

Talking turkey at Tesco: chewing the fat about a retail notice

By Sarah Carr, associate, [Plain Language Commission](#), February 2008

Background

In [Pikestaff 11](#) (December 2007), we announced a Christmas competition: to rewrite a short seasonal text, a notice spotted in Tesco:

Seasonal Gift Refund Policy Amendment

Any goods purchased as gifts from the 1st of November until 24th December 2007 can be returned up until the 31st January. Our policy of the 28 days period will be re-applied on all goods purchased after 24th December 2007. Your statutory rights are not affected

We received 16 entries, and announced the winner in [Pikestaff 12](#) (January 2008) – lawyer Clive Wilson, of Corrs Chambers Westgarth, a law firm in Melbourne, Australia, who rewrote the text as follows:

A change to our Refund Policy

We usually give you 28 days after purchase to return goods. But if you need to return a gift bought between 1st November 2007 and 24th December 2007, you can return it up to the end of January 2008.

If you need to return goods bought after 24th December, the usual 28-day period applies.

None of this affects any rights you may have under the law. Merry Christmas!

This article

We had intended to analyse the original text and entrants' rewrites in *Pikestaff*, as our tip of the month. But the remarkable number of weaknesses in the notice's 51 words meant there wasn't space to do this in full. So this article:

- examines the original text
- analyses how the winner and others tackled it.

We use our PROCESS METHOD as a framework for this.

The PROCESS METHOD

Writing clearly isn't just about using clear language; other factors are important too. We reflect this in our PROCESS METHOD – a mnemonic (memory aid) for the initials of the 5 steps:

- **Purpose** – why you’re writing and what you want the letter or email to achieve.
- **Content** – what you have to say: your messages and ideas (*Pikestaff 12’s* tip of the month looked at this).
- **Structure** – how you organize the content.
- **Style** – how you express yourself in language (words and sentences).
- **Revision of everything** – checking all your writing to make sure its purpose, content, structure and style work together to make your message clear.

Purpose

Most, if not all, public documents need a clearly stated purpose. Yet the purpose of this notice isn’t immediately obvious. Displayed at tills and customer-service points in Tesco stores, the notice sought to explain to customers the change in refund policy for the Christmas period. To what extent did its content, structure and style get the message across?

Content

There are several weaknesses in the content of the original Tesco notice:

- As well as being unidiomatic, *Our policy of the 28 days period* gives incomplete information. The reader may deduce that this refers to the usual policy of having 28 days to return goods, but the words don’t actually say this.
- The notice doesn’t say whether you need a receipt to return the *goods purchased as gifts*. Since receivers (as well as buyers) of gifts could return them, they may not have a receipt (even buyers could have lost it). Based on usual shop practice, we expect that in this case you could still return the goods, but only for an exchange not a refund.
- The notice doesn’t exclude any types of product. So you could buy a bag of carrots on 1 November, wait for them to fester, then return them on 31 January (along with any other Tesco food that’d gone mouldy in your fridge). You could say you didn’t like these gifts you’d been given at Christmas for your donkey, and ask for your money back – or at least some nice fresh groceries to replace them.
- The notice doesn’t say that the goods should be unused and unopened. So (were you so inclined) you or your donkey could have a nibble at the festering carrots first.

Many competition entrants added a brief explanation of *Our policy of the 28 days period*, including the winner: *We usually give you 28 days after purchase to return goods*. Others went further and changed the facts, for example almost half specified that the policy applied to buyers or receivers (not both), and another added information about having a receipt.

In our editing work, we try not to change the basic meaning of the text, though in most editing there are likely to be some shifts in meaning or emphasis – exact equivalence is hard to achieve using different words and sentence structures. If a point seems to be missing or illogical, we won't add to or change the facts without being absolutely sure – which usually means checking with the customer. We'll normally do this by adding a comment about our concern.

Structure

The Tesco notice is short enough not to need any 'navigational aids' – things like page numbers, a contents list, a hierarchy of headings, headers and footers – to help readers find their way around the text. But a clear heading helps tell people what the notice is about, and encourages them to read it.

Seasonal Gift Refund Policy Amendment isn't a clear heading, and may deter people (those who aren't plain-language devotees, that is) from reading the notice at all. This is because it's a long noun string – or, more accurately, an adjective-noun string with one adjective then 4 nouns stacking up to modify a single word, *Amendment*. This pattern, which some writers think sounds impressive, is a common feature of officialese. It makes heavy work for readers, who must retain a pile of concepts in their brain before getting to the noun that is described. Readers probably won't retain them, and then they'll have to return to the start of the string to re-focus on these multiple modifiers.

Clear English tends to be language that people can understand easily at first reading. Recognizing this, Clive Wilson moved the main noun – *Amendment* (which he's rewritten as *Change*) – to the front of his title (*A change to our Refund Policy*). He's moved *Refund Policy* to its more logical position – after the main noun – and got rid of *Seasonal Gift*, as readers don't need to know about these concepts at this stage of reading; they're covered in the following text.

A quarter of the entrants didn't include a heading, but the rest recognized the benefits of doing so. Good heading suggestions included the following:

- Unwanted Christmas presents
- Change to our returns policy for Christmas gifts
- Returning unwanted Christmas gifts
- Extra time for refunds on Christmas presents
- Returning Christmas Gifts
- Need to return a gift bought from us?

This illustrates an important skill in plain-language editing: not just replacing long and unfamiliar words with short and familiar ones (as in one suggested title *Xmas Gift Refund Policy Change*), but looking at the underlying sense and being willing to rejig the sentence structure to express the point more clearly.

Let's look now at the structure of the text itself. The main paragraph of the notice isn't too long, but the information is in an illogical order. The heading has announced a change to the usual policy, but the reader must wait until the second sentence to find out what that is. The winner takes a more logical approach by starting with a clear statement of what the change is to: *We usually give you 28 days after purchase to return goods*. This lays a good foundation on which to build the next stage: an explanation of how things will be different over Christmas.

The winner also splits the information into 3 shorter paragraphs. Some people are taught at school that writing one-sentence paragraphs is wrong. But if you can say what you want in a single sentence that doesn't directly connect with the one before or afterwards, that's fine. In some contexts (such as a longer report), a lot of very short paragraphs might make for rather staccato reading, but in a short notice like this, which makes several distinct points, it works well. Several other entrants also chose to split the text into 2 or 3 paragraphs.

Style

There are some aspects of language where there's a clear right (and wrong), and many others where it's a matter of good (or bad) style. In the Tesco notice, the following things are just plain wrong:

- An apostrophe is missing from *28 days period* – so, even if you wanted to keep this rather stilted phrase, it should be *28 days' period* (or you could say *28-day period* without an apostrophe but with a hyphen)
- The full stop is missing from the end of the last sentence.

Other things are not in the clearest style:

- We've discussed the heading already, with its nasty noun string (that's a nasty string of nasty nouns).
- The dates are given in a remarkable range of formats: *the 1st of November* (the Xst of X), *24th December* (Xth X) *the 31st January* (the Xst X). Variety may be the spice of life, but in language, consistency (unlike clichés) is usually a virtue.
- Every verb is in the passive voice: *can be returned*, *will be re-applied* and *are not affected*. The active-voice equivalents (*[you] can return*, *[we] will re-apply* and *[this] does not affect*) would make easier and livelier reading.
- The notice is written entirely in the third person: Tesco doesn't refer to itself as *we*, nor to the reader as *you*, which would give a more human and direct tone. As shown above, using active-voice verbs would help remedy this.
- Some long words are used (for example *Amendment*, *purchased* and *statutory*) where shorter ones would do.
- Other words are redundant: in the text of the original notice, you could delete several words without changing the meaning at all: *Any goods purchased as gifts from ~~the~~ 1st ~~of~~ November until 24th December 2007 can be returned ~~up~~ until ~~the~~ 31st January. Our policy of the 28*

days period will be re-applied on all goods purchased after 24th December 2007. Your statutory rights are not affected

We don't set too much store by the results of readability formulas (see our tip of the month in *Pikestaff 9*, and Martin Cutts' article *Writing by numbers: are readability formulas to clarify what karaoke is to song?*); they ignore many important elements of clear language, as well as non-linguistic aspects of clear writing, such as tone, content, structure and design. But they can be useful, for example to compare different versions of the same document. They're normally used on samples of at least 100 words, but we thought it'd be interesting to calculate the results for the original and winning versions of the Tesco notices:

- Original notice – Flesch–Kincaid 10.5; SMOG 13.5.
- Winning rewrite - Flesch–Kincaid 7.1; SMOG 9.9.

These scores are American grade levels: add 5 for approximate British reading ages. SMOG scores tend to be higher than Flesch–Kincaid ones because SMOG requires a 100% comprehension level, Flesch–Kincaid only 75–85%.

This notice didn't appear to be available in a format that customers could take home (such as a leaflet, or printed on receipts). So it was important that they could understand it quickly and easily in the few minutes they were waiting to be served at the till or customer-service point. Although the concept of average reading age is problematic too (again, see *Writing by numbers*), the average UK adult has a reading age of perhaps 12–14. So the original notice, with a reading age of 15.5–18.5, would have been on the high side for many customers. At 12.1–14.9, the score of the winning version is much more in line with the average adult reading age.

The winner has achieved a clearer style using a range of techniques (most of which aren't measured by readability formulas), such as:

- making the format of dates consistent – and we liked how a few entrants also changed *24th December* to *Christmas Eve*, the familiar term for this date
- using active verbs: *[we] give*, *[you] need*, *[you] can return*, *[the period] applies*, *[none of this] affects* and *[you] may have*
- referring to Tesco as *we*, and the reader as *you* (creating a direct and friendly tone that is reinforced by ending the notice *Merry Christmas!*)
- changing some long words to shorter ones – *change* instead of *amendment*, *bought* for *purchased* and *under the law* rather than *statutory*
- using conjunctions (connecting words) to show the relationship in meaning between sentences. For example, *But* introduces the second sentence as having contrasting meaning, and *If* shows the reader that the coming sentence is a condition.

It's interesting that the winner's version, at 74 words, is 45% longer than the original. It's a popular fallacy that the plain-English version of a text

will always be shorter. Although this does often happen, it's also common for a clearer text to be longer than its confusing counterpart.

Revision of everything

The final step in our PROCESS METHOD is to check your writing to make sure its purpose, content, structure and style work together to make your message clear.

We can't know how the weaknesses in the original Tesco notice occurred. A few writers may think it politically expedient to be purposely unclear – hence the term 'doublespeak'. This is unlikely here, not least because the notice puts Tesco in a less (rather than more) favourable position, possibly facing a slump in profits if all *Pikestaff* readers decide to return their fusty foodstuffs. Far more likely is that the notice has so many flaws because the writer didn't revise it thoroughly, didn't understand what the policy was, didn't think the notice was worth spending much time on, or thought that if they could understand it, anyone else could too. The range of different interpretations produced by our contestants shows that the last of these possibilities was wildly over-optimistic.

Clearly, writing clearly is an underrated skill, even at the UK's biggest retailer.