

# Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 32,  
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## Brown's letter backfires

The importance of correct spelling – especially of people's names – has hit the news this month after Jacqui Janes, whose son Jamie was killed in Afghanistan, received a letter from Gordon Brown. The missive contained various misspellings, including her surname and apparently the soldier's first name, though it looked as if Brown had written over that error.

The sad story shows that the noblest of intentions can be undone by sloppy spelling, grammar and presentation, though there are several mitigating facts: that the prime minister is visually impaired; that he must therefore use a chunky black pen with which it's hard to form accurate characters; and that handwriting letters to the families of war dead – a convention started by Margaret Thatcher in the Falklands War – is regarded as a private process. Prime ministers usually write these letters alone, and often late at night.

Robert Crampton makes an interesting point in *The Times*, suggesting that the furore may have been fuelled by a misunderstanding between social classes:

In the middle class, many of whose members spend their lives in front of computers, the handwritten note is seen as superior to the typed. It represents the personal touch. Authentic, rootsy, person-to-person, heartfelt. But to Jacqui Janes, I think, to judge by her comments in *The Sun* yesterday, the handwritten note is something that you leave out for the milkman when you want an extra pint.

Whatever the rights and wrongs – of Brown sending an error-strewn letter, of Janes sending both it and a recording of Brown's subsequent phone call of apology to *The Sun*, and of the newspaper using these to score political points – the episode illustrates the importance of the most basic piece of good-writing guidance: always put yourself in your reader's shoes.

[Sources: *The Times*, 10 November 2009: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/robert\\_crampton/article6910135.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/robert_crampton/article6910135.ece); and *The Week*, 14 November 2009]

## Plain Language Commission news

### Stunted errors climb the vile wall

So reads the mysterious subtitle of Dr Bernard Lamb's new article, just published in *Quest*, the journal of the Queen's English Society. Lamb's research found that 'on average, home students made three times more errors in English than did the overseas students, who had been taught better, had been corrected much more often, and who took English more seriously than did the home students'.

Lamb concludes:

Many of our schools do a poor job of motivating their pupils to take English standards seriously, and are not teaching basic topics such as grammar, spelling and punctuation effectively. Above all, they are not correcting errors, so how are pupils to know what is right and what is wrong? I know that correction takes time, but if all teachers did it, the burden on each individual would be much reduced. One of my final-year home students told me that I was the only lecturer ever to have corrected her English, and that she was grateful for it, unlike some others. We need constructive criticism and correction from primary school onwards. We need to tell the country that good English matters.

To find out the truth behind stunted errors climbing the vile wall, read the full paper on our Articles web page at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=34>.

### **Down-under photos are up**

You'll now find lots of information about the recent PLAIN conference on the website of Australia's Plain English Foundation:

- For some photos of the event, go to: <http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/PLAIN2009photos/tabid/3272/Default.aspx>. Here you can view a short selection of around 40 snaps, or link to a larger selection of 270.
- You can access pdfs of speakers' PowerPoint slides at: <http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/Paperspresentations/tabid/3273/Default.aspx>. Over 40 of the presentations are so far available, with another 15 or so to come.
- Read some of the media coverage of the event at: <http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/Resources/Inthemedialtabid/3066/Default.aspx>.
- And the opening address of Premier Nathan Rees from New South Wales, during which he announced a major plain-English initiative (see *Pikestaff 31*) is available in full at: <http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/Resources/Papersandspeeches/tabid/3067/Default.aspx>.

Coming soon are some short films and video, which are currently in production.

### **Clearly clarified**

Last month we featured the first of 3 examples used by Martin Cutts as an editing exercise in his legal workshop at the PLAIN conference. Now here's the second:

#### **Election of new members**

New members shall be admitted to the Society upon election by the committee, such election to be confirmed by a vote of a simple majority of the full members present at a general meeting, but no person shall be presented as a candidate for election without application in writing signed by himself or herself and one full member of the Society and the Regional Training Manager being lodged in the hands of the Secretary at least fourteen clear days before the committee meeting.

And here's how Martin suggested clarifying it:

#### **Election of members of the Society**

For a person to be elected as a member of the Society, 3 things must happen.

- 1 At least 14 clear days before a committee meeting, the Secretary must be given an application for membership signed by:
  - (a) the candidate
  - (b) a full member of the Society, and
  - (c) the Regional Training Manager.
- 2 The committee must consider the application and decide by a simple majority vote whether to support the candidate's election.
- 3 If the committee does support the candidate's election, the next general meeting must consider the application and decide, by a simple majority of the full members present, whether to elect the candidate.

This is an example of how converting a text to plain English may make it a little longer (112 words compared to 87, in this case) but much clearer. Here Martin has applied many plain-English guidelines, including:

- making the heading more explicit
- creating a list format, which makes the conditions much clearer
- using shorter sentences (the original version being one massive sentence, while the revised version contains 4 sentences – an average sentence length of 28 words versus 87!)
- removing unnecessary legal constructions, words and phrases– such as 'shall be admitted', 'upon election', 'such election', 'no person', and 'lodged'
- including some active-voice verbs, for example, 'must happen', 'must consider' and 'does support' (the original contains none!)
- converting nouns to verbs where possible – 'election' to 'elected'
- using a figure '14' rather than word 'fourteen'.

Tune in next month for the third and final instalment of Martin's legal-workshop exercises!

## Linguistic link: the English project

Conceived in 2005, the English Project is a charitable company, which aims 'to promote awareness and understanding of the unfolding global story of the English language in all its varieties – past, present and future'. It intends to reach 'a broadly based audience, globally, socially, ethnically and by age amongst English's two billion speakers worldwide'.

The project plans to develop a programme of activities and projects that will be funded through sales, commercial sponsorship, charging fees, and government and public support. Underwritten by the University of Winchester, Hampshire, it hopes to develop a visitor attraction in the city, with a format that can be replicated and customized globally.

Visit <http://www.englishproject.org/> to find out more.

## City University champions clarity in legal language

The English Project has coordinated the first ever English Language Day 'to celebrate what is one of the wonders of the world: the English language'. October 13 was chosen because of its historic importance. It was on 13 October, 1362 that the Chancellor of England for the first time opened Parliament with a speech in English. In that same Parliament, a Statute of Pleading was approved that permitted members in debate to use English, making it an official language of law and law-making.

City University in London celebrated English Language Day by holding a half-day conference to examine the complicated use of language in the legal profession. Partnering with the English Project and law firm Taylor Wessing, the university asked:

In a profession where terms 'personam', 'hereditament' and 'ultra vires' have become common place, is it time for a change? The Language of the Law conference looks at why the profession uses the languages it does, examines the developments made by the profession to modernise and asks if it is time to create a new language fit for a profession which touches all areas of life?

You can hear a recording of the afternoon and read speaker papers at [www.city.ac.uk/whatson/2009/10\\_oct/131009\\_languageoflaw.html](http://www.city.ac.uk/whatson/2009/10_oct/131009_languageoflaw.html).

## Tip of the month: please, no nasty pleonasm

### The problem

As this month's Clearly clarified shows, less is not always more when it comes to clarity in writing – so long as every word serves a purpose. But it's important to get rid of redundant words and phrases that add nothing to the meaning of your text. On this topic, reader Stephen Day wrote in to ask:

Have you ever had a discussion in *Pikestaff* on redundant words and phrases such as 'pre-booked in advance' or 'prepared beforehand'? I was wondering whether there were any tips on how to avoid them when writing.

Well, no we haven't and yes there are – and thanks to Stephen for sending us this idea.

### Examples

The official term for using more words than necessary to express meaning is pleonasm. Wikipedia gives these examples: *black darkness*, *tuna fish*, and *burning fire*, explaining that the term comes from a Greek word meaning 'I am redundant'. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleonasm> for an analysis of the types of pleonasm. And here's a real example, spotted recently in a newspaper: 'The disease seemed to come from nowhere with no real prior warning.'

### Our advice

Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English* includes a chapter on this (chapter 3 – Writing tight). As he notes, it's easy to agree with the idea that useless words are best omitted, but often hard to do. Martin advises:

The key is to let the first draft stand as long as possible, then return and revise it. Then revise again. And probably again. In business, of course, time is against you: that letter or report must go out tonight. And useless words aren't always obvious – they have to be hunted.

Having even a short break from your text should help you to see it more objectively, enabling you to strike out the redundant words. Look out for these common ones:

- in total
- a total of
- absolutely
- very
- quite
- in fact
- actually
- basically
- at the end of the day
- to all intents and purposes
- current
- currently
- existing
- in due course
- in other words
- obviously
- of course.

Stephen Day also provided a link to a website with other phrases where some words (those in brackets) can be omitted without affecting the meaning. Examples include: (close) proximity, (difficult) dilemma, (free) gift, (general) public, (natural) instinct, surrounded (on all sides), and (unexpected) surprise. See [http://www.fun-with-words.com/redundant\\_phrases.html](http://www.fun-with-words.com/redundant_phrases.html) for more.

## Stupid letters of the month

*Private Eye* includes these two letters from an airline to passengers complaining about their flights:

[To Mark Levesley] <about us contacting you belongings. Thank personal your without destination at arrive to is it stressful how appreciate do luggage. I with problem a had that sorry very am.>

[To Diana Hembry]: I have reviewed all the circumstances again and taken account of your letter. I am therefore afraid that no commercial gesture was done for this kind of situation.

As *Private Eye* comments, 'international travellers may expect to run into language problems occasionally. But which airline has such trouble with the English language? Er, British Airways!'

[Sources: *Private Eye*, number 1247, 16 to 29 October 2009; and number 1249, 13 to 26 November 2009]

## Information Standard launched

The national launch of the Department of Health's new Information Standard (IS) took place on 3 November in London. The keynote address was given by Paul Streets, the newly appointed Director of Patient and Public Experience at the Department of Health, and delegates also heard from the IS testing sites. The IS web site is now live and you can find resources and information about joining the scheme there: [www.theinformationstandard.org](http://www.theinformationstandard.org).

## An editor's revenge

A favourite news item among editors this month has been the story of the Toronto Star editor who responded to an internal memo warning about the outsourcing of editorial jobs by marking up the error-strewn letter. Read it and weep at [http://torontoist.com/2009/11/disgruntled\\_star\\_editor\\_takes\\_revenge.php](http://torontoist.com/2009/11/disgruntled_star_editor_takes_revenge.php).

## Hideous headlines

Maybe editorial cuts lie behind some of the language we've spotted in newspapers recently:

- The *Daily Express* printed the headline: 'Can Dec anally match Ant?' The first edition of Saturday's paper said: 'Can Dec finally match Ant?' on a two-page feature about the ITV presenters, with 'finally' cut between two pages. Apparently, there were too many headlines with 'finally', so it was changed to "Can Dec at last match Ant?" But someone forgot to change both sides of the spread, leaving the 'a' of 'at' on one page and 'nally' of 'finally' on the other, creating the memorable headline.

- The *Warrington Grauniad* hits its usual high standards with headlines 'Penisoner takes on intruders' (using his weapon?); 'Help with losing a pet' (actually for bereaved pet owners, not those wishing to become so); and the rather unfortunate 'Shop till you drop at St Rocco's' (the local hospice).
- The *Daily Mail* writes: 'He used a webcam to carry out acts of indecency on himself.' Are we missing some novel use of webcams? Or should it have said '...to film himself carrying out...'?

[Sources: *The Guardian*, 1 September 2009: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/mediamonkeyblog/2009/sep/01/express-ant-dec-headline-error>; *Warrington Guardian*, 15 May, and 5 and 19 November 2009; and *Daily Mail*, 13 November 2009]

## 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](mailto: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](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk) Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177