

A free newsletter that provides hints and tips, links to language-related websites, amusing sidelines, updates on our services, and short news articles.

p kestaff

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

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May 2013

In this issue:
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Point-scoring pedants grab grammar headlines

On 14 May, year 6 children (those in the last year of primary school, aged 10 to 11) sat the first national test of grammar, punctuation and spelling. Popularly known by a range of abbreviations – including SPAG and GAPS – the test really isn't that tricky, but the media has leapt at the chance to scare hapless adults with much harder online 'grammar quizzes', implying that this is what juniors will be tested on.

Here are a couple of questions from the **kids' test** (the standard level 3–5 paper; a very few 'gifted and talented' youngsters also had the chance to take the level 6 one – level 6 being the average ability of 14-year-olds):

En
KEY STAGE
2
LEVELS
3–5
SAMPLE

English tests

Grammar, punctuation and spelling
Paper 1: short answer questions

First name				
Middle name				
Last name				
Date of birth	Day	Month	Year	
School name				
DfE number				

Barcode

Circle the most suitable connective to complete the sentence below.

Amir went to the doctor _____ he was feeling ill.
however because despite yet

[Don't get us started on 'however' (defined in the Oxford dictionary as an adverb only) now being treated in schools (and elsewhere) as a connective – see Pikestaff 7.]

max is coming here in december to learn english.

Circle the three words in the sentence above that should start with a capital letter. For one of the words you identified above, explain why it needs a capital letter.

And here are two questions from a **BBC website test**, published on 14 May and introduced in a way that clearly links it to the children's test: 'Grammar is in the headlines with the arrival of a new test for primary school children. How much do you know about apostrophes, semi-colons and dangling participles?':

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Read this sentence carefully.

"I'd like to introduce you to my sister Clara, who lives in Madrid, to Benedict, my brother who doesn't, and to my only other sibling, Hilary."

Which of the following is correct?

1. Hilary is male.
2. Hilary is female.
3. It's impossible to know from the context.

Consider this sentence:

"Do you mind my asking you?"

Which of the following does it include?

1. Modal
2. Gerundive
3. Imperative

We covered a **similar quiz**, this time presented by The Guardian, in Pikestaff 61. And **here's another**, by the Telegraph.

For the linguistically minded, they're not that hard (with the odd sneaky/unclear exception designed to catch people out). But they're nothing like as easy as the kids' questions – few people know what a gerundive is. Indeed, making people afraid of grammar – which is really only an agreed system to allow folk to communicate with each other with minimal misunderstanding – seems to be a popular pastime for many media types.

For example, The Idler magazine's **Bad Grammar Awards** recently condemned a letter by academics for saying that the national curriculum demanded 'too much, too young'. They criticised the phrase – an allusion to The Specials' 1979 song of the same name – for confusing an adjective and an adverb, apparently failing to see, or perhaps to care, that 'too young' modifies an understood third-person plural pronoun: 'demands too much (of them) too young'. Another alleged offender was Transport for London for its sign 'It is safer to stay on the train than attempting to get off' – mixing up gerund ('attempting') and infinitive ('attempt'). Yet these communications are perfectly clear.

In a **leader**, The Times hit back at the pedants: '...grammar scolds are an impediment to encouraging clear and idiomatic English'. We couldn't agree more: and, putting his money where his mouth is, our research director Martin Cutts has expanded the grammar chapter in the next (fourth) edition of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, due out in August. The new book includes a batch of authentic examples for readers to test themselves on – not designed to catch them out and make them look stupid, but to help them communicate clearly without ambiguity.

And in case you're thinking this attitude conflicts with our mini-rant on 'however', think again: using 'however' as a conjunction does risk ambiguity, as this real

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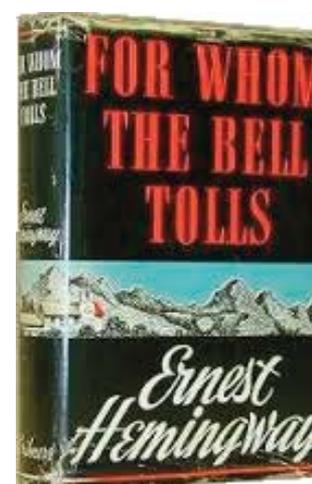
example (names removed to protect the clueless) illustrates: 'The query function was identified as a very useful tool for healthcare professionals, however many people are still not aware of the service.'

However you look at it, it is, however, unclear.

The bell tolls for whom

The correct use of 'whom' is another area that even native English-speakers can find tricky, but Megan Garber, writing in [The Atlantic](#), claims this word is dying, albeit slowly:

According to Google's expansive collection of digitized books, the word has been on a steady decline since 1826. The 400-million-word Corpus of Historical American English records a similar slump. Articles in Time magazine included 3,352 instances of whom in the 1930s, 1,492 in the 1990s, and 902 in the 2000s. And the lapse hasn't been limited to literature or journalism. In 1984, after all, the Ghostbusters weren't wondering, "Whom you gonna call?"



Mignon Fogarty, the host of the popular *Grammar Girl* podcast, said: 'I'd put my money on *whom* being mostly gone in 50 to 100 years.' Examining the reasons, Garber claims that 'whom' has 'outlived its ability to fulfill the most important function of language: to clarify and specify'. More importantly, however [adverb!], '*whom* simply costs language users more than it benefits them'. Garber continues: 'Correctness is significantly less appealing when its price is the appearance of being—as an editor at *The Guardian* wrote—a "pompous twerp."' She recommends writer William Safire's advice on the subject: 'Whenever *whom* is required, recast the sentence.'

Indeed, writing has become more informal, as Simon Kuper also argues in the [Financial Times](#): day by day, prose is 'becoming blessedly more like speech'. Kuper claims that 'social media, blogs and emails have hugely improved the way we write', despite pessimists' 'vision of mute youths exchanging semi-literate solipsistic messages' (or should we say 'slpsstc msgs ;-)'?).

Jolyon Connell, writing in *The Week*, also disagrees with the pessimists:

They're wrong. Texts, blogs and emails are making journalism, books and business communications more conversational, and that's a good thing. I certainly won't mourn the passing of whom, a word I've always struggled with. But there's still enough of the pedant in me to be glad that Mid Devon District Council has abandoned its plan to scrap the apostrophe in street signs.

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Jolyon, you're no pedant: apostrophes too are often important to avoid ambiguity.

Can you think of any examples where replacing 'whom' with 'who' would lead to ambiguity? If you can, do **share!**

[Source: The Week, 4 May]

Clearly clarified

In this occasional slot, we quote a real example of poorly written text, highlight some of its linguistic problems, and suggest one way of editing it into clear English.

Example

This example comes from an incorporated friendly society's letter to members:

Over the past five years and despite the challenging investment conditions the XYZ Friendly Society has been able to maintain its annual bonus award at the same level. The Society has achieved this by saving some of the growth achieved in previous profitable financial years, ready for payment in leaner times such as now. However, as 2013 commences the nation continues to work together to improve the economic strain we all experience, the Society has had to implement a slight reduction to some policy bonuses. We do hope that conditions in the markets improve and stabilize in the future, which will enable the Society to consider future increases. [108 words]

Problems

The whole paragraph is wordy and woolly, deteriorating as it goes on. Here are some of the specific problems:

- Although the letter is from XYZ, the organization talks about itself mostly in the third person (using lots of caps too).
- There's a lack of commas to show the structure of some sentences – for example, in the first one, to mark off the end of the prepositional phrase that starts 'Over'.
- The letter refers to 2013 starting, but the readers are getting the letter in mid-May.
- The third sentence yokes together two complete sentences that don't make sense when run together like this. The sentence could perhaps be saved from grammatical chaos by inserting 'and' after 'commences'.
- Also, 'the nation' could easily (at first sight) be read as the direct object of the rather grandiose 'commences' ('starts' would be fine), making the reader begin the sentence again.
- It's not clear how a singular nation can 'work together'. (There's also the contentious assertion that everyone is somehow working towards the same goal of national prosperity, though that's not a language issue.)
- The phrase 'improve the economic strain' is awkward – better verbs would be 'reduce' or 'remove'.

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- When the society is able to consider increases, they will no longer be future ones.
- Since 'considering' costs little, it could really be done at any time, making this a poor choice of verb. It's paying out those increases that's trickier – and of more interest to readers.

Suggested rewrite

From 2008, we kept your annual bonus at the same level, despite tough investment conditions. We achieved this by saving some of the profit from previous years, ready to pay you in leaner times. But as everybody pulls together to improve the national economy, we now need to reduce some bonuses a little to safeguard our position. We hope market conditions will improve and stabilize, and that we'll then be able to increase bonuses again. [75 words]

UK law writers say the laws they write are too complex

'I wish that the superfluous and tedious statutes were brought into one sum together, and made more plain and short.'

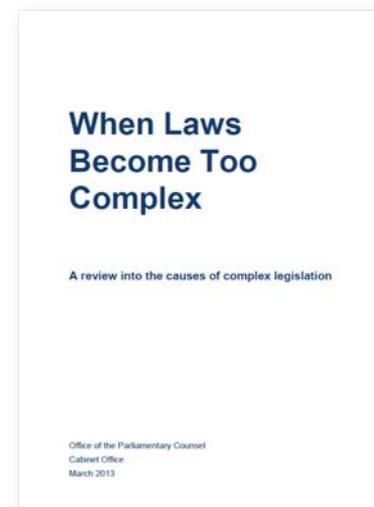
Quoting Edward VI's statement from the sixteenth century, the report *When Laws Become Too Complex* – newly published by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel – is subtitled *A review into the causes of complex legislation*. It follows talks with experts and users 'to understand better their expectations and experience of legislation, and to identify the difficulties they encounter when using legislation'.

The report sets out its stall as follows:

Clear and effective legislation is essential to good government. It is also a critical part of the democratic process. It gives effect to policy, translating abstract principles and very specific provisions into legal remedies, while mediating between the (often) conflicting objectives, views and expectations of legislators and users.

The preparation of legislation is therefore an inherently complicated process, subject to external pressures and unforeseeable events. Political necessities may sometimes require particular legislative approaches that are inherently complex. Consideration of political factors of that nature was outside the scope of this review.

Subject to that limitation, this paper will attempt to illustrate the main characteristics of complex legislation. It will also discuss the causes of disproportionate complexity.



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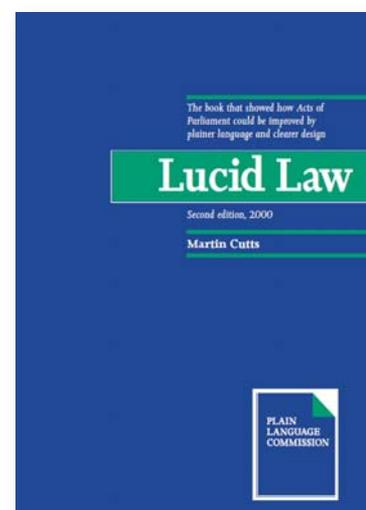


It identifies three key problems:

- the volume of the statute book
- the quality of legislation
- the perception of disproportionate complexity.

The office looked at how these problems could be ameliorated by those sponsoring, preparing or drafting the legislation. Suggestions include 'shared ownership of, and pride in, our legislation', regarding pieces of legislation 'not just as documents in their own right, but as parts of a larger mosaic of legislation'; and 'a stronger incentive on all involved in the process to avoid generating excessively complex law, or to act positively to promote accessibility, ease of navigation, and simplification'.

The authors didn't consult Plain Language Commission. We've written extensively about the unnecessary complexity of UK law. We've said it arises partly from bad writing practices within the office itself – linguistic and structural smoke being injected without good reason – and partly from a lack of consideration for the users of legislation, many of whom are not lawyers. Our book *Lucid Law* (available [free](#) from our website under 'Publications') gives more details. The book is referenced in the report's bibliography, though the authors manage to feminize it as 'Lucida Law'.



The office is launching a 'good law initiative', which aims to:

- 'build a shared understanding of the importance of good law
- ensure that legislation is as accessible as possible, and consider what more can be done to improve readability
- reduce the causes and perception of unnecessary complexity
- talk to the judges who authoritatively interpret the law and to the universities which teach it, to avoid confusion and facilitate interpretation.'

You can read the [full report online](#). Clarity's next London breakfast (on 9 July) will also feature an introduction to the good law initiative by the Office of Parliamentary Counsel – for which more individual Clarity members work than for any other organization in the UK. See 'Conferences and events' towards the end of this newsletter.

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Readers write

Sincere advice

A reader asked:

Can you advise me on the closing signature used by several of my team? They end every letter (whether ad hoc or template) as follows:

If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely,

I don't see why we need to add both 'With kind regards' and 'Yours sincerely'. But my team feel it makes the letter sound more friendly. What is the etiquette with closing signatures?

We replied:

There are no set rules, merely conventions and norms that businesses can choose to follow or ignore.

A bare 'Yours sincerely' may seem a bit brusque when the writer knows the reader.

So I feel that the approach being taken is OK, though I don't see how a full stop is a good idea after 'With kind regards'.

My adjustment to the style would be as follows:

If you have any further questions, do please contact me.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

I don't like 'do not hesitate' as it introduces two negatives and implies the person is normally hesitant. I don't like 'queries' because it makes people sound querulous.

Another decent variation is:

If you need more information, please feel free to contact me.

On the whole, in a personal business letter it's better to craft something personal and sincere than rely on stock phrases.

There's more on starting and ending letters in the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (chapter 14: Sound starts and excellent endings).

Catching some zeds

Another reader emailed: *'I recently signed up to receive your newsletter. I thought it was a British publication, but I've noticed your spellings seem a bit off. I notice you spell organisation, utilise and so on with zeds. Is there a particular reason for that?'*

We directed him to this explanation, on our website:

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Our spelling choices

You'll notice that we spell words like recognize, organize, sympathize and utilize with a z. This is the first spelling given in British dictionaries for words derived from the Greek zeta root – it's not necessarily the American spelling! If you prefer to use s in your own writing, this will never be wrong except in capsized. When we're editing other people's writing, we'll follow their preference – which in the UK is usually -ise.

In fact, Oxford dictionaries and the Oxford University Press also use the 'z' spelling – as do other UK publishers who are 'etymology conscious' (according to Merriam-Webster), including Cassell, Collins and Longman dictionaries; The Times Literary Supplement; and many academic journals.

Horsing around

Pikestaff 61 explored the derivation of the phrase 'I could eat a horse', topical in light of the meat-adulteration scandal.

Diane MacGregor emailed from Canada to say: 'On the horse story, my father used a couple of colourful expressions to describe a ravenous hunger: he would say he could "eat a horse and chase the driver" or "eat the arse out of a dead skunk." He was half Irish, filtered through a century or two of outport Newfoundland, and born in cosmopolitan industrial Cape Breton, Canada.'

Do you have any other interesting hunger-related expressions?

Let's get quizzical

We wonder weather you'll get this one

Here's our regular quiz question from Ray Ward: 'What is measured in units called oktas?'

As usual, you'll find the answer and an explanation at the end.

New on our website since Pikestaff 61

(Click on any item to view online)

-
- | | |
|--------|--|
| 13 May | Boots escape a kicking with that weasel word ANY |
| 13 May | Ellie Harrison breaks curse taboo |
| 13 May | Grammar goes to pot after pots go to wife |
| 13 May | Just don't know why they do it |

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13 May	Osborne crime wreaks havoc at The Lady
13 May	Phew, what a stickler
13 May	Rubbish from the High Peak
13 May	Whitehall's nudge unit shows there's more to writing than being clear
8 April	Be Wiser Insurance, and other apostrophe crimes
8 April	Rarely audited, rarely inspected – no wonder private car parks are a rip-off
8 April	Royal Mail couldn't see the error of its ways – can you?
6 April	Grand National won by unpunctuated horse
20 March	Aberrant apostrophe anguish, again
20 March	Cyprus savings rip-off – couldn't happen here ... but it already did

Conferences and events

In this slot, each month, we'll update you on future plain-language conferences and other events.

Clarity breakfast (22 April, London): 'The Visual Element in Complex Legal Documents'

The notes and slides of this event are now available on Clarity's [website](#), courtesy of speaker Josiah Fisk of More Carrot.

Clarity/Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (joint evening event, 13 June, London): Konrad Schiemann on EU law

Konrad Schiemann stepped down last year as Judge at the European Court of Justice (ECJ). In his farewell speech, he referred to his efforts to improve the clarity of ECJ judgments. He spoke of the difficulty of understanding long sentences and the risk that they conceal ambiguities. He will expand on this theme at an evening lecture called 'The Advantages of Obscurity: The Drafting of EU Legislation and Judgments'. There is no charge for this event and it is open to all.

Find out more and reserve a place on the [website of IALS](#).

Clarity breakfast (9 July, London): Parliamentary Counsel introduce the good law initiative

Hayley Rogers and Elizabeth Gardiner, Parliamentary Counsel and Clarity members, will introduce the good law initiative to Clarity members and guests, covering:

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- the aims of the project
- building a partnership across government and beyond
- practical steps
- what Clarity members can do to help.

For more information, email [Daphne Perry](#).

Clarity journal: call for submissions (deadline 15 July)

The Clarity journal is seeking submissions for issue 70, due to be published in November. The theme will be 'teaching plain language', and the editors are particularly interested in articles, research studies, or book reviews focused on teaching methods and theory related to teaching plain language in the classroom and in practice. For more information, email guest editors [Cynthia Adams](#) or [Kara Zech Thelen](#).

PLAIN conference (10–13 October 2013, Vancouver, Canada)

The [homepage](#) of the site has been updated with information on plenary sessions and speakers.

Clarity conference

Like PLAIN, Clarity holds a conference every two years, with the two usually alternating. We'll let you know when there's an official announcement about Clarity's 2014 conference, which we've heard will be back in Europe this time.

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 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 it to them.

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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

Cloud cover

In meteorology, an okta is a unit of measurement used to describe the amount of cloud cover; sky conditions are estimated in terms of how many eighths of the sky are covered in cloud, ranging from 0 oktas (completely clear sky) to 8 oktas (completely overcast).

Symbol	Scale in oktas (eighths)
	0 Sky completely clear
	1
	2
	3
	4 Sky half cloudy
	5
	6
	7
	8 Sky completely cloudy
	(9) Sky obstructed from view