

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 37,
April 2010

The logo for the Plain Language Commission is a dark blue square with a green triangle in the top right corner. The text "PLAIN LANGUAGE COMMISSION" is written in white, uppercase letters, stacked vertically in the center of the square.

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Clarity to cut call costs

Does the public sector spend its money effectively and honestly? A government body charged with finding out says that HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) could save cash by producing clearer written information. A report by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), *Handling telephone enquiries*, says HMRC estimates that '35% of calls are avoidable, often from people seeking to clarify information they had received which they did not understand'.

In oral evidence to the PAC, which is appointed by the House of Commons, Chris Hopson – HMRC's Director for Customer Contact – describes how HMRC is tackling this problem:

We have...used our most important resource, which is our staff, and we have asked them to identify every time they come across a call that they think might be avoidable to send us a postcard that says, 'This is an example of a call that is avoidable,' and then we are working through all of the changes that need to be made. I can give you a very specific example. We send out a letter every year to those people who are joining self-assessment for the first time. We send out 622,000 of those letters and it was very clear from our advisers' feedback that there was one particular element of the letter that was confusing people, so we have now changed that letter on the basis of our advisers' feedback and we have eliminated 80,000 phone calls, which will save us £447,200 a year.

You can read the PAC's report at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmpubacc/389/389.pdf>.

Linguistic link: Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please

As HMRC's work shows, writing in plain language isn't a luxury: it can cut costs and so help businesses survive. US law professor and international plain-language champion Joe Kimble collects examples of plain language saving money for all kinds of public- and private-sector organizations. As the title of this month's link suggests, it also improves customer and staff relations. Joe writes:

Try to imagine the costs of poor writing – typified by officialese and legalese – in business, government, and law. The costs are almost beyond imagining, and certainly beyond calculating. If this evidence doesn't convince organizations and individual writers that plain language can change their fortunes, probably nothing will.

First published in Volume 6 of *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* (1996–97), Joe's article is available at <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/dollars.htm>.

Plain Language Commission news

Coughing up cash for ash

Our research director Martin Cutts offered a ray of sunshine amid the encircling volcanic ash when he addressed the Travel Insurance Industry Conference on 21 April at the Royal Automobile Club, London. 'If your policies promise to pay out for delays caused by "adverse weather conditions", it will be hard for customers to argue this includes ash spewed out by Eyjafjallajökull,' he pronounced (badly). 'And if the policies exclude delays because aircraft have been grounded by government edict, then again you won't have to pay.'

He said it was a different matter for stranded passengers covered by EC regulation 261/2004: 'There are very clear posters in European airports saying EU-based carriers must meet customers' reasonable receipted expenses. It's tough on the airlines, but those are the rules and they have presumably insured themselves against having to comply with them in extreme situations. The message is: "Cough up cash for ash."'

Martin showed delegates how they could improve unclear language in travel policies by following plain-language guidelines. The clarity of policies was very variable, he said, but all must comply with the spirit of the 'plain and intelligible language' requirements in the unfair contract terms regulations.

Martin railed against the poor layout of some policies, which shouted 'Don't read me!' He singled out the practice of putting all defined words in bold type, which left 'customers dazzled by numerous references to **we** and **you** on most pages'. He also said that using initial capitals for defined words was typically lawyerly and offputting: 'Nothing else that anyone reads is ever dressed like this.'

Among others speaking at the conference was Tony Boorman, principal ombudsman and decisions director at the Financial Ombudsman Service.

Alluring alliteration attracts accolades anew

Associate Sarah Carr won a competition held by the Society for Editors and Proofreaders to come up with a catchy new title for its code of practice. Sarah's suggestion – Ensuring Editorial Excellence – was chosen from 45 entries, winning her 2 SfEP Guides.

Tip of the month: the proof of the pudding is in the checking

The issue

Poor proofreading is a perennial problem; to err is human, but language errors do matter. Martin Cutts devotes a chapter of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* to this: 'Proofreading matters. Without it your writing could soon be plagued by uninformed not uniformed police, marital not martial arts, infernal not internal disputes, and pubic not public affairs.'

Sometimes poor proofreading is just embarrassing – like the recent Telegraph Online headline 'Large Hardon Collider breaks energy record' (read 'Hadron'). But it can also cost a business money. Recently, readers of the Penguin Group's *Pasta Bible* were left wondering if they were making cannelloni for cannibals, as one recipe suggested seasoning the dish with 'salt and freshly ground black people'. The publisher had to pulp and reprint 7,000 copies of the book, at a cost of £12,000. Martin's chapter concludes with a list of 8 other 'proofreading blunders that chill the blood'.

Our advice

- Proofreading is not like other reading where we skim-read for information, often in a rush. You need to go slowly, checking once for 'the big picture' – layout, headings and type – and then again for detail (sense, spelling, grammar and punctuation).
- If proofreading on screen, enlarge the image size and brightness so you can read the type and punctuation easily. Your program's automatic spell-check can help, though you need to make sure you don't get tired, go onto auto-pilot and wrongly click 'Replace' – that's what could have happened in the Penguin case. And of course computers won't pick up a word that is a proper English word, but not the one meant to be there: as the internet poem goes, 'Eye halve a spelling chequer; It came with my pea sea; It plainly marques four my revue; Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.'
- If proofreading on paper, make sure you have good lighting, and put your finger or a ruler below each line as you go along, so that your eye concentrates on the right part. If you don't do this, your brain gets too smart, spots the way the pattern is going and sees what it expects to be there, rather than what really is.

Martin suggests 14 areas to check for errors:

- House style
- Alignment
- Captions
- Contents list
- Dates
- Phone numbers/website addresses
- Headlines
- Numbers and prices
- Spelling of names
- Names of organizations
- Footnotes/other reference numbers
- Homonyms
- Consistency in punctuation
- Alphabetical order

The chapter concludes: 'If you can't spell, get someone else to proofread'; and the same applies to ability to spot incorrect grammar. Remember that our team at Plain Language Commission is expert in English, so you can always ask us to check your document. At a recent workshop that Martin Cutts attended, participants were asked to create a haiku – a Japanese verse of 17 syllables, in 3 lines of 5, 7 and 5 – summing up their everyday work. Here's Martin's masterpiece (or doggerel, according to taste):

Daily transforming
Sesquipedalian dross
Into clarity.

To benefit from our editors' poetry in motion, contact us at mail@clearest.co.uk for a quotation.

[Sources: BBC News, 17 April 2010: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8627335.stm>; *Private Eye*, No 1259: 2 April – 15 April 2010]

There's no debate: fewer party leaders use less bad grammar

The TV debates in the UK's general-election campaign have been remarkable for several things including the ability of 3 grown men to stand for 90 minutes without needing a pee, and the different-colour ties the rivals have worn, perhaps to help us all remember that, er, yes, Cameron is in the blue corner, Clegg is the new golden boy, and Brown does not wear brown.

The nation of language purists, though, must have been aghast that all 3 PMs-in-waiting repeatedly confused 'less' and 'fewer'. They spouted about 'less jobs' and 'less people' whereas traditional grammar requires 'less' with a commodity and 'fewer' with a plural. In radio interviews, successive education ministers have also made this error.

Two of the party leaders also used the ghastly phrase 'amount of people' instead of 'number of people'. As any fule know, 'amount' goes with a commodity, eg 'an amount of money was stolen'.

Pettifogging distinctions or necessary rules? One obscure party in this election is called the English Democrats and runs (or ruins, some would say) Doncaster Council. How democratic about the rules of English should we all be?

Readers write with re'newed vigour

In *Pikestaff 36*, we asked if you'd come across any unusual organizational names and job titles. Here are some we received:

- The BBC has advertised for a 'Change Lead', who would be responsible for 'shaping and managing the execution of the change ambition' and 'ensuring the change strategy is operationally implementable and effective'. The successful candidate will have 'visibility of all change initiatives' and be responsible for 'driving decisions' on how change is managed.
- Bromley Council meanwhile is after 3 'Reablement Assessors'.
- Many councils employ 'Contaminated Land Officers' – another good case for a well-placed hyphen.
- The University Boat Race recently sold its name to a business services company – it's now the Xchanging Boat Race.
- Last year, the government spent £24,765 removing two words from the (Department for) Communities and Local Government. A minister told MPs that the rebranding was necessary to 'emphasise the mission of the department'.
- One North East (a weird name in itself – wouldn't North East Development Agency be rather more self-evident?) is advertising for 'an organisation to deliver the Talent Challenge Front-facing Service'. Yeah, right.

The late Keith Waterhouse, journalist and founder of The Association for the Abolition of the Aberrant Apostrophe, once asked: 'Should not the Society of Indexers be known as Indexers, Society of, The?'

Rising to both our challenges to send in unusual organization names and (from *Pikestaff 35*) examples of strange punctuation, reader John Devine emailed with this double whammy:

In Leeds, we have 'a regeneration charity working with disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities' with a name that fits your description. A few years ago they took the decision to change their name from Leeds Partnership Charitable Homes. In a flash of marketing style brilliance, they now use the name re'new.

Lower-case proper nouns seem to be the latest trend, though organizations adopting this style shouldn't be surprised if their customers no longer include members of the Queen's English Society. In the recent issue of *Quest*, the society's journal, President Dr Bernard Lamb writes:

Kuoni's latest glossy brochure is called: world class luxury holidays to Europe and morocco 2010. It offers holidays in italy, rome, spain, madrid, france, hotel danieli, and other places with no initial capital letters for proper names in the headings.

I wrote to Kuoni to complain vigorously about this. An executive telephoned me to say that this was a design statement, not illiteracy. Indeed, he said, the designer in Switzerland was highly literate. I replied that I did not like their design

statement, that it set a poor example to others, and that it would reduce my likelihood of travelling with their firm again.

Captivatingly contemporary or newfangledly nutty: what do you think of this design fashion? Do write and tell us at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

There must be a link between this trend and games giant Mattel's decision to change the rules of Scrabble to allow proper nouns? Place names, trademarks and brands, and people's names – including pop-star monikers like Jay-Z (big points!) – will be allowed in the new edition of the game, to be launched in July.

A spokesperson for the company said the use of proper nouns would 'add a new dimension' to Scrabble and 'introduce an element of popular culture into the game'. She added: 'This is one of a number of twists and challenges included that we believe existing fans will enjoy and will also enable younger fans and families to get involved.'

But Mattel won't do away with the old rules altogether, continuing to sell a board with the original rules, for the more traditional customer. Martin Cutts said: 'Mattel must be bonkers. How will anyone know whether a word is a proper name or not? If I put down "Zarqsplat", who's to say it's not the name of some pop star in Mongolia?'

[Sources: *Daily Mail*, 26 January 2010: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1246037/You-WHAT-BBC-After-vow-rid-ridiculous-jobs-corporation-advertises-Change-Lead.html>; *The Week*, 28 November and 26 December 2009; *The Guardian*, 11 September 2009: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/sep/04/keith-waterhouse-dies-billy-liar>; BBC News, 6 April 2010: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8604625.stm>]

French great ape gets local lass pregnant and drops dead

Strange goings-on at London Zoo, according to the *London Evening Standard's* science editor, Mark Prigg. He reports that Yeboah, the zoo's male gorilla 'who died last Thursday, may have fathered a child before his demise'.

The beast, which (not 'who', Mr Prigg, if that's not too priggish to point out) was brought in from France 'to provide London Zoo's three females with a mate', weighed 20 stone. Staff apparently believe Yeboah 'may have got Mjukuu, the youngest female, pregnant..., and have been administering human pregnancy tests to find out'.

Horses having bred with donkeys and lions with tigers, maybe it was only a matter of time before apes and humans sought solace in the sack together.

Mjukuu will be seeing her human resources manager soon to arrange maternity leave, we're told.

[Source: *London Evening Standard*, 7 April 2010: <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23822228-london-zoos-gorilla-will-be-missed.do>]

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

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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

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