

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 38,
May 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, centered within the square.

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Fewer politicians still use less bad grammar

We observed last month that the party leaders in the UK election campaign might be offending language purists with their confusion of 'less' and 'fewer', among other linguistic atrocities. *Private Eye* also reported these writing-related 'electionballs':

- Richard Benyon, Conservative candidate for Newbury, emailed supporters inviting them to 'keep up to date with the campaign by following Richard on his bog'.
- The UK Independence Party delivered thousands of leaflets pledging: 'No-one admitted to the UK unless they fluent in English.' The *Eye* comments: 'No word on whether the leaflet writer is to be deported...'
- Lib Dem Danny Alexander's 'Local News' sheet pleaded: 'Re-elect Danny to bring real change.'
- Hackney council told *Eye* reader Sophia Gordon that if her postal vote hadn't arrived by 29 April, she should email the council. Which she did, only to learn that 'a service officer will respond to you within 10 working days'. Polling day was 6 May.
- Labour and Conservative candidates in Islington were reported to the police after issuing leaflets that resembled polling cards – which is against election law.

We're with Kentucky-born blogging editor Mary Foley: having received an invitation from a local candidate to 'come and hear what myself and the other candidates have to say on matters that effect you', she suggested forming the Editorial Pedants' party:

We wouldn't have any policies on the economy or immigration; we'd leave the substance to other politicians, while advocating the correct use of *affect* and *effect*, licenses for those who want to use *less* or *fewer*, the allocation of funds to add question marks to the ends of deprived questions, and stronger penalties for using *myself* as the subject of a sentence.

[Sources: *Private Eye* No. 1262, 14 to 27 May 2010; and M E Foley's Anglo-American Experience Blog: <http://mefoley.wordpress.com/2010/05/04/election-2010-part-4/>]

Election candidate calls for Easy Read finance documents

Lawyer Deborah King, who stood as an independent candidate for Yiewsley in the recent local council elections, achieving 193 votes, has called for Easy Read documents to be used to explain Hillingdon council's investment policies. Drawing on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which ensures the right of disabled people to have access to politics, King argues:

Over-complexity in financial transactions was one of the main reasons for the financial collapse. People's pensions and other investments have been put at risk because people did not understand what was going on in the City and global markets. I have asked the Bank of England for Easy Read documents. An example of a well done Easy Read document can be seen at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/newsrelease020608a.htm> where the Ministry of Justice has prepared an Easy Read guide to the Human

Rights Act 1998. My argument is that if we had Easy Read guides to macroeconomic policy, fewer economic and investment errors would occur in the UK and in Hillingdon Council's investment policies.

Easy Read uses simpler words, with pictures alongside to aid understanding.

Linguistic link: Demand to Understand

Part of the Plain Campaign, sponsored by the US Center for Plain Language (covered in our linguistic link in *Pikestaff 34*), Demand to Understand – at <http://demandtounderstand.org/> – includes a petition for people to sign demanding that government and business communicate more clearly: do please visit and add your name!

You can also see a couple of amusing public-service announcements, and don't miss the plain-language rap song: definitely worth a listen. All together now:

Plain language makes us all feel good
Plain language says it like it should
Plain language – it's the right thing to do
Help us understand – it's up to you!

Political straight-speaking can be a source of deep regret, though – at least to the speakers. The outgoing prime minister Gordon Brown, on the stump in the northern town of Rochdale, was overheard calling a local person a 'bigoted woman', and spent the next few days eating humble pie. Actually, Gillian Duffy, the woman in question, seemed more offended by being called a woman than a bigot – she preferred 'lady', despite general plain-language opinion that 'lady' and 'gentleman' are outdated terms of rank and not really PC.

And Liam Byrne, the defeated party's chief secretary to the Treasury, left a bottle of wine and a note for his successor that may have been just a bit too frank for someone hoping for a continuing political career. It said: 'Dear Chief Secretary, I'm afraid to tell you there's no money left. Kind regards and good luck!'

First ClearMark awards honour best and worst language use

Capturing the top 2 national awards in a new scheme sponsored by the Center for Plain Language were a clear online video that explains low back pain, and a confusing homeland security form. The awards were presented at the end of April, in Washington, DC. The ceremony featured comedian and political impressionist, Jim Morris, and was chaired by Australia's Christopher Balmford, president of Clarity.

Winning the top ClearMark award, Healthwise used an online video to present information about low back pain in an easy-to-understand format. The information compares the spine to a bridge to explain what causes low back pain, and also provides clear information on how to manage the condition. 'This was a well done video with a message that provided a good explanation of the problem, an easy flow of information, and great analogies,' said Annetta Cheek, chair of the Center's board. 'In addition, the information was presented in a relaxed conversational style and reached out to each viewer personally.'

Another ClearMark award went to an organization on this side of the pond: London-based Boag Associates won the ClearMark award in the category of 'Best revised document'. Director Andrew Boag said: 'We are very excited that our writing and design is being recognised in this way – language and design clarity and transparency has had significant traction in the UK for some time, and it's reassuring to see that US clients and organisations see the benefit of this for both end users and the organisation that produce

documents.’ The UK consultancy developed the bill for First Choice Power, one of the largest retail electricity providers in Texas. ‘The new bill saves customers time and energy because reading it is easy,’ said Brian Hayduk, president of First Choice Power – ‘We listened to our customers and are putting more clarity around what they want to know about their energy usage.’

Meanwhile, the overall WonderMark award – so called because ‘we wonder what they were thinking when writing these documents’ – went to the form written by the US Department of Homeland Security. Used by those entering or re-entering the country, this form is filled with language that is ‘confusing, arcane and offensive’. The judges found the form to have a challenging layout that makes it hard to complete, condescending questions, unrealistic content and a bureaucratic tone. It was considered ‘a particularly noteworthy nomination’ because of how much it is used, and because it may affect visitors’ first impression of the US. Susan Kleimann, chair of the ClearMark awards, commented:

It might not be the best way to start out by saying to US tourists: ‘Welcome to the United States – you diseased, crazy, drugged-out, criminal, lying, spying, child abuser!’ I’m wondering how many citizens, let alone foreigners, know what ‘moral turpitude’ means? And why say ‘Type or print legibly’ when it’s unlikely that tourists bring typewriters on the plane?

Entries for the awards were judged by a national panel of plain-language experts.

For more information, go to <http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org>.

Plain Language Commission news

Clarity, an international organization promoting clear legal language, is holding its next conference in Lisbon, on 12 to 14 October. Hosted by our colleague Sandra Fisher-Martins of Português Claro, it promises to be a great event, with several eminent speakers already confirmed, including Professor Joe Kimble, Christopher Balmford and Annetta Cheek. Our own Martin Cutts and Sarah Carr are also submitting proposals to present papers: more on this in a future *Pikestaff*.

You can find out more on the conference website at http://www.clarity2010.com/home_en.html. The conference fee is reduced for Clarity members, and if you register before 31 August. The conference website gives a range of hotels to stay in, and the prices if you book early are particularly good value. Several airlines fly direct to Lisbon from the UK, including EasyJet, BMI Baby and TAP Air Portugal. The hotels are about 20 minutes’ drive from the airport, and taxis are apparently much cheaper than here. Hope to see you there!

Commission is a hotbed of advice

Allen Green of the Berkhamsted Chilli Growing Society emailed us for advice on a spelling question that had been vexing the society for some time: ‘What, if indeed there is one, is the correct spelling of the word chilli? Is it chilli, chillie, chile or chille – all of which I’ve seen in use.’

Our advice, quoting Pam Peters’ *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* in the first paragraph, subsequently appeared on the society’s website:

chilli, chili, chile or chilly

'The first three are alternative spellings for a pepper or a peppery vegetable discovered in the New World. In Britain and Australia the primary spelling is **chilli**, which is believed to render the original Mexican word most exactly. But in American and Canadian English, the spelling **chili** is given preference and often featured in the spicy Mexican dish *chili con carne*. The actual Spanish form of the word is **chile**, hence its use in *chile con carne*, in parts of the US where Spanish is better known. The fourth spelling above is a separate word meaning 'rather cold' in all varieties of English. But in British English it's yet another possible spelling for the pepper, according to the *Oxford Dictionary* (1989).'

So, as with other spelling variants, it wouldn't be right for us to say there's only one correct spelling, but I would suggest that chilli (as spelt in your society's name) is your safest bet. As my Oxford Dictionary gives the only plural form as chillies, with the 'e', I'd go for that too (though the British National Corpus shows about the same number of entries for 'chillis', so you're obviously not alone in finding the 'e' superfluous).

The main thing with spelling variants is that it's important to be consistent in your own writing. So once you've decided on your chosen form, stick with it unless you're quoting someone else who's done differently.

Meanwhile, Steven King wrote to ask how best to avoid the phrase 'and/or', particularly in legal writing. We agreed that plain-language lawyers unanimously revile this phrase, and we recommended the comprehensive entry in Mark Adler's book, *Clarity for Lawyers: Effective Legal Writing* (The Law Society, 2007), which we quote from here:

A and/or B may be shorthand for **A or B or both** but the saving is trivial. Too often the expression is a lazy alternative for the drafter who has not considered which option is appropriate: '(A and B) or (A or B or both) or (A or B but not both)'

Is a bequest to **A and/or B** to be shared between them...? If so, in what proportions, and what is the function of **/or**? Or is it a gift to one or the other? If so, who chooses, and what is the function of **and**/?

And does **A or B and/or C** mean '(A or B) and/or C', or 'A or (B and/or C)? And what of **A and/or B and/or C**?

If you intend **Any one or more of (a number of items)**, say so.

StyleWriter 4: a review

We announced last year that Editor Software was releasing an enhanced version of StyleWriter, specialist software that encourages people to write in plain English. So how good is StyleWriter 4, and what's new? We've been trying it out to see.

When we reviewed the previous version of StyleWriter in *Pikestaff 9*, we asked the software to analyse this text:

StyleWriter claims to:

- change the writing style in your organization
- check each document for thousands of writing faults
- cut 25 per cent of the wordy style, resulting in a clear, concise and readable document.

Could it make me a nice sandwich while it's at it? Well, probably not, but it certainly does have a beneficial impact on obfuscated linguistic output.

Here are the problems it picked up:

- Do I mean *readable* – ‘pleasant or interesting to read (used of content)’ – or might I actually mean *legible* – ‘able to be deciphered, clear (used of handwriting)’?
- *Nice* is a ‘weak word’, which it advises me to edit out.
- Do I really mean *it’s* (= it is or it has’) or might I actually mean *its* (= belonging to it’)?
- ‘You can usually omit *certainly*,’ it tells me.
- When it gets to *beneficial* and *obfuscated*, it offers me various plain alternatives, and suggests I ‘be specific or edit out’ *output* (sage counsel).

To check out StyleWriter 4’s extra editing features and proofreading tools, which derive from a new graded 200,000-word and phrase dictionary (the ‘wordlist’), we asked it to analyse the same piece of text. This is what emerged:

- Ironically, it didn’t recognize its own name written ‘StyleWriter’, though it does ‘Stylewriter’, which is apparently how most people write it. As we believe the correct way to write a name is the way its owner prefers, we’d have chosen to do this the other way round, but no matter: it’s easy to add unrecognized words to StyleWriter’s dictionary, so that’s what we do with mixed-case ‘StyleWriter’.
- On ‘organization’, it says: ‘Although the “ize” spelling is acceptable, for consistency prefer the “ise” form.’ Our own house style is to use the ‘ize’ ending, which is probably (slightly) less common in UK English (the British National Corpus showing 6,297 occurrences of ‘organization’ against 8,294 of ‘organisation’). But we weren’t sure why it said ‘for consistency’, as so long as the document is consistent internally and with any house style (which ours was), then that’s OK.
- If you click an icon for ‘heavy sentences’ (appropriately, a picture of a weight) and another for ‘jargon phrases’ (a bull’s head!), the software highlights various words to edit.

Underlying and enabling these extra points to emerge is StyleWriter’s main and most exciting addition: the Bog index, which replaces the previous version’s Style index and now measures readability. It’s so named because a high Bog score means the style bogs down readers. Thanks to the inclusion of new audience types and more kinds of writing task, the StyleWriter scores and ratings are now more sensitive to the type of document you are writing and your intended audience. On the next page are before-and-after screenshots to show how StyleWriter encourages sound plain-English editing of a typical report.

We’d have preferred to keep ‘European fisheries’, to ensure that readers know what the policy regulates. And if this had been a news piece, beginning with the name of a policy and a distant date may not have grabbed readers’ attention. But StyleWriter has done a pretty impressive job, so we can forgive the minor niggle of its 0–100 scale for the Bog index running in the opposite direction to that of the well-known Flesch Reading Ease (shown in Word’s readability statistics). Read more on how the Bog index beats traditional readability formulas in an article by Nick Wright of Editor Software on our website: <http://www.clearerest.co.uk/files/TowardsABetterReadabilityMeasure.pdf>.

You can download the full version to try by emailing info@editorsoftware.com with ‘Plain Language Commission – StyleWriter Free Trial Offer’ in the subject line. Editor Software will then send you all the information you need to download and use StyleWriter 4.

Before

StyleWriter - [Report.docx]

File Edit View Analysis Tools Window Help

are managed **Passive Verbs** Report In-house UK Resume

Prefer active verbs **Edit Text**

more...

European fisheries **are managed** by the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), which **was set up** in 1983 with the **objective f sustainable exploitation of aquatic resources** in **environmental, economic ad** social terms. The cornerstone of this policy may be **the limitation and control of** catch volumes by setting total **allowable catches (TACs)** and national quotas as well as **the limitation of** effort in some fisheries. The European fisheries control policy is at the heart of the **CEP**, because **its credibility** depends on **its** effective application. Despite several years of **the implementation of** the **CFP**, the state of **resources** remains worryingly low. Several stocks have **been exploited** beyond **sustainability** and **as a consequence of deficiencies in the implementation and enforcement of** the **CFP**. The current control **system** is inefficient, expensive, complex, and does not produce the **desired** results. The continued failure of the control policy will have significant **consequences** for the future of fisheries **resources**, the fishing industry and the regions relying on fishing. It is within this **context that the Authority is**

Number of Sentences

Sentence Length (words)	Number of Sentences
0-5	1
5-10	1
10-15	1
15-20	2
20-25	2
25-30	2
30-35	2
35-40	2

Average Length

Bog Pep

Words: 191 Bog Index: 100 **Poor** Ave Sentence: 23.9 Fair Passive Index: 38 **Good**

After

StyleWriter - [Report-Redraft.docx]

File Edit View Analysis Tools Window Help

economic **Confused Words** Report In-house UK Resume

economical = thrifty, avoiding waste
economic = profitable, of economics **Edit Text**

The Common Fisheries Policy, set up in 1983, aims to preserve fish stocks in an environmentally, **economic** and socially acceptable way. The policy limited total catches allowed with national quotas on each fish.

The policy's **credibility** depends on **its** effective application. Despite several years enforcing the controls, some fish stocks remain worryingly low. Overfishing and the poor enforcement of fisheries policy means some fish are no longer sustainable.

The current controls are inefficient, expensive, complex and fail to protect fish stocks. This failure threatens further fish stocks, the fishing industry and the regions relying on fishing. The Authority proposes reforming the controls in the Common Fisheries Policy by addressing **its** shortcomings and modernising **its** approach.

Number of Sentences

Sentence Length (words)	Number of Sentences
0-5	1
5-10	1
10-15	1
15-20	5
20-25	1
25-30	1
30-35	1
35-40	1
40-45	1
45-50	1
50-55	1
55+	1

Average Length

Bog Pep

Words: 115 Bog Index: 21 **Excellent** Ave Sentence: 14.4 **Excellent** Passive Index: 0 **Excellent**

What the Kyrgyzstan?

Following last month's news that games giant Mattel had relaxed the rules of Scrabble to allow the use of proper nouns, Sue Wloszczak (who surely has top-scoring potential herself) wrote in a letter to *The Guardian*: 'So Kyrgyzstan makes global headlines barely a day after Scrabble changes its rules to allow proper nouns? No coincidence, surely...'

And we've more in our continuing theme of stupid letters, as *The Week* reports that a mobile-phone company was forced to apologize to a potential customer after sending him a letter addressed to 'Mr Illegal Immigrant'. Inside, the letter from Virgin Media began: 'Dear Immigrant...'

We're not sure if this or Sky's stupid letter makes the bigger faux pas: replying to a chap who had contacted the company to cancel his late mother's account, Sky started well: 'I'm sorry to hear about your loss and would like to offer my condolences.' But then things went rapidly downhill: 'As this account is not registered in your name, I'm unable to process your cancellation request. To be able to cancel the above account, we'll need the account holder to contact us'.

And last but not least, a reader who recently returned from the maiden voyage of the latest P&O ship, Azura, was amused to spot the following notice onboard:

We apologies for the delay in getting the Cruise Overview to you. This was due to a technical difficulty in our print shop. Please notice that the published days are incorrect, however the dates and ports are.

As the holiday season gets going (ash permitting), do spare a thought for our regular summer feature looking at amusing mistranslations and funny foreign English (not that we're any better at other languages, but it's all meant in the nicest possible way, as Dame Edna would say). So do email us with any snippets you spot!

[Sources: *The Guardian*, 10 April 2010: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2010/apr/10/grand-national-airports-kyrgystan-recipes>, *The Week*, 27 March 2010; Private Eye No. 1259, 2 April to 15 April 1=2010]

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