



## Spelling mistakes claimed to cost economy millions in lost sales

Charles Duncombe, a retailer who runs travel, mobile-phone and clothing websites, claims customers' spending on a website can be halved by a single spelling mistake. Errors cast so much doubt on the website's credibility, he believes, that people don't buy. Duncombe said:

I know that industry bemoaning the education system is nothing new but it is becoming more and more of a problem with more companies going online. This is because when you sell or communicate on the internet, 99% of the time it is done by the written word.

Duncombe says it's possible to identify the specific impact of a spelling mistake on sales. He measured the revenue per website visitor and found that it doubled after an error was corrected.

William Dutton, director of the Oxford Internet Institute at Oxford University, says that in some informal parts of the internet, such as Facebook, there is greater tolerance of weak spelling and grammar. He added:

However, there are other aspects, such as a home page or commercial offering that are not among friends and which raise concerns over trust and credibility. In these instances, when a consumer might be wary of spam or phishing efforts, a misspelt word could be a killer issue.

But science writer Ed Yong pours scorn on the whole story, saying the BBC's website has fallen for Duncombe's marketing ploy by publishing an article about it:

So based on no knowledge about the error that was corrected or the revenue that was lost/gained, the BBC thinks it's reasonable to project this one incident onto the entire internet. What we have here is someone doing some puff PR for their sites, baited with an irrelevant and largely imaginary hook that the BBC have gladly bitten into.

Whatever you think of the story, the issue of poor spelling on websites is not new. As the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP) points out in a media release as long ago as 2002, the Stanford-Makovsky Web Credibility Survey claimed that errors on websites 'have roughly the same negative impact on a website's credibility as a company's legal or financial trouble'. And research by the Royal Mail in 2005 showed that over 70% of customers would not trust a business that has poor communication skills.

All this does of course assume that website users notice mistakes of spelling and grammar that often lie uncorrected for months, even on high-profile sites like that of the furniture maker Multiyork, which confuses 'compliment' and 'complement' at least 15 times and doesn't know that 'choose' and 'chose' are different words. In January 2011 the site also included text like: 'Available in our generously proportioned collections these extra large sofas are extremely generously proportioned.'

Remember that we can put your website through a generously proportioned external check of language and layout, after which you may be able to display the web version of the Clear English Standard on your site.

[Sources: BBC News, 14 July 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14130854>; Google+, 14 July 2011: <https://plus.google.com/u/0/106952974709619007593/posts/ERzGsZnp1uU#106952974709619007593/posts/ERzGsZnp1uU>; and SfEP media release, 15 July 2011: <http://www.sfep.org.uk/pdocs/SfEP-release-20110715.pdf>]

### **Linguistic link: SfEP self-test in proofreading**

On mentioning her proofreading work to an acquaintance, Pikestaff's writer was asked: 'Can't people just use the spellcheck?' Naturally, Pikestaff readers are more enlightened than this deluded soul (who did survive the conversation), but here's an interesting self-test for people to discover what proofreading really involves – and whether they have what it takes to do it. The exercise was designed by Gerard Hill, the SfEP's mentoring and tests director, who comments:

A lot of people are attracted to the idea of earning a living as a proofreader. It seems appealing – particularly if you enjoy reading – and we've all seen the adverts suggesting that vast amounts of money can be earned doing this type of work. Of course, the reality is often very different.

Many people are surprised at how detailed and demanding the work is, and not everyone has what it takes to do it well. There are lots of things you need to learn, through training and mentoring, to make you more reliable and efficient, but you also need a natural aptitude and a well-stocked brain. And most professional proofreaders will tell you that it's very difficult to make your fortune by following this career.

The SfEP test is multiple-choice and based on a piece of text specially written for the purpose. It is divided into sections; in each section you can delete, insert, substitute or query text, choosing from a short list of options at the foot of the page. At the end of the test you can find out how you did, and then you can either try again or see exactly what you got right or wrong. Hill explains:

This is quite a basic test. In real life, most proofreaders deal with many more issues, such as images, tables, headings, breaks, footnotes, endnotes, reference lists, and foreign languages, to name but a few. And this test is just one page. Proofreaders have to maintain their standard of work over many pages – sometimes many hundreds – and they're working against the clock and the calendar.

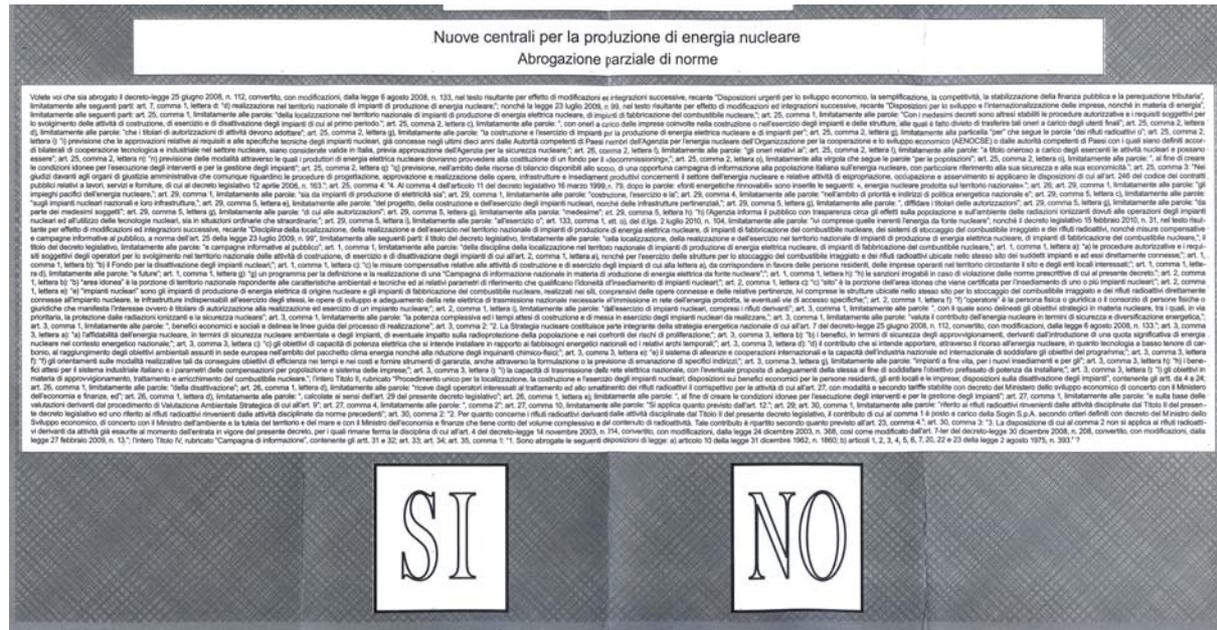
To take the test, visit [http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/train/self\\_test/index.asp](http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/train/self_test/index.asp).

[Source: SfEP media release, 18 May 2011: <http://www.sfep.org.uk/pdocs/SfEP-release-20110518.pdf>]

## Readers write

James Fisher emailed to tell us about an Italian referendum on the production of nuclear power. It's a 40-line list of decrees, in tiny font, and includes little punctuation. What's more, it's all one sentence, in the form of a question.

You can get the general idea from this picture; James comments: 'A picture says a thousand words...er maybe more in this case.' The version that's high-enough quality to see the detail is 10MB, but do email us if you'd like a copy (and have an email account that doesn't balk at big attachments).



Meanwhile, Stephen Day contacted us, having had his fill of UK jargon:

Yesterday was a particularly bad day for gobbledegook. The worst example of my working hours was a handbook for ambulance staff on helping people who have fallen, including such pearls as 'guidelines for dealing with a descent to the floor', which would seem to be more suitable to a manual on parachuting.

Whilst reading the evening newspaper at home, I came across a letter – apparently from a councillor but probably written by one of the officers. There's been a debate in the newspaper recently about the dangers of cycling in shopping areas reserved for pedestrians so it seems the letter is the council's official response. The text includes the usual stuff about strategic approaches, stakeholders and focus groups as well as some choice statistical jargon such as 'key trip indicators' so most of the argument would be lost on the average reader.

Indeed it would; our specialist readability software shows the full letter has a reading-age level of over 20 (while the average reading age in the UK is thought to be around 13 to 15). And StyleWriter, the plain-English editing software, scores the piece as 'poor' on all 3 indexes, including the use of passive-voice verbs, at 83%!

Here's an excerpt from the letter:

The work undertaken in the development of the Strategic Network Plan involved a number of key stages, including:

- A public consultation was carried out to highlight the barriers to the uptake of cycling;
- An "evidence base" of other data was developed on which the proposals could be formed. This looked at aspects such as identifying key trip generators, locations of existing cycling uptake and studying collision data;
- A detailed work was carried out to determine the "target market" for potential new cyclists, which enabled those groups with the highest propensity to cycle to be identified and superimposed onto a map of Cardiff;
- From this data a "skeleton" network of key routes was developed and an audit undertaken of the existing cycle infrastructure to identify gaps in cycling provision;
- Schemes to improve the network were identified and prioritised to form the proposed Strategic Network Plan; and
- A second public consultation was carried out to gather feedback on the plan and further identify the perceived barriers to cycling.

In the unlikely event you'd like to read more, the full version's at <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/letters-to-the-editor/south-wales-echo-letters/2011/07/12/tuesday-12-july-2011-91466-29033808/>.

And if you'd like an expert assessment of the readability of a text, just let us know. We can provide a readability report, using specialist software to calculate the reading level of the text and identifying any problem areas. We'll explain clearly what we've done and why, and what the results mean, and include a qualitative expert assessment of the document, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. See <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=50> for more information.

## Our associate writes new SfEP guide

Written by senior members of the society, SfEP guides are practical booklets on editing, proofreading and related fields, and on how to make a living from them. The guides are intended for editors and proofreaders, both practising and potential, and for others involved in publishing in some way, including those working for companies and government agencies and departments.

The sixth and latest title to be published is *Editing into Plain Language: Working for non-publishers*, which our associate Sarah Carr has written. Covering key aspects of working as a freelance plain-language editor for public- and private-sector organizations, including training and qualifications, services and pricing, markets and tools, the guide aims to help:

- editors to command good rates of pay, and to have the satisfaction of clarifying information intended for the general public
- organizations to improve the clarity of their texts (both printed and electronic), and so their own efficiency and effectiveness
- the public and other readers of such texts to have more readable information, and so more knowledge and power.

Read more and find out how to order the guide, which costs £5, at [http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/br/business/sfep\\_guides.asp](http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/br/business/sfep_guides.asp).

## Improving clarity through document design

The next Clarity breakfast will take place in London, on Tuesday 6 September.

We all know that it's not enough to choose good words – so much depends on how you arrange them on the page. Good document design and templates can prompt writers to do the right thing, such as putting the answer first or writing more informative headings. And well-designed documents present clear writing clearly. Simon Carter of One Three Four has spent the last 10 years helping investment banks and law firms improve their research reports, client updates and pitch documents. Before that, he was a brand consultant and creative director of a branding and communication business. He spoke at PLAIN's conference in Australia in 2009, and at this breakfast he will share his experience of what works and what doesn't in legal and business writing.

The presentation and following discussion will ask:

- What are the best ways to improve understanding through document design?
- How can you measure the improvement?
- What are the worst pitfalls to avoid?
- Where do lawyers habitually fail to achieve good design?
- In the fine print of contracts, can you improve readability without taking more space?
- How do clients react to redesigned reports and updates?
- What scope is there for better document design in client work?
- Could better document design improve written advocacy and evidence?
- How would you design a 21st-century judgment?

There is no charge to attend and guests are welcome, though non-members are asked to join Clarity (<http://www.clarity-international.net/join.html>) if they attend a second event. For more information about the London meetings, contact Daphne Perry at [daphneperry@clarifynow.co.uk](mailto:daphneperry@clarifynow.co.uk).

## Still the Oxford comma

The so-called Oxford comma (more generically known as the serial comma) is used to separate the last 2 items in a series of nouns or noun phrases. For example, we offer editing, readability reports, training, and software. In general, British English doesn't use the serial comma (unless the noun phrases are longer and more complex, in which case it can help clarify where the penultimate item ends and the final one begins); American English does. The practice has formed part of the house style of the Oxford University Press (OUP) for the last century.

A Twitter report that the OUP was dispensing with its comma recently caused a storm of pedantic debate on the social networking site. Yet the report turned out to be inaccurate, with OUP retaining the Oxford comma in its guidelines for authors, and dispensing with it only in its press releases. University officials said the mistaken report was apparently caused by someone finding a guide for staff for writing press releases as opposed to books. NPR's Linda Holmes observed:

The PR department and the editorial department are two different things, so this doesn't necessarily mean much of anything, except that it's maybe a little embarrassing to have your own PR department abandoning your style guide.

It's likely that the decision is based on a desire to bring OUP's press-release style into line with that of news organizations, which typically use Associated Press (AP) style ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AP\\_Stylebook](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AP_Stylebook)). AP style omits the serial comma unless it's necessary to clarify meaning. Which seems sensible and is what we do too.

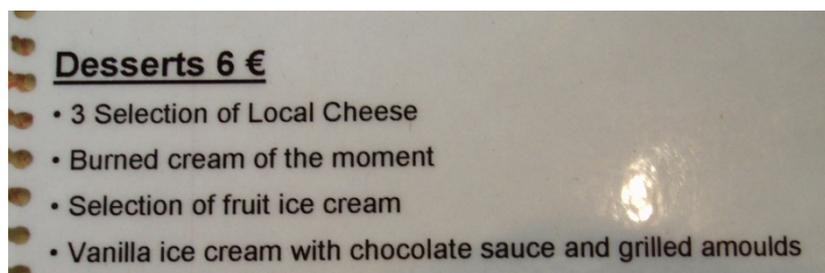
[Sources: Mercury News, 30 June 2011: [http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci\\_18383824](http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_18383824); and NPR, 30 June 2011: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2011/06/30/137525211/going-going-and-gone-no-the-oxford-comma-is-safe-for-now>]

## Dount defie apostrophe and spelling rule's

Thanks to James Fisher for sending us these 2 signs of the times:



And here's a not-too-tasty translation of a French menu, spotted by reader Peter Neill.



As usual, Pikestaff takes a break in August, but will return in September. From then on, we'll be producing Pikestaff every other month, in odd-numbered months.

### **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