ever since I accidentally burned holes in my pyjamas after experimenting with a chemistry set on my 8th birthday'.

[Sources: BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/2950896.stm>; and *The Week*, 17 March 2007]

Visit our new website

We've relaunched our website with a fresh look, some new free downloads and plenty of new information: www.clearest.co.uk.

Articles by our team include the mildly controversial *Paying the price for crystal balls*. This draws on National Audit Office research and:

- weighs up the pros and cons of schemes that accredit the clarity of public documents
- describes how a government department fell foul of the Crystal Mark scheme, which promised a plain-English guarantee it didn't deliver, and
- considers what the national average reading age might be.

Other articles include 2 by Sarah Carr for *Clarity*, the journal of the international association promoting plain legal language (www.clarity-international.net/home/about.htm). *Clarity* is free to members; non-members can download some back numbers free from the association's website. Sarah has been invited to guest-edit the November 2007 issue of *Clarity*. Reflecting our aim of offering practical plain-English support underpinned by sound research, the theme she has chosen is getting research into practice.

Scottish English impacted by mandarin dialogue

The Scottish Executive's civil servants have baffled and frustrated Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), according to *The Scotsman*, after a Holyrood committee couldn't understand one of their statements: 'We are also developing a more robust dialogue with key partners around the health of system and the impact of policy and refocusing the approach used to measure improvement locally and related support for benchmarking.'

Brian Monteith, the independent MSP who convenes the audit committee, said the wording left members puzzled. Margaret Smith, a Liberal Democrat MSP, said she hadn't understood the document and added: 'We should introduce an audit committee award for complete gobbledegook. That doesn't mean anything to me, and I doubt very much to ordinary members of the public.'

The Scotsman quoted our spokesman as saying: 'There's no reason why they have to write in this fashion. People must be well qualified and highly paid to write like that. We have to persuade them they don't need to use high-flown language. It's as if they have a list of buzz words that it's compulsory to use. They're just trying to impress other people in their department and the ministers who look at their work, but nowadays people are more likely to laugh at them instead.'

[Source: *The Scotsman*, 14 February 2007: <http://news.scotsman.com/scotland.cfm?id=238762007>]

The 209,000-dollar question: how can I improve my business writing?

'It does not diagram sentences, rap rulers on desks or sport a beehive hairdo. But for \$209,000, Los Angeles County will get the next best thing to your grade-school grammar teacher: software to help employees write more clearly.' So reported the *Los Angeles Times*, as the local government bought StyleWriter – a British-authored computer program that helps people write in plain English (or, in the newspaper's words, 'an enterprise-wide solution for streamlining content, where the end product is improved by its interface').

Stylewriter is an add-on to word-processing programs such as Microsoft Word. Much better than inbuilt grammar-checkers, the program:

- catches 35,000 style and usage problems missed by common spell-checkers
- flags complex and abstract words, wordy phrases and clichés, misused words, faulty word division and bad hyphenation
- doesn't give advice you can't understand or constantly flag correct English as dubious
- is easy and quick to use.

You can read more about Stylewriter, and download the full version to try, on our [website](#). The trial lets you use StyleWriter for 28 days at a minimal cost, refunded if you buy at the end of the trial. What's more, with the software starting at £85 + VAT a copy if you buy 20 or more (site licences are available too), it's likely to cost you rather less than \$209,000!

[Source: *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 2007: <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/editorials/la-ed-plainlanguage09mar09,1,485574.story?ctrack=1&cset=true>]

Birdies, eagles, albatrosses – and a dodo

The Rules of Golf, by the United States Golf Association (USGA), is a dodo: 'It is an essential book,' says *The American Statesman*, 'but a tedious read. The prose is often awkward and requires several readings to make sense. It's written as if intended to be interpreted by lawyers.'

So Bryan Garner and Jeffrey Kuhn combined their lawyers' minds with their love of golf to write *The Rules of Golf in Plain English*. Says Garner: 'In addition to simplifying the language, we tried to make cross-references more usable, and one of the biggest improvements was that we took out any sexist language.'

The book hasn't replaced the real rules (yet) but David Fay, USGA executive director, endorsed it: '*The Rules of Golf in Plain English...is a good and interesting read, regardless of whether the reader is an expert or novice in interpreting and applying the rules.*'

[Source: *The American Statesman*, 18 January 2007]

'I trust this provides the degree of cloudification that you

require'

Recently spotted by our network of spies:

- In a Spar supermarket, near the till – 'Our staff are fully trained in credit card fraud.'
- In the window of Barnard Castle YMCA, County Durham – 'These premises are protected by CCTV for the prevention of theft and safety.'

And from Northern Ireland they sent a complex letter from the Public Services Commission which had an average sentence length of 35 words and ended triumphantly: 'I trust this provides the degree of clarification that you require.' Two of the sentences came in at 53 and 67 words:

'Clearly it is for existing employers, within the RPA affected group, to consider the relevant pools from which they will make a determination of adverse impact if any and the options open to them to ensure a proportionate response to ensuring the legitimate aim of securing the avoidance of redundancies of existing staff.'

'To the contrary the Commission envisages that in documenting the case for filling any particular posts employers will be required to demonstrate that their actions in avoiding redundancies are justifiable having considered the relevant data and statistical analysis of options under consideration to demonstrate that the decisions they are adopting are a proportionate means of achieving the aim of filling a vacancy and avoiding a redundancy.'

Have you seen any notices in which unclear English changes the meaning, or had any yawn-inducing letters? If so, do email us. Let us know if we can include your example in a future issue of *Pikestaff* or on our website (or both).

Contribute

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, www.clearest.co.uk (click on 'Newsletter').

Tell a friend

If you think a friend or colleague would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward it to them.

Rolling the credits

Pikestaff is written by Sarah Carr and edited by Martin Cutts.
Published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd).