



PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

'The only book in our house is the Argos catalogue'

So said a 9-year-old London boy to his teacher, who had asked pupils to bring in a book from home to discuss with the class, reports the *Daily Mail*.

In its first annual Omnibus survey, the National Literacy Trust has surveyed over 18,000 young people aged 8 to 17, finding that 30% of children live in households that have no books. A further 10% live in households with 10 books or fewer, yet 85% own a games console, and 81% have a mobile phone.

The research follows official statistics showing that 20% of children leave primary school without reaching the expected level of progress in English, and finish high school without passing GCSE English and maths. Sir Jim Rose, former director of Ofsted, said: 'We are in serious trouble. We need to do something urgently. It is a responsibility we cannot afford to shirk.'

The National Literacy Trust's report on the results of the survey – *Book ownership and its relation to enjoyment, attitudes, behaviour and attainment* – states that when compared to peers who do not have books of their own, children who own books:

- enjoy reading more
- read more books
- read more frequently
- read for longer lengths of time when they do read
- read more of every kind of material not just books
- are more likely to have been bought a book as a present
- are more likely to have visited a library or bookshop
- have more positive attitudes to reading
- find it easier to find books that interest them
- have higher attainment.

A separate study of 70,000 people in 27 countries, by Nevada University, recently found that children who grew up in a home with 20 or more books remained in education 3 years longer than those born to bookless families.

You can read the National Literacy Trust's report at
http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/9502/Book_ownership_2011.pdf

[Source: *Daily Mail*, 1 June 2011: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1392782/Boy-9-tells-teacher-The-book-house-Argos-catalogue.html#ixzz1PoNO51cP>]

Boys 'can't read past 100th page'

In a survey by publisher Pearson, 25% of the 500 teachers included said that in their experience boys lost interest in books within the first few pages, 22% within the first 50 pages, and 25% by the 100-page mark. Nearly a third of the teachers questioned said boys were put off before the book had even been opened, if they saw it had more than 200 pages. Teachers also noted that classics of English literature, such as those by Jane Austen, are putting boys off reading. Shakespeare plays including *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer's Night Dream* were particularly unpopular, as was Steinbeck's 1930s classic, *Of Mice and Men*, a set text for English Literature GCSE.

The reluctance to read could partly explain the achievement gap between boys and girls; according to children's organization Unesco, the biggest single indicator of a child's future success at school is whether they read for pleasure.

Best-selling author Frank Cottrell Boyce, consultant editor on *Heroes* (<http://www.pearsonschoolsandcolleges.co.uk/Secondary/Literature/11-14/Heroes/Heroes.aspx>), a new series of books that aims to switch boys back on to reading and get them past 100 pages, said: 'Pleasure can't be taught. Pleasure can only be shared.' He added that boys should start on shorter books.

Jonathan Douglas, director of the National Literacy Trust, said its research showed that boys lag behind girls not just in literacy skills, but in the amount they read and how much they enjoy reading: 'More needs to be done to engage boys and build on their own interests.' He added that publishers have a crucial role in this.

[Source: BBC News, 17 May 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13393321>]

Linguistic link: Better book titles

For anyone averse to long books, the 'Better book titles' blog may be just the thing. Here's how blogger Dan Wilbur sums it up:

This blog is for people who do not have thousands of hours to read book reviews or blurbs or first sentences. I will cut through all the cryptic crap, and give you the meat of the story in one condensed image. Now you can read the greatest literary works of all time in mere seconds!

New titles appearing in the readers' or Wilbur's top 10 include:

- JK Rowling's *Two Guys, One Cup* (aka *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*)
- Sophocles's *How I Met Your Mother* (*Oedipus the King*)
- F. Scott-Fitzgerald's *Drink Responsibly* (*The Great Gatsby*)
- Shakespeare's *Crossdressing Helps Everyone Find Love* (*As You Like It*)
- Tolstoy's *War and Peace and Russians and Napoleon and Hard Names to Remember and Even Harder to Pronounce and Lots of Talk, Talk, Talk. And Snow.*

A new book title is posted every weekday, including a reader's submission each Friday.

For more book titles – including some less polite or politically correct – see <http://betterbooktitles.com/>.

Tip of the month: don't not use the positive!

The issue

Putting your points negatively makes them harder for the audience to understand. It can take some time to work out the meaning of statements that contain negative words,

particularly if there's more than one. Readers have to stop and mentally 'cross out' negatives to see whether they are left with a positive or negative statement. If they get it wrong, they'll completely misunderstand your message.

Our advice

There are 3 types of negative words:

<i>Obvious negative words</i>	<i>Words starting with negative prefixes, such as un-, ab-, in-, im- and dis-</i>	<i>Words with negative associations</i>
<p>Examples:</p> <p>not none no except less few, fewer neither nor</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p>unless unnecessary abnormal inefficient inexperienced impossible disorganized discontinue</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p>stop, end decrease lack reduce, reduction avoid, avoidance cease, cessation close down, shut down shortage</p>

Try to phrase your points positively where you can.

Examples

Here are 2 real examples, from a strategy document and a staff newsletter. As usual, there are various other problems in the sentences; to illustrate how to remove negatives, we tackle just these first, then show a fully rewritten version.

Before: The strategy will not lead to a diminution of existing core service provision.

After (removing just negatives): The strategy will maintain existing core service provision.

After (rewriting fully): The strategy will maintain our main services.

Before: These quality improvements have not been gained lightly, but by the dedication, commitment, hard work and teamwork of all staff. Not satisfied to rest on its laurels, however, the Trust is now looking towards the European Foundation of Quality Management model as a target for the future.

After (removing just negatives): These quality improvements have been gained through hard work, by the dedication, commitment and teamwork of all staff. Keen to improve further, however, the Trust is now looking towards the European Foundation of Quality Management model as a target for the future.

After (rewriting fully): Staff have improved quality by working hard as a dedicated and committed team. But because we want to improve still more, we are aiming to use the model of the European Foundation for Quality Management.

Exceptions

As with all plain-language guidelines, there are exceptions to our advice to avoid negatives (that's why we call them guidelines, not rules).

In some situations, a negative does convey your meaning better. One example of this is in commands not to do something, such as:

Never talk about what you did in the secret service.

Don't touch the plug socket.

These sentences would lose much of their impact if rephrased positively:

Always keep quiet about what you did in the secret service.

Keep your hand away from the plug socket.

For more on putting your points positively where you can, see Martin Cutts's book, *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Chapter 7 looks at this – 'Converting negative to positive' (chapter 7, pages 73 to 76).

A triptych of transparency

Every organization knows that customers and service users value clarity. So if you are making the effort to write your leaflets, forms, sales brochures and legal agreements in plain English, why not tell people?



Displaying the Clear English Standard helps you do this. It shows customers that your documents have passed a rigorous check of clarity, grammar and layout by experts in the field. The Clear English Standard also gives you a competitive edge and a public-relations boost by reassuring customers that you've taken extra care to be clear.

Some of our accredited documents have gone to 10 million UK households – probably the widest distribution of such material anywhere in the world. More than 10,000 documents bear the mark, so it probably appears on about 100 million printed items. Here we share news on 3 customers who have used our accreditation service.

Scottish Social Housing Charter consultation paper

In *Pikestaff 46*, we reported that consultation events were being held across Scotland on the Scottish Social Housing Charter, due to come into force next year. We had accredited the discussion paper with the Clear English Standard.

We've since heard that many of the people and groups who commented on the proposals in the discussion paper also took time to praise the clarity of the writing, for example:

- Aberdeen Housing Partnership and its Tenants Association commended the paper for its jargon-free, easy-to-read style.
- The Association of Local Authority Housing Officers complimented the Charter team for preparing a simple and jargon-free discussion paper.
- Clackmannanshire Tenants and Residents Federation found the discussion paper easy and straightforward to read and understand, and would like to see later stages of the development of the charter continue to use plain English, be jargon-free and accessible to everyone.
- Quarriers recognized and appreciated the use of non-jargon, plain English and asked that this be the way in which the Charter itself is written.
- The Scottish Disability Equality Forum commended the clear and accessible nature of the discussion paper.
- The Scottish Housing Regulator's Tenant Assessor Panel commended the document for its clarity, and jargon-free and easy-to-read style.
- The Tenants Information Service found the paper very clearly written and accessible.

Ian Spence from the Housing Charter Team commented: 'One stakeholder said that someone who knew nothing about the charter could pick up and read the paper, understand it, and come away well informed about it.'

The Scottish Government is now working on the formal consultation paper, which will be published in the summer, followed by the first draft charter in the autumn. You can read more about the project and have your say at <http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk/>.

Strabane District Council Corporate Strategy 2011–15

Described by Philip Faithfull, the council's chief executive, as 'our road map to the future', this strategy sets out Strabane's mission, ambitions and clarity of purpose for the next 4 years.

Among the council's 5 corporate objectives are 'to provide better, higher-quality services'. This includes improving communication with customers and key stakeholders by doing customer satisfaction surveys, developing citizens' forums, implementing a customer complaints policy, and co-ordinating how local people are asked for their views on council strategies.

In getting its corporate strategy accredited with the Clear English Standard, the council has made a solid start to improving customer communication. Rachelle Craig, Corporate Policy Officer, writes: 'Councillors were very pleased at the jargon-free content of the document.'

See the full strategy document at

http://www.strabaneDC.com/filestore/documents/lsp/594_StrabaneDC_CoporatePlan2011-15_LR.pdf.

When someone has died – information for you

Health Rights Information Scotland (HRIS – a project based within Consumer Focus Scotland and funded by the Scottish Government Health Directorates) has published this new leaflet, which we have accredited with the Clear English Standard. The leaflet aims to help people through the first few days after someone close to them has died, covering what they need to do, and how they may feel. It is available in a number of formats: audio (English), large print and dual translations in Arabic, Chinese (traditional), Polish and Urdu. It is expected that most NHS boards in Scotland will use this new resource, which you can see on HRIS's website at <http://www.hris.org.uk/patient-information/information-about-health-services/bereavement/>.

Brigitte Cosford, HRIS's Project Support Officer said: 'At HRIS, one of our key aims is to ensure the accessibility of any information we produce in terms of format, language and style. We are confident that Plain Language Commission helps us achieve this, and would encourage all professionals involved in producing information for the public to seek Clear English Standard accreditation.'

To find out more about our accreditation service, see <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=28>.

Plain-language conference in Sweden

The Plain Language InterNational (PLAIN) conference 2011 was held in Stockholm, Sweden from 9 to 11 June. The event was an important milestone in the development of the plain-language world, as members of the International Plain Language Working Group led a discussion on the recently published options paper, *Strengthening plain language: public benefit and professional practice*.

Our research director Martin Cutts was at the event, speaking in 2 sessions:

- *Establishing a universal definition of plain language* – a plenary panel discussion featuring 4 ‘practitioners who have been closely involved with defining plain language, either through an influential definition of their own or their recent work on the options paper’. Martin and the other 3 plain-language experts (from Canada and the USA) discussed the options and the feasibility of establishing a universally accepted definition. Work is continuing to fine-tune a definition: we’ll keep you posted on this.
- *Complaining about bad writing: does it achieve anything except make me feel better?* – a presentation on what happens when you complain to the people responsible for unclear writing: ‘Sometimes they ignore you as a madman, sometimes they send a poignantly illiterate reply, and sometimes they commission you to rewrite a stack of dodgy documents.’ Martin described his complaint about a badly written sign, which led to the people of Buxton, Derbyshire, saving about £18,000 a year in parking fines. Martin’s paper is newly available on our website at <http://clearest.co.uk/files/ComplainingAboutBadWriting.pdf>.

You can read more about the conference at <http://www.plain2011.com/>, and view the options paper at http://www.clarity.shuttlepod.org/Resources/Documents/64_032111_04_final.pdf.

In the alphabet soup

The Investment Management Association (IMA) has concluded that the existing ‘cautious managed’, ‘balanced managed’ and ‘active managed’ sector names will be replaced by an alphabet system that makes no reference to the strategies or holdings used by the funds. The 3 sectors will be renamed ‘managed A’, ‘managed B’ and ‘managed C’.

The move follows calls from financial advisers to end the confusion over cautious and balanced funds, after complaints from bemused investors who made huge losses in ‘cautious’ funds and the record fine of £7.7 million faced by one bank for failing to explain the downside of ‘cautious’ and ‘balanced’ products.

According to the IMA, its new classifications will group comparable funds and help investors choose wisely. But fund managers and advisers have criticized the decision, saying it will make it even harder for fund investors to know what they are buying. Gary Shaughnessy, UK managing director at Fidelity International, urged the IMA to rethink the new names: ‘The IMA has said that it is important that these sectors are properly understood by investors, but in our opinion the new sector differentiations are meaningless and actually increase the opacity for investors.’

Having had 9 months to come up with clearer alternatives to the original sector names, the specially convened IMA committee should have done better, according to Matthew Vincent, writing in the *Financial Times*:

Now, if you had nine months to think of a name, you’d think you’d be able to come up with something sensible. After all, most parents manage it – and, if anything, the Pierses and Tobys of the fund management industry had more material to work with. *Roget’s Thesaurus* lists 79 synonyms or phrases for ‘caution’, plus another 63 for ‘absence of excitability’, while thesaurus.com suggests 51 alternative verbs for ‘manage’. As there are only 165 funds in the Cautious Managed sector, there seemed every chance that a combination of English words could be found to describe their *modus operandi*. Even more chance if you include Latin.

Vincent goes on to say that when he first read the IMA's press release (see <http://www.investmentfunds.org.uk/press-centre/press-releases/press-release-2011-05-26>), he assumed that 'an unfinished, draft document – with Managed A, B, C and D typed in to leave space for the real names – got sent out by mistake'. He concludes: 'If it doesn't make time to rethink its infantile ABC, it's time for the Financial Services Authority to knock some heads together. Fund investors deserve plain speaking, not being left lost for words.'

[Sources: *Financial Times*, 26 May 2011: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/b4b6444e-8793-11e0-af98-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1Pu9zwhji>; and 27 May 2011: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/c9042e80-888c-11e0-afe1-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1Pu9zwhji>

Thank you to Debbie King for passing us this story.]

British sign language

A *Pikestaff* spy spotted a dialectically interesting sign in a field in Cumbria: 'TEK CARE LAMBS ONT ROAD'.

Meanwhile, a professionally wrought sign in Buxton, Derbyshire reads as follows:



We wondered if this might be a clumsy try at using the singular to sound more individual or intimate – as in the Patient's Charter and Citizen's Charter. But probably not.

And finally – spotted at Barley Hall in York – here's a novel solution for teachers of exuberant school parties:



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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