

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 34,
January 2010



Christmas competitors clearly clarify content

Last month's *Pikestaff* asked readers to edit this piece of turgid text from a form produced by Birmingham Council a few years ago:

In consideration of the District Council of Birmingham (hereinafter called the Council) making an award to the above named pupil, I, the undersigned, hereby undertake:

- (1) To repay to the Council on demand all sums paid by the Council under the said award, or such portion thereof as the Council may determine, if the pupil is withdrawn before the completion of the normal duration of the school course, without the prior consent of the Council.
- (2) If the pupil is withdrawn before the end of a term without the consent of the Council to pay to the Council an amount proportionate to the unexpired portion of that term.
- (3) In the event of the award being decreased retrospectively or of any overpayment being made, to repay to the Council the amount actually paid to and/or on behalf of the pupil in respect of the period covered by the revised award in excess of the amount receivable under the revised award or the amount so overpaid as the case may be.
- (4) To repay to the Council on the due date any payments which shall have been notified to me as being the parental payment due to me after an assessment of my income in accordance with the Committee's approved scales.

All entries were of a high standard, but the following, sent in by Melissa Davidson, stood out for its innovative structure:

If the District Council of Birmingham ('the Council') gives an education grant to Claire Pikestaff then I, Mrs Clarity Pikestaff, agree to repay some or all of this grant according to the terms set out in the table below:

If this happens...	...then I will repay the Council this amount:
1. Claire Pikestaff does not complete the school course and leaves the school without the Council's approval.	All or some of the grant. The Council will decide what the repayment amount will be.
2. Claire Pikestaff leaves the school before the end of a term, without the Council's approval.	The amount owing for the rest of the term.
3. The Council later decreases the grant	The difference between the original grant and the new grant.
4. The Council makes an overpayment.	The surplus (overpaid amount).
5. The Council decides that, because of my income, I should pay more towards Claire's education.	The amount decided on by the Council as set out in the income scales approved by the XXX Committee.

Signed by:

Name

Signature

Date

We've sent Melissa her book prize, and awarded additional book prizes to 2 runners-up – Paul Affleck and Janet McCarter – whose entries were also excellent.

And the winner of our 'easier [or certainly quicker] Christmas competition' – was Sue Chambers. Sue came closest to guessing the publication date of this splendid prose:

What is most wanted is a system by which the young people of this country will learn to use the English language with lucidity and precision. An old educationalist used to assert that the whole matter lay in the short sentence; teach either a child or a man to have a beginning, a middle or an end to each written or even spoken utterance of his, and you force him to think clearly and to bring his thoughts into compass and clear definition. The long involved sentence which nearly all ignorant people write is not a proof of a complicated mind, but of lack of command over the English language. Clear thinking is the main essential to clear expression. Teach English and you teach a child to educate himself.

Only males need apply, of course! This outmoded outburst dates from 100 years ago; it was published in *Country Life* of 4 December 1909. Sue too receives a book prize.

'Police forced to fill out 50 forms for a playground fight'

This unintentionally ambiguous headline was used by the *Daily Mail* on 7 January above an article about the amount of form-filling police officers have to endure.

Jan Berry, the Home Office's senior adviser on police reform – aka 'the red-tape tsar' – said the public never asked for such high levels of bureaucracy, and the incident should be dealt with using common sense. Berry added that officers spend a full hour at the end of their shift 'recording how many meetings they've had, who they've spoken to, and how many leaflets they've dished out – all logged in some system which is only needed because of a shortage of trust'.

Plain-language principles require that forms are not only as simple as possible, but necessary too; we do wonder whether all this rampant red tape really is.

In another law-related story, *Bedfordshire on Sunday* included this equally equivocal headline: 'Headless corpse accused in court'. That's a capital offence against clarity. The *Evening Standard* meanwhile proclaimed: 'Man found dead in graveyard'.

[Sources: *Daily Mail*, 7 January 2010: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1241115/Red-tape-officers-beat-warm-stations-say-police.html>; *Private Eye* No. 1252, 25 December to 7 January 2010; and *InfoPlus+*, December 2009]

Tip of the month: avoid nominalization copulation

In other words, don't confuse your readers by combining multiple nouns into long strings.

The problem

In the latest edition of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, Martin Cutts describes this problem:

In most well-written sentences, nouns tend not to lie next to each other. Normally starved of familiar company, when they are eventually bundled together by an

unthinking author, they often couple promiscuously and spawn that loathsome love child of business writers, the noun string.

Noun strings are hard to understand, partly as the main noun comes at the end (so you're relying on the reader to retain all the words in the string before finding out what they apply to) and partly as it's not always clear how the nouns relate to each other. Long noun phrases may also include other word types – often adjectives or participles – thrown in for good measure.

Examples

We mentioned noun strings in *Pikestaff 15*, where we lamented the over-long name of an otherwise admirable regulation: Northern Ireland Personal Current Account Banking Market Investigation Order. Other examples, from Martin's book, include:

- National Performance Framework Service Delivery Plan
- Employee Job Consultation (Appraisal) Scheme
- community capacity enhancement initiative
- affordable housing special/specific needs provision targets
- advanced practice succession planning development pathway.

And here's a couple more, sent to the email forum of the Plain Language Association InterNational by Janet Pringle and Anita Stuever, which illustrate the tendency for noun strings to be ambiguous:

- Dog bite victim support group
- Voluntary Accidental Death and Dismemberment Plan.

Our advice

As we said in *Pikestaff 15*, we'd usually recommend no more than 2 or – at a push – 3 modifiers per noun in documents we edit. So we'd have renamed the banking order: Market Investigation Order on Personal Current Bank Accounts in Northern Ireland.

In other words, try to move the main noun towards the front of the phrase, adding prepositions (words like 'of', 'for', 'to' and 'with') to show how the components relate to each other. So, instead of 'service user suggestion scheme' and 'advanced practice development needs analysis tool', Martin's book suggests 'suggestion scheme for users of our service' and 'needs analysis tool for advanced practice development'.

Going through the motions

A US judge annoyed by the linguistic blunders in a motion for dismissal has lambasted the Florida lawyer responsible and ordered him to send his client a copy of the criticism. So reports the journal of the American Bar Association, which quotes the judge as saying the motion was 'riddled with unprofessional grammatical and typographical errors that nearly render the entire motion incomprehensible'. The judge used red pen to mark up the original, one sentence of which read:

A review counsel's file subsequent to the court order indicates that for some reason full which counsel is unaware, the defendant named in the complaint was changed to the current defendant. Counsel believes this was changed by counsel's prior assistant it was no longer with counsel's firm.

[Source: *ABA Journal*, 22 September 2009:

http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/judge_labels_lawyers_motion_nearly_incomprehensible_marks_up_errors

Thanks to Jan Spoor for the link to this story.]

Linguistic link: plain English in the US

This month, we present 2 US websites:

- <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/> – this government website, until recently unavailable to many people outside the US, aims to improve communication from the federal government to the public. It contains a wealth of examples, tools, resources and guidelines.
- <http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org/> – the Center for Plain Language, a non-profit organization, wants government and business documents to be clear and understandable. It supports those who use plain language, trains those who should use plain language, and urges people to demand plain language in all the documents they receive, read, and use.

Plain Language Commission news

New articles

We've 2 more new articles on our website this month:

- Clear as mud – the International Travel Insurance Journal has published this article by Martin Cutts. With small print in insurance policies hitting the headlines for all the wrong reasons, Martin shares his 10 top tips on how to write insurance policies that don't require a translator or insurance expert to understand them.
- Avoiding ambiguity – in the last of his 3 articles for the newsletter of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association, Martin provides some practice at spotting ambiguities.

You can see both articles on our website at: <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=34>.

Going beyond plain language. Don't just optimize...transform

This is the message from Professor Rob Waller at the University of Reading's Simplification Centre – see www.reading.ac.uk/simplification (writes our associate Ian Hembrow). The centre exists to persuade and help organizations to make forms and complex documents easier to use and understand. And they need your help.

Speaking to a packed audience at a public lecture titled 'Why they find it so hard to talk to us' at the end of 2009, Professor Waller explained that getting the words right is crucial. But well-designed, layered information, that helps people to find their way around text and to become 'active readers', is just as important.

Taking a real-life example of a council parking fine notice, he showed how some simple headings, columns, and different fonts and point sizes transformed an almost unintelligible form into something that really demanded attention.

Striking the right balance between clarity and completeness does involve taking some risks and doing things differently. But the risks of not producing understandable customer information are much greater – in non-compliance, loss of business or even legal challenge. The House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee's recent report suggested that 'official language which results in tangible harm should be regarded as maladministration.'

Some big names like Axa, HM Revenue & Customs, Department for Work and Pensions and the Welsh Assembly have already signed up to work with the Simplification Centre to improve their documents. And you can help too, because the centre is recruiting a

special panel of typical users to trial documents from all kinds of organizations. Anyone over 18 is welcome to join and there's a small payment for taking part in the research.

So, start transforming today!

Instructional update

Pikestaff 31 covered Martin Cutts's recent study of chainsaw instructions. Having dispatched 2 officers to Martin's office to test the instructions for themselves (they failed), Derbyshire Trading Standards wrote to the UK distributors of the Echo chainsaw, who have taken up the matter with the Japanese makers. Martin has also written to the other 3 manufacturers mentioned in the chainsaw paper. No replies so far, but we'll keep you posted.

At the conference where Martin presented his paper, he declared: 'I'm going to spend a good part of my time over the next 10 years improving as many instruction manuals as I can find in the UK and throughout the world.' (See the video clip for yourself at <http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/ConferencevideosAC/tabid/3316/Default.aspx>.) Martin won't be short of material: a manual for a multi-purpose ladder he bought from Everbuild Building Products Ltd of Leeds advises: 'It is extremely dangerous to attempt to alter the positioning of The alter , hinges or operating joints while the alter is in use.' Mmm, right, if you say so.

InfoPlus+ (the newsletter of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators) includes in its December issue a few more instructions that ain't too instructional:

- (In a first-aid manual) The first essential in the treatment of burns is that the patient should be removed from the fire.
- (In a booklet on computing) You may find inkjet printing too slow in which case you should consider a lasier printer instead.
- (In a gardening magazine) ...could use a contact insecticide, such as powder or gel, to get rid of unwanted pests like aunts...
- (In a user manual proof) This is the third daft version of the guide.
- (In an electrical repair manual) Make sure the brown wire is connected to the terminal.
- (In a user guide) To open the report in the preview window, lick the screen icon.
- (In a troubleshooting guide for car owners) Below is a list of staring and suspension problems.

Have you come across bad (or good) instructions recently? If so, we'd like to hear from you.

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