

# Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 9,  
October 2007

## Readers write

It's always good to hear your views, and 2 *Pikestaff* readers have written to vent their spleens on the lazy use of language.

### Keyed-up writers drive reader to fruit

*I wanted to tell you about something that is driving me bananas, that is misuse and overuse of the word 'key'. Just listen to newsreaders, politicians, business people and others who are trying to sound important or authoritative. Everything is key. There are key decisions made by key decision makers and all issues (now there's a word to rant about for another day) seem to have key aspects. And yet the key thing is that many of these key things are not key.*

*Some of them may be quite important, and some might be essential; others are perhaps vital or influential, remarkable or serious. Perhaps these key things are crucial or valuable, weighty or pivotal. All these alternatives to the word 'key' give us much more idea about just how key this key thing really is.*

'Key' is certainly a trendy adjective. As Jane Tomlinson (our correspondent) says, it can mean many subtly different things. Handy as a lazy escape from precision, it reminds us of the word 'nice', which school teachers used to prefer replaced with something more apt. On this – and 'issue' – Walter Nash (in *Jargon: Its Uses and Abuses*) notes that Hamlet might have said: 'To die, to sleep – to dream – aye, there's the key issue.'

### Caveat to writers: Latin is lazy when used *ad infinitum*

*Can we do anything about the use of 'etc', 'eg' and 'ie'? I would love a campaign to ban them. They are often overused or used for the wrong reasons. I always suspect 'etc' means that a person has run out of ideas! (Laura Berryman)*

Some people do overuse 'etc': lists introduced by words like 'such as' or 'includes' (or 'eg'!) shouldn't end with 'etc' as the reader already knows the list is incomplete. Perhaps that's why 'etc' is sometimes labelled 'extreme thought collapse'.

These abbreviations raise another point: whether it's OK to use originally foreign words and phrases in writing English. Look out for a future tip of the month on this topic.

[Thank you to Jane Tomlinson, YWCA, and Laura Berryman, Enfield Council, for emailing *Pikestaff* and letting us reproduce their comments here]

**Tip of the month:**  
**remember Word's grammar checker gives stats of chequered quality**

### The problem

Few people can write a perfect document straight off. It's important always

to check your writing, and in our tips of the month, we'll sometimes look at ways of doing this. This month, we look at the readability statistics in Microsoft Word.

### What readability statistics are

After checking your work, the grammar checker in Microsoft Word shows a panel headed 'Readability Statistics' (so long as you've ticked 'Show readability statistics' under Tools – Options – Spelling & Grammar). These include:

- words per sentence – showing the average sentence length (ASL).
- proportion of passive-voice verbs (which we looked at in *Pikestaff 8*)
- Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL) – these are 'readability formulas' that score how easy your writing is to read, based on the number of words, syllables and sentences. The FRE formula measures your writing on a scale of 0 (very hard to read) to 100 (very easy). The FKGL formula measures your writing as a US grade level, which you can convert to a British reading age by adding 5.

### Our advice

- It's useful to know the ASL – as we said in *Pikestaff 5*, this should be between 15 and 20 words (with some longer and some shorter, for variety and effect).
- Checking the proportion of passives is handy too – if this is over half, look at your verbs carefully. Do you really need so many passives?
- Ignore Word's FKGL formula, as a blip in the program means it never scores above 12, no matter how complicated the text.
- The FRE score can be useful, so long as you don't regard it as conclusive. Readability formulas ignore other important elements of clear language, as well as non-linguistic aspects of clear writing, such as tone, content, structure and design. But they can be useful to compare different documents, or different versions of the same document. For example, if your manager or a committee wants to amend your work, you could use FRE scores to show whether they really are making it plainer.

## Writing by numbers

The pros and cons of readability formulas are hotly debated among plain-language experts. And this month, our research director Martin Cutts presented a paper on this topic at the biennial conference of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) – which we told you about in *Pikestaff 4* and *8*. *Writing by numbers* looked in detail at the shortcomings of readability formulas. We'd analysed the readability of 4 song lyrics – *Angels*, *Dancing Queen*, *Three Times A Lady* and *White Room* – using some specialist software, leading Martin to suggest that readability formulas may be to clarify what karaoke is to song. If you'd like a copy of Martin's presentation, please email us at [mail@clearest.co.uk](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk). It will be available from 20 November or so.

## Writing with style

StyleWriter: the Plain English Editor is generally thought to be a better, more sophisticated tool than Word's grammar checker. Plus, it's tailored to plain English. So we asked one of our editors to put StyleWriter through its paces and report back. We're an agent for StyleWriter so we told her: 'You're not under any obligation to give a favourable review just because we're selling it.' So what did she think?

## Her report

StyleWriter claims to:

- change the writing style in your organization
- check each document for thousands of writing faults
- cut 25 per cent of the wordy style, resulting in a clear, concise and readable document.

Could it make me a nice sandwich while it's at it? Well, probably not, but it certainly does have a beneficial impact on obfuscated linguistic output.

To show you what StyleWriter can do, let's ask it to check the 2 paragraphs I've just written. These are the points it picks up:

- Do I mean *readable* – 'pleasant or interesting to read (used of content)' – or might I actually mean *legible* – 'able to be deciphered, clear (used of handwriting)'. I really do mean *readable*, but thanks for checking anyway.
- *Nice* is a 'weak word', which it advises me to edit out – yup, you've got me there. (Yikes, this is like having my high-school English teacher in my office – just without the blue rinse and risk of detention.)
- Do I really mean *it's* ('= it is or it has') or might I actually mean *its* ('= belonging to it')? Being a linguistic type, the girl done good, but this is a common slip, so well done, StyleWriter, for checking – and explaining the difference clearly.
- 'You can usually omit *certainly*,' it tells me. That's certainly true.
- When it gets to *beneficial* and *obfuscated*, it probably guesses I'm having it on, but politely offers me lots of nice plain alternatives, and finally suggests I 'be specific or edit out' *output* (sage counsel).

My personifying StyleWriter above isn't because editing can be a lonely job (we talk to our PCs only rarely – don't we, Dell?) but because StyleWriter really is a helpful companion to have around. Compared to Word's grammar checker, it picks up fewer things that are actually OK, more things that aren't, and explains both more fully and clearly, especially for those who aren't linguistic types. The alternatives it suggests are usually sensible and relevant.

Like Word, StyleWriter offers statistics on your text. But instead of just numbers, based on a small number of variables, you get adjectives too, based on far more. StyleWriter tells you whether your style index, passive index and average sentence length are poor, good or excellent. You can also record how the document scores, so you can compare it with others. To make these measures more meaningful, you can:

- specify the type of writing task (such as academic paper, advert or newsletter) from a choice of 13
- set the long-sentence limit
- exclude quoted text if you wish.

It's a little confusing that StyleWriter's 0–100 scale is the opposite way round to the FRE's: 1 is very easy and 100 very hard. And of course – as with most software – you can't use it on autopilot: you must use your brain to decide whether to accept, reject or modify the suggestions. But if applied with common sense, StyleWriter can help you make your document plainer, perhaps even saving us time (and so you money) on preparing it for Clear English Standard accreditation.

Could it make me a *delicious* sandwich while it's at it? This question is 'excellent' in all respects (style, length and passives) – bar the answer being

negative.

### **How to buy StyleWriter**

You can read more about StyleWriter, and download the full version to try, on our website (<http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=17>). The trial lets you use StyleWriter for 28 days at a minimal cost, refunded if you buy it at the end of the trial. The software starts at £85 + VAT a copy if you buy 20 or more (site licences are available too).

## **Unusual languages make the news**

### **Dictionary immortalizes miners' language**

*The Week* reports that a dialect used by miners in North East England for over 150 years has been rescued from oblivion. Pitmatic, used by pit workers, was first recorded by Victorian officials but has been dying out as Newcastle's coal mines have gradually closed. Now the first dictionary of Pitmatic, compiled by Geordie scholar Bill Griffiths, has immortalized thousands of unique words. Described by *The Week* as 'an impenetrable argot', Pitmatic borrowed some words from Old Norse and Dutch. Pretty plain though is the term 'arse-loop': a rope chair that miners use when repairing shafts.

### **Parlez-vous Geekspeak?**

In another news item on unusual languages, *Tin House* magazine looks at the language invented by PhD-linguist Marc Okrand for the Klingons – 'a sort of Viking-Spartan-samurai motorcycle gang' – to speak on the *Star Trek* TV show. (Karaoke fans who have belted out The Firm's *Star Trekkin'* will recall the classic line: 'There's Klingons on the starboard bow!')

There is a Klingon Language Institute, which administers 3 language exams, conferring a bronze, then silver and finally gold pin (like our Winning Websites scheme – well, sort of), and organizes an annual conference. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has even been translated into Klingon.

Klingon sounds alien because it combines sounds that you don't normally find together, which makes it tricky to pronounce. Also, it has a rare basic word order of object-verb-subject. Like Hungarian and Finnish, it's an agglutinating language, which means not that it contains gluten (nor is it nut-free, judging by the photos of 'Klingonists' in costume), but that it builds words by adding extra bits onto roots. This means the Klingon proverb, 'If it is in your way, knock it down' can be expressed in only 2 (rather long) words: 'Dubotchugh ylpummoH'. On this, Word and StyleWriter stand united: no scores, no suggestions (no surprise).

[Sources: *The Week*, 4 August and 29 September 2007; and *Tin House*, Summer 2007]

## **News from Plain Language Commission**

### **Better spelling**

Our associate Christina Gleeson has edited a new book, *Better Spelling*. Published by Chambers, it's a pocket guide that helps people improve their spelling and write with more confidence. It sets out the history and main rules behind English spelling and gives a comprehensive list of the most problematic words to spell, with some spelling tips. On sale at £5.99, its ISBN is 978-0-550-10338-3.

### **Welcome to new corporate member**

We'd like to welcome Norwich Union, which has recently joined us as a corporate member. Benefits of corporate membership include discounts on

many of our services and priority status for all our work for you. And, if you wish, you can put a customized corporate membership mark on all your documents. Corporate membership costs £1,500 + VAT in the first year, and £1,250 + VAT in later years. You can read more and download an application form at

<http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=15>.

### **Hell's kitchen is readin' heaven; but hell's belles, Lawson's dauntin'**

*Pikestaff's* cookery editor was perturbed to read she may need to polish her reading skills before becoming a domestic goddess. In a recent survey, the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) found that more than 5.3 million adults were unable to understand Nigella Lawson's and Delia Smith's instructions because of long sentences, complex measurements and complicated words. By contrast, a 7-year-old child could understand Gordon Ramsay's recipes, and an 11-year-old could read Nigel Slater's.

But Alan Wells, former director of the Basic Skills Agency, wrote to *The Sunday Times* criticizing DIUS's 'gimmick'. He describes this as 'the latest in a long tradition of similar pointless announcements', which 'started with millions not being able to write Christmas cards, followed by the millions that couldn't do karaoke if the Robbie Williams' song *Angels* was to be sung' (this being the inspiration for Martin's paper mentioned above). Alan concludes: 'I suspect it is all the brainchild of an underemployed civil servant or an expensive PR company. So be ready for "millions can't cook turkey because of difficulty reading oven settings" later this year.'

[Sources: *Daily Telegraph*, 13 September 2007; and *The Sunday Times*, 30 September 2007]

### **Horribly highfalutin**

#### **Hard-to-understand shoulder**

We'd like to warn any *Pikestaff* readers who may travel on the M60 westbound near Bury, Lancashire, that there's a 2-mile stretch of 'discontinuous emergency refuge'. Mind those gaps now!

#### **Quest for cool coif continues**

*Pikestaff's* beauty editor was excited to spot an advert in her local paper for a hairdressing salon: 'If you're ready for a truly original hairdressing experience, Sgt Barnets can offer a fresh experience on all elements of a new lifestyle driven brand.' Thinking that's just what she needed (well, that and a dictionary of stylist-speak), she read on: 'Colour confidence and expertise ensures [sic] that all clients will enter a new spectrum of hairdressing.' Raring to enter this seductive spectrum, she got straight on the blower. But she was destined for disappointment: no appointments were available, only 'team motivated salon sessions unlocking all creative hair concepts'. Oh well, it's back to the home perm.

### **Contribute**

Have you recently come across any rampant rhubarb or troublesome tripe? If so, we'd love to hear from you. 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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