

# Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 35,  
February 2010



## Jurors think they understand what judges tell them, but often don't

A study commissioned by the Ministry for Justice has published its report, *Are juries fair?* Led by Professor Cheryl Thomas of University College London, the study involved 797 jurors at 3 courts who all saw the same simulated trial and heard the same judicial directions.

Most jurors at Blackfriars (69%) and Winchester (68%) felt they could understand the judge's legal directions, while most of those at Nottingham (51%) felt these were hard to understand. But when researchers tested jurors' actual comprehension of the directions, only 31% actually understood them 'fully in the legal terms used by the judge'.

Younger jurors were better able than older ones to understand the directions, and a written summary given to jurors at the time of the judge's oral instructions improved their comprehension: the proportion of jurors who fully understood the legal questions in the case in the terms used by the judge increased from 31% to 48% with written instructions.

The report recommends assessing how many judges already use written instructions, when and how often; considering giving jurors written notes on the law in all cases; and conducting further research to identify the most effective tools for increasing jurors' understanding of judicial directions.

You can read the full report at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/are-juries-fair-research.pdf>.

## Tip of the month: remember we're your plain-English – not plain English – partner

### The issue

Many documents confuse hyphens and dashes, use them inconsistently, or fail to use them where they could enhance clarity. A hyphen is a short line ( - ), and a dash (officially called an en-dash or en-rule) is a longer one ( – ). There is also an even longer dash ( — ), known as an em-dash or em-rule, but this is uncommon in British English; it's used much more widely in American English.

### Our advice

We advise using hyphens and en-dashes only, as using the em-dash is uncommon in the UK.

### *Hyphens*

Hyphens are used to link words that could confuse the reader if left separate, but can't (yet) be run together as one word. Many compound words in English (eg 'babysitter', 'downstairs' and, more recently, 'website') started off as separate words, which then became hyphenated and finally joined as single words.

For phrases that aren't routinely hyphenated, use hyphens when the phrase comes before the noun but not when it comes after:

Hard-to-understand words are best avoided.

Words that are hard to understand are best avoided.

In many cases, this technique is important to avoid misunderstandings, for example:

- 'we want to find a well groomed man' could be taken to mean that the man is well (healthy) and groomed, whereas 'the well-groomed man' is unambiguous
- 'we need more experienced staff' could mean either a greater number of experienced staff, or staff who have more experience (to make the latter meaning clear, you'd need to write 'more-experienced staff')
- 'your plain English partner' could mean your partner who is plain and English, but 'your plain-English partner' (as on our home page) doesn't reveal our nationality or comment on our appearance.

But it's also important not to insert pointless hyphens – as reader Melissa Davidson writes:

I was horrified to notice these misplaced hyphens in a report recently: 'US mortgage applications have started to move-up while the Volatility Index (VIX) has eased. Fortunately, consumer inflation is expected to fall-off during the course of 2009.'

Indeed, few compound verbs (those comprising two or more parts) need hyphenation – most are written either as separate words or as one (unhyphenated) word. But compound verbs consisting of a noun plus verb are typically hyphenated, for example 'baby-sit', 'gift-wrap', 'air-condition' and 'short-list'. If you're unsure, check in the dictionary; and if you don't find the compound verb there at all, hyphenate it.

### **Dashes**

Use the dash spaced to separate strings of words, and unspaced to link words or numbers in pairs, for example:

I wrote a strategy document – the first of its type – and presented it to the board. It covers 2008–15. The well-attended meeting – which took place at 5–7 pm in the first-floor boardroom – approved the strategy.

### **'Double-hyphen surname law gets both barrels'**

The practice of using double-hyphenated double-barrelled surnames has been outlawed by the Conseil D'Etat, France's highest administrative watchdog, reports *The Week*. The practice dates from 2004, when parents were given the option of using both the mother's and father's surnames for their children. To distinguish between old-style and new-style double-barrelled names, the latter must use a double hyphen in official documents, for example Dupont--Dupond (rather than Dupont-Dupond). 175,000 children's names now include the double hyphen, which has recently been outlawed on the grounds it's 'ungrammatical and unFrench'.

According to *The Independent*, 'the French state has a long history of trying to lay down rigid rules for names – both surnames and first names'. It continues: 'The double-barrelled first name (such as Jean-Marie or Marie-Louise) became popular when the state barred all but a restricted list of religious or traditional names. Now that anything goes for first names – even Kevin or Ryan cause no stir – such double first names have become less common.'

The double hyphen isn't the only unusual punctuation mark; here are some other examples from around the world:

- Wikipedia reports that an international patent application was published in 1992 for 2 new punctuation marks: the question comma and the exclamation comma.
- Russian designer Artemy Lebedev suggested a double-comma sign, which he believed would communicate a pause better than the semicolon does.
- The interrobang or interabang combine the functions of the question mark (also called the interrogative point) and the exclamation mark (known in printers' jargon as the bang). The symbol is a superimposition of those 2 marks.
- The newly proposed SarcMark even has its own website (including illustrative video clip) at <http://02d9656.netsoljisp.com/SarcMark/modules/user/commonfiles/loadhome.do>. The site claims: 'With the spoken word, we use our tone, inflection and volume to question, exclaim and convey our feelings. The written word has question marks and exclamation points to document those thoughts, but sarcasm has nothing!' The SarcMark is intended to help avoid misunderstandings in texts and emails, rather like emoticons – more on this in a future issue of *Pikestaff*.

Do you know of any other unusual or novel punctuation marks? If so, do share!

[Sources: *The Week*, 16 January 2010; and *The Independent*, 8 January 2010: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/doublehyphen-surname-law-gets-both-barrels-1861421.html>]

## What's in a name?

You may remember that *Pikestaff* ran a series of features on unusual names. We promised you 'an end to nutty nomenclature', but since then, we've been building up a new stock of such stories, and can contain ourselves no longer (well, if it's good enough for *Private Eye*, with its Pseudo names column, it's good enough for us – what's more, ours are real!):

- Will Power, Justin Case, Terry Bull, Jo King, Barb Dwyer, Paige Turner and Barry Cade were among the names uncovered by researchers from parenting group TheBabyWebsite.com after trawling through online telephone records. Former RAF chap Stan Still, from Gloucestershire, said his name had been 'a blooming millstone around my neck my entire life'. He explained: 'When I was in the RAF my commanding officer used to shout, "Stan Still, get a move on" and roll about laughing. It got hugely boring after a while.'
- A Lincolnshire vicar, Ralph William Lyonel Tollemache-Tollemache, perhaps finding his own name rather lacking in length, bestowed some amazing concoctions on his 14 children, including a daughter (born 1884) named Lyonella Fredegunda Cuthberta Ethelswytha Ideth Ysabel Grace Monica de Orellana Plantagenet Tollemache-Tollemache. When a son with as many names was killed in action in 1917, his gravestone bore just 3 of his multiple monikers – perhaps to save on stone masonry costs?
- A New Zealand girl whose parents called her 'Talula Does the Hula from Hawaii' was made a ward of court until she was renamed. 'It makes a fool of the child and sets her up with a social disability and a handicap,' said Justice Robert Murfitt. He also voiced concern about a number of outlandish names accepted by the registrar of births, including Violence, Midnight Chardonnay, Number 16 Bus Shelter and, for twins, Benson and Hedges.

And those are just the personal names. Watch out for forthcoming features on place names, organizational names and job titles! And if you've come across any interesting or amusing examples of these, do let us know.

[Sources: BBC News, 25 February, 2009: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7909561.stm>; and *The Week*, 2 August 2008, and 28 February and 31 October 2009]

## Linguistic link

Sticking with our punctuation theme, this month's linguistic link is to a light-hearted look at another often-superfluous punctuation mark, with the 'Blog' of 'Unnecessary' Quotation Marks. For lots of photos and amusing analysis, visit <http://www.unnecessaryquotes.com/>.

## Plain Language Commission news

Research director Martin Cutts gave a keynote speech at a conference endorsed by the Patient Information Forum (PiF), 'A Practical Guide to Developing Quality Patient Information', held in London on 26 January. Martin's session provided a step-by-step guide to developing patient information that's clear and easy to use.

Other speakers included PiF president Mark Duman, who provided an update on UK policy initiatives in this area, and Theo Raynor, Professor of Pharmacy Practice at the University of Leeds, who presented his work (including for the National Institute for Health Research's Health Technology Assessment programme) on testing and assessing medicines information.

## Heads roll after unobserved obverse reverse

Gregorio Iniguez, general manager of the Chilean mint, has lost his job after thousands of coins were issued with the name of the country spelt wrongly. Instead of C-H-I-L-E, the 50-peso coins (worth about 6 pence) had C-H-I-I-E stamped on them. The coins have since become collectors' items and the mint says it has no plans to take them out of circulation.

Chileans have been hoarding the coins in the hope that their value rises, but the error was less auspicious for Iniguez and several colleagues who were sacked over the blunder. It followed 2 other embarrassing incidents involving inadvertent sales of 2 rare medals that should have been housed in the mint's museum.

For a useful guide to proofreading, see Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, which has a new chapter on this, 'Keeping errors in Czech'. And for training in this skill, visit the website of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders at <http://www.sfep.co.uk/>.

[Source: BBC News, 12 February 2010:  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8511910.stm>]

## What a mouthful

*Pikestaff's* cookery editor was interested to find this notice on the box of her Sainsbury's stuffed-crust pizza:

Due to the unique nature of this Stuffed Crust Pizza, it may be necessary to redistribute toppings prior to cooking.  
This is characteristic of the product and does not affect the eating quality.

Meanwhile, Gary Evans reports that the job description for the new Head of Culture and Performance at the Quality Care Commission includes 'developing a dashboard of human metrics'.

And David White noticed the following phrase in a hotel lift (that's elevator to American readers) in Ottawa: 'Ontario Elevating Device Licence'.

## Reader's email

Thanks to Les Clark, who sent in the following snigger-inducing snippets, including the headlines.

### **'Ee' (bah gum, burrit's odd!)**

In my youth:

- an interviewer would interview an interviewee
- an employer would employ an employee
- a trainer would train a trainee.

And so it went on – solid, dependable, and fairly easy to understand (with the possible exception of barges' being piloted by bargees!).

However, the world has changed. On buses, people who stand are called 'standees'. People who attend meetings are 'attendees'.

To spare my continued confusion, could 2010 see the inauguration of a national 'Doers, not Doees' campaign'?

[Interestees may wish to refer back to our piece on this in *Pikestaff 19*.]

### **High-precision haircutting**

A Nottingham hairdresser is displaying a sign in the window – 'Oi! Student! 12% off your hair'.

### **Subsidence warning?**

Estate agents recently sought new occupants for a vacant shop in Nottingham city centre: 'Premises for Lease. May Split.'

## 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 Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177