

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 31,
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Taking a chainsaw to rubbish instructions

The seventh conference of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) included 3 sessions from our research director Martin Cutts:

- Ten easy tactics for clear legal writing – at an industry seminar the day before the conference (see an example from this in Clearly Clarified, below)
- Pioneering plain language – a conversation with Australian host Neil James on Martin's 30 years of plain-English campaigning
- Instructions for consumer products – as easy as 1-2-3?

His third session showed the importance of clear and easy-to-follow instructions – especially if using a product wrongly could have serious consequences. Anyone in the UK can buy and use a chainsaw, relying solely on the instruction manual to avoid mutilation or death. But as everyone who has tried to assemble flat-pack furniture knows, instructions are often muddled or just plain wrong – and if you're using a chainsaw, one mistake can be fatal. Figures aren't collected on how many injuries and deaths occur from non-work-related chainsaw accidents in the UK, but in the USA there are 36,000 hospital admissions every year from this cause alone.

'It's time to tell writers of instruction manuals that people won't accept their nonsense any more,' said Martin. 'In law, instructions are part of the product. If they're rubbish, the products feel like rubbish too, and we should all be prepared to make a fuss and complain. Company helplines are often condescending and complacent, which adds to the stress for consumers.'

Martin has several chainsaws and knows from experience how useless their instructions can be. He examined 4 manuals in the session, showing why their text and illustrations would be hard for novices to understand. Read Martin's full paper on our Articles page at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/InstructionsForConsumerProducts.pdf>.

Martin was one of only 2 speakers from the UK at the biennial conference where plain-language professionals swap ideas on making official documents and the law easy to understand. The other UK speaker was Simon Carter, who spoke on using Word to create text boxes, text tables and flowcharts that can help lawyers summarize complex information and make pages more interesting and attractive. More at <http://www.onethreefour.co.uk/2009/10/16/non-text-explanations/>. And all other speakers' papers will appear soon on the website of the Plain English Foundation (<http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/>), which hosted the conference.

[Source: CDC fact sheet: Preventing Chain Saw Injuries During Tree Removal After a Disaster: <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/pdf/disasters-chainsaws.pdf>]

Tip of the month: write instructions that cut it

Martin's paper suggests that there ought to be a British Standard or International Standard (or both) on writing instructions for consumer products. We understand that a British Standard may be in the offing as a consultation paper is being circulated at present. (Have any *Pikestaff* readers heard anything more about this? If so, let us know.)

In the meantime, these 5 principles are good to follow when writing instructions:

1. Remember the readers. Usually readers haven't used the product before; that's why they're reading the instructions. Say a little at a time.
2. Favour a basic style of language. This often means using the command form of the verb, the imperative, which helps you state the action early and keep the message simple, for example 'Read the instructions' not 'The instructions should be read'.
3. Split the information into chunks and use separate, headed sections. A common sequence of sections is:
 - introductory explanation, overview or summary
 - tools or materials needed
 - definitions
 - warnings
 - main text, split into headed sections.
4. Use clear illustrations of adequate size with good labels and captions. Relevant illustrations should be visible while the user is reading the text.
5. Test with typical users.

Above all, though, pick a capable writer who is fairly ignorant about the product but has it in front of them and has an expert on call for guidance. The writer should be fluent in the language of the manual. If the writer is, say, preparing a base version of the manual in English for translation into other languages, their version must be tested by another author before the translations are made. This is because errors and idiocies in the base text tend to be magnified by translators, who may not have the product in front of them.

There's more on writing instructions in Martin's book, *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (see also below); *Designing Instructional Text* by James Hartley, Kogan Page (1994); and *Instructions for Consumer Products* by Susan Cooper and Magdalen Page, Stationery Office Books (1988). David McMurrey also gives good advice at <http://www.io.com/~hcexres/textbook/instrux.html>.

Schools to blame for gruesome grocery grammar?

We've often featured terrible Tesco text in *Pikestaff*, but now the retail giant's boss, Terry Leahy, speaking at the Institute of Grocery Distribution conference, has claimed: 'Standards are still woefully low in too many schools. Employers like us...are often left to pick up the pieces.'

The *Daily Mail* reports that the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has identified 'serious failings' in school leavers' ability, and that some companies have had to give teenagers remedial English and maths lessons because they have such a poor grasp of the 3 Rs. One CBI study found that 52% of employers are dissatisfied with the basic literacy of school leavers. A similar number said some teenagers are 'unable to function in the workplace', claiming they can't speak articulately or understand written instructions. [Were the instructions written clearly, though? – Ed]

And a survey of over 100 business leaders by IMC (UK) Learning Ltd earlier this year – ‘Exploring the educational skills gap’ – found that 83% of leaders believe that many school-leavers and new graduates ‘do not have the basic skills necessary to work in business without further training’, resulting in many organizations having to train new staff in literacy and numeracy.

Commenting on the research, Gareth Walters, IMC’s sales and marketing director, says: ‘This report raises questions about what organisations can do to bridge the suspected skills gap between the classroom and the office. It reinforces my belief that training within the workplace is extremely important for business survival and success.’

Maybe one reason for dismal literacy levels is to be found in a recent Poetry Society survey. It showed that more than half of primary-school teachers couldn’t name as many as 3 poets. Which does suggest a certain lack of interest in words, reading and education. Ten percent of these degree-toting graduates from teacher-training colleges in the birthplace of Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare, Auden, Wordsworth, Owen, Rossetti, Hughes, Causley, Clare, Browning and Pam Ayres (well, why not?) couldn’t even name a single stanza-supplying versifier living or dead – not one! There may well be teachers out there who think Homer Simpson wrote the *Iliad*.

For information on our writing-skills courses (we offer in-house and distance-learning options but no poetry courses – yet), please visit <http://www.clearest.co.uk>.

[Sources: <http://www.tescocorporate.com/plc/media/pr/pr2009/2009-10-13/> ; *Daily Mail*, 13 October 2009: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1220140/Tesco-chief-raps-woeful-education.html>; <http://www.im-c.co.uk/en/company/spotlight/extensive-view/article/research-reveals-new-graduates-lack-basic-skills/>; and *Daily Mail*, 9 October 2009: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1219130/More-half-primary-teachers-unable-poets.html>]

Plain-English progress down under

In his opening address at the PLAIN conference, Premier Nathan Rees from New South Wales (NSW) announced a major plain-English initiative including:

- a Premier’s Memorandum mandating plain English for NSW government agencies
- a new category in the annual Premier’s Public Sector Awards for the best use of plain English, and
- a random audit of all government agencies, using focus groups to test the effectiveness of government documents.

Here’s one of the many media reports about the announcement:

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/rees-urges-public-service-keep-it-simple-stupid-20091017-h233.html>.

Meanwhile, in New Zealand, Plain English Power is lobbying for legislation requiring all government communications to be written in plain English. As a result, Plain English Power’s committee is now consulting the Minister of State Services, Tony Ryall. The Minister has stated he intends to introduce ‘government expectations’ on the use of plain language in all New Zealand’s state services.

Martin Cutts has responded to Plain English Power’s call to join the campaign as an individual, and to add Plain Language Commission to its growing list of organizational supporters. In the words of Plain English Power, ‘by standing with us, you can show the Minister and the New Zealand Government the “eyes of the world” are watching as they consider this historical decision’.

You can find out more information about the campaign at <http://www.plainenglish.org.nz.php>.

Plain Language Commission news

To P(DF) or not to P(DF)?

That was the question, and lots of readers answered, thank you, when we sent out *Pikestaff 30* as an attached PDF and asked whether you preferred this or the usual web link. Most people preferred receiving a PDF, so we'll be continuing with this method. We'll also be bookmarking all main headings (the purpley ones) so you can move easily between articles (though of course we hope you'll read them all – and they make best sense when read in the order they come).

For those who like having a web link, we'll make sure the PDF is also on our website as we send it out, and provide a link to this. We hope this will give you the best of both worlds! We've also converted issues 1–29 to PDF: watch out for links to these from our website.

Omission contrition

A technical blip meant the Plain Language Commission news section vanished from the *Pikestaff* PDF we emailed you last month. The full version is now on our website (<http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/Pikestaff30.pdf>), so do revisit this to read about the conference of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders; the Patient Information Forum's new advisory group; an EU seminar on transparency and clear legal language; and the new edition of Martin Cutts's popular paperback, *Oxford Guide to Plain English*.

Martin's book provides 25 guidelines on clear writing and has new chapters on writing for the web, low-literacy plain English, proofreading, and pitching your writing at the right level. Martin has also reworked several other chapters. The book is published by Oxford University Press, with a recommended price of £7.99 sterling. If you want to buy through Amazon – where it's just £4.79 and already has 6 customer reviews all awarding 5 stars (not all of them written by the author) – please make sure you get the new edition and not the second edition, which Amazon is also displaying. The ISBN you want is 978-0-19-955850-6. This number is correctly shown under 'Product details', though the table of contents is for the second edition.

New articles on our website

My, how busy we've been, so you'll find 3 more new articles on our website this month:

- How not to write like a barbarian – In the second of a series of 3 articles for *The Ombudsman*, the newsletter of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association (mentioned in *Pikestaff 29*), Martin Cutts describes some common pitfalls in business and official writing
- ASBO English: clear or baffling? – Antisocial behaviour orders in England and Wales are increasingly being breached. Might one factor be that ASBOs are written unclearly, using archaic language, so that recipients don't understand fully what they must or mustn't do, or feel alienated from the producing body? In this article, Sarah Carr and Martin Cutts investigate by analysing 6 ASBOs, seeking lawyers' views on the clarity of ASBO English, and rewriting 2 ASBOs in plain language.
- Towards a better readability measure: the Bog index – Nick Wright, Director of Editor Software and co-designer of StyleWriter (plain-English editing software), describes this new readability measure and puts it through its paces.

Linguistic link: Twurdy

Twurdy may be an unfortunate name (from a play on the question: 'Too wordy?'), but the concept's interesting: Twurdy is an internet search engine that colour-codes its results – in rather t(w)urdy tones, as it happens – in line with their readability. The site explains the philosophy as follows:

Everyone has different reading abilities. Some people searching the web are university professors and others are 5 year old children. Twurdy has been created to provide people with access to search results that suit their own readability level. This will mean that 10 year olds doing school assignments don't have to click through difficult material to find something they can use. It will also mean that PhD students do not have to click through websites designed for kids in order to find what they are looking for.

You can try Twurdy at <http://www.twurdy.com/search.php>.

Clearly clarified

Reprising the travel theme, this month's editing example is the text from a hotel's 'left luggage' ticket (used by Martin Cutts as an exercise in his legal workshop at the recent PLAIN conference):

Contract releasing liability: In consideration of the receipt and free storage of the property for which this check is issued, it is agreed by the holder in accepting this check, that the Hotel shall not be liable for loss or damage to the said property and if property represented by this check is not claimed within three months, Hotel may sell same without notice, at public sale.

Here's one way Martin suggested of clarifying it:

Baggage ticket

We agree to store your property free of charge for up to 3 months but we are not responsible for any loss or damage to it. If you don't collect your property within 3 months, we may sell it and keep the money!

This shows yet again that plain-language editing is rarely a case of translating a text word for word. Martin has applied many plain-English guidelines, including:

- adding a heading to help the reader understand what the piece of paper is and what the text is likely to be about
- using the first person ('we') to refer to the hotel and the second person ('you') to refer to the guest
- removing unnecessary legal words – such as 'contract releasing liability' and 'consideration'
- omitting wordy phrases that add no meaning – eg 'for which this check is issued' and 'in accepting this check'
- changing passive-voice to active-voice verbs – for example, 'collect' rather than 'is claimed'
- converting nouns to verbs where possible – 'storage' to 'store'
- using a figure '3' rather than word 'three' to make this more noticeable (more on numbers as figures or words in another *Pikestaff* soon).

If you can suggest a better way of rewriting the original, do email us. We'll send a prize of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* to the best version and any accompanying reasoning,

though ideally the thing should speak for itself. Just one condition: we reserve the right to use the winning version and any other entries in our training courses for legal writers.

Signs of the times

Last month's *Pikestaff* included readers' examples of amusing mistranslations they'd spotted on their summer travels. Reader Les Clark has now written in with 2 more, taken from menus of restaurants in Caen: 'fish foam' (seafood mousse, as Les worked out) and 'bird in gelly' (chicken in aspic).

Les went on to tell us about various signs closer to home 'that will delight the connoisseur of the whimsical':

The car park at a nearby branch of NatWest warns: 'Restricted parking for thirty minutes'. Presumably, after thirty minutes the parking becomes unrestricted.

Before it moved to new premises, the Crown Court at Nottingham had a private alleyway running alongside the building. Commendably, the Lord Chancellor's Department had taken pains over the legal accuracy of the signage – 'Private Property. Trespassers may be sued.'

And the Telegraph included the following readers' letters on unintentionally funny signs:

- Driving past a pub recently I was concerned to see a banner displaying the message, "Live on Plasma". We also have a sign outside a shop advising, "Eat healthy – Eat Polish". That also took me a while to comprehend. (Judy Farbrother, Sheffield)
- I was alarmed to see a sign on a children's ride: "1. Place child on ride. 2. Insert coin in slot. 3. Stand well back." (L J Fisher, Longlevens, Gloucestershire)
- In a hardware shop: "Disappearing loft ladders – only two left." (Brian Adams, Swanbourne, Buckinghamshire)

Finally, we spotted this interesting sign in a clearance shop: 'We limit the number of shoes and boots to 3 per customer per day.' Good if you're visiting the Isle of Man, or entering a 3-legged race?

[Source: *Telegraph*, 15 July 2009:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/5827864/The-cost-of-a-mile-of-motorway-could-save-a-Servicemans-life.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. And do say if you'd prefer to remain anonymous if we include your contribution in a future newsletter!

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

Pikestaff is written by Sarah Carr and edited by Martin Cutts.
Published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd).
mail@clearest.co.uk Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177