

pkestaff



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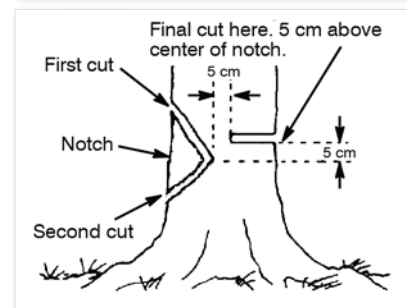
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Logging an excellent chainsaw manual

Avid Pikestaff readers will know we complain about useless manuals for consumer products, and in 2009 we vented our spleen on baffling and dangerous instructions for chainsaws. (To see our article 'Instructions for consumer products – as easy as 1-2-3?', [email us for a copy if it's not shown under 'Publications > Articles' on our website.](#))

Well, something good has happened since then. The chainsaw maker McCulloch (part of Husqvarna), has produced a truly excellent instruction booklet. Written in a language that is recognizably English rather than a bad translation of Icelandic, it uses short sentences and short paragraphs and includes more than 50 well-labelled diagrams. It also explains clearly for DIY users a range of tree-felling and log-cutting techniques.

The booklet is so clear that most of its content could apply without alteration to other manufacturers' chainsaws. To download this marvel – and why don't other manufacturers follow suit? – [click here](#) or visit their [website](#).



Defining plain language

In Pikestaff 65 we reported on efforts by the International Plain Language Working Group to come up with a single-sentence definition or description of a plain-language communication. Their idea was to unify the many attempts at a definition put forward in the last 30 years. The sentence they suggested aimed to cover wording, structure, purpose, usability and design (ie, layout).

A near-final draft was announced at the Plain Language InterNational Association (PLAIN) conference held in Vancouver in October 2013:

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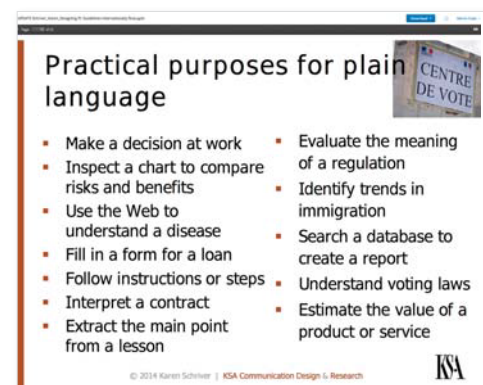
'A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.'

Pikestaff 65 said the sentence ended on a dud note, and seemingly discussions have continued. We liked a question-and-answer variation suggested by Karen Schriver of KSA Communication Design & Research at the IC Clear/Clarity conference in November 2014. Modifying it further to create a self-contained sentence would give something like this:

'A communication is in plain language if its writing and design are so clear that people can easily:

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- use what they find for practical purposes.'

Schriver offers the slide on the right to explain 'practical purposes'. Comments, please!



Race to the bottom wipes out euphemisms

The company that holds a royal warrant to supply the Queen with disposable tissues has begun to write very clearly indeed about its toilet paper. Out go euphemisms, and in come bold statements about how the nation should wipe itself clean after visiting the thunderbox. Kimberley-Clark Ltd's packaging for Andrex has this to say:

'Andrex has been expertly cleaning Britain's bottoms for 72 years, so rather than avoiding the subject we're starting the discussion. We're going to talk about clean bottoms more openly and how our products help you feel clean and confident.'

Perhaps Andrex will sign up Lord Grade to front its openness campaign. The former BBC chairman recently described the typical non-executive company director as 'a bit like the bidet in your bathroom: nobody is quite sure what they are for, but they add a touch of class'.





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Overhaul for UK law explanatory notes

The explanatory notes that accompany UK statutes are sometimes as turgid and impenetrable as the language of the law itself, but the Good Law Project – an initiative of the parliamentary counsel's office – wants to change that. The project has run a consultation on a new style and format for the notes, and is now analysing the results. You can see the suggested approach, which features plenty of headings and short paragraphs, in PDF and html [here](#).



Private parking signs: sometimes so bad they're criminal

As we've reported before, about two million drivers are penalized at private-parking sites around the country every year, often to the tune of £70–100 a time. They fall foul of the petty rules dreamt up by a largely unregulated industry whose main aim is to inflict penalties and then threaten non-payers with courts and bailiffs. It's become an unsavoury fact of British life.

But here's a strange thing. At some – perhaps most – of the 20,000+ sites, the signs that supposedly set out the parking terms and conditions have been erected illegally. They lack the advertising permission they need from the local council. This is a criminal offence from the moment they're put up. Just how widespread this is, we don't yet know. But at one of the most controversial sites, the Queen's Hospital, Burton, Staffordshire, the local council has now written to the hospital trust to explain that a criminal offence has been committed.

You can read our article about the ambiguous and unclear Queen's Hospital signs, 'ParkingEye's unclear signs plague hospital patients and visitors', [here](#).

You'll see from the council's letter ([download here](#)) that the trust (or ParkingEye, if they are responsible for the signs) has 14 days to apply for the permission it needs. How lucky they are to get a 14-day warning to put right a criminal offence, while thousands of drivers get an immediate £70 penalty notice through the post for a supposed breach of contract! We hear that ParkingEye has just begged the council for another 14-day grace period.

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We've asked the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency how it can justify selling drivers' data to ParkingEye, which enables them to be chased for penalties, when the Queen's Hospital signs were put up unlawfully. How can there be a properly formed contract when erection of the signs was a criminal offence?

Smiley face of customer care

So you send a sternly worded complaint to your local NHS hospital trust about a serious failure in patient care, and you get back an email signed like this:

Kind regards

#hello my name is...

Josephine Bloggs

Customer Services

Maybe this is meant to seem friendly but, depending on the seriousness of the complaint – eg, 'your stupidity and incompetence seriously harmed my newborn child and left my wife in a wheelchair' – could easily look like trivializing the problem. East Cheshire NHS Trust's customer services team uses this kind of sign-off.

It's good that public services are trying to make themselves seem approachable and informal, but perhaps they can go too far.

Impact – subeditor's hate-word aims for world domination

Like Japanese knotweed, the dreaded noun-verb 'impact' continues to spread. Here are two examples from a school newsletter:

- 'The Christian character and values of the school are lived out in the care and love given to all children and have a positive impact on their academic development and well-being.'

Here, the authors have realized that 'impact' needs help because an impact can be

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bad or good. So they've wheeled out 'positive' in support. They could have used 'improve' or 'boost' to replace 'have a positive impact on'.

- 'Collective worship and religious education impact on children's spiritual and moral development and encourage an understanding of prayer.'

The authors have forgotten that 'impact on' is double edged, as the text can be read as meaning that collective worship and RE damage children's development. Presumably they meant to say 'improve' or 'boost' (again).

'Impact' is often used as a verb to mean 'affect', eg 'A bout of flu seriously impacted his prospects at the interview.' The suspicion lingers that many authors use 'impact' like this because they're not sure whether the verb should be 'affect' or 'effect'.

Loose chippings from the Tower of Babel

► **Danone constipated by Activia jargon** No-one can escape the adverts for Activia, a kind of yoghurt slurp interminably plugged by Danone, the US-based megacorp that claims it's 'the only probiotic yogurt product made with our exclusive probiotic culture, *bifidus regularis*'. (As it would be, being so exclusive an' all.) If corporate jargon is not to your taste, though, the adverts could be a feast too far. Activia, they say, causes 'acceleration of intestinal tract transit'. This is presumably A Good Thing, but what are people meant to understand by it? That all those wonderful *bifidus* bacteria will keep them oh-so regularis? We asked Danone's representatives on Earth, the global PR firm Burson-Marsteller, to get to the bottom of it for us. But in a bad case of corporate constipation, all they could produce was along the lines of 'we've asked Danone and we'll let you know'. The rest, so far, has been silence.

► **Crunch day looms in private parking war** There's been a welter of mass-media coverage about the predatory tactics of the largely unregulated private parking companies, an occasional theme of Pikestaff and news items here. The court of appeal has recently heard the case of ParkingEye v Beavis, and a judgment is expected in the next few weeks. It may help decide whether parking companies can continue to impose the level of charge they do for breach of their rules. Under contract law the amount is supposed to represent no more than their genuine loss, and it's often hard to see how this amounts to the usual charge, £70-100. We'll put details of the eventual judgment on our website.

► **Topping idea: don't rely on the spellchecker** Takeaway menu leaflets for Super Pizza distributed throughout Southend-on-Sea, Essex included among possible toppings for a vegetarian pizza the tasty option 'Aborigines'. Staff at Super Pizza HQ explained the word was supposed to be aubergines.

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► **Global look-out – enhanced language around** Investors in the Global Bond Fund (no less) offered by Threadneedle Investment Funds have just learned from the company's Short Form Report and Accounts 2014 that there have been some changes to the fund's prospectus. Bit of a yawn, but they read on regardless to discover that one of these changes is: 'Enhanced language around use of derivatives for Efficient Portfolio Management.' Even if the readers know what derivatives are, they must surely wonder what 'enhanced language around' is supposed to mean. Maybe the folk at Threadneedle think old-style unenhanced language just doesn't cut it any more for a fund with such a swanky name. Or maybe they think investors dim enough to be impressed by enhanced language won't notice if the fund tanks.

► **Puffed-up language** is a theme in *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy* by Richard Rumelt, who has worked on projects for NASA, Apple and the US Army. He says: 'Bad strategy is not simply the absence of good strategy. It grows out of misconceptions and leadership dysfunctions. Once you develop the ability to detect bad strategy, you will dramatically improve your effectiveness at judging, influencing, and creating strategy. To detect bad strategy, look for one or more of its four major hallmarks: Fluff, failure to face the challenge, mistaking goals for strategy, bad strategic objectives.' He goes on to describe fluff as '... gibberish masquerading as strategic concepts or arguments. It uses "Sunday" words (words that are inflated and unnecessarily abstruse) and apparently esoteric concepts to create the illusion of high-level thinking.' Rumelt quotes a major retail bank's internal strategy memorandum: 'Our fundamental strategy is one of customer-centric intermediation.' He translates this as: 'Our bank's fundamental strategy is being a bank.'

Commons Speaker floats the end of 'honourable' but jargonauts fight back

The impersonal way MPs traditionally address each other in the (UK) House of Commons could change if an idea floated by the Speaker, John Bercow, is adopted. At present, members use variations on the subtle themes of 'honourable gentleman', 'honourable lady', 'honourable member for Erewton', 'my honourable friend' and 'the right honourable lady'; and only the Speaker may refer to an MP by name. Bercow says Parliament should review whether it should move towards a more 'modern system'.

We think it should: the current approach is tedious, timewasting and confusing to outsiders. (The House of Lords uses similar rhubarb, with peers referring to each other as 'my noble lord', 'the noble lady' etc.)

MPs do sometimes object to other people's jargon, eg the nonsense uttered before them by Jon Day, an official who chairs the Joint Intelligence Committee. He declared: 'Each department has its own horizon-scanning policy development

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machinery. If I was to identify the first risk, it is that this work is stove-piped.' Alluding to the ordure of a male farm animal, Greg Mulholland, a Liberal Democrat MP, said he could think of an eight-letter word to describe such language.

Meanwhile, in a statement about blankets and tents for displaced people in Iraq, Philip Hammond, the Foreign Secretary, told MPs he was busy 'winterising refugee accommodation'.

(Source: Daily Telegraph, 21 Nov and 13 Dec 2014, Daily Mail 17 Oct 2014)

Plain-language conference presentations are now available

About 180 people attended the Learning to be Clear conference at Antwerp and Brussels in November, arranged by Clarity (the body of – mainly – lawyers who campaign for clear language in the law) and IC Clear (clever title, huh?, which enables people to become certified as clear communicators).

[Click here](#) for the link to the conference presentations, a treasure trove of current thinking on plain language and related topics. These include talks by Emily O'Reilly (European Ombudsman), Karine Nicolay (IC Clear), Neil James, Ginny Redish, Karen Schriver, Hayley Rogers (UK parliamentary counsel), Daphne Perry and Annetta Cheek.

Martin Cutts of Plain Language Commission gave a paper on one of his many consumerist obsessions. 'Foxed and fined: how unclear contractual parking signs bamboozle motorists' examines the signs at Queen's Hospital, Burton, Staffs and finds them completely useless (except at generating penalty income for ParkingEye, one of the UK's biggest parking companies). His paper is included in the presentation list you can access via the link above. Around 45 people came to his talk and underwent its 'little parking quiz' in which they had to put themselves in the motorists' shoes and figure out how much money they should pay for parking. Most of the brain-boxes present, who included top-notch lawyers and parliamentary drafters, failed to get any or all of the correct answers. But perhaps that's because the signs are so multiply ambiguous there aren't really any correct answers. This means they'd each pick up a £70 parking penalty. As Italian graffiti used to say (and perhaps still do/does), 'Lotta continua' – the struggle goes on.

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Falling asleep on the job

A fine ambiguity appeared in The Times about the declining fertility of women in Japan, where small thin-walled apartments offer few opportunities for privacy and the average number of children born to each woman is 1.43. As the 'replacement rate' is 2.1, this is quite a crisis:

'Doctors and sociologists have offered a variety of explanations. One is the lifestyle of many urban Japanese men, who leave home early, return home late after a long commute, and spend weekends sleeping or socialising with work colleagues.' (20 Jan)

Perhaps we are meant to understand this as meaning that Japanese blokes spend their weekends sleeping, not that they spend them sleeping with colleagues. Otherwise the birth rate would be ticking over just fine.

The article yields the further fascinating facts that after their wives give birth, 16% of husbands stop having sex (with their wives, presumably), and that the phenomenon of de-sexed men has spawned such book titles as 'The Men Who Wear Bras and the Women Who Don't' and 'Herbivorous Girly Men Are Changing Japan'.

Some turn away from apostrophes

Another torrid time for that beleaguered outpost of literary strife, the apostrophe. First on the attack came the Legal Ombudsman, which contacted all its suppliers to say:

I am writing to advise you that the Legal Ombudsman has changed it's address with immediate effect.

So that would be its, known to all third-formers as the possessive form of it.

And then came Strata Solicitors Ltd, proud claim-handlers for the Royal Mail Group, which thinks the plural of 'client' needs an apostrophe as follows:

We refer to the above and write as the appointed claim handlers for our above named client's. In regards to the circumstances of the incident involving the Royal Mail driver hitting the wall we can advise you that liability is admitted by our client's.

When even lawyers so badly misuse the errant tadpole, can it survive much longer?

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Rolling the credits

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