

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 7, July 2007

Say what you mean

Wanted: 'Senior Legislative Drafter'

So say adverts in several national newspapers, placed at huge expense by HM Attorney General's Chambers in the Isle of Man Government. 'The successful candidate will have experience in drafting complex primary legislation . . .'

Surely some mistake here, so *Pikestaff* gets on the blower. Don't you want *simple* laws these days in the Tynwald, the most ancient parliament in the world? Or are you sending a clear message to antediluvian drafters that the Isle of Man is their last stronghold, like smokers in search of a lawful place to have a fag?

Kath Quane of the Attorney General's office takes our twitting in good part: 'Ah yes, I see your point. We do want our laws to be as clear as possible. We'll have to mention this to the candidates. Maybe we could have drafted the advert a bit better. It is a bit misleading.'

We refrained from suggesting that an 'eye for detail' should be added to the job description.

A shaky start

The home page of solicitors Arani & Co begins: 'We deal with criminal, family, civil cases, and proceedings against the police. We undertake national and international work in order to assist in the abuses taking place as a result of the so called alleged war on Terror.' As they're representing Sheikh Abu Hamza and others in anti-terrorism cases, and have written a 'Know Your Rights' leaflet for Muslims, we think they mean they assist in *tackling* the 'so called alleged' abuses.

Plain names at a premium

Who is ICSTIS; what is she? The name may sound like a Greek goddess, and perhaps only Jason and his Jargonauts could work out the real answer.

It's useful if the name of an organization – unless it's already well known – gives you some idea of its business. So, having grown weary of explaining itself, ICSTIS – the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of the Telephone Information Services, aka regulator for premium-rate phone services – will soon 'adopt the consumer-facing name PhonePayPlus'. Mmm, it's a bit better – plainer words – but still doesn't really say what it means. In fact, the new name even sounds like a premium-rate phone service – with 'plus' implying it may cost you more than the firms it regulates.

When the Post Office Group was rebranded 'Consignia', the BBC News website described it as 'the most ruinous decision since the biblical scam that saw Esau swap his birthright for a bowl of stew'. The report continued: 'Think "Post Office Group", think trust, honour, gritty postmen braving blizzards to

save a child's smile. Think "Consignia" . . . Think, um, Roman general? Footballer? Tummy bug?'

And after 2 years of similar sustained derision, the Consignia name was consigned to history – at a reported cost of £1.5 million (then about US\$2.2 million).

[Sources: <http://www.aranisolicitors.com/about.html>;
http://www.icstis.org.uk/pdfs_news/MediaRelease_annualreport0607.pdf;
BBC News, 31 May 2002: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/2002480.stm>;
and <http://www.marcusletter.com/Consignia.htm>]

Success for Plain Language Commission customers

Bromford Housing Group gets top marks

Bromford Housing Group has this summer received top marks from the Housing Corporation, a government agency that funds and regulates housing associations in England.

Each year, the Housing Corporation assesses how every housing association that owns or manages more than 250 homes has performed in 4 key areas: governance, management, financial viability and development. A traffic-light rating of red, amber or green is given against each area, with green as the top. Bromford's 4 green lights show it exceeds the required standard in all 4 areas.

We've been working on a series of leaflets with Bromford to support it in providing extensive and varied services to a diverse range of customers. The leaflets will inform customers of all Bromford's services. And, because it's important to make information accessible, customers can ask for them in alternative formats and other languages.

Melanie Reid, Customer Communications Manager, said: 'We would like you to know how very pleased we are with all Plain Language Commission recommendations – they have done a great job and have made huge improvements.'

Clear English Standard for O2 report

Telefónica O2 Europe has just published its Corporate Responsibility Report for 2006. The report enables the company to describe how well its business activities:

- comply with regulations and the law
- compare to best practice
- perform against its annual targets for improvement.

The report has 2 parts:

- a full online report that details social, environmental, and ethical policies and performance during the year
- a more selective printed review that looks at topical issues for the business and industry.

To see the finished report, visit <http://www.o2.com/cr2006>.

Plain Language Commission awards the Clear English Standard only to printed and online documents that meet a pre-defined set of criteria. It shows readers that documents have passed a rigorous check of clarity, grammar and layout by experts in the field. To learn more about the criteria for the Clear English Standard, visit <http://www.clearest.co.uk>.

Memorandum of misunderstanding

John McFall, MP for West Dunbartonshire and chair of the Treasury Select Committee, has described a memorandum of understanding on the income-tax treatment of venture capital and private equity as a 'memorandum of incomprehensibility'.

You can see this document at http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/shareschemes/bvca_and_fb2003_carried_interest.pdf (warning: could induce drowsiness). We managed to stay awake long enough to work out its readability score. Clocking up a spectacular grade level of 17 (meaning it's roughly for a British reading age of 22 – higher than graduate level), the memo opens with a 50-word sentence:

This memorandum describes a typical venture capital/private equity ("VC") limited partnership fund structure and sets out guidelines agreed by the BVCA [that's the British Venture Capital Association – but it doesn't tell you this] and Inland Revenue on the application of the provisions introduced by Schedule 22, Finance Act 2003, to a carried interest in a limited partnership fund structured in this way.

Mr McFall has called for the memorandum, a crucial document, to be explained to him and his committee, preferably before they make their recommendations in October. If his 16-strong committee of MPs can't understand it, who can?

[Source: Radio 4's Today programme, 3 July and 30 July 2007: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/>]

However we look at it, we just don't like it

In our last tip of the month, we covered run-on sentences, using this example from a business letter: '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.'

Barrister Malcolm Gammie, who deals in commercial tax law and related administrative law, including international and European taxation, emailed to say:

I was interested in your piece in the latest *Pikestaff* about 'run-on sentences'. I receive instructions from the majority of the largest firms of solicitors and accountants and I can report that the use of 'however' as a conjunction [joining word – in this case to join 2 sentences] is widespread. As the people writing my instructions (and recording my advice) are university graduates and would usually count themselves among the country's top graduates, I can only assume that this is a use of the word 'however' that is now taught in our schools. Whether or not that is true, it is obviously a use that is never corrected (unless they come to me for advice).

We came across an example – from 10 Downing Street no less – of using 'however' like this (as well as another run-on sentence – there should be a full stop or semi-colon after 'Prime Minister'):

Thank you for your recent letter addressed to the Prime Minister, I have been asked to reply. Your portfolio of pen portraits was very impressive, however we already have a portrait of Humphrey [the famous feline employed as a mouser there from

1989 to 1997] hanging on the walls of the Cabinet Office.

We think this use of 'however' is cat-astrophic. But we don't like to be dog-matic, so off we went to consult *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (by Pam Peters, Cambridge University Press, 2004). This great book is corpus-based [not cor-puss-based? – Ed], which means it describes how real people actually write and speak, rather than prescribes how language experts say they should. Peters confirms that using 'however' as a conjunction is indeed widespread these days. But she adds that most published style guides still advise writers to avoid this.

Language evolves and we're generally happy to accept language change. But it's important to choose the right time to do this – otherwise, readers who know about run-on sentences might think there's a mistake. Even more important, it risks distracting readers from the message. Plain language is all about getting your message across effectively. So, to quote our research director, Martin Cutts: 'As we've almost never seen this new use of "however" in a newspaper or book that's worth reading, it's definitely where we plant our flag.'

Not for Chinese whisperers

Over 350 million Chinese people – more than the entire population of native English speakers – are estimated to be learning English. And the latest language-learning craze to hit China comes in the form of Li Yang's 'Crazy English' class at the Beijing Science and Technology Training Institute.

Mr Li set up his English teaching company, Crazy English, almost 20 years ago. The Beijing authorities have now appointed him to train over 1.5 million volunteers for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. He plans to hold intensive English 'boot camps' from September onwards, where volunteers will study 14–15 hours a day if necessary.

Mr Li's method involves persuading large groups of learners to shout out short phrases in English, to help them 'overcome their inhibitions while simultaneously instilling passion for the language'. So, among Mr Li's favourite 'crazy' phrases is 'I love losing face', which he encourages his fans to shout out as often as they can. Preparing for the Olympics, they must bellow: 'Chinese people are friendly and kind!'

We'd like to assure self-conscious readers that our course presenters don't adopt Mr Li's methods. Nor do we go for his group sizes: he often addresses 10,000 students gathered on a football field; we find a maximum of 12 (indoors, out of the rain) is rather more effective.

[Source: *The Hindu*, 27 June 2007: <http://www.hindu.com/2007/06/27/stories/2007062750611100.htm>]

Tip of the month: punctuate bullet lists properly, or you could be shot at

The problem

In *Pikestaff 5*, we explained how to shorten sentences. We mentioned using vertical lists as a good technique for sentences that contain a list of items. But how should you punctuate a vertical list? And what other pitfalls should you avoid when using vertical lists?

Our advice

How you punctuate a vertical list is a matter of style: there's no right or wrong, but it's important to be logical and consistent. If you look through

different books and periodicals, you'll see many different ways. If your organization has a style sheet (setting out its conventions), follow it. If not, for lists where each point isn't a sentence but follows on from the lead-in statement, we recommend using:

- a colon after the lead-in statement
- lower-case letters to start each point
- a full stop at the end of just the last point.

But if each list is a complete sentence, then you can do the following:

- Still use a colon after the lead-in statement.
- Start each point with an upper-case letter.
- Use a full stop at the end of each point.

Don't present a whole page as a vertical list, as this looks monotonous. Instead of bullet points, you can use numbers (useful if people need to refer to them), or ticks or crosses (good if the items are things the reader should or shouldn't do).

A common mistake with vertical lists is that the items don't all follow on properly from the lead-in statement. In the following example, which we found in a school handbook, the first item follows on correctly, but the other 2 don't:

Medical appointments in school can only be authorised if:

- a student is collected by a parent/carer
- by an adult duly authorised by the parent/carer
- on receipt of a written request from the parent/carer to the school.

You can't say: 'Appointments in school can only be authorised if by an adult...' or 'Appointments in school can only be authorised if on receipt of ...'. Here's a correct version, which we've clarified in some other ways too:

We can authorise students to attend medical appointments in school time only if:

- a parent or carer, or another adult they authorise, collects the student, and
- the parent or carer writes to ask our permission.

We've changed the verbs in the first bullet point from passive- to active-voice – we'll explain more in *Pikestaff 8*.

You can read more about using vertical lists, and see lots of examples, in Martin Cutts' book, *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (Oxford University Press, 2004). There's a whole chapter – chapter 6 – dedicated to this topic.

Pedants revolt

This month, our team of pedants has again been hard at work, gathering examples of unashamedly unclear English.

Because you're mirth it

We know the weather's been cold for July. But while chilling out in her local camping shop, our beauty editor was surprised to spot a 12-volt 'hair dryer and defroster'. Keen to have a cool coif, she took a closer look but was disappointed to read the defroster was just for her windscreen.

O vary special offer

The beauty editor also spotted an advert for spray tans in a local newspaper:

'Visit us with your friend and you can both get spayed for half price.'

What's in a name?

As more and more bleary-eyed commuters grab thrusting but unlovely freesheets like *Metro* for their daily fix of news, there may be troubled times ahead for 82-year-old weeklies like the *Doncaster Free Press* (*DFP* – priced 55p, part of the Johnston Press group).

A handwritten sign above the stack of *DFPs* on Doncaster railway station reads: 'This paper is not free.'

It's all hot air

Pikestaff reader Stephen Day emailed us with some prize waffle on wind farms, which can apparently have 'very severe dominant visual effects on large numbers of sensitive receptors (eg residents)'.

Pikestaff takes a break

We hope you've been a sensitive receptor to this month's *Pikestaff*. In August, *Pikestaff* will be taking a break, but of course our editing and training teams will still be here – keyboards and courses ready to have a dominant verbal and visual effect on the clarity of your organization's documents. Have a good summer, what's left of it; we'll be back in September.

Contribute

Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Back issues

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

Our e-shop . . .

. . . is still out of action. In the meantime you can order most of the items by phone or email. We'll have more news in September.

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

Pikestaff is written by Sarah Carr and edited by Martin Cutts. Published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd). Email: mail@clearest.co.uk Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177.