

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 33,
December 2009



Christmas competition

In the Clearly clarified slot in the last two issues of *Pikestaff*, we've shown how we would clarify 2 of the 3 examples used by Martin Cutts as an editing exercise in his legal workshop at the recent PLAIN conference. This month, we bring you the third – and it's your turn to clarify!

As in previous years, we're offering a book prize to the reader who sends in the best edit of this piece of turgid text from a form produced by Birmingham City Council a few years ago:

In consideration of the District Council of Birmingham (hereinafter called the Council) making an award to the above named pupil, I, the undersigned, hereby undertake:

- (1) To repay to the Council on demand all sums paid by the Council under the said award, or such portion thereof as the Council may determine, if the pupil is withdrawn before the completion of the normal duration of the school course, without the prior consent of the Council.
- (2) If the pupil is withdrawn before the end of a term without the consent of the Council to pay to the Council an amount proportionate to the unexpired portion of that term.
- (3) In the event of the award being decreased retrospectively or of any overpayment being made, to repay to the Council the amount actually paid to and/or on behalf of the pupil in respect of the period covered by the revised award in excess of the amount receivable under the revised award or the amount so overpaid as the case may be.
- (4) To repay to the Council on the due date any payments which shall have been notified to me as being the parental payment due to me after an assessment of my income in accordance with the Committee's approved scales.

To enter, rewrite this in clear English and email the result to pikestaff@clearest.co.uk, with 'Competition' in the subject line (deadline 4pm, 5 January 2010). If you find any ambiguities, please follow our usual practice: try to work out what it means but if you can't be sure, add a note to the author. The winner will receive the new edition of Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (in bookshops at £7.99). Or if you've already rushed out and bought this (if not, why not?), you can choose Martin Manser's *Good Word Guide* instead. We'll announce the results in *Pikestaff 34*. By the way, there's a much easier competition for persistent readers who reach the end of this newsletter.

Linguistic link: parliamentary counsel's writing guides

The style in which British laws are written strongly influences the rest of legal writing in this country. Changes towards a clearer style of law writing have occurred since the mid-1990s when the Tax Law Rewrite project began. So this month's linguistic link is to 2 writing guides that shed more light on current thinking at the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel:

- *Recommendations And Policies On Drafting Matters* – at http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/190037/dtg_recommendations250708.pdf
- *Clarity in Drafting: Principles and Techniques* – at <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/190016/clarity%20paper%20with%20hyperlinks.pdf>.

Members of Clarity, the international association promoting plain legal language, have been invited to comment. If you have any comments on the writing guides, please email OPCenquiries@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk.

Bad Language: The Use and Abuse of Official Language

In *Pikestaff 29*, we announced that the Public Administration Select Committee had launched an inquiry into official language, exploring the use of language in government. The committee has now published this report, which draws the following conclusion:

Bad official language which results in tangible harm—such as preventing someone from receiving the benefits or services to which they are entitled—should be regarded as “maladministration”. People should feel able to complain about cases of confusing or misleading language, as they would for any other type of poor administration. Equally, government and public sector bodies need to respond properly to complaints.

You can read the full report at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmpubadm/17/17.pdf>.

Read and relax

Research at the University of Sussex has found reading to be the most relaxing pastime (reducing stress levels in the group of volunteers by 68%), more so than listening to music (at 61%), having a cup of tea or coffee (54%), and going for a walk (42%). And, as we'll see in our tip of the month, reading improves writing skills.

So if you've not yet finished (or started?) your Christmas shopping and are at a loss for ideas, why not head to the bookshop? Here are 3 ideas:

- *Forms That Work: Designing web forms for usability*, by Caroline Jarrett and Gerry Gaffney (Morgan Kaufmann, 2008). Caroline is a colleague of ours from Plain Language Association InterNational, and an expert in forms design. Illustrated with full-colour examples, the book guides readers on how to define requirements, write questions that users will understand and want to answer, and deal with instructions, progress indicators and errors. Read more at <http://www.formsthatwork.com/>.
- *How We'd Talk If The English Had Won in 1066*, by David Cowley (Authors Online Ltd, 2009). The book answers the question: what might English look like today, had there been no Norman Conquest? Learn the meanings of 'Overseas Ambighthouse', 'Thane wrayed of craftless wield' and 'Middliand at frith talks' in this book that's clear for non-specialists but includes the Old English sources in a reference section for those who are. See <http://www.authorsonline.co.uk/book/798/How+We%27d+Talk+If+The+English+Had+Won+in+1066/>.
- For the loved one for whom size matters (and for whom you'd spare no expense – this one's RRP is £250!), consider the Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary, edited by Christian Kay, Jane Roberts, Michael Samuels and Irené Wotherspoon (Oxford University Press). The world's biggest-ever thesaurus has just been published, 44 years after work on the book began. Funding problems dogged the project, and in 1978 the only copy of the manuscript was destroyed when the

office it was kept in burnt down. The thesaurus provides 800,000 meanings for 600,000 words organized into 23,000 categories. Read more at <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199208999.do?keyword=Historical+Thesaurus+of+the+Oxford+English+Dictionary%3A+With+additional&sortby=bestMatches>.

- And finally, here's one for the kids – The Puncs is a series of 7 books aimed at children aged 7 plus. Each character – for example, Colin Comma, Ethel Exclamation Mark and Henrietta Hyphen-Hyphen – introduces young people (7+) to a common punctuation sign using cartoon stories. Fergus Full Stop is number one Punc; his job is to keep the words and sentences and other Puncs in order. More at <http://www.thepuncs.com/index.html>.

[Source: *The Week*, 1 April 2009]

Tip of the month: try hard to follow the Bard!

Continuing our literary theme, this month we bring you William Shakespeare's 5 best copywriting tips, based on an article by Daphne Gray-Grant, a former newspaper editor and now publication coach:

1. On brevity

'Since brevity is the soul of wit and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief.'

'You cram these words into mine ears against the stomach of my sense.'

Being brief remains an important part of clear writing today.

2. On how difficult it is to find just the right word or phrase

'They have been at a great feast of languages, and stolen the scraps.'

It takes effort to find the best words – which are often the shortest, most concrete ones.

3. On the importance of reading

'My library was dukedom large enough.'

Gray-Grant advises: 'Read fiction; it will inspire you. Read outside your field of employment to gain breadth. Read essays and other forms of persuasive writing. While Will kept up with Christopher Marlowe, you may prefer Christopher Buckley. But read. It is a lifelong apprenticeship in the craft of writing.'

4. On gathering information for writing documents

'Have more than thou showest; speak less than thou knowest.'

'Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.'

If you need to speak to people to gather information for your document, ask open-ended questions and then let them speak.

5) On writing about what matters:

'Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart.'

The style and language of your writing matter a lot, but not to the exclusion of all else. As our Process Method advises, content is vital: put yourself in your readers' shoes and tell them what they need and want to know.

You can read the original article at <http://www.publicationcoach.com/free-articles/Shakespeare.php>.

Plain Language Commission news

Information Commissioner's Office demystifies data protection

Awarded the Clear English Standard, a new plain-English *Guide to Data Protection* will give businesses and other organizations practical advice about the Data Protection Act and dispel popular myths. Our research director, Martin Cutts, commented: 'Data protection can be complex because the law on it is often complex. This guide helps readers by slicing the subject into manageable chunks they can digest at their own pace.'

The guide, from the Information Commissioner's Office, a corporate member of ours, will help organizations safeguard personal data and comply with the law. It takes a straightforward look at the principles of the Data Protection Act and uses practical, business-based examples.

Stephen Alambritis, head of public affairs at the Federation of Small Businesses, said:

Small businesses do not have time for pages and pages of jargon and gobbledegook, but getting data protection right makes good business sense. Data protection lapses cost reputations and can affect the bottom line. But, many organisations tell us that data protection law is difficult to understand. This new no-nonsense guide will help the business community to understand and comply with the law.

The *Guide to Data Protection* was launched in London on 26 November by the Information Commissioner and can be downloaded from the ICO website at http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection_guide.aspx.

Oneplace website launched

The Audit Commission has launched its new Oneplace website, where you can see how local public services are performing in England, whether they provide value for money, and where they could improve. The site tries to make it as easy as possible for you to find what you're interested in: 'There are a few different ways of finding information about the subject you're interested in – you can look at different themes (such as children and young people, crime or the local economy), different areas, or just the organisation you want to. You can also do searches for key words.' View the website and find information on your local area at <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk>.

To help prepare its authors to write for Oneplace, we gave a series of writing-skills courses for the Audit Commission in the summer, entitled Writing for the Public. Martin Cutts, writing for the Audit Commission's internal newsletter, commented:

When that one-man educational audit commission Alcuin of York scatter-gunned Charlemagne's Europe eleven hundred years ago with his revolutionary tool, the full stop, he might not have foreseen that it would be quite so fervently embraced by his 21st-century Millbank equivalent in its efforts to 'Just tell it like it is' (as one Preston resident urged an assessor recently); but he'd probably have been pleased that terms like 'beaconicity', 'coterminosity', 'governance' and 'provider vehicles' were to be shunned, and that one place where the big news about his native Northumbria would be proclaimed without flummery and weasel words would be *oneplace*. No more 102-word sentences, then. Today, Alcuin's full stop is king, and clarity's to be the new public face of the Audit Commission.

New forms reduce failure rate

New Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA) forms for the Office of the Public Guardian – written and designed by our friends Boag Associates – reduce the rate of failing to complete the form properly from 33% to 10%. An LPA is a legal instrument that anyone can make to state who they would like to make decisions on their behalf – about their finances, or the

food they eat, for example – if they lose mental capacity to be able to make decisions for themselves.

Asked to comment on the revised forms, Martin Cutts said:

As these may be among the last and most important documents that someone completes in a lifetime of form-filling, it's crucial that they be clear. The forms combine good plain English with easy-to-follow layout that guides people through what would otherwise be a complex maze.

See the forms for yourself at <http://www.publicguardian.gov.uk/forms/>.

Words of the year

It's the time of year when various dictionaries and websites name their 'word of the year'. *Webster's New World College Dictionary* has selected 'distracted driving' – 'what many are guilty of when they use digital devices on the go' – for 2009, claiming that this term is rapidly entering law books around the world.

The 2009 Merriam-Webster's Words of the Year list, meanwhile, is based on actual look-ups in the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* and *Online Thesaurus*. The word that received the highest intensity of searches over the shortest period of time in 2009 is 'admonish'. 'Admonish shot to the top of the list three days after Rep. Joe Wilson's outburst during a speech made by President Obama, and it remained among our top lookups for weeks,' said Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster's Editor at Large. 'When the House announced plans to "admonish" Rep Wilson, the word was understood to be technical or official, and it has been repeated often in coverage of recent contentious political issues. While this particular story wasn't very important in the context of a year's worth of news, it triggered enormous interest in this word.'

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* has named 'unfriend' its word of the year, defining it as 'to remove someone as a "friend" on a social networking site such as Facebook'. Apparently, though, unfriend isn't a new word, as a 17th-century example from the large *Oxford English Dictionary* illustrates: 'I hope, Sir, that we are not mutually Unfriended by this Difference which hath happened betwixt us' (from a 1659 work by Thomas Fuller).

Christopher Howe, in the *Telegraph*, criticizes the *New Oxford American Dictionary's* choice:

I can't help thinking, though, that as the technology changes, so the new sense of *unfriend* will evaporate. But at least *unfriend* will last longer than another word nominated by Oxford: *intexticated*, meaning "distracted because texting on a cellphone while driving a vehicle". This is merely a facetious nonce-word, spawned by the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, or *Noad*, as I shall call it. In other words it is *Noadspawn*, defined as 'the ephemeral deposits of an amphibian enterprise, extruded in large numbers and forming a more or less coherent mass intended to attract undiscerning browsers'.

Meanwhile, the Global Language Monitor has attempted to go one better and has produced a list of the top 25 words of the decade. The list is topped by 'global warming' (in first place), '9/11' (in second) and 'Obama' (third).

[Sources: <http://newworldword.com/>; *Telegraph*, 18 November 2009: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/christopherhowse/100004877/100004877/>; and http://www.languagemonitor.com/top_word_lists]

Yule laugh at these

A rift in time

“Has an anomaly in the space-time continuum been discovered by a decorative lights company?” asks *The Times* following this letter from reader David Stevens:

Before Christmas we purchased a new set of decorative lights, which bore, in four languages, the message: “For indoor and outdoor use only.” I found this instruction worrying for it suggests that the manufacturers have discovered that, at exactly the junction between indoors and outdoors, there is a mysterious anomaly in the space-time continuum, where the use of these lights might be dangerous. I think we should be told more.

Pre-prepare yourself for pleonasm

Last month’s *Pikestaff* looked at pleonasm (nasty but less malign than neoplasm – thanks to Joe Cohen for spotting our typo, now corrected) – or using more words than necessary to express meaning. In an advert from Llangollen Railway to ride its Santa Express, punters are warned: ‘Pre-Booking is Essential.’ It seems just plain-old booking early isn’t enough to avoid disappointment these days.

When writing right’s no piece of cake

As you prepare to decorate your Christmas cake (as one does), here’s a blog that shows:

- the need for orthographic accuracy when writing on your creation: <http://cakewrecks.blogspot.com/search/label/Mithspellings>
- why gateau grammar really does matter: <http://cakewrecks.blogspot.com/search/label/Creative%20Grammar>
- the importance of giving clear instructions: (<http://cakewrecks.blogspot.com/search/label/Literal%20LOLs>).

The *Pikestaff* team trusts that you will experience no such cake wrecks this festive season, wishes you a very happy Christmas, and hopes that 2010 will be a successful year for you and your organization. As usual, instead of sending cards to our customers, we’ll be making a donation to Plan International, for girls’ education in Nepal.

[Source: *The Times*, 30 December 2008:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article5415055.ece>; and

The easier Christmas competition

In case the challenge of rewriting legal or pretend-legal prose is too daunting during your holiday, here’s one requiring you merely to guess a date – assuming you don’t actually know the answer. Same wonderful prize, too, since it’s Christmas (and same deadline). Question: On what precise date did this piece of writing first appear? The sexist and somewhat crusty style may help you.

What is most wanted is a system by which the young people of this country will learn to use the English language with lucidity and precision. An old educationalist used to assert that the whole matter lay in the short sentence; teach either a child or a man to have a beginning, a middle or an end to each written or even spoken utterance of his, and you force him to think clearly and to bring his thoughts into compass and clear definition. The long involved sentence which nearly all ignorant people write is not a proof of a complicated mind, but of lack of command over the English language. Clear thinking is the main essential to clear expression. Teach English and you teach a child to educate himself.

Just email pikestaff@clearest.co.uk, with your date in the subject line. The prize will go to the sender of the date nearest to the date of publication. Exciting, huh?

Contribute

Have you recently come across any rampant rhubarb or troublesome tripe? If so, we'd love to hear from you. Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk. And do say if you'd prefer to remain anonymous if we include your contribution in a future newsletter!

Back issues

You can see back issues of *Pikestaff* on our website (click on 'Newsletter'). Here you'll also find a table that summarizes each month's content.

Tell a friend

If you think friends or colleagues would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward the newsletter (or any part of it) to them.

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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Published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd).
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