Escaping the Fog People: how we can write more clearly about complicated things

Speech by Martin Cutts for the Terminology Coordination Unit of the European Parliament's Directorate-General for Translation, Luxembourg, 24 February 2020

Martin Cutts gives the keynote speech (top) and takes part in a Q&A session with translators. The event was staged by the citizens' language project of the directly elected European Parliament, which aims to use text, audio and video to communicate better with people in each of the 24 official EU languages. "The future of reading is listening," said **Cathy Waibel**, chef d'unité, Directorate-General for Translation, as she described efforts to make the parliament's work 'interesting and accessible' by using plain language in a parliament radio stream and podcasts.

Escaping the Fog People: how we can write more clearly about complicated things

My talk today is about plain language. Plain language means, among other things, language without ambiguity, so it's not ideal for jokes, detective stories or political promises. It's mainly for saying things clearly. So plain language could be rather dull, but I'm here today to make it interesting and fun, because I would say there are few things more interesting and fun than taking a complicated matter and reducing it to its essential points, and then communicating it to a wide audience whose prior knowledge and literacy skills may be weak.

To be dull for a moment, though, I want to give you this definition of 'plain language', which has been agreed by the main group of plain-language professionals on the planet, Plain Language International or PLAIN for short:

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

So this means authors need to make informed judgments about whether the material is clear enough to be easily understood. It also means using good organization and layout to help readers navigate a path through the material, and easily use what they find. It doesn't mean always using simple words instead of the most accurate or writing whole documents in childish language.

My talk is in three sections

1   Language lessons from Portugal

2   A short history of plain-language highlights

3   Some tactics for dispelling fog

First, a true story...

Just four years ago, in the United States, Colorado held a referendum on various questions, including one about **whether to abolish slavery** from its constitution. Oddly, a form of slavery (as legally defined) was still permitted in 2016 for prisoners because they were expected to work for little or no money. The relevant question on the ballot paper said this:

"Shall there be an amendment to the Colorado constitution concerning the removal of the exception to the prohibition of slavery and involuntary servitude when used as a punishment for persons duly convicted of a crime?"

What could go wrong in asking a question that included the phrase 'removal of the exception to the prohibition'?

Did voters really understand it? Of the 2.3 million votes cast, there was a small majority for **keeping slavery**. This provoked a national row but slavery therefore survived in Colorado law for two more years until voters reversed their decision.

Section 1

Language lessons from Portugal

I visited the magnificent library at Coimbra university, Portugal and picked up their tourist leaflet. It explains how the books, arranged in gold-covered cases, are protected from damage and co-exist with a colony of bats that eat any flying insects that dare to invade the sacred space. The leaflet says:

"It is common knowledge that variations in humidity and temperature are a threat to books. It is equally known that books have another 'enemy': papyrophaguses (insects feeding on paper). Insects constitute no problem here, as the shelves are entirely made of oak wood, which in addition to being exceptionally dense (making life difficult for those insects) also produces a worm-repellent odour.

"In their daily fight for preservation, books rely on another ally: inside this temple of books lives a colony of bats, which come out at night and feed on the occasional insects."

('The Baroque Library'. Universidade de Coimbra, 2010.)

We can see some of the author's tactics. Sentences are reasonably short and in the active voice. Vocabulary is fairly basic, though words like 'constitute' and 'exceptionally' have simpler alternatives (such as 'are' and 'very'). Readers are invited in by reminding them of things they might already know. There's some story-telling, with a battle between goodies and baddies. There's an explanation of an unusual word (papyrophaguses), and we're told why oak is used in libraries like this. These are all helpful tactics and make the leaflet interesting and accessible to the busy reader.

Let me contrast that rather good piece of writing with an email I received from a group of lawyers who invited me to a seminar at the same university, Coimbra, last year. It starts with a 600-word paragraph of extraordinary obscurity, even for readers who are well educated and have specialist knowledge and continues in the same vein:

"In a time of plurality and difference which is also, significantly, a time of aproblematic (if not naif) panjuridism, the discussion of the limits of law is not a frequent or obvious explicit topos. On the one hand, the diagnosis of plurality and difference favours the conclusion-claim that «the sense of the expression the "law" is constructed internally, and separately, within the system of semantic values of each [semiotic] group» (B.F. Jackson) – which means arguing that only «the signifier» is common, not the «signified», as well as admitting an implacable diversity of interpretative communities (involving incommensurable cultural-civilizational, political, ethical and professional codes or canons). On the other hand, the celebration of panjuridism, successfully corroborated by the relentless emergence of ultra-specialized dogmatic fields (from health law to biolaw, from robotics law to geo-law), justifies a passive assimilation of hetero-referentially constructed interpretations of social need, reducing law to a mere conventional order (with contingently settled frontiers) or even to an ensemble of institutionally effective coactive resources — which in any case means depriving juridicity or juridicalness of any practical-cultural specific or intrinsic (non-contingent) sense claim. However, do our present circumstances condemn us to this complacent nominalism, preventing us from attributing any effective relevance to the problem of the limits of law? Even without departing from the "semio-narrative" ground (and its external point of view), it may be said that plurality and difference do not exclude a productive exploration of

inter-semiotic aspirations (if not inter-semiocity) — relating differently contextualized claims of juridicity and paving the way for the reconstruction of plausible arguments of continuity. These arguments may, in turn, justify a return to the well-known questions on the concept and/or the nature of law (in the sense in which, in an all or nothing approach, Hart and Raz have taught us to understand this), and may also, conversely, lead to the reinvention of an archetypal or aspirational perspective (Fuller, Simmonds), in relation to which the reconstituted features of the autonomy and the limits of law do not represent characteristics but rather guiding intentions or constitutive aspirations or promises (if not desiderata), with reference to which past or present expressions and their institutional instances should permanently be judged. Following this path in fact means acknowledging how the problem of limits becomes an indispensable thematic core whenever the reflexive agenda involves rethinking law's autonomy (or rethinking this autonomy beyond the possibilities of legal formalism), as an autonomy or claim to autonomy which should be seriously considered in terms of its cultural-civilizational specific (non-universal) base, as a decisive manifestation of European identity and European heritage (Castanheira Neves). It is precisely this critical-reflexive connection between issues of sense and limits (aspirations and borders) which, in terms of law, as well as considering the challenges of a société post-juridique (F. Ost), our roundtable aims to explore. This means discussing the growing weight of hetero-referential elements (invoking philosophy and economics, literary criticism and sociology, epistemology and ethics, politics, political morality and social engineering as plausible key arenas), which not only interfere (as contextual conditions) with juridical discursive practices but also wound these practices (and their autonomous intelligibility) by functionalizing them (diluting their specificity in a new practical holism), or at least condemning them to permanent «boundary disputes» (David Howarth). However, this discussion also leads directly to the consideration of specific (real, hypothetical and even fictionalized) case-exempla, including the so-called «tragic cases» (Atienza), which enable us to experience the limits of law's responsivity or even the impossibility of obtaining plausible correct legal answers. The roundtable will, as usual, favour a practical-cultural context open to multiple perspectives and involving the productive intertwining of juridical and non-juridical approaches."

That hymn of praise to academic and legal obscurity is written by my fictional enemies, the **Fog Peopl**e. I hope we are here today to resist the embrace of the Fog People.

Section 2

A short history of plain-language highlights

Nobody knows who first coined the phrase 'plain English', but in the 14th-century **Geoffrey Chaucer** (c. 1343–1400) had his Host in the *Canterbury Tale*s demand that the Clerk of Oxford put aside 'youre terms, youre colours, and youre figures' (technical terms, figures of speech, and rhetorical devices), and: [

"Speketh so pleyne at this time, we yow preye,
That we may understonde what ye seye."

(Speak so plainly now, we ask you, that we may understand what you say.)

Around 1391, Chaucer also wrote what seems to be the earliest surviving technical manual or guide in English. It explained how to operate the astrolabe, which enabled users to tell the time and predict the position of the stars. The guide was wordy by modern standards, but used simple language with plenty of active-voice verbs and imperatives, and was split into sections with headings. Chaucer's immediate audience was a ten-year-old boy, probably the son of a close friend. He tells the boy that he'll write it in easy grammar and vocabulary. So he was adjusting his style to the reader in a way we recognize as good practice today.

Put into modern English by James E Morrison, the manual declares: "This treatise is … written clearly and in plain English because your Latin is still not good enough, my little son … I ask every person who reads … this … to excuse my crude editing and my excessive use of words … [for] it is hard for a child to learn from complex sentences." (James E Morrison, 'Chaucer's Astrolabe Treatise', www.chirurgeon.org/files/Chaucer.pdf—includes Chaucer's original text)

With such ideas and inclinations, it seems fair to regard Chaucer as the originator of the plain-language movement.

William Tyndale, born in 1492, secretly translated the New Testament into English in 1525, which was against the law. He could have used an ornate,

high-level style. Instead he used the more basic vocabulary of the common people of his day, as well as simple syntax and vigorous verbs. Tyndale expressed the modern plain-English principle of keeping the readers in mind. In a row with a priest he said: 'If God spare my life, I will cause the boy that drives the plough to know more of the scripture than you [do].'

Betrayed by an English agent in the Low Countries, Tyndale was executed by the Holy Roman Empire in 1536. But after various Tudor monarchs had come and gone, King James I published a Bible in English in 1611 (the Authorized Version) whose New Testament is drawn 84 per cent word for word from Tyndale, according to expert analysis. Whether or not you like his theology, it's Tyndale's unique voice that gives us such rhythmical and enduring phrases as

for ever and ever, *salt of the earth*, *judge not that you be not judged*, *let there be light*, *the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak*, *in the beginning God created heaven and earth*, *apple of his eye*, *fight the good fight*, and *a man after his own heart*.

For another great figure in plain-language history, we leap nearly 400 years into the twentieth century to find that in the midst of war, **Winston Churchill**, the British prime minister, wrote a memo called 'Brevity'. It told civil servants he wanted shorter, clearer, jargon-free reports:

"To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent looking for the essential points … The aim should be reports which set out the main points in a series of short, crisp paragraphs … Let us not shrink from the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversational … The saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking." (The full text is given in *The Plain English Story* by Cutts M and Maher C (Stockport 1986))

In the United States in 1948, **Rudolf Flesch** published his Reading-Ease Formula, a seemingly objective measure of reading difficulty, and followed this with *The Art of Readable Writing* in 1949. In 1975, the US Navy funded **Peter Kincaid** to simplify the Flesch formula to relate it to US school-grade levels because the military found that 30 per cent of new recruits read at below the seventh grade (UK reading age 12). The Navy used the new Flesch-Kincaid Formula to pre-check written materials and technical manuals so recruits could understand

them. Arguments continue about whether readability tests are useful, but I feel they can at least be a helpful guide as long as we don't worship them.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the seeds of a modern plain-English revolution were sown in the US. Consumer groups used the mass media to publicize and ridicule examples of obscurity in legal documents and government forms, calling for plain language or plain English. Around 1974 **Siegel+Gale**, a pioneering document-design company, worked with **Citibank** in New York to write a loan agreement that customers and staff could understand. The Citibank loan note was so striking it was publicized across America.

The fact that obscurity could be oppressive had been shown in the 1960s when **civil-rights activists** challenged a Louisiana law requiring African-American people to interpret difficult passages from the constitution before they were allowed to vote.

In 2010 a tenacious campaign in the US by the **Center for Plain Language** led the House and Senate to pass the Plain Writing Act. This required most kinds of federal-government information (except regulations) to be written in plain language. It defined this as text that is clear, concise, and well organized, and that follows other best practices suitable to the subject or field and intended readership. It also stated what government agencies must do to achieve these goals, and required guidance to be given them.

You may recall the confusion over the US presidential elections in 2000. It showed why it was vital to think about an audience's needs and, ideally, to test the usability of public documents with them. In **Palm Beach Count**y, the election supervisor had ten names to fit on the ballot paper. To help the mainly elderly electorate, she decided two pages would be better than one. She got the design of the ballot paper approved by all the political parties and the authorities. Yet when the voters came to use it, the design so misled them that 19,000 people double-punched their papers, which invalidated them, while many Democrats accidentally voted for a right-wing candidate. From this confusion, George W Bush emerged victorious. World history was significantly altered by the avoidable accident of a bad piece of document design and not pre-testing it with the users.

In the United Kingdom, a public protest against bad official writing occurred on 26 July 1979 as **Martin Cutts** (that's me) and **Chrissie Maher** co-founded and launched their Plain English Campaign by shredding boxes of unclear forms in Parliament Square, London. Our work helped to persuade the incoming government led by **Margaret Thatcher** to issue a policy statement ordering departments for the first time to count their forms, abolish unnecessary ones, clarify the rest, and report their progress annually to her.

As you will know, European law has improved the clarity of consumer contracts in the UK and the EU. In the UK, our **Consumer Rights Act 2015** requires the written terms of consumer contracts to be 'transparent'. This means each term should be plain and intelligible to the average person, who is defined as a consumer who is reasonably well informed, observant and circumspect. There's more on this in the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*.

If there is complexity in the language of the written law, this will usually be reflected in guidance issued to the public, so it's good to start with clear law. In 1994, I took a complex law, the Timeshare Act, and rewrote it in plainer language as a demonstration project. [Published in *Lucid Law*, 2000, available on free download from my website.] My so-called **Clearer Timeshare Act** was tested with 90 senior law students. Nine out of ten preferred my version to the real thing. Performance also improved: on one key question, 94 per cent got the correct answer when working with my version, while only 48 per cent did so with the real thing. My pretend law was meant to provoke, and it had an immediate effect. Two groups of tax and accountancy professionals were formed to persuade the government to translate tax laws into plainer English. Surprisingly, the government's own law drafters did something similar, effectively rewriting a piece of their own work – an astonishing development.

As a result, in 1995 the government set up the **Tax Law Rewrite Project** to transform tax law into plainer English. Parts of the rewritten tax law are now in force, and there's also a new, clearer page layout for all laws. Some new laws read as if they've been heavily influenced by plain-language thinking as they use short sentences and well-constructed vertical lists.

In 2001 and 2002, I worked closely with your former colleague **Emma Wagner** of the Translation Directorate to rewrite and redesign into plainer language an EC

directive and a regulation, both as demonstration projects. These were published as the booklets *Clarifying Eurolaw* and *Clarifying EC Regulations*, still available on free download from my website. They included for the first time the idea of a **Citizen's Summary** for each law or regulation. This gave readers a quick idea of what the legislation was about. I believe the two booklets were translated into many languages and put on your intranet.

As regards legislation, much depends on who is thought to be its main audience. I say this is interested citizens, not just lawyers. Laws may never be written in the plainest of plain language, but they should at least be understandable to reasonably literate, motivated people who are willing to make an effort. It may be a big effort, of course, especially in technical areas of law. Yet many non-lawyers must from time to time read laws in their raw state: police officers, officials, special-interest groups, and that group of ordinary citizens who happen – usually without the benefit of any training in the law – to have been elected as members of the various parliaments. With the internet, the law is now visible to most people. When it is horribly hard to read, this is obvious to everyone.

Several Nordic countries have been busy with plain-language work. For many years, **advocates of plain Swedish** have influenced the language of new laws in Sweden. No government bill, including proposed acts of Parliament, may be printed without approval from the ministry of justice's 'division for legal and linguistic draft revision'. In 2001 it revised 1,306 acts and ordinances.

When **Nelson Mandela** became president of South Africa in 1994, he wanted the new constitution to be written clearly. This task was done partly by a plain-language specialist, the Canadian lawyer Phil Knight.

Of course, plain-language documents are not a panacea. They are merely instruments, and as such they can be well played or badly played. They don't make bad people good. They don't stop corruption or incompetence.

In the European Commission, translators have led the way in campaigning for plain language across the institutions because it reduces costs and produces a better basis for translation. Your **Fight the Fog** initiative, which began in 1998, was relaunched in 2010 as a multilingual Clear Writing Campaign. Your booklet *How to write clearly* is available free online from the EU's bookshop in all

member-state languages, I understand. Its companion, *Claire's Clear Writing Tips*, is available in English and French, I'm told.

Promoting plain language internationally

Internationally, two not-for-profit membership bodies promote plain language: **Clarity** (founded in 1983 by John Walton, a British lawyer) publishes a journal on plain legal English; and, for other professionals working in the field, **Plain Language Association International** (also called PLAIN), whose definition I've already mentioned.

PLAIN (as part of the International Plain Language Federation) has applied to the International Standards Organization, the ISO, to agree an international standard on plain language. This aims to be relevant to most, if not all, languages. A draft document [ISO copyright] has been published for comment. Here follows a summary of the principles. Based on them, the draft gives detailed guidelines.

[Glossary note: *Reader* means user, website visitor. *Author* means those who create documents. *Document* means the information and medium.]

• **Principle 1: The content is what the readers need or want**

This principle establishes how authors select and shape (and sometimes omit) information to give readers what they need or want – rather than what authors want to tell the readers.

Creating plain-language documents is about more than choosing words and sentences. Authors must also decide what to put in a document – and what to leave out. Authors should make every content decision in terms of the reader's purpose.

• **Principle 2: Readers can easily find the content they need or want**

This principle establishes how authors organize information logically and visually, so that readers can readily find what they seek. The rigorous use of headings is usually crucial. Plain language is not just about clear writing. Readers should not need to hunt for the content they want.

• **Principle 3: Readers can understand the content**

This principle establishes how the author coordinates all aspects of the document: the content, the organization, the language (words and sentences), and the visuals

(design and graphics) – so that readers can understand the message that authors intend the document to convey. The key message is sometimes the explicit implications of the information – rather than just the information itself. Readers need to understand the key message if they are to achieve their goal. Authors must evaluate a document, choosing from a range of techniques, to be sure readers can reach the required level of understanding.

- **Principle 4: Reader can use the content**

This principle establishes how authors plan for readers' use of the document and how authors evaluate the document's success. Ultimately, whether a document is in plain language depends on whether readers can use it to achieve their purpose. To ensure that readers can use the document effectively and efficiently, authors should try out drafts of the document – choosing from a range of techniques – with a suitable sample of readers.

So evaluation and testing are both advocated in the proposed standard. These are the most difficult and expensive things to do. They are desirable but are often not practical because time and money are limited.

Section 3

Some tactics for dispelling fog

Ten guidelines from the Oxford Guide to Plain English

I realize that some of this section will already be familiar to you, so please regard it a quick refresher course. I also realize that some of it is also blindingly obvious.

Guideline 1 – Plan before you write.

Richard Williams was ambitious for his daughters. When Venus and Serena were still under five years old, he drafted a 78-page plan for them. It mapped out their journey from playing on public tennis courts to dominating the world. His plan paid off.

Most of us don't need a 78-page plan before we write something, but planning is a useful first step. We benefit from putting on paper or screen the document's

main purpose, our likely readership, and the points we'll include. This breaks the deadlock, reduces writer anxiety, and creates a structured start.

Then we organize the points into a numbered sequence or under headings and subheadings. Next we expand the points into rough sentences, which begin to form a first draft. Much of the quality in a document comes from editing and polishing the draft, then doing the same repeatedly for as long as we're improving its content, structure, and style.

Guideline 2 – Organize your material so readers can see the important information early and navigate the document easily.

When you're writing for busy people, they want to get in, get on, and get out. So you need to give them a clear structure they can see instantly. It may be questions and answers; headings and subheadings; chronological order; or the top-heavy triangle (that is, newsy points in descending order of importance).

Normally, put the big news early. If your document has more than a few hundred words, put a summary of its most important points at the start. In other words, give away the big news first because then, if people read nothing else, they've got the big picture.

Guideline 3 – Make the average sentence length 15–20 words.

Long sentences are hard work for readers, so we should make the full stop the most common punctuation mark on the page. Readers love full stops. Your simplest way of raising readability is to cut average sentence length as far as you sensibly can to below 20 words.

This is different from how many of us were taught to write at school or college, where the often meandering sentences of long-dead literary greats were highly regarded. But their readers were usually a well-educated minority with time on their hands, whereas today most of us are writing for busy people, for people who may choose not to read much, or who may not read much because they have weak literacy skills. Our documents may at best be a necessary nuisance in their hectic life. If we make them work too hard, they'll prefer to do something else.

Guideline 4 – Use words your readers are likely to understand.

Long and unusual words are less likely to be understood than short and everyday words, so the value of having a rich vocabulary needs to be tempered by restraint if we want to communicate with a wide audience. Obviously, though, some long words like *immediately* are common and easy, while some short ones like *recuse*, *redact*, and *resile* are rare and difficult. I expect something similar is true in languages other than English.

In general, short and everyday words should be your first choice if you want to be understood by the many not the few. These words will reduce the readers' workload and help them get the meaning at first go. So always examine every word of three or more syllables in your own writing: is it really the best word for the job? When I was learning French at school, I loved to use *consequemment*. Now I hope I would choose *ainsi* or *donc*.

If you need to use technical terms and the readers may not know them, give an explanation in brackets, in a breakout panel, or in a glossary.

Here are some obvious edits that use shorter, simpler, and fewer words. Instead of:

"We spend a lot of our shrinking financial envelope on estate that we don't utilise with sufficient effectiveness."

– we could say:

"We spend a lot of our money on buildings we don't use effectively enough."

Guideline 5 – Use only as many words as you need for meaning and tone of voice.

Every word should be worth its place on the page. If a word doesn't help you say something worthwhile or get the tone of voice right, delete it. This is especially necessary on webpages, where busy readers are even less tolerant of dross than in a paper document.

Try to develop a good nose for padding and nonsense because they distract busy readers and waste their effort. Sometimes, we can just save a word or two, or we can be more radical by looking for the essence of what's being said and discarding the rest. This is what's needed in the next example, where phrases like *physical problem* and *put this right* can be removed:

"If you have suffered severe damage to your heart muscle, then you may have a physical problem such as a ruptured muscle which is preventing your heart from working in the right way. If this is the case then you should be considered for surgery to put this right within two days of your heart attack." [56 words, average sentence length (ASL) 28]

We could say this instead, using less than half the wordage:

"If a heart attack has severely damaged your heart muscle, it may be ruptured (torn) and not working properly. So your doctor should consider surgery within two days." [28 words, ASL 13] Half the words, half the sentence length.

Even a short sentence may be poorly expressed:

"The infancy stage is where blockchain currently resides."

In almost half the words, we could write:

"Blockchain is in its infancy."

Guideline 6 – Prefer active-voice verbs unless there's a good reason for using the passive.

Perhaps nothing drains the life and interest from writing as much as the overuse of passive-voice verbs. But if you use them where active-voice verbs are feasible, you'll miss a good opportunity to make your writing more human and personal. I know that you know this so I won't dwell on the point, but...

... in English, the word order tends to be:

agent (or 'doer') + a verb in the active voice + an object.

So, at its simplest, we get:

Helen (agent) is playing (active-voice verb) the drums (object).

In the passive voice, this would be *The drums are being played by Helen.* This is fine if you want the readers to focus on the drums, but it's not the word order you'd usually hear in speech. Anyone who spoke mainly in the passive voice would sound very odd.

A common problem with the passive is that the doers may go missing, so it gives constructions like *The drums are being played*, *Mistakes have been made*, and *The trees will be felled tomorrow*, from which responsibility and agency have vanished. This

happens a lot in business and official documents, making reading more difficult than it needs to be. It may also sound formal, evasive, and defensive. Of course, sometimes the doers are irrelevant but generally readers want to know who's doing the action as it helps them picture events accurately. When passives are combined with long sentences and wordiness, reading difficulty multiplies.

Guideline 7 – Use good verbs to express the actions in your sentences.

Verbs carry most of the action, so we need to choose them well. They should not be dull, stale, weedy, shrivelled, or otherwise unexpressive. In much public speech and writing, there's a vogue among native English speakers for one particularly unexpressive and inexact verb, which is 'to impact', usually 'to impact on'. Everybody knows that many other verbs will do the job better, such as affect, alter, change, reduce, lessen, disrupt, block, undermine, worsen and so on, but politicians and business people always seem to use 'impact on', leaving the listener to work out what kind of impact is meant. It's horrible, it's spreading, and it's everywhere. The Fog People love it. Oh dear!

An over-formal approach can obscure the clarity of the ideas behind simple verbs. Say you want to buy 400 sheep. Here are two simple ways of saying it:

• I want to buy 400 sheep.

• I'd like to purchase 400 sheep.

But in some writing, these simple ideas become overdressed, for example:

• I am desirous of purchasing 400 sheep.

• The acquisition of 400 sheep by means of purchase is my objective.

• Undertaking the purchase of 400 sheep is desired by me.

To write like that is to be a disciple of the Fog People. So a key part of a plain-English style is to use simple verbs in simple constructions.

I see many examples of legal writing from young lawyers across the world. A common problem is that their writing is too 'nouny'. They try to express the action using nouns supported by a verb such as part of 'to have' or 'to be'. So they write 'The improvement of engineering skills is needed', when it would be more English to write 'Engineering skills need to be improved' or, if we know who's

supposed to perform the action, 'Monsieur Brunel needs to improve young Isambard's engineering skills'.

Guideline 8 – Use vertical lists to break up complicated text.

Busy readers like to see well-constructed vertical lists because they're easy to scan and digest. For example, instead of writing this in a health leaflet:

"You can try to self-manage your pain by using things like formal self-management programmes (group-based, individual or online), or informal self-management (for example, learning about pain management by reading about it or watching a video)."

– we can write this:

"You can try to cope with the pain by self-managing it:

• formally – using group-based, individual, or online programmes, or

• informally – for example, learning about pain management by reading about it or watching a video."

This helps readers focus better on the two main issues and then go into the detail.

Guideline 9 – Put your points positively when you can.

As we saw in the Colorado example at the start of this talk, negative expressions are often harder for readers to process, so it makes sense to say things positively when you can. Multiple negatives can be particularly difficult.

So we need to be careful about negatives, useful though they can be. We can often replace them with positives without changing meaning or emphasis. For example, instead of using the annoyingly negative phrase 'not without', like this:

"Fishing quotas are not without their own well-recognised disadvantages."

– we could simply write:

"Fishing quotas have some well-known disadvantages."

Guideline 10 – Use simple prepositions

On the left are multi-word prepositions and other long-winded words and phrases. On the right are alternatives that will often work perfectly. Always choose the ones on the right if they are feasible.

accordingly	so
consequently	so
for the purpose of	to
in order to	to
in relation to	about, regarding
in terms of	regarding
in the event of	if
prior to	before
pursuant to	under
regarding	about
within the framework of	under
with reference to	regarding, about
with respect to	regarding, about

Sometimes, and I haven't made this a guideline, we might need other things too, like a striking word picture, a metaphor, a parable, or a relevant or arresting analogy. Recently the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who uses colourful language and many word pictures, referred to global warming as being like a tea cosy on top of the planet. That kind of image can be worth a thousand words because the picture stays in the mind and connects to the everyday.

Pictures and words combine well on some websites, too. The Bank of England, for example, has some excellent short videos on its site to enliven otherwise dull topics and make them memorable.

In an episode of the TV series *Better Things*, written by and starring Pamela Adlon, she (as her character, Sam) and her three daughters visit the go-kart track for the afternoon. [Series 3 episode 5] As this is America, there has to be a safety briefing. Against a noisy background of racing go-karts, the attendant begins to speak. But nobody can hear him because he mumbles. Sam interrupts:

"Hey buddy, sorry to interrupt but can you talk a little louder? I can't hear you."

Her middle daughter, Frankie, tries to shut her up, but Sam persists: "He's telling us important safety things. We're about to operate dangerous machinery. We need to hear this."

Again, Frankie tries to stop her, and the attendant restarts his mumbling. Sam stops him again: "Buddy. Bro. Not to be an asshole but I still can't hear you. Not at all. Listen, I know this probably isn't your dream job but what you do here is important. You provide a very important service so we need to hear you... I'm trying to give my daughters a fun childhood and at the same time not die or get paralysed. And you, sir, are the only thing that sits between my family and a horrible tragedy, **so please make your instructions clear**."

This is why many of us work in the plain-language field. We want to do what we can to make things clear so that people can understand, are not misled, are not injured or killed by badly written product instructions, and can take a full part in the rich personal and public life that many countries offer.

I hope that what we do here together, today, will help you achieve the same result.

Finally, did I mention that the guidelines I've been describing come from my new book, the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*? This is the fifth edition, much revised and expanded, 368 pages, and it's published on Thursday at the ridiculously low price of 10 euros. If you'd like one, do please ask.

I'll leave you now with these words on the final slide from my friend, the poet and novelist Nick Murray. They recount his experience at King's College, London of trying to persuade university graduates to make their writing clearer. As you can see, he gave up, stricken by being regarded as a heretic. But we at least must continue in the next workshop session and beyond.

Thank you so much for listening.

[SLIDE]

Nicholas Murray, lyric poet, Rack Press –

"A few years ago I gave some seminars at King's College London on Fundamentals of Good Writing in the graduate school (a by-product of being there on a temporary Royal Literary Fund fellowship).

"I enjoyed the contact with students, many from around the world, but eventually I had to give up because I was demonstrably a HERETIC.

"I argued for clarity, precision, concreteness – citing George Orwell who said good prose is like a window pane, allowing you to see through unimpeded to the meaning.

"This appalled some of my students, who wanted to sound complex and difficult in order, they thought, to be taken seriously."

[ends]

• **Front-page photographs courtesy of the European Parliament.**