

pkestaff

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits

1

No business writing if business writing is this bad

Businesses often shoot themselves in the foot when it comes to writing decent English in their letters and emails. Here's how Chocland, a (pseudonymous) British chocolate company, responded to a customer who'd complained its carrier bags were made of paper that became so rain-soaked on her way home that all the chocolate bars fell out and were lost.

Thank you for taking the time to email us regarding your disappointment in our carrier bags, I am really sorry to take a little while to reply to you, as you can imagine it is rather busy here at Chocolate HQ during the Christmas period.

The reason we use paper bags, as apposed to plastic, is to coincide with our company ethos in that we use enviromentally packaging as much as we can, we appreciate during bad weather conditions this can occassion create issue, and I am only sorry that this has been the case for you on this occasion.

With regards to how the store dealt with your situation, we hope you appreciate that it is a difficult situation for them to be able to replace a product under these circumstances.

I do hope my email goes in some way to regain your confidence and custom in Chocland.

So many errors in so short a letter! For example, the first 'sentence' needs two more full stops; there are three spelling mistakes in the second paragraph, which also needs more full stops; 'create issue' is not English; 'goes in some way' is not English; and 'my email... goes... to regain your custom in Chocland' is not a feasible statement.

Chocland is only a smallish company so may have slender in-house writing resources, although the author signed herself personal assistant to the directors.

No such excuse for the giant Santander Bank, though, whose business banking website betrays a dismal command of punctuation:

Please check the data you have entered, the day you have entered is a Bank Holiday please select the previous or following working day.

So that should be three sentences and lower case b and h.



Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits



Over at the Post Office website, though, customers can rejoice in a decent semicolon, even though a comma after 'however' would have been good, too:

Debit cards are now free of bank cash advance fees; however your bank may still apply additional fees for Credit Cards.

But why do some authors imagine 'credit cards' must have initial capitals? Would they put them on 'birthday cards'?

When it's Tuesday, your time's up

A patient recovering at Rotherham Hospital, Yorkshire was shocked when the radio-controlled clock on the wall of the ward displayed the command 'DIE' to him (and other patients) in large black letters.

Finger trembling, he pointed out the doomy message to staff.

They found that the clock had reverted to a German setting and was showing DIE as an abbreviation of Dienstag, which means Tuesday.

A technician was called and, after a few buttons were pressed, local language norms were restored.



'Either that German clock goes or I do.'

Indie a slave to its preconceptions

Ever written a headline you regret? The Independent had one of them in November when its front-page lead about three women allegedly kept in slavery at a house in Peckford Place, Brixton, howled that the story was 'London's shame'.

This was never going to be a good headline. First, because most of London's six million inhabitants were unlikely to feel any shame at all about the weird goings-on of a 40-year-old Maoist cult they'd never heard of and could have no responsibility for. And second, because even at that early stage the story was starting to unravel, so the headline had all the signs of a hostage to fortune.

It has since emerged that the 'slaves' who were 'rescued' by police and the Freedom charity seem to have had the, er, freedom to walk the streets pretty much as they pleased. One of them even wrote 500 letters to the bloke next door, while another neighbour spoke of the youngest 'slave' knitting him a jumper and inviting him into the kitchen for a piece of toast.

Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits

Serial killer's plain language shocks courtroom

It must have been like a Bateman cartoon at the Old Bailey on 18 November when 30-year-old Joanna Dennehy shocked her barrister by pleading guilty to three murders, having been expected to do the opposite. Instead of a lengthy and lucrative trial, Nigel Lickley, QC could see a large chunk of fee income disappearing. Aghast, he lapsed into legal-speak as he asked the judge for time to persuade his client to relent:

'The course of the arraignment is not one we had anticipated. We ask for more time given what has just occurred.'

Mr Justice Sweeney briefly adjourned the case. Lickley told him he planned to meet his client again later in the week and would inform the court the following Monday whether she would stick to her pleas.

But Dennehy cut through all the legal rhubarb, shouting from the dock:

'I'm not coming back down here again just to say the same stuff. It is a long way to come to say the same thing I have just said. I've pleaded guilty and that's that.'

Perhaps this is the best thing Dennehy has ever done. She will be sentenced later.

Jargon of the week: personalized sauce option

The high-street bakery chain Greggs has banned its staff from adding brown sauce or tomato ketchup to cheese rolls – from now on these condiments may be used only on breakfast rolls with bacon or sausage.

The cost-cutting move was served up by a company spokesman with a delicious dollop of business jargon: 'Research tells us our sandwich customers value speed of service as very important to them at lunchtime. This means we are unable to offer a personalised sauce option for our full sandwich range.'

Local-council parking rip-offs

Parking rip-offs have been in the news again, with local-authority practices looking increasingly shady in the media spotlight.

The Yorkshire Post says British motorists are being stung for £360million a year in parking fines, with a 13% increase in fines issued on a Sunday when many drivers fondly imagine that parking is free, according to data from insurer LV=.

Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits

Communities Secretary Eric Pickles said: 'This new research is more evidence that drivers are being ripped off by unfair and confusing municipal parking policies. Overzealous enforcement is damaging local high streets and shops, as they lose business to out-of-town superstores and internet retailing.'

Making changes to parking rules is a particularly lucrative tactic because drivers tend to act out of habit without reading new signs. In Leeds, despite warning notices posted in the city centre, almost 2,500 extra parking fines were issued in the first month after new evening and Sunday charges were introduced – in the busy run-up to Christmas, too. This suggests that merely sticking up a few signs is not a sound way to give clear public information when habits are ingrained. To help people get the message, the council could have sent warning letters during a grace period. Instead, it chose to go for the money-making option immediately.

BBC's consumer champion role compromised by payout scandal

For anyone who admires the BBC's record as a consumer champion in investigative shows like Watchdog, Inside Out, Rip-Off Britain, You and Yours, and Moneybox, the scale of the corporation's enormous pay-offs during its recent clear-out of senior managers is bad news.

Mark Byford, deputy director-general, was handed £949,000 – of which £300,000 was more than he was contractually entitled to, supposedly in order to keep him 'fully focused' until his departure. Jana Bennett, executive director, walked away with £687,000. Caroline Thomson, chief operating officer, trousered £680,000. Roly Keating, director of archive content, got a mere £376,000 but was so ashamed when he found out how the amount had been calculated he returned it less the tax paid.

The director of human resources, £332,000-a-year Lucy Adams, who oversaw all this largesse, was mauled by the Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) after it found a key part of her evidence to be false. She told the PAC she knew nothing of an email about the Byford payment, but later it emerged she was one of the email's main authors.

So when brave sleuths like Matt Allwright of Watchdog confront some rogue trader with proof of their dodgy dealings, what will their defence be? Simple: 'We were just putting our snouts in the trough, old son, like those departing executives of yours at the BBC – what's the difference? Why don't you buzz off and investigate them instead of bothering me?'

Since the BBC has to include the trader's defence in the programme and on its website, the corporation is going to look very silly indeed.

[Sources: Times and Daily Mail, 16 Dec 2013]

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits



Ethnic questions on official forms: who needs 'em?

Several obituaries of Nelson Mandela remarked that he wanted a non-racial society in which everyone was well treated wherever they came from and whatever their skin colour or genetic background.

It led Libby Purves, sage columnist of The Times, to tell how she and other family members completed their immigration forms on entry to apartheid-stricken South Africa in 1962 when her dad was appointed to a Foreign Office post there:

To our delight, when we had to fill out immigration forms on the ship my father – who had already gone out there by plane – told my mother we could treat the “race” question with contempt or leave it blank, and he would face down any subsequent official problems. So I put “egg and spoon”, my mother put “Ladies’ breast stroke 300 yards” and he, we were told bafflingly, wrote “Protestant”.

France, in its penal code and constitution, famously forbids the collection of ethnic-origin statistics for French citizens, on the basis that it would create division not fairness or harmony. In the UK, though, officials are obsessed with collecting and trying to interpret racial-origin details, with most forms including a page of tick-boxes about it.

Insurer returns £30,000 after private-parking pillage

The private-parking industry continues to pillage its customers for penalty income to the tune of about £200 million a year, but one leading insurer has seen the light by repaying £30,000 to drivers in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire who were given £100 tickets after falling foul of a change in car-park rules.

Legal & General had hired parking operator Civil Enforcement Limited (CEL) to put up signs limiting free parking to three-and-a-half hours at the Towerfields cinema, restaurant and shopping complex. Visitors who had got used to parking for free as they watched a film or had a meal often didn't notice the signs, especially at night when they weren't illuminated. Their number plates were read by surveillance cameras on entry and exit, enabling CEL to buy details of overstayers from the Government's DVLA at £2.50 a time and sock them with tickets.



Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits

A previous survey found that the car park was never full, even at peak times, so it wasn't as if drivers needed to be deterred.



The local Hunts Post ran a successful 'Ditch the Fines' campaign which, after only a month, led the insurer and its managing agent to pay CEL £30,000 to reimburse the drivers. A new regime with better signs and longer waiting times has been promised.

Ofgem simplifies tariff mayhem

It's good that Ofgem, the UK's energy regulator, has moved to limit the bewildering range of tariffs offered to consumers by suppliers, which has caused widespread confusion. They must now offer no more than four tariffs, of which one must be a standard variable-rate deal. Ofgem has banned two-tier tariffs that levy high charges for an initial number of units. Instead there must be a single unit rate and a daily standing charge. In April, suppliers will have to tell customers which of their tariffs is the cheapest.

At present, the cheapest tariffs are available from smaller suppliers like First Utility and Ovo as they do not have to pay the same social and green taxes as their big rivals. Comparison sites will continue to offer discounts even though suppliers have been banned from offering cashback deals direct because they make comparisons too complex.

Print so small it's not so smart

SmartWater Technology, a British company that sells crime-deterrent marking technology, has been trying to raise its own capital by advertising investment bonds that promise a return of 7.5% a year. But the small print 'important information' section in its Sunday Times advert (24 November) was so tiny as to be virtually illegible. This is a bit ironic as SmartWater technology is all about making things clear by helping identify criminals. The liquid products leave a trace on skin and clothing that's unique to the place invaded - it's like postcoding in a bottle. The trace emits a ghostly green glow under ultraviolet light.

SMARTWATER
THE GREAT BRITAIN COMPANY

EARN 7.5% INTEREST PER ANNUM

SmartWater Technology was founded with a simple vision to create a powerful deterrent to crime for use by householders and businesses alike. Over the past 20 years our forensic technology has protected many communities from the threat of crime and aided hundreds of criminal convictions.

You can now be a part of one of Britain's entrepreneurial success stories by investing in our Bond and, at 7.5%, you will benefit from a higher interest rate than you will find in UK high street banks.

The SmartWater Technology Bond will allow us to grow further and faster, protect even more communities from criminal activity, and create new jobs. We have a bright future and, by investing in our Bond, we would like you to share in our success.

Apply:
www.smartwaterbond.com

Offer closes 16th December 2013

Enquiries: bonds@smartwater.com or 0121 985 1131 (Mon to 5pm weekdays)

Aided by a magnifier, readers can make out that the advert's 'important

Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits

information' is all about making sure they understand the risks of investing in an unsecured bond whose value they could lose if the company goes bust. The roughly 5-point type in the advert (shown on the previous page, size reduced) is reversed out of dark blue and typeset over a six-inch line length, meaning there are some 150 characters and spaces to the line. Most experts recommend about 50-80 characters and spaces for good legibility. The headline offering a 7.5% return is in huge lettering.

Pundits' verbal own goals

December included a bad weekend for those with an ear for the spoken word, as soccer commentators gave us:

- 'The auspices weren't good at West Ham' – read 'auguries'
- 'He is playing within his own genre' – which may have been possible had the late philosopher Albert Camus still been putting on the keeper's jersey for Racing Universitaire Algerios, and
- 'He immediately behorts his defence' – probably conflating 'berates' and 'exhorts'.

Strigine and lapidary

Quentin Letts slipped a rare bird of a word into his Daily Mail parliamentary sketch recently, describing The Guardian's editor Alan Rusbridger as 'a pukka bookworm with a ruffled hairdo and strigine gaze'. Neither the New Oxford nor the Shorter Oxford includes 'strigine', which online dictionaries say relates to the Strigidae or owl family, so means owl-like. Apparently it should be pronounced as if an Australian cricketer were saying 'Stray Jane'.

A colleague of John Cole, the BBC's political reporter who died recently, wrote in The Times of Cole's disgust at being told by an editor on the Nine O'Clock News that he should omit 'lapidary' from his script because no-one would understand it. Cole harrumphed that this was the worst kind of dumbing down. His colleagues pretended to agree but as soon as Cole left the room they rushed to consult a dictionary. Lapidary means 'engraved on or suitable for engraving on stones, therefore elegant and concise'. It also means concerned with stones, engraving etc, so a stonecutter is known as a lapidary.

All this trouble with the meaning of words reminds us of a cartoon where Trendy Dad, seeing his son engrossed in a book called Thesaurus, says: 'You know, son, that's just great. When I was your age I was interested in dinosaurs too.'

Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillage

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits



All-purpose 'appropriate' fails suitability test

Whenever something dodgy needs to be sweetened with a coating of fudge, the words 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' come in very useful.

The security firm G4S – gold medallists at failing to supply enough staff for the London Olympics – said its £24.1m bill to the Ministry of Justice for tagging offenders who were actually untaggable, as they were in jail or dead, was not dishonest or criminal, merely 'not appropriate'.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25001800>

'Inappropriate' is also a non-judgmental softener among social workers and teachers faced with bad, disruptive or antisocial behaviour; and it's a widespread flak deflector in public-relations work.

One of the finest examples came from the Western Isles Council in 2010 after a high school on Stornoway erected a large metal cage with a door and bolt to contain an 18-year-old autistic boy who had to be kept apart from other children. His parents had raised £500 towards what they thought would be specialized play equipment and decking for their son to use. Instead, the Nicolson Institute created what looked like an enclosure for wild beasts. The council apologized for the high school's 'entirely inappropriate' conduct. (The Times, 2 November 2010)

Appropriate: suitable, good, correct, proper, right or (more old fashioned) fitting, meet, condign.

Inappropriate: unsuitable, bad, wrong, poor, or, in the example above, shockingly insensitive.

Other stories from our website – just click on the headline:

Jargon comes up trumps for the kids

Pinged pong hits net not fan

How we helped people buy less Xmas tat

Teachers (some of them) can't write – head

Decoding cryptic bank-speak

Enlarged obesity predictions could mean bigger sugar warnings

Straight talk expected (reports Eileen Dover)

Sentence length halved and for once it's not good

Lenders invoke small print to big up their rates

My true love sent to me... nine parking signs

Pikestaff 66
January 2014

In this issue:

No business writing if
business writing is this
bad

When it's Tuesday, your
time's up

Indie a slave to its
preconceptions

Serial killer's plain
language shocks
courtroom

Jargon of the week:
personalized sauce
option

Local-council parking
rip-offs

BBC's consumer
champion role
compromised by payout
scandal

Ethnic questions on
official forms: who needs
'em?

Insurer returns £30,000
after private-parking
pillaging

Ofgem simplifies tariff
mayhem

Print so small it's not so
smart

Pundits' verbal own goals

Strigine and lapidary

All-purpose 'appropriate'
fails suitability test

Other stories from our
website

Links and credits

Facebook

Pikestaff has its own page on Facebook. Visit facebook.com/PikestaffNews

Back issues

You can see back issues of Pikestaff on our website, along with an index showing each month's content.

Spread the word and send us your news

We're happy for you to use any of our articles to promote plain language, provided you acknowledge Pikestaff as the source. And please feel free to forward Pikestaff to friends, colleagues, anybody. We'd also be pleased to receive plain-language-related news, snippets and details of forthcoming events from anywhere in the world.

Rolling the credits

Pikestaff is published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd).
mail@clearest.co.uk Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177