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PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Pikestaff 59
November 2012

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International Plain Language Day 2012

Plain-language supporters all over the globe celebrated the second International Plain Language (IPL) Day on 13 October (the second anniversary of the US Plain Writing Act being passed). The day included a virtual conference, comprising ten presenters from four countries:

- Testing a plain-language text with your target audience (Debra Huron, Canada)
- Plain language unplugged: thinking outside the box with plain language (Kate Harrison Whiteside, Canada)
- Working with lawyers on your projects (Cheryl Stephens, Canada)
- IPL Day – why are we celebrating? (Michelle Black, Canada)
- Toronto plain-language challenge (Sally McBeth, Canada)
- How plain language is saving lives in healthcare (Rosemary Knight, New Zealand)
- Rights of arrested people (Frances Gordon, South Africa)
- Giving advice in plain language (Angela Rae, UK)
- Language and the law (Paul Danon, UK)
- Plain language and health literacy for translation (Aracely Rosales, US).



All conference presentations are now online on YouTube or SlideShare; you can find the relevant links on the IPL Day website at <http://www.iplday.org>.

As well as the virtual conference, a range of local plain-language-themed activities took place across the world.

'Parking champion of Stockport' strikes again

Here at Plain Language Commission, research director Martin Cutts made his contribution to the plain-language cause by appearing on the Martin Lewis Money Show. Broadcast on 30 October, the show covered Martin's ongoing campaign against the private-parking industry's issue of unfair parking tickets.

Martin Lewis explained that only the police and councils have the authority to issue

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parking fines. If you get an unfair ticket from them, he suggests you take the following action:

- Gather your evidence, for example photograph the scene, showing the relevant signs and road markings (or their absence).
- You can then appeal against the ticket (with your evidence); first make an informal appeal.
- If that's rejected, you can then make a formal appeal, though the fine may then be increased.
- If your formal appeal fails, you can go through the independent appeals process; 50% of people who get to this tribunal stage win their case.

But none of this applies to tickets issued in private car parks, for example at supermarkets or shopping centres. Private-parking companies cannot impose parking fines as such; your ticket is in fact an invoice for what they define as breach of contract. For this type of ticket, the show advised the following:

- If the ticket is unfair, don't pay.
- Write back explaining why it is unfair and why you are therefore rejecting the invoice. Usually the matter will go no further although you may get a string of letters demanding payment (court action is rare).
- You can now refer unfair private-parking charges to an independent adjudicator when the operator is a member of the British Parking Association.

As regular readers know, Martin Cutts won a court case against a private-parking company whose signs were unclear. Dubbing him 'the parking champion of Stockport', Martin Lewis told his namesake: 'You are a rare example and, boy, did they meet their match!'



UK readers can view the programme online at <http://player.stv.tv/programmes/martin-lewis/2012-10-30-1930/> (at about the 14-minute mark). And for the latest on the campaign against parking rip-offs – including Martin's appointment to the new DVLA Consumer Forum on Private Parking Management – see 'News and views' on our homepage.

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Simple Actions hack day to redesign parking signs

The Simplification Centre (<http://www.simplificationcentre.org.uk>) is a not-for-profit organization ‘dedicated to advocacy, innovative co-designing, and design education’. It organizes ‘Simple Actions’ – clientless design projects in which volunteer designers and writers offer solutions to whoever can use them. Hack days (named after open-source software developers’ hackathons) bring volunteers together for a day to analyse and improve a complex document. The results are then made available for comment and use by anyone.

Previous topics of Simple Actions hack days have included the penalty charge notice for driving in a bus lane (see <http://www.simplificationcentre.org.uk/get-involved/simple-action-penalty-charge/>) and tenancy agreements. The centre is holding a Simple Actions hack day on parking signs on 14 December at the Royal College of Art in Kensington. For more information on how to get involved, see <http://www.simplificationcentre.org.uk/2012/11/simple-action-simplifying-parking-signs/>. Martin Cutts has been invited to contribute to the event.



Readers write

To apostrophize or not to apostrophize...

A reader recently wrote in about apostrophes, suggesting that *Magistrates’ Court* is wrong since it is not a court belonging to magistrates but ‘simply defines the type of court’. Of course, as with so many other language ‘rules’, there’s no absolute right or wrong. The view of Bill Sabin, great (pragmatic) grammarian and author of the Gregg Reference Manual (McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2005) was that the possessive apostrophe may express relationships other than literal ownership. Bill used these examples:

- IBM’s product line (meaning the product line made or sold by IBM)
- Faulkner’s novels (meaning the novels written by Faulkner)
- Matisse’s paintings (meaning the paintings created by Matisse)
- Frank’s nickname (meaning the nickname given to or used by Frank)
- A two weeks’ vacation (meaning a vacation for or lasting two weeks).

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We also pointed out that – on the question of *Magistrates’/Magistrates Court* – the government website and other official bodies favour using the apostrophe, for example <https://www.gov.uk/courts/magistrates-courts>. The apostrophe is also included in the title of the Magistrates’ Court Act 1980:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1980/43>. So we can’t really claim it’s wrong, especially as it’s ultimately the choice of every organization (and individual) to style their name as they wish: think popstar Prince (who renamed himself an unpronounceable symbol representing love) and bookshop Waterstones (sans apostrophe)!



There are of course examples of perfectly acceptable apostrophe omissions – like the Children Act, as our correspondent pointed out – although based on Bill’s logic, it could just as well have been called the Children’s Act.

The key point from the plain-language perspective is that clear writing aims to make the message stand out and the linguistic style ‘invisible’. While *children* can only be a straight plural, magistrates could be either descriptive or possessive; so choosing to omit an apostrophe from a term such as *Magistrates Court* risks some readers thinking you’ve made a mistake. And as soon as an apparent error has caught their eye, they’ve been distracted from your message.

You can read more on this topic in Sarah Carr’s article ‘Possessive puzzles’, published in the ‘Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers’ column of *Clarity 66* (November 2011) and now available on our website under ‘Publications > Articles > Getting to grips with grammar’.

Providing the answer

Another reader asked: ‘Can you use “providing (that)” and “provided (that)” interchangeably? I thought they meant the same thing but someone has just corrected my sentence: “Members and firms can appeal against a decision made by a tribunal providing they do so within 28 days...”’

Either ‘providing that’ or ‘provided that’ can introduce a condition and both have been around since the fifteenth century. ‘Provided that’ is generally preferred, with the *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* reporting that this form appears more than twice as often in British English – and around three times as often in American English.

However, neither phrase is particularly plain; the Cambridge Guide notes: ‘Most style commentators agree that these phrases are heavyweight ways of prefacing a condition. If that is the effect you’re seeking, they serve the purpose. Otherwise *if* serves for a positive condition, and *unless* for a negative one.’

So the reader’s sentence could be rephrased: ‘Members and firms may appeal against a tribunal decision if they do so within 28 days’ – or even ‘Members and

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firms have 28 days to appeal against a tribunal decision.'

Indeed, rephrasing is often a good way to eliminate tricky bits altogether. Another illustration of this is in a third reader's question: 'Would you hyphenate the following: "This boy was an eight-year-old"? I would but others disagree.' We agreed that we would hyphenate it – and the Oxford Style Manual backs this up, giving the example 'a rambunctious two-year-old' – but again an alternative would be to rephrase the sentence: 'This boy was eight years old.'

A colo(u)rful tale

'Have you ever wondered why the British spell "color" with a "u" and Americans don't?' asks Grammar Girl, in a podcast sponsored by Intelligent Editing, maker of PerfectIt proofreading software. She explains that many of the spelling differences came from Noah Webster, of Webster's dictionary fame, and were for political and philosophical as much as linguistic reasons.

In Webster's day, Americans weren't even sure that English should be the national language, with some people suggesting German, Hebrew or Columbian as alternatives. To convince people that they should choose English, Webster wrote a spelling book to replace the British one that schools were using; in this, he began to create American spellings.

As well as the political motivation, Webster believed he was creating linguistic order with his changes, arguing that the spelling reforms would save money: 'Such a reform would diminish the number of letters about one sixteenth or eighteenth. This would save a page in eighteen; and a saving of an eighteenth in the expense of the books, is an advantage that should not be overlooked.'

Some critics thought he had gone too far, and he later reversed some of his suggestions, including reinstating the final 'e' in words such as 'doctrine', 'discipline' and 'medicine'. Originally he had spelt:

- 'ache' as 'ake'
- 'soup' as 'soop'
- 'tongue' as 'tung'
- 'women' as 'wimmen'
- 'weather' as 'wether'.

There are other differences that aren't Webster's doing – including 'program' versus 'programme' and 'aluminum' versus 'aluminium'. You can read more about these at <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/colour-and-color.aspx>, and more about Webster's work in *The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster's Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture* by Joshua Kendall (Berkley, 2012): maybe one for the Christmas list?



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WriteMark Plain English Awards (New Zealand)

Each year, organizations and members of the public are invited to submit documents and websites they think are outstanding examples of plain English – or of gobbledygook. Organized by the WriteMark Plain English Awards Trust (a charity registered in New Zealand), the awards aim to:

- improve government and business documents so that all New Zealanders can understand them
- raise public awareness of the need for, and benefits of, plain English
- create a public preference for organizations that choose to communicate in plain English.

Independent panels of plain-English experts and advocates judge the entries and decide the finalists and winners in each category:

- plain-English champion – best organization and best individual/team
- best plain-English document – public sector/non-government organization (NGO) and private sector
- best plain-English website – public sector/NGO and private sector
- best plain-English sentence transformation
- best plain-English technical communicator
- best plain-English investor document
- people's choice – best plain-English communication and worst 'brainstrain' communication
- best plain-English turnaround.

Finalists have now been announced; keep your eye on the trust's website at <http://www.plainenglishawards.org.nz/> to find out the winners when they're announced at the presentation ceremony on 29 November.

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As the nights draw in and the temperatures drop, this month we have a quiz question to warm you up: what is the unit for the strength of chilli peppers? As usual, you'll find the answer at the end of this newsletter.

Long-time readers may recall that Plain Language Commission – hotbed of holistic help that we are – was once called upon to advise the Berkhamsted Chilli Growing Society on the correct spelling of the spicy pepper. We explained that there are three alternatives: chilli, chili and chile. The first is the usual spelling in the UK and Australia, and is thought to follow the original Mexican most closely. American and Canadian English prefer 'chili', while the Spanish is 'chile' (preferred in parts of the US where Spanish is known). According to the *Oxford Dictionary* (1989), 'chilly' is a fourth option in British English. We'd say it's unusual though – and rather confusing (so not plain English) given its better-known meaning on the opposite end of the thermometer.

And last but not least, here's another brainteaser for you: listen to this Bob Dylanesque song by 'Weird Al' Yankovic and see if you can spot what's special about the lyrics: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nej4xJe4Tdg>. (Scroll down a little on the YouTube page to find out: rather clever, we thought.)

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(Click on any item to view online)

12 November	Words on the loose: mitigate, casuist, capitulating, enormity, layin'
5 November	Forum to advise on preventing private-parking rip-offs
15 October	Savile row spells doom for gravestone
16 October	Three more private parking firms suspended from access to DVLA data
16 October	My newt's on the menu in Jamie's missing-hyphen diet
14 October	Panic at the BPA as two parking companies are suspended over bad signs
18 September	MP's speech spotlights parking signs rip-off

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Facebook

Pikestaff has its own page on Facebook, thanks to colleague James Fisher-Martins, 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, as well as an index showing 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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Let's get quizzical: answer

Scoville unit

Named after the American pharmacist who invented it, the Scoville scale measures the amount of capsaicin in chilli peppers. (Capsaicin is a chemical that stimulates nerve endings in the skin, especially the mucous membranes – hence the nose-blowing effect when you eat something spicy).

[Source: Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scoville_scale]



Prof Wilbur Scoville