

# pkestaff



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June 2014

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## European auditors go for plain language

The European Court of Auditors hosted a seminar in Luxembourg in May on 'Plain language and the ECA', arranged by Alex Brenninkmeijer, a Member of the Court. He is a former ombudsman in The Netherlands and the event marked his country's Liberation Day. Around 150 auditors and translators were present.

The ECA acts as the EU's external auditor, scrutinizing spending on every aspect of its work. In 2013, the auditors spent more than 6,000 person-days in on-the-spot auditing. They mainly produce written reports and opinions. Before the web came along, only a handful of EU insiders and the press had easy access to the material. Now, it's all publicly available through the [ECA website](#). So it needs to be clear and attractively designed if the ECA is not to be embarrassed.

Martin Cutts of Plain Language Commission (pictured) gave the seminar's keynote speech on ways of clarifying ECA documents and took part in a round-table discussion with other speakers. The ECA journal for June 2014 ([download here](#)) summarizes all the contributions.



Cutts praised the many good features of the Court's recent special report on transport, EN2014/01. These include much-improved layout and design of the contents page, glossary, text pages and charts.



The report begins with a brisk summary of its main points. This helps busy readers to get the gist without having to read the fine detail.

Cutts said the report would pass his Eurostar test, which was, 'If an ECA booklet were lying open on a Eurostar seat, would anything catch your eye and persuade you to read it?' So an important part of the test was visual appeal – even the best-written report is likely to be ignored unless the design is good.



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There was discussion about the ECA's target audience. Was it every adult in the EU, because their taxes pay for the auditors' work; or members of the European parliament, whose levels of literacy and concentration may be quite varied; or interested members of the public who want to find out what the ECA is up to?

Cutts argued that the intended audience should be the latter. He showed by using readability-test statistics that some of the ECA's writing was probably at too high a level to meet this need. He also said authors should always put themselves in the reader's shoes. An ECA report had said:

'The estimated error rate for spending from the EU budget as a whole increased again in 2012 from 3.9% to 4.8%. The estimated error rate has increased every year from 2009, after having fallen in the three previous years.'

On the face of it, this was in clear English but EU outsiders would not know what 'error rate' meant as it was not defined in the report; nor would they know whether such a rise was worrying. Similarly, a long report about 'cohesion' never said what cohesion was. (To fluent eurospeakers, Cohesion – usually with a capital C – refers to efforts to reduce the disparity in economic development between EU regions.) So it was important to spell out the 'so what?' of ECA statements.

Cutts said question headings could be helpful, but when a question like: 'Did the Commission make proper use of the information provided by national audit authorities for its own assurance and when granting Article 73 status to OPs?' went unanswered, readers would justifiably feel annoyed.

He mentioned that some ECA authors overused the passive voice and omitted doers from their sentences, so readers were unsure who was taking the actions described. This and high-level vocabulary tended to produce foggy writing.

## Vexatious vocab in feline flap-fitting

Fitting a cat flap to his door – and not just any old cat flap but the tongue-twisting SureFlap Microchip Cat Flap – our colleague James Fisher-Martins of Português Claro needed to, er, paw for thought at an unusual word in the product instructions: 'Importantly, please check whether there is metal in the substrate that the flap is to be fitted into.'

Stopping only to do the said check 'importantly', as required by the grammar – ie, in full ceremonial DIY dress – he thought it best to peruse a dictionary lest 'substrate' had some special technical meaning other than 'door' or 'thing'. Well it doesn't, at least not in the world of feline flappery. The New Oxford gives merely 'a substance or layer which underlies something, or on which some process occurs'.

So that's a door or thing, then.

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## Vine entwined in Freudian slip

11 May was not the ideal time for the Sunday Telegraph to eulogize the sterling work of Richard Scudamore in helping create the stream of riches that is English soccer's Premier League, using a headline saying 'Scudamore in a league of his own' and text like 'Whoever follows Scudamore at 30 Gloucester Place will have a hard act to follow.'

For on that same morning, readers of the Sunday Mirror were tucking in to a juicy breakfast of Scudamore's emails about 'big-titted broads' and 'female irrationality', all leaked in a wholly selfless and public-spirited way by his temporary PA, Rani Abraham.

'Foul!' cried some, as Scudamore had meant his unpleasant musings to stay private (as you would) despite using office equipment to send them and giving Ms Abraham access to his account. Abraham is now suing the league for sex discrimination, and claims to have suffered anxiety and depression as a result of reading the emails. (What a fragile little flower.) Anyway, Scudamore seems certain to keep his job, not least because the women he works with get on well with him.

As the row simmered on, Radio 2's Jeremy Vine Show weighed in with a debate between the Guardian's Bea Campbell ('disgraceful conduct – sack him') and the Daily Telegraph's Allison Pearson ('blokey emails – give him a break'). As Vine closed the discussion, sounding relieved to have got through to the end without some ghastly sexist faux pas or double entendre, sharp-eared listeners heard him burble: 'And my thanks to Bea Campbell and Allison Penis.'

## Rafts of jargon deliver overarching frameworks and challenges, going forwards

**In a newspaper article**, Jemima Lewis writes of the heap of jargon-filled drivel she had to read from teachers, catering companies, dieticians, charities, union reps and academic researchers when helping her husband compile a report for the Government on school food.

*'About 7 per cent of it could be classed as mild gibberish: you could understand the gist, but the specifics remained vague. Jargon and important-sounding clichés were often used to disguise the absence of any useful ideas. "Rafts of measures" were always required. There was much talk of "driving pictures of excellence", as if one could load these mysterious pictures into the back of the car and motor them around the country.*

*'And every now and then we'd get sent something like this: "The Diffusion of Innovations Model provided an organising framework to present emergent themes. With the exception of triability (not relevant in the context of mandated guidelines/policies), the key*

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*attributes of the Diffusion of Innovations Model (relative advantage, compatibility and observability) provided a robust framework for understanding themes associated with implementation of mandated guidelines.”*

Lewis continues: ‘...like the courtiers of the naked emperor, the dietician [who sent it] wanted us to believe that she could see something there. Thus is the virus of gibberish spread – by well-meaning people too embarrassed to admit they can’t understand the incomprehensible.’

The National Health Service, like the education system, has its share of puffed-up writing. Here is NHS England’s director of patient safety weighing in with a 66-word sentence about ‘never events’ – ie, events that should never be allowed to happen:

*‘In order to achieve our overarching goal to eradicate never events, we will need to engage and collaborate with organisations and bodies across the healthcare spectrum including patient groups, trusts, royal colleges, specialist societies, and regulators, to not only ensure the initiatives we develop are accessible and achievable, but also that they can be used as standard practice across NHS peri-operative care, education, training and regulation.’*

Graduates the world over seem to be taught to write like this, and emerge from their student days fearful of being thought stupid if they say only one simple thing per sentence. In the last few months Plain Language Commission’s editors have been working on several lengthy NHS consultation documents intended to inform the public about changes in local services. A few were written in the heavy academic style lampooned by Lewis. One 12,000-word monster was impossible for us to rewrite in normal English because it lacked any discernible meaning. Many of the sentences were in the impersonal passive (eg, ‘the ward will be closed’) and the lack of doers made them hard to decode. Buzzwords proliferated, with ‘overarching’, ‘challenges’ and ‘deliverables’ being particular favourites. Nothing was bought; everything was procured. Services were no longer provided; but targets were delivered on. And every effort was being set in train to ensure that patient management outcomes would not be impacted by changing agendas.

We politely urged the authors to at least write a clear summary of their most important points, then readers could ignore the detail if they had other things to do with their time.

We were pleased to edit and give the Clear English Standard to one NHS document that was less of a struggle. This was the 72-page booklet ‘Improving specialist cancer and cardiovascular services in north and east London’, issued last October. It



A good document we edited for the NHS

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explained the clinician-led reasoning behind plans to combine existing services and create a few centres of excellence where the best treatment would be available.



This kind of editing task, often done to a sharp deadline, always involves some compromise between making the text accurate and readable for a wide audience and ensuring it remains technically correct. You can judge for yourself how far we succeeded by [downloading the booklet here](#).

Largely derived from the booklet was a separate summary, which you can [download here](#).

## Staff head for the exits as way-out word makes an entrance

Those unusual nouns 'ingress' (entry) and 'egress' (exit) occasionally appear in reports by building surveyors, who write things like 'wet rot and fruiting bodies have arisen following water ingress'. They are less often seen, though, in the humble office email, so there was some sniggering when this message went the rounds at a company swish enough to have both an atrium and an executive director:

*'Acoustic testing is to be carried out in the executive director's office area on Thursday 10 April from 5pm. Please may we ask that you egress the building through alternative exits, other than through the atrium while the testing is concluded.'*

Assuming people know what 'acoustic testing' means (do they?), presumably the second sentence is meant to say: 'During the testing, please do not use the atrium exits to leave the building.'

But how will staff know that 'testing is concluded'? Perhaps they'll get another enlightening email.

## Law drafters shocked that readers find their work unclear

The drafters of UK law say they are flabbergasted after a research study found that people visiting the [legislation website](#) regard their handiwork as hard to understand.

Writing in *The Loophole* ([May 2014, pages 25–49](#), published by the Commonwealth Association of Legislative Counsel), deputy parliamentary counsel Alison Bertlin said: 'It would be difficult to overstate the profound sense of

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realisation with which drafters observing the user testing sessions came to recognise the difficulties that ordinary readers have in reading ordinary legislation.'

Bertlin claimed her office (the OPC) had used plain-language techniques for many years to make laws clearer than they used to be. The National Archives, which looks after the legislation website, funded the latest study. It comprised an online survey and face-to-face user testing, aiming to find out whether some kinds of drafting techniques and styles are better understood than others.

Bertlin reports the findings in great detail and her candid article is recommended reading for anyone interested in the clarity and quality of statute law. She says:

*'The dominant, and unexpected, finding was the striking level of difficulty that users of legislation have in making sense of it. This greatly outweighed any observations about how one drafting style compared with another. Readers seem to have very little grasp of how legislation is structured and organised. Their "mental model" of it is simply not very good. This was true not just for members of the public but for participants of all types, including some of the lawyers. The sessions certainly challenged a drafter's assumptions about the audience for legislation.*

*'For example-*

- *there was very little understanding of what it meant for a provision to have been enacted but not be in force, or of what the term "commencement" meant;*
- *a typical section introducing a schedule - "Schedule 2 makes provision about ....." - left more than one reader completely stumped; modern United Kingdom legislation would not use the ...[underlined] words in the expression "Schedule 2 to this Act", but perhaps the desire to streamline has in this instance produced an unexpected outcome;*
- *even straightforward cross-references to "subsection (2)" or "paragraph 3" were a problem, not so much because readers had to interrupt the flow of their reading, as because they simply did not know what a subsection or paragraph was, so did not know what was being referred to;*
- *terms like "prescribed", meaning "prescribed by regulations", perplexed and frustrated most readers, some of whom were unsure what regulations were and did not know where to look for them;*
- *when looking at legislation online, readers tend to click straight through from the table of contents to the provision that appears from its title to be of interest, and may well not look at the surrounding provisions that are needed to understand it properly - and which the drafter may assume that they will have read.'*

Bertlin continues: 'The user testing was intended to compare drafting styles, but what emerged from it was that the more pressing need is to help readers to "find their feet" when reading legislation.'

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## Homophonics corner

With the same sound but different spelling, homophones and their linguistic relatives can be a rich source of fun for wordsmiths, from Frank Muir's mock surprise at a restaurant menu's 'four quennelles', to Ronnie Barker's 'four candles/fork handles' sketch, to the racehorse trainer who tried to register a nag with the British Horseracing Authority as 'Norfolk and Chance'. Sadly, there was nothing so amusing in the Daily Telegraph obituary of pin-up model and photographer Bunny Yeager, but its double heterographic error should not go unremarked:

- *'Bunny gave [Bettie Page] a wholesome makeover and the pair made pop culture history in 1955 when men across America peaked into the Christmas issue of Playboy...'*
- *'her buxom young women peaked out from behind ferns, kicked up their heels on sofas and covered their dignity with soap suds.'*

So that would be 'peeked' in both cases. Peaked/peeked/piqued is that rare thing, a triple homophone.

## Private parking scandal: an update

We've reported several times on the UK's private-parking scandal, where companies are chasing drivers for hundreds of millions of pounds in parking 'charges' that look like penalties, which are not normally allowed in consumer contracts. In April, a judge heard a case on whether a private-parking firm could extract money from drivers who broke its rules. The firm has been raising as many as 1,000 summonses a week.

## Ward's words

Ray Ward (Brain of Britain 2012) tests you with this quizzicality:

**Why is a furniture van (and, often, any large van) called a panttechnicon?**

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## Rolling the credits

Pikestaff is published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd).  
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### Answer to quiz:

Clearly, 'pan' means 'all', so the word must mean something like 'carries all'? Not so. 'Pantehnicon' means 'all the arts', and was the name of a mid-19th-century arts-and-crafts bazaar in London. Later it became a furniture storehouse and kept the name. Then 'pantehnicon van' came to be used for a vehicle for carrying furniture, and eventually 'van' was dropped.