

# Pikestaff

## Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 6, June 2007

### Dons warn of students' failing language skills

Lecturers from some new universities are calling for public discussion about linguistic standards among young people. They say students' weak writing skills, including sloppy punctuation and bad spelling, will make them unemployable in graduate jobs. Yet universities aren't tackling the problem, the lecturers claim, for fear students will drop out of courses – which will cost universities money.

Examples of student howlers include:

- 'language as a mean's of self expresun'
- 'garunteed' for 'guaranteed'
- 'case in point to me alone but not all'.

Lecturers at Bournemouth and Teesside universities have complained of their fail grades being reversed so students can stay on. And Professor Tony Marcel of the University of Hertfordshire described the English and essay-writing skills of some of his psychology students as 'appallingly bad' (he meant 'appalling'). He said: 'Spelling and punctuation is only part of the problem. Their vocabulary is poor and mistaken; they have little idea of syntax, cannot punctuate and seem to have no idea of what constitutes a sentence. When I am reproached for being an old fuddy-duddy I tell students that if they can't write a report then employers won't want them.'

[Source: *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 2007]

### Exclusive offers from Plain Language Commission

My word, we've some good offers for you. The new edition of the *Good Word Guide*, edited by Martin Manser and published on 31 May, has a foreword by our own Martin Cutts. The book offers information and advice on spelling, grammar, punctuation, pronunciation, confusables and the latest buzzwords, and provides clear, straightforward answers to everyday language problems. Published by A&C Black, it costs £12.99 in paperback but we're pleased to report several special offers for Plain Language Commission customers and *Pikestaff* readers:

- All our corporate members will receive 12 free copies of the book.
- For every onsite course we run until the end of 2007, we'll give each course participant a free copy of the *Good Word Guide* (this is a limited offer, though; we've 1,750 books to give away)
- Until the end of July, *Pikestaff* readers can order copies at the discounted price of £9.99 (that's over 20% off) with free postage and packing. Just call Macmillan Distribution Limited on 01256 302699 or email [direct@macmillan.co.uk](mailto:direct@macmillan.co.uk), and quote GLR code P40 and ISBN 9780713677591.

After that time, you can buy copies through our website,

<http://www.clearest.co.uk> (click on 'Books'), at a discount of 10%. Here you'll also find the full text of Martin's foreword (click on the image of the book's cover), in which he too highlights the poor reading and writing skills of many youngsters: '...we liberate 100,000 school-leavers every July, after 11 years of formal education, with such weak literacy skills that they join the five million adults who (according to government figures) already flounder for the same reason.' He adds: 'This book will form a rare stock of riches for writers and speakers, and help sticklers to decide at what precise point to pin their flag.'

### **E-shop temporarily closed**

Please note that for technical reasons our e-shop is closed until at least 15 July, but this doesn't affect these offers.

### **Cost of thinking is criminal**

Did you know that George Orwell was an early supporter of plain-English principles? In *Politics and the English Language* (1947), he lists 6 rules based on his belief that language is 'an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought'. But would *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Thought Police have believed that by 2007 the cost of thought would be as much as £36,915 a year?

*The Times* reports: 'The cost of sending a criminal to jail could be £49,220 a year, a third more expensive than thought, according to a study by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London.' That's doubleplus ungood.

[Source: *The Times*, 21 May 2007]

### **Tip of the month: don't be a writing also-ran, right any run-on sentences**

#### **The problem**

Run-on sentences join 2 or more complete sentences without the right punctuation or a conjunction (joining word – such as 'and', 'but', 'or', 'when', 'if' and 'although').

#### **Examples**

Did you spot the error in the title of this piece? It's wrong because 'Don't be a writing also-ran' and 'right any run-on sentences' could both stand as complete sentences but are joined by just a comma.

Here's another example, this time from a business letter (in a stuffy style too): 'I trust this response will suffice, however should you have any concerns or wish to discuss the matter please do not hesitate to contact me.'

#### **Our advice**

There are 3 main ways to right a run-on sentence:

1. Make the 2 parts into separate sentences.
2. Replace the comma with a semi-colon or dash.
3. Replace the comma with a conjunction.

Not all of these will work for every run-on sentence.

You could correct the first example like this:

- (Making the 2 parts into separate sentences) 'Don't be a writing also-ran. Right any run-on sentences.'
- (Replacing the comma with a semi-colon or dash) 'Don't be a

writing also-ran; right any run-on sentences.'

If you wanted, you could use exclamation marks instead of full-stops for either of these.

Replacing the comma with a conjunction wouldn't work for this one, unless you turned it round and reworded it a little, say: 'Right any run-on sentences unless you want to be a writing also-ran.'

And you could change the second like this, modernizing the style at the same time:

- (Making the 2 parts into separate sentences) 'I hope this answers your questions. However, if you have any concerns or wish to discuss the matter, please contact me.'
- (Replacing the comma with a semi-colon or dash) 'I hope this answers your questions; however, if you have any concerns or wish to discuss the matter, please contact me.'
- (Replacing the comma with a conjunction) 'I hope this response answers your questions, but if you have any concerns or wish to discuss the matter, please contact me.' (To use the conjunction 'but', omit 'however'.)

## **Wanted: comments on standard for health info providers**

In *Pikestaff 4*, we reported that Martin Cutts had been invited to join an expert working group to develop standards for a new scheme to accredit providers of health and social care information.

The Department of Health's consultants have now drafted a standard for the scheme. The idea is that the public will know they can trust information from organizations adopting this standard. The department is consulting on the standard, and would like to hear from anyone who's interested in using or producing health information for the public.

The closing date for the consultation is 31 July 2007. You can find out more and download the relevant documents at <http://www.iascheme.org>.

## **Financial Services Authority takes gold**

In *Pikestaff 2*, we announced our updated Winning Website Scheme. We're now delighted to announce we've awarded our first gold standard – to the Moneymadeclear website, run by the Financial Services Authority. The gold standard requires that 'all pages are clear, well written and free of obvious errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Proofreading errors and broken links are rare. The site is highly accessible, broadly equivalent to W3C standard (see w3.org for more details, though we don't insist on W3C accreditation). Page layout is consistently excellent. Overall, the site is a pleasure to read and use.' You can check out the Moneymadeclear website for yourself at <http://www.moneymadeclear.fsa.gov.uk>.

It's important to put at least as much effort into making clear your print documents as your website, especially since, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, recent research in the United States 'challenges conventional wisdom that online readers lack the attention span of their print counterparts'. A laboratory study presented 600 people with identical stories in a broadsheet newspaper and online. Readers got through an average of just 62% of each story on paper, compared to 75% online.

To find out more about our Clear English Standard for documents and for websites, visit <http://www.clearest.co.uk> and go to 'Accreditation'.

[Source: *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 2007]

## States restate Federal Rules

The United States Supreme Court has recently approved the clarified Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. These rules govern the procedure in all US federal trial (district) courts. Judges and lawyers rely on them daily, the rules serve as models for state courts, and law students study them in a year-long course.

The rules – more than 300 pages – were originally written in 1937 and hadn't been completely rewritten since. Putting them into plain language took 4 years and involved federal judges, practising lawyers, law professors and a drafting consultant, Professor Joe Kimble, who's an international champion of plain language. The Burton Awards, which recognize and reward significant achievement in the legal profession, have named the project as the winner of the 2007 Reform in Law award.

The restyled rules are shorter, clearer, more consistent, and better organized and formatted. Here's an example of the difference plain language has made:

**Before:** 'When two or more statements are made in the alternative and one of them if made independently would be sufficient, the pleading is not made insufficient by the insufficiency of one or more of the alternative statements.'

**After:** 'If a party makes alternative statements, the pleading is sufficient if any one of them is sufficient.'

You can see the full rewritten rules at: <http://www.supremecourtus.gov/orders/courtorders/frcv07p.pdf>.

They're now much easier for judges, lawyers, and law students to learn and use. They also send out the important message that laws and rules can be written plainly without losing any meaning. Judge Rosenthal, chair of the Advisory Committee, said: 'Our goal was to make the rules clearer, more readable, and more consistent – without changing the substantive meaning. We think we have achieved that goal and are honored to receive this award.'

[Source: Send2Press newswire, 10 May 2007: [http://www.send2press.com/newswire/print/news\\_2007-05-0510-003.shtml](http://www.send2press.com/newswire/print/news_2007-05-0510-003.shtml)]

## Pains in trains and planes add mainly to the strain

Rail staff are being told to cut back on intercom announcements. *The Times* reports that passengers on many lines have objected to bombardment by bulletins: 'They complain that electronic announcement systems, station staff, guards, drivers and buffet stewards compete for Tannoy time.' One passenger said: 'Some of these guards seem to think of themselves as DJs.' In a letter to *The Guardian*, Colwyn Lee made a similar point about plane travel: 'Overly chatty airline captains are, indeed, one of air travel's annoyances.' But announcements can go too far the other way. Lee adds: 'But as a young co-pilot, I often flew beside one captain – a taciturn Yorkshire-man who had perfected his passenger address, reducing it to slightly less than two words. In the middle of the flight the captain would announce to the cabin: "alf way".'

Some travellers say they enjoy certain announcements 'as an entertaining diversion to their journey'. Going Underground, a website that collects funny

announcements from the London Underground, gives these examples:

- 'This is a train. Get on it. Go home. See you Monday.'
- 'The Bakerloo line is running normally today, so you may expect delays to all destinations.'
- 'Hello, I am the captain of your train, and we will be departing shortly. We will be cruising at an altitude of approximately zero feet, and our scheduled arrival time in Morden is 3.25 pm. The temperature in Morden is approximately 15C, and Morden is in the same time zone as Mill Hill East, so there's no need to adjust your watches.'

And Alexander Chancellor reports in *The Guardian* that an American Airlines captain 'entertained' passengers on a flight from New York to London by singing Frank Sinatra's *Come fly with me* and *Singing in the plane*, his own version of *Singing in the rain*.

Being plain-language people, we'd usually recommend being brief, and so saying only what the audience needs to know – which wouldn't include the messages above. But plain language is for communicating facts; we wouldn't claim it should apply to communication with other aims, such as literature or entertainment. And in fact you couldn't get a much plainer style than in the examples above.

This was a newsletter. Read it. Enjoy it (we hope). See you in July.

[Source: *The Times*, 22 April 2007; *The Guardian*, 8 and 9 June 2007; and Going Underground website: <http://www.going-underground.net>]

## Contribute

Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

## Back issues

You can see back issues of *Pikestaff* on our website (click on 'Newsletter').

## Tell a friend

If you think a friend or colleague would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward 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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