



Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 41, September 2010

Referendum on electoral reform: assessing the question

The government has drafted the question it's planning to put to voters at the referendum on electoral reform on 5 May 2011:

Do you want the United Kingdom to adopt the "alternative vote" system instead of the current "first past the post" system for electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons?

By law, the Electoral Commission must comment on whether the question is written in a way that means voters are likely to understand it. So over the summer it has been asking for advice from experts on accessibility and plain language, including us.

We advised that 'first past the post' should not be used. Although media people tend to use this term, it is a misnomer. Also, we thought 'method' would be closer to the intended meaning (which is 'way') than 'system'. So we suggested this wording:

Should the United Kingdom use the 'alternative vote' method instead of the current 'outright winner' method for electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons?

or

At present, the United Kingdom uses the 'outright winner' method to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' method be used instead?

We also advised that it would be worth testing these revised versions with a small sample of typical voters. In any case, 'alternative vote' would need explanation.

As well as seeking expert advice, the Electoral Commission is holding focus groups and one-to-one interviews with people from different backgrounds and areas of the UK, and talking to campaign groups, other interested groups and individuals, and the main UK political parties. It expects to publish its views in early October. For more information, see <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/referendums>.

Linguistic link: National Punctuation Day

Did you know that on 24 September the US celebrated its seventh National Punctuation Day (NPD) in the US? Described in *Chase's Calendar of Events* as 'a celebration of the lowly comma, correctly used quotation marks, and other proper uses of periods, semicolons and the ever-mysterious ellipsis', the event has its own website offering a range of serious and silly stuff, including:

- resources (useful websites and books)
- punctuation products (including t-shirts proclaiming 'It's not possessive')
- punctuation playtime program (visits to primary schools to improve children's understanding of punctuation rules)
- how to celebrate NPD
- photos and letters about poor punctuation
- NPD in the media
- a free e-newsletter, The Exclamation Point!

While last year saw NPD fans battling it out in a baking contest (think comma cakes and semicolon scones), this year they're trying something a bit more literary – a haiku contest. The site includes some examples by communications trainer Craig Harrison:

Serial comma.
What is your philosophy?
To use or not to?

Exclamation points
And question marks together?
Only in comics.

Em dash or en dash.
On typewriters it's easy,
On keyboards, less so.

While I like to write,
Punctuation is a drag.
That's for editors.

You can read more about NPD at <http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com/index.html>. Just one word of warning to UK readers: don't forget that there are a few differences between British and American punctuation. (For example, Harrison warns: 'Are you Brit or Yank? / Show me your quotation marks / And I'll tell you which.')

And don't forget that if – like Jane Austen, as Roger Walshe (curator of a British Library exhibition of literary manuscripts) recently claimed – you find punctuation a pain, our team of trainers and editors can help. We offer courses in writing skills – face to face or by distance learning – and a range of editing services.

[Source: *Telegraph*, 20 August 2010:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7955526/Dash-it-all-give-Jane-Austen-the-last-word.html>]

Edited leaflet wins prize for carers' information

Congratulations to our customer Health Rights Information Scotland (HRIS); its leaflet *Caring and consent*, which we edited for clear English, has scooped a special prize for carers' information at this year's British Medical Association (BMA) Patient Information Awards. Based on the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000, the leaflet explains carers' rights to be involved in decisions about the health care of the adults they look after.

HRIS consulted 34 carers from 11 to 72 years old from 5 NHS board areas: Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and Fife and Forth Valley. The reviewer of the leaflet commented: 'I really like how it covers all possible questions that the target audience may have, and provides extensive links to further information.'

The BMA this year received 313 entries for the awards, 11% more than in 2009. Read more on the BMA's website at http://www.bma.org.uk/whats_on/offers_and_competitions/2010bookawardwinners.jsp.

Tip of the month: punctuation rules (but not always)

The issue

It's common to see misplaced apostrophes (cue one last Harrison haiku – The apostrophe: / Found on both sides of letters / The right side and wrong). In *Pikestaff 14's* tip of the month, we advised: 'Don't improvise when you apostrophize: be wise and follow the rule that applies.'

But a recent plea from a customer highlighted a less clear-cut area:

Please settle an argument.

A few years back a man set up an illegal business that basically comprised him maintaining a list of workers from the construction industry who at some point in their working lives, had taken part in industrial action. He hawked this around to all the major construction companies offering, for a fee, to check whether prospective employees were on his list.

The question is about the line below. Should 'workers' have an apostrophe? It's not their list, they just happen to be on it

Construction industry workers blacklist

In *The Gregg Reference Manual* (McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2005), Bill Sabin advises: 'Do not mistake a descriptive form ending in [plural] s for a possessive form.' He gives these examples:

- sales effort (*sales* describes the kind of effort)
- savings account (*savings* describes the kind of account)
- news release (*news* describes the type of press release)
- earnings record (*earnings* describes the type of record).

Our advice

As Sabin warns, some cases can be difficult to distinguish. Although we've come across various tips to help the writer decide whether to insert an apostrophe in such phrases, none of these seems to work, and usually neither is unarguably right (or therefore wrong). It's one of those areas of language that's more about interpretation (and so is inherently subjective) than about applying an objective rule.

What's important, we think, is to realize there's no hard and fast rule here, but to make you think about each such case, so you know you can justify your choice if anyone challenges you. So, getting back to those blacklisted workers, here's how we replied:

Grammar buffs will give different opinions on this but ours is that an apostrophe is not needed, partly for the reason you give. We see 'construction industry workers' as an adjectival phrase so there's no strong element of possession and therefore (for us) no apostrophe.

Vending machines should be just the ticket

Independent watchdog Passenger Focus, whose 'mission is to get the best deal for passengers', has published research showing that even people familiar with ticket machines are not always confident when making complex or less-familiar journeys and need help from staff. Often this is because ticket restrictions are not displayed clearly on ticket machines. Passengers may avoid the machines or give up, instead queuing at the ticket office and risking missing their train.

Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus chief executive, said:

Ticket machines can present bewildering jargon, a barrage of information and choices as well as incomplete information about ticket restrictions. As a result some passengers would rather queue to speak to a member of staff, buy more expensive tickets than they need to or just give up and join the ticket office queue.

The report – which you can see at <http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/news-and-publications/press-release.asp?dsid=4524> – includes many detailed examples with quotations from passengers. Here's one interesting case:

A further difficulty for some was the terminology, which although familiar, was not always recognisable in the context of TVM [ticket vending machine] language. For example, 'Anytime' was not always known but was easy enough to work out but it was not always obvious that 'First' means First Class since this could be assumed to relate to the name of certain TOCs [train operating companies, of which there's one called 'First'].

"If I was travelling First Class for the first time, the fact that it didn't say First Class, it just said 'first', I would find a bit confusing" [Commuter]

Passenger Focus is calling for ticket machine improvements to give clearer, better information to passengers.

Readers write

In the last issue of *Pikestaff*, we looked at this letter from *The Independent*, written by Jane Gregory of Dundee:

Lost elegance

Today I posted a bill payment to Thames Water in the envelope provided. The familiar, elegant wording "Please affix correct postage" had been replaced by "Stick stamp here". Where will it all end?

After commenting, we wrote: 'Do let us know what you think.' And you did! Thank you to all who emailed with their views. William Webber came out in favour of 'affix':

I affirm 'affix'. I am in favour of ingress and egress also. But, I would: spiritually I'm an 85 year old Edwardian.

Christine Mowat and Janet McCarter meanwhile proposed alternative wording:

How about "Place correct postage here"? Sometimes it is a stamp, sometimes stamps, and sometimes a printed postage message. [Christine Mowat]

What about simply 'Please pay (or 'use' or 'add') correct postage'? It's only slightly shorter but keeps the meaning of the traditional wording - politely

pointing out that it's not free - without implying I might not know how to use a stamp or where it normally goes. [Janet McCarter]

And last but not least, Stephen Day and Paul Affleck thought laterally, coming up with these ideas:

Do you need to write anything? Everyone knows where the stamp goes and, if you're only enclosing an invoice and cheque, you just buy either a first or second class. Just in case, the usual stamp-sized box with the word 'postage' inside it will convey the message.

In the same way, we can all tell the difference between an e-mail address, a website address, an office phone number and a pocket phone number by now, but we still write 'e-mail', 'website', 'mobile' etc. The only one that needs to be marked is the fax number, which is something of an endangered species, anyway. [Stephen Day]

I cannot improve on the words, 'Please stick correct postage here'. However, if politeness is at stake perhaps Thames Water should simply print the word Freepost on their envelopes. It is a bill payment envelope after all. [Paul Affleck]

Results of Pikestaff readers' survey

Many thanks to everyone who completed our online survey. It's been most useful for us to find out what you think of *Pikestaff*, and a little more about you. Although around half of all respondents are based in the UK, we had respondents from 8 other countries, including Australia, Hong Kong and Canada.

Most readers said they liked these article types a lot: tip of the month, clearly clarified (examples of plain-English editing), UK news, readers' letters, linguistic link and funny examples of unclear English. And most liked reading international news and Plain Language Commission news a little. Some readers offered ideas for new article types, which we hope to include in due course.

The winning respondent in our free prize draw is Tracy Waind, who will receive a copy of the new edition of Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English*.

We plan to repeat the survey in another couple of years or so, to make sure we continue to pick up on your ideas. Of course, if you've any positive or negative feedback in the meantime, please email us at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Associate Sarah Carr will be speaking about *Pikestaff* at Clarity's conference in Lisbon in October, while research director Martin Cutts will be presenting a beginner's guide to plain legal language. Read all about it in next month's *Pikestaff*. For the full conference programme, see http://www.clarity2010.com/program_en_files/Clarity2010_Conference_Program.pdf.

Update on WriteMark Awards

In July's *Pikestaff*, we wrote about the WriteMark New Zealand Plain English Awards, which Martin Cutts was helping to judge. The winners have now been announced, and the awards were presented by Hon Christopher Finlayson – Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage; Minister for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations; and Attorney-General – in Parliament's Banquet Hall on 3 September. You can see the list of winners and finalists, view photos of the presentation ceremony, and read more about the awards at <http://www.plainenglishawards.org.nz/>.

Lost in translation

Following our series taking a light-hearted look at foreign funnies, Michael Galley emailed to point out a whole new treasure trove of travesties:

Although you cite various foreign sources of tortured/creative English, you have, so far, appeared to miss a most profitable source, namely the Japanese T-shirt. Slogans appear in (a form of) restructured English, that is *almost* familiar, and *nearly* comprehensible, but somehow just missing that last little something. My favourite so far is "Let's all go happy cycling moments!" I quite agree. I think.

But we don't need non-native speakers to mangle English for us; many Brits are quite capable of doing so themselves – like the person who wrote the web text for Broad House hotel, Wroxham:

The ensuite continues the elegance with traditional sanitary wear, a spacious shower and pretty cast iron slipper bath, evoking the elegance of a bygone age.

And it's a good job the staff at Romany's café in Poynton make better pastries than posters:

Call in for tea,s and coffee,s
Homemdade cakes ,scones & delicious pastry,s

Have you gone any unhappy reading moments recently? 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 should 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

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