



### Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 42, October 2010

#### Obama signs Plain Writing Act of 2010

On 13 October, the US President signed into law the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires federal agencies to use plain writing in government documents for the public.

'This is a triumphant moment for all those who support plain language use,' said Dr Annetta Cheek, Chair of the Center for Plain Language, long-time advocate for plain writing. 'The Act defines plain writing as writing that the audience can understand and use because it is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices of plain writing.'

You can see:

- the official statement by the White House Press Secretary at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/10/13/statement-press-secretary>
- the full text of the Act at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111\\_cong\\_bills&docid=f:h946enr.txt.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_bills&docid=f:h946enr.txt.pdf).

#### Linguistic link: Center for Plain Language

We've mentioned this site before but as it's just been redesigned (thanks to board members Whitney Quesenbery and Kate Walser), it's well worth a return visit. The new website:

- integrates a blog, Plain Language Matters, into the site
- connects to related Twitter and Facebook pages
- features the ClearMark and WonderMark awards
- aims to look more vibrant (we think it's achieved this)
- allows new content to be added more easily. For example, the Center is adding information about US plain-language laws.

The Center writes:

All this will help us do our jobs as writers and advocates better. We welcome your comments. ([centerforplainlanguage@gmail.com](mailto:centerforplainlanguage@gmail.com)). Let us know how our new site works for you. (Also, we're still finding a few typos and glitches from moving all the content over. If you spot one, let us know.)

You can visit the new-look site at [www.centerforplainlanguage.org](http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org).

#### Electoral Commission publishes report on referendum question

In last month's *Pikestaff*, we said we'd advised the Electoral Commission on the question being put to voters in the electoral-reform referendum next May. The Electoral

Commission has now published its report, which suggests the question should be changed to make sure voters find it easier to understand.

The research found that the main difficulty, as we predicted, was that many people didn't recognize or understand the voting systems it talks about – 'first past the post' and 'alternative vote':

- Some people – even those who had voted before in this type of election – didn't understand the term 'first past the post', or didn't know it's the name of the current system for electing MPs to the UK Parliament.
- The term 'alternative vote' caused particular problems and was not understood, or – worse – was misunderstood, by nearly all participants. For example, some people thought the term meant a different channel for voting other than in a polling station (such as postal or internet voting); a different voting system from what is used now, but not a particular system (they thought the actual system would be decided later); or a system based on proportional representation.

The Electoral Commission comments:

The lack of knowledge of voting systems is not surprising. Our research was carried out at a time when the campaigning and media coverage that is likely to take place in the run-up to the proposed referendum was not yet under way, and public information for voters was not yet widely available.

In fact, when people were given explanations of the two terms, most felt able to understand what the question was asking, and to answer it.

The research also showed that some members of the public (particularly those with lower levels of education or literacy) found the proposed referendum question unclear. The structure of the question, its length, and some of the language used made it unnecessarily hard to read:

- The alternative-vote system is mentioned first in the original question, and the current system second; this is illogical (in that it isn't chronological) and so could be confusing.
- At 31 words, the question is too long. The Electoral Commission found that people had to reread the question a few times to take it in, and to work out which answer matched the system they wanted.
- People found some of the language too formal and preferred familiar, everyday words, such as 'use' instead of 'adopt'. People also commented that the word 'adopt' was not plain language in this sense, being more usually associated with childcare.
- Some people felt that terms such as 'Members of Parliament' and 'House of Commons' were political jargon and not everyday language.

The Commission has recommended a redrafted question:

<b>Referendum on the voting system for UK Parliamentary elections</b>	
Vote (X) once only	
At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?	
Yes	
No	

It has also concluded:

Our assessment process has shown that it is very important that voters are given clear, neutral explanations of the 'First Past the Post' and 'Alternative Vote' systems before the proposed referendum. These explanations are necessary to help people to understand the question and be able to make an informed choice when they answer it. Part of our role in the referendum will be to produce a booklet to send out all households in the UK about the referendum that will include an explanation of the two voting systems and how they work.

The original question is part of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill, currently before the UK Parliament. The final wording of the referendum question is up to Parliament to decide.

You can read the Commission's report at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/uk/referendum>.

## A reader writes

Thanks to Les Clark for sending us these scintillating snippets:

### Stating the Patently Obvious Awards 2010 – nominations

- A shop in Sherwood, Nottingham: 'Moving due to relocation.'

### A new building method?

- From the packaging of a reinforced lining paper used in decorating: 'Simply paste the wall and hang it.'

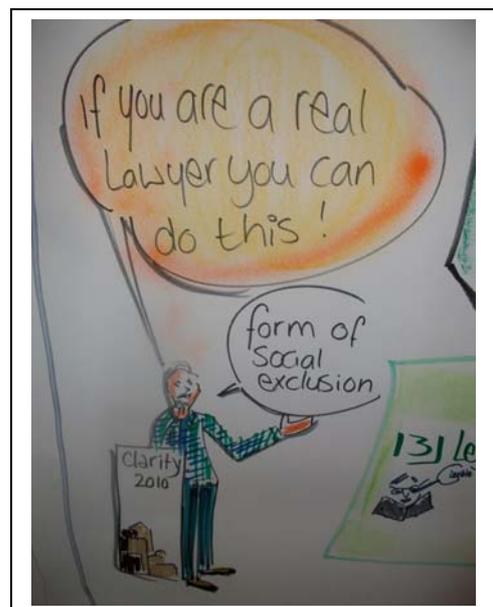
## Plain Language Commission news

Research director Martin Cutts and associate Sarah Carr recently travelled to Lisbon for Clarity2010, the fourth conference of Clarity (an international organization promoting plain legal language). Organized by our partners Português Claro, the event was stimulating and successful, bringing together several hundred plain-language novices and experts alike to discuss ways of making legal language more accessible.

Martin Cutts made 2 presentations on how to get started on clarifying legal documents, while Sarah Carr presented a session on our experiences of using a newsletter to spread the word about plain language.

Key sessions were captured by 'creative lawyer and visual facilitator' Susanne Hoogwater, of Legal Sketchpad (<http://www.legalsketchpad.com>): see Susanne's graphic of Martin's session (it's rather a good likeness).

Clarity and the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) hold their international conferences in alternate years, so next year it's PLAIN's turn, and the event will be held again in Europe, this time in Stockholm – plain-language nirvana as it's often known in the trade! (In Sweden, plain language has been strongly supported by the government for some time.)



If you fancy visiting the land of the midnight sun, reserve the dates now – 9–11 June 2011 – and register your interest on the conference website at <http://www.plain2011.com>.

## EC Clear Writing Campaign

Also speaking in Lisbon was Paul Strickland, Head of Editing at the Directorate-General for Translation, European Commission (EC). Paul is coordinating the EC's new Clear Writing Campaign. The conference brochure summarizes Paul's presentation:

The European Union, with its 23 official languages, is often seen as a Tower of Babel: yet multilingualism is essential to its democratic legitimacy. The EU's citizens must be able to read its laws and obtain information on its policies in their own language.

But multilingualism poses challenges for the European Commission. Most officials have to draft policy documents (often complex and technical) in a language which is not their mother tongue, and this compounds the stylistic problems typical of bureaucrats everywhere. The result all too easily finds its way into booklets and web pages, making them difficult to read for the general public. Unclear texts are also a problem for EU translators and legislators. It takes much longer to translate a wordy, unclear document, and there may well be divergences between the translations. If the text is a piece of key legislation, the European Court of Justice may have to intervene.

To tackle these problems, the Commission has launched a new campaign to raise its staff's awareness of the need for clear writing and of the principles involved. The long-term challenge, however, is to bring about a change of culture in the institution and this will take time.

As part of the campaign, the EC has published a booklet, *How to write clearly*. Available in all 23 languages of the EU, the online version is at <http://ec.europa.eu/translation>. The EC is holding a conference entitled 'Clear Writing throughout Europe' in Brussels on 26 November; Martin Cutts will speak at this – more on this in December's *Pikestaff*.

## Tip of the month: have an I for personal pronouns

### The issue

Many people believe it's wrong to use 'I' and 'we' in formal reports; to avoid it, they often resort to clumsy and confusing constructions such as referring to themselves as 'the writer' or putting the verb into the passive voice (for example, 'it is suggested' rather than 'I suggest').

### Our advice

If you can, write in the 'first person'. That is, use the words 'I', 'me', 'we' and 'us' to refer to yourself or your team, department or organization. Martin Cutts comments:

Using the word 'we' in your reports will bring 'us' and 'our' into your writing too. This one small move can really bring your writing to life. It will help you use a more natural, conversational word order, avoiding impersonal passives like 'it is suggested', which few people use in speech.

This may go against how some staff were taught to write at university. But we aren't writing to get good marks now. We're writing to inform people, and we need to use linguistic tricks that help us to be clear. Almost every verb we write should have an easily identified doer.

Addressing readers in the 'second person' (calling them 'you') will also help the document sound more directly relevant to them, and so grab and hold their interest and attention. The following sentence is from a health service newsletter for patients:

**Before:** The Trust recognizes the importance of keeping its patients fully informed.

**After:** We recognize the importance of keeping you fully informed.

Sometimes people's objection to using personal pronouns like 'we' and 'you' is that it's unclear who they are referring to. This can be a particular concern in formal records that may be audited, for example minutes of public-sector boards. But you can often get round the problem by stating at the start exactly who 'we' and 'you' refer to. For example, if we assume the newsletter example above is the first sentence, you could write:

We at the Ambulance Service recognize the importance of keeping you as patients informed.

You could then continue to use just 'we' and 'you', as the reader would know who you were talking about.

## Pants in translation

We end our summer series looking at foreign funnies on an oral note. Unfamiliar accents can produce some interesting misunderstandings, as these letters to the *Guardian* show:

American friends were disconcerted when a British guest suddenly left the room in the middle of a dinner party, saying she had forgotten to fan her pants. Too many chillis in the sauce? They felt relieved when she returned saying that her mother and father were well and sent their regards. (Simon Fisher)

My wife and I were surprised to hear [on the ferries between New Zealand's South and North Islands] a couple of PA announcements asking for 'all hands on Dick' as we approached the harbour at Wellington. I will say nothing about the response of the many British passengers on board. (Alan Brown)

The Kiwi accent came as a shock to a British couple who emigrated with their beautiful daughters Sally and Peggy, only to find that in New Zealand they were called Silly and Piggy. (Martin Scott)

Over Auckland airport's PA I heard the Kiwi operative requesting a stray passenger to 'proceed to the chicken zone'. (Peter Gill)

But even other UK accents can cause difficulties:

My children's Geordie schoolmate announced that he was playing turd in the school play. Doubting that the school's staid head would allow anything so scatological, I inquired further. "Yeah," he said, "Turd of Turd Hall." (John Veit-Wilson)

When I was at primary school in north London, our games teacher, Ernest Turkington, in his best Belfast accent, told us to bring a 'pair of Spurs socks' the following week. In his next lesson the whole class was wearing socks from the Tottenham Hotspur replica kit (even the Arsenal boys). He was apoplectic – he'd meant 'spare' socks. (Andrew Varley)

I used to manage the attendants in a local authority museum service in Scotland. We had a complaint from some visiting schoolgirls that one of our staff had called them 'you scumbags'. After a disciplinary hearing, the member of staff appealed to the director. He explained that he came from Northern Ireland and that what he had actually said was 'Yous, come back!' The director laughed so much that he let him off. (Derek Janes)

Finally, Guy Smith reports that while working in a Mayfair wine bar, he was repeatedly asked by an increasingly irate woman for cake. Refusing to take no for an answer, she eventually used its full name: Cakey Cola. What would she have made of this phrase spotted by David Cook on a website about living in Indonesia: 'Kuku-kuku kaki kakak kakek-ku kaku-kaku'? Just in case it should come in handy, the phrase translates: 'My grandfather's older brother's toenails are stiff.'

Have you been prey to pronunciation problems, or fazed by phrase books? If so, do email us at [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

[Sources: *The Guardian*, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 14 and 16 August 2010; and *Telegraph*, 5 January 2010]

## 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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