pikestaff

PLAIN LANGUAGE COMMISSION

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Watchdog takes up fight against bad parking signs

Following our articles about badly worded and illegible car-park signs, BBC1's *Watchdog* took up the story of the signs at the Peel Centre, Stockport. Our research director, Martin Cutts, featured in the 19 April programme, explaining our concerns.

In brief, some private parking companies are using unclear signs and legalistic payment demands to get money from two million drivers a year by imposing 'parking charge notices' that many people mistakenly think are genuine official fines. Martin commented:

Private parking sign at Tiverton, Devon – its use of 'fine' and 'offence' is misleading

This is probably the biggest plain-language-related story we've had in the UK for a long time. But it's disheartening that the organizations with legal powers to act – the Office of Fair Trading, Consumer Direct, trading standards departments, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) – have decided they'll do virtually nothing to protect drivers against this £160million-a-year activity.

Martin has written a report about the whole story, which you can download from our website under 'Publications > Articles': 'Phoney fines and dodgy signs take drivers for a ride'. The piece includes a detailed analysis of parking signs and payment demands, as well as 12 pages of a juicy Employment Tribunal judgment full of plots, conspiracies and Low Dutch expressions. The companies involved deny any wrongdoing.

You can see the relevant part of the *Watchdog* programme on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwFdPYxvJAA.

Stop press: Campaigners against bad private-parking signs have had a success. The DVLA has just suspended Premier Parking Services UK Ltd, of Bridgwater, Somerset from having access to its database of motorists' names and addresses after it was caught using misleading signs that include the words 'fines' and

'offence'. The company had signed up to the British Parking Association's legally binding code of practice banning any language that implies parking charge notices are issued under statutory powers. For supposed breaches of its car-park rules, the company has been imposing thousands of its non-fines, charging £150 a time, at car parks throughout the South West. See above for its sign at Tiverton, Devon.

Ministers to road-test online services in usability drive

The coalition government has, since its early days, vowed to reduce bureaucracy: take, for example, the Red Tape Challenge, designed to 'free up business and society from the burden of excessive regulation' – see

http://www.redtapechallenge.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/home/index/. The challenge asks firms to identify rules where tick-box regulation, multiple inspections and contradictory advice are making it more difficult to run and grow their businesses. (Ironically, businesses often manage to create plenty of red tape of their own, with recent research by *Which?* finding that the terms and conditions on some shopping websites are longer than Hamlet, Shakespeare's longest play!)

So it was in keeping that the government recently managed to radically reduce the length of the National Planning Framework. But is shorter necessarily clearer? Jeremy O'Grady, writing in The Week, thinks not:

How the coalition basked in praise for reducing 1,000 pages of planning guidance to just 50. At last, politicians sensible enough to make things simple. Yet that simplicity was only realised by making the key notion of 'sustainable development' so ill defined, it will lead to more, not less [he means 'fewer'!], *planning issues being decided by courts – the opposite of what was intended.'*

In a related move, the March budget statement outlines the government's target to ensure that all its transactional services (which must be online by 2015) will be road-tested by the minister responsible for the service. The document says:

To support technological innovation and help the digital, creative and other high technology industries, the Government … will transform the quality of digital public services by committing that from 2014 new online services will only go live if the responsible minister can demonstrate that they themselves can use the service successfully.

[Sources: The Week, 14 April 2012; InfoPlus+, April 2012; Budget 2012 (section 1.224, page 42): http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/budget2012_documents.htm]

Regulator explains (some) legal jargon

If you need to use legal services, you might come across words and phrases that you're not sure about. Although your lawyer should explain them to you if you ask, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) have produced a glossary of some common terms; see http://www.sra.org.uk/consumers/using-solicitor/legal-jargon-explained.page. So far, it's a very short list, so if you can't find the term you're looking for, you can email the SRA at consumer.affairs@sra.org.uk to suggest they add it.

A quick check using StyleWriter (specialist plain-English editing software) gives the following results:

- Bog index (a measure using a weighted readability score for more than 200,000 graded words, sentence length and style issues): **Average**
- Average sentence length (average number of words per sentence): **Good**
- Passive index (proportion of verbs that are in the passive voice): **Good**

Of course, software – while useful – is not a substitute for editorial expertise (that's why our readability reports use both), and on the whole we think this glossary is both useful and pretty clear. The lower score on the Bog index may be because a glossary inevitably includes the difficult words it seeks to explain.

Proving the rule that anyone writing a guide or glossary about language will always make mistakes (otherwise known as Muphry's law: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muphrys_law), we spotted an error in the glossary. The entry for 'Allegation' says: 'A claim made against someone which has not and may not be proved true.' This should read: 'A claim made against someone that has not been, and may not be, proved true.' (Though 'which' isn't actually wrong, we think it's better to use 'that' in defining clauses – to find out why, see page 16 of our style guide, available from our website under 'Publications'.

Clarity 2012 conference

The fifth international conference of Clarity, the international association promoting plain legal language, took place in Washington, DC from 21–23 May. Co-hosted by Scribes – The American Society of Legal Writers and the Center for Plain Language, the conference covered many plain-language topics, including:

- what agencies are doing to comply with the US Plain Writing Act 2012
- what the Affordable Care Act means for plain language in health communications

- the new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's views on the need for clarity in financial communications
- what's happening with plain language in other countries
- plain-language progress in balloting, jury instructions, court rules, and other legal areas.

Many luminaries of the international plain-language movement attended; you can see the programme at https://sites.google.com/site/claritydc2012/program and speakers' abstracts at https://sites.google.com/site/claritydc2012/presentations.

Clear Writing Campaign conference

In partnership with the Institute for Translation and Interpreting (ITI) and Translating Division of the Chartered Institute for Linguists (CIOL), the European Commission in Brussels is organising a conference in London on Thursday 5 July. Part of the Commission's Clear Writing Campaign, the conference features presentations with practical exercises by:
- Martin Cutts (Plain Language Commission)
- David Monkcom (Editing Unit, European Commission)
- Daphne Perry (Clarity)
- Jonathan Stockwell (Web Unit, European Commission).

The event is aimed at all translators who are keen to improve the clarity of their written language; it is also open to non-members, with prices as follows:

	Early-bird rate (book by 5 June)	**Standard rate**
CIOL/ITI members	£35	£45
Non members	£45	£55
Students	£20	£25

You can book online at http://www.iti.org.uk/uploadedFiles/events/Booking%20form%20Clear%20Writing%20Seminar%205%20July%202012.mht.

Why use editors to improve your text?

The Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP) is compiling a collection of positive examples of editing – ones that demonstrate what a difference good editing can make to a text in terms of clarity and readability. *Why edit?* 'goes a step further than the usual exposing of gobbledegook, poor English and greengrocers' apostrophes'. Instead, it aims to highlight the value of what editors do by giving 'before' and 'after' examples and including an explanation of each problem and its solution.

Usually of around 50–100 words, examples are sorted into the following categories, with one dedicated to plain-language work:

- Editing for length
- Editing for plain English
- Grammar and syntax
- Non-native authors and translations
- Spoken into written language
- Structure
- Style, flow, rhythm

All examples have been submitted by SfEP members, and are checked by a team of editors to ensure they are watertight before being published on the SfEP website. The idea is that *Why edit?* will be added to continually. All submissions are anonymized, so that a web search won't embarrass the author by revealing the original source of the text! See http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/whyedit.asp.

Tips from a publishing insider

Of all business sectors, the 7,000 publishers in the UK are perhaps the most experienced at choosing external editors and proofreaders to support their work. So this makes their views on how best to pick an editing service worth listening to.

An article for the Publishing Training Centre by Mary James summarizes the six key factors ('you' being the editors, to whom the article is addressed):

1 *You can adhere to tight deadlines.*
2 *You know your target market inside out.*
3 *You're easy to work with.*
4 *Your communication skills, particularly over the phone, are second to none.*
5 *You provide value for money.*
6 *You guarantee high levels of confidentiality.*

We were delighted to see that all these factors are in line with our business principles, as stated on our website:

We believe in:

- *being reliable, responsive, ethical, approachable and easy to work with*
- *providing high-quality work whose standards are supported by evidence and research*
- *keeping our promises and meeting deadlines*
- *being clear about our prices – you'll find them set out on the website or you can ask us to quote for a specific job*
- *the benefits that good plain-language editing can bring to your business and customers – because it makes sense to ensure your documents are clear and easy to read*
- *the benefits of good writing-skills courses offered by experienced presenters – because helping your staff to write more clearly will be good for your customers, your colleagues and your business*

• *dialogue with other plain-language practitioners around the world. Several of our team belong to the Plain Language Association InterNational, contribute to journals in the plain-language field, and present papers at conferences about linguistics and writing skills. We advise and support Português Claro in Portugal (www.portuguesclaro.pt/).*

If you've not already experienced our professional approach to editing, why not give us a try?

[Source: Publishing Training Centre: http://www.train4publishing.co.uk/blogs/item/what-a-publisher-looks-for-before-hiring-freelancers]

Sequence of adjectives baffles experts (and foreigners)

Writing in the Daily Telegraph, Robert Colville observes:

A great joy of the English language is its endless capacity to delight and surprise. Yesterday, for example, my colleague Tom Chivers introduced me to the hierarchy of adjectives. This is the rule that descriptions tend to go opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose: for example, "a lovely little Seventies Bakelite radio" or "a hideous new green crinoline dress". Put any of the words in the wrong order, and the meaning breaks down. Thus, Ken Livingstone can be a ghastly old socialist relic, but "socialist old ghastly relic" sounds off.

Perusal of *A Student's Grammar of the English Language* by Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk confirms there is a complex system for 'ordering of adjectives in premodification' consisting of four 'zones' – precentral, central, postcentral and prehead – into which adjectives with different 'semantic properties' (meanings) are placed. Makes you glad not to be a non-native English speaker trying to get your head round all this! No wonder Michael Swan, in his book *Practical English Usage* – a staple for teachers and students of English as a foreign language – advises: 'Unfortunately, the rules for adjective order are very complicated, and different grammars disagree about the details.' He goes on to simplify the rules the best he can, which boil down to:

1 *Just before the noun come adjectives that tell you its purpose.*
2 *Just before these, we put adjectives that say what something is made of.*
3 *Before these are words that tell you the origin of something.*
4 *Before these come colour adjectives.*
5 *Words for age, shape, size, temperature, and other adjectives, come before all these.*

At this point, Swan concludes rule 5 with a resigned 'the exact order is too complicated to give practical rules'.

The Chivers sequence provides the mnemonic OSAShCOMP: does this help?

[Source: Daily Telegraph, 2 May: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/weather/9241170/Its-not-the-rain-I-hate-but-what-will-happen-when-it-stops.html]

Let's get quizzical

A tough cookie?

Here's this month's quiz question from Ray Ward (Queen's English Society committee member and trustee – and now Brain of Britain 2012: congratulations, Ray!):

Which common English word means 'twice cooked'?

You'll find the answer at the very end of this newsletter.

Cheese or font?

And in case you're chomping at the bit for more food-related language questions, we've come across a mouth-watering delicacy to whet your appetite. 'Cheese or font?' is an online quiz that asks you to decide whether words are names of cheeses or fonts, and then tells you how many other people got it right. The site also has a separate list of statistics, which lists the hardest and easiest items as follows:

Hardest items

Name	Performance	Attempts
Rudelsberg	20.8%	52,937
Gabriel	24.5%	53,433
Beaumarchais	24.8%	50,642
Koenigsbrueck	25.3%	53,684
Patzcuaro	25.7%	50,116

Easiest items

Name	Performance	Attempts
Helvetica	88.2%	54,197
Cambazola	85.2%	53,171
Manchego	84.0%	53,147
Lancashire	82.4%	53,400
Ragusano	81.9%	52,831

Most are on the harder end of the scale, in our opinion (no Cheddar or Arial here) – so if you're ready to test yourself, visit http://cheeseorfont.mogrify.org/. (Note: we cannot be held responsible for readers not getting their work done as a consequence of indulging in this educational pursuit.)

New on our website since Pikestaff 55

News and views *(click on any item to view online)*

17 May	Diners kebabbed by lost sheep
17 May	In non-Highway code: go away
26 April	Email peril as fat finger strikes at Aviva
28 April	Tiny print is Virgin on the ridiculous
28 April	Law firm goes a bit simple
20 April	Private parking: phoney fines and dodgy signs take drivers for a ride
13 April	Watchdog, 19 April, exposes bad signs
28 March	Christian Wolmar blasts dodgy parking signs
27 March	BBC1 Watchdog well worth watching
20 March	OFT (Office of Flatulent Tripe) fails to act on unclear contracts

Jottings *(click on any item to view online)*

17 May	Taking exception to rubbish writing
17 May	'Self' abuse: rising since Victorian times
17 May	Warding off the plague of hospital jargon
17 May	Screaming at the ice-cream cacophony
28 April	Fazed by Facebook
28 April	Dull story gets more Boring as it goes on and on
27 April	Eau water silly billy
12 April	Whatever a petard is, they were hoist by it
12 April	More blankety-blank in the papers
12 April	Pendant participles set to perturb pedants
21 March	Bullet lists not a panacea in painkiller leaflet
20 March	Pesky prepositions
19 March	Adair Turner writes – or maybe not

Facebook

Pikestaff has its own page on Facebook, thanks to colleague James Fisher, who has kindly set this up for us and is posting regular features there. So visit http://www.facebook.com/PikestaffNews and have a look for yourself. What's not to 'like'?

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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mail@clearest.co.uk Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177

Let's get quizzical: answer
Biscuit (biscuits were originally bread hardened in an oven, and therefore cooked twice).