Complaining about bad writing: does it achieve anything except make me feel better?

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Bad sign language cost motorists £19,000 a year

Hunting for a parking space as you turn into Water Street near the town centre of Buxton, Derbyshire, there are many distractions, all worth admiring. There is the great dome of the former stables of the 5th Duke of Devonshire, which at the time of its construction was the widest unsupported dome in the world (ahead of the Pantheon and St Peter’s in Rome). There is Frank Matcham’s magnificent opera house, built in 1903. And there is the first glimpse of the Crescent, an 18th-century masterpiece by John Carr, modelled on the Royal Crescent in Bath, Wiltshire.

But forget all that, for you must concentrate on finding a safe piece of road on which to leave your vehicle, buy a ticket from the machine, and ensure you don’t overstay your time.

Several parking spaces are empty today in Water Street, so you slip your car into one of them, next to the roadside post advertising parking (below, right). You buy your ticket from the machine two metres away, display it, and head for the sightseeing and shopping. Buxton has been attracting visitors like you since the Romans first fell in love with its waters and named it Aquae Arnemetiae, probably to confuse the locals.

Having spent some money in the town, you return full of goodwill towards Buxton and its friendly inhabitants. But then you notice a green-jacketed fellow with the words ‘civil enforcement officer’ on his back and, though he is indeed very civil, he looks delighted to have stuck a parking penalty notice on your car. Your visit to Buxton is ending with a £70 parking penalty – or £35 if you pay within 14 days.

How can this be, you ask him, when you’ve parked properly and paid for your ticket?

‘That’s very simple,’ he says, looking smug. ‘You’ve parked in a permit-only bay. Didn’t you read the sign? People do this all the time – makes us a lot of money.’

This article comes from Plain Language Commission’s website, http://www.clearest.co.uk. Visit the site for more articles, guides on plain English, free books and newsletters for download, and details of our services.

*The British pound is worth US$1.6, €1.12 or SEK10 (June 2011 prices).
Of course you had seen the sign but, like hundreds of people every year, you’d misread it – because the roadway to the right of the sign is for parking by residents with permits only, and the roadway to the left of the sign is for pay-and-display parking only. Inadequately drawn white lines divide the two contiguous areas (photo, above right). The crucial detail, easily missed, is the direction of the arrows on the signpost (photo, right).

Well, this happened to me. I appealed against the penalty, arguing that the lack of a clear division between the two parking areas was misleading. I also emailed a local-authority councillor, asking if she could do anything to improve the signs. She said she’d raise it with local officials.

It took nine months and complaints from other motorists but finally the council sent a road crew with a bucket of white paint to write a big new sign alongside the permits-only section declaring ‘Permit holders only’ (photo, right).

Some interesting local opinion emerged after a front-page story about this parking trap appeared in the Buxton Advertiser on 26 August 2010. Naturally, Derbyshire County Council denied there had ever been a problem, saying: ‘The two bays are well marked and signposts make it clear [my italics] which bay is permit-only parking. To help motorists further [my italics] a permit holders only instruction was painted on the road surface on 27 July.’

Correspondents to the paper thought otherwise, however, describing the council as sanctimonious, underhand and negligent. One, making a more general point about bad signs, said: ‘It has been pointed out to me, by literate international travellers, that the signage around the car parks at Heathrow airport, London, seems calculated to trap the unwary or foreign flyer into mistakes which result in the payment of large fines or the seizure of their vehicles.’

People sometimes say that protesting about bad public information is a waste of time, that nothing will change and that even if you write a clear leaflet or a clearer sign, people will still ignore it.

So what happened in this case? Did the new road sign work? Fortunately, we know exactly what happened, because the figures can be got under freedom-of-information rules (see table overleaf).

From 19 February 2009, when the council took over parking enforcement, till 26 July 2010, when the new permit-holders-only road sign was painted, 894 penalty notices were issued in Water Street. An amazing 87% of these – 775 notices – were for parking in the permit-only section. On an annual basis, that’s 540 penalties or, to put it in tourism terms, 540 disgruntled visitors to Buxton who find they’ve just had a very expensive day out.
From when the new road sign was painted until 17 August 2011 – a significant date in this story, of which more later – 307 penalty notices were issued in Water Street. Of these, 185 were for the permit-only section. That’s 60%, or 27 percentage points below the previous level. So the number of no-permit penalties was now only 175 a year on average or less than two thirds of the previous annual rate. It represents a drop of 365 a year, exactly one a day.

The saving to motorists is between £12,775 and £25,550 a year depending on whether they would have paid the full or early-payment penalty. Call it £19,000 – nearly 16% of Buxton’s £126,000 annual take from parking penalties. The Water Street trap was the biggest single contributor to this figure.

Given the huge sums their contractors were raking in from one little street, council officials must have known that something was seriously wrong. Yet they kept on taking the money, week after week.

Negligence, incompetence or wickedness? Whatever it was, they were treating motorists with contempt and ripping them off.

On 17 August 2011, everything changed: another road crew descended on Water Street. They hooded the pay-and-display machine, attached new signs to the posts, and blanked out the signs they’d written on the roadway only 13 months before. The whole street was re-zoned and re-signed as being for permit holders only. Somewhere in officialdom, the penny had dropped that putting two types of parking next to each other was just too confusing.

Who watches the (Post)watchman?

One day I got lucky. I’d just done a radio programme about plain language and I was sitting in a pub near Euston station in London having a beer before the train home. A call came through on my mobile from a man who’d heard the programme. He told me of a letter he’d received from a government agency, Postwatch (now abolished), responding to his complaint about postal services. It turned out to be as bad a letter as he said it was – crawling with errors of punctuation, grammar and spelling, and it made no sense either.

So I sent a pleasant and friendly letter of complaint on his behalf to the chiefs at Postwatch, asking if they thought there was a problem and, if so, could we at Plain Language Commission, help? Surprisingly, they replied straight away, contrite about the dreadful letter and seeking a meeting.

Over the next few years we analysed their letter-writing problems, did a quarterly check of a sample of Postwatch correspondence, ran training courses for their staff all over the UK, and were able to earn about £50,000 for our work. So a single letter of complaint, if you can reach the right person, can prove lucrative and do some good.
Council’s lessons in how not to write for your readers

Early in 2011, a leaflet from Leicestershire County Council’s department of adults and communities dropped through the letter-box of several thousand elderly people. One of their carers told me: ‘This was sent to my wife who is very disabled with a Parkinson’s-type disease.’ It’s a tough read (below), so you could spare yourself some pain by reading just the third bullet point:

Fact Sheet for Service Users that have both Commissioned Services and Direct Payments

If you have been assessed to contribute towards your Non-Residential Services, and receive both Commissioned Services (e.g. Home Care; attend a Day Centre; Supporting People Services) and a Direct Payment arrangement, you need to be aware of the following.

• A payment or an invoice will be issued – not both.
• Where possible your contribution will be collected by reducing your Direct Payments. All deductions will be shown on your Direct Payment notification letters.
• When the Commissioned Services are due to be billed an invoice will only be issued if the total contribution for both the Commissioned Services and the Direct Payment has not already been collected by reducing your Direct Payment covering the same period, and your next Direct Payment amount would not be large enough to deduct the outstanding balance.
• If it is necessary to issue an invoice the amount that has already been deducted from your Direct Payment covering the same period will be taken into account. If you have not been assessed to contribute the Full Charge for your services, then the invoice will show a reduced max charge to allow for the fact that part of your total contribution has already been collected.
• When the Invoice for Commissioned Services is calculated the next Direct Payment is calculated at the same time.
• The invoice will indicate that a further deduction will be made from the next Direct Payment which will result in no actual payment being made. Your Direct Payment letter will show this.
• The invoice will be reduced by this further deduction amount.

This kind of writing is probably why many of us are involved in the plain-language field. Even allowing for some subject knowledge among the readers, it is likely to be baffling to many of them. What to do?

The department’s web pages showed examples of good, clear writing, including some that seemed well designed for people with reading difficulties. So I emailed the head of department, complimenting him on the excellence of this information and asking whether he could apply the same skills to rewriting this abysmal factsheet. And, in case the department needed our help with this, I offered it on a non-profit basis. Nearly a month passed without reply. I emailed him again, asking whether he’d care to reply. He did:

Martin,

thank you for your letter. Apologies for not responding earlier.

The authority produces many pieces of information and we try to adhere to plain english to ensure we are as clear as possible. We also have easywrite expertise.

I am grateful for your comments which we will note and seek to address,

This kind of pathetic effort really cheeses me off. I waited a few days trying unsuccessfully to think of a tactic that would improve the situation. So I burned my boats with this follow-up:

Should I care that your short reply includes at least four mistakes? No-one expects perfection from busy people but for there to be so many errors suggests to me that you do not take the matter seriously.

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When you say you will ‘seek to address’ my comments, what exactly does this mean? It gives the impression of being a meaningless phrase of the kind beloved by Sir Humphrey Appleby in ‘Yes, Minister’. What will you actually do, and by when, please? I wish to give a clear statement of your intentions to my correspondent, one of your council tax payers.

Under FOI rules, please let me know what your annual salary is.

No response came except to say that he is paid an annual salary of £131,000, which is a little below the level of a Cabinet minister in our national government. It says a lot about local government that someone who writes so badly can get such a colossal amount of loot from the public purse.

So, in this case, my complaint seems to have achieved little or nothing. I may yet take up the matter with the council’s chief executive. But since local taxpayers bankroll him with £193,000 a year, perhaps it will seem too far beneath his pay grade.

Licence to print rhubarb

We go back to 1980 for my next story – I’ve been ploughing this furrow a long time.

About 20 million people in the UK buy a TV licence. In 1980 it was in such archaic language it could have been drafted by Moses. Here’s a section:

The person named below (hereinafter called ‘the Licensee’) is hereby licensed subject to the terms, provisions and limitations set out in the Schedule ... to use the said apparatus for the purposes of receiving visual images sent by television from authorised Broadcasting Stations for general reception and from licensed amateur stations which can be exhibited by the said apparatus either in monochrome only or, if the licence includes colour, in any colour or colours.

Instead of bowing down before this sacred text, I wrote to the Home Office to protest that sentences of 120 words and dreadful layout meant that nobody could understand their TV licence without severe pain. They tried the old defence of hiding behind the lawyer’s skirts:

• ‘This licence form will be the actual licence issued to the applicant.’ (Er...yes, I’ve bought one, so I know that.)
• ‘It is a legal document and that is why it is written in legal phraseology.’ (Er...being a legal document doesn’t mean it has to sound archaic or obscure.)
• ‘We will certainly have another look at the form in the light of your letter.’ (Oh good.)

Pressed further, the Home Office fell silent for a year or two until, suddenly, a new-style TV licence emerged. The equivalent section began:

This licence applies to the person named below (the licence holder) and any member of his/her family and domestic staff while they are living with him/her at the address shown below.

No more ‘said apparatus’ and ‘said premises’. No more legalistic phrases, no more guff.

In fact, every year or two, the licence has been revised further and it usually gets a bit clearer every time. In the latest one (for 2011), there’s even a front-page summary saying:

What your TV Licence entitles you to:

Your TV Licence allows television receivers to be installed and used at the licensed address and at the other places as detailed in the licence conditions (to find out more, turn over).
Nowadays, the main fault in the licence is perhaps a technical one. Quite rightly, the authors use the word ‘you’ for the licence holder but give it bold type and a capital y, under the mistaken impression, still widely held among lawyers, that this is what authors should do with defined terms.

**Bemoaning bad instructions**

Finally, to product instructions, which by law are supposed to be clear to the intended users. After buying a self-assembly bunk bed from John Lewis, my local department store, I spent several frustrating hours trying to follow instructions like this:

> Please Note: This Bunk Bed is designed so that the routes of all four panels are visible when viewed from the Foot End of the assembled bed, i.e. The Head End panels face into the bed & the Foot End panels face away from the bed.

I complained to the store, trying not to be pedantic about the bad grammar, crazy capitalization and weird spelling, but focusing instead on the mysterious word ‘routes’. Well, I received a reply from Carole Lee, the director of buying (hard furnishings), saying this:

> The word routes is a manufacturing term coming from router, the machine that creates grooves. I am not aware that our customers find this difficult to understand. To date we have not had any other comments with this sentence.

So there you are. ‘Routes’ is a term everyone should know, even though it’s not in the dictionary and doesn’t, in fact, derive from ‘router’ at all – it’s a made-up word. And because nobody else has complained, there is, of course, no problem. This is how many authors think of their readers. If they can’t understand, they must be idiots who haven’t been to the right school, in this case the School of Made-up Words.

I went back to Lewis’s to buy a board game for my son’s birthday. Here are some of the rules of the board game. Maybe you can guess what the game was:

> Then man placed on top is one of those captured by your opponent which he returns to you a King, can be moved backwards diagonally. If there are several men on the board with vacant squares behind them, they may be all captured at once. In this case the Talking man is placed on the vacant diagonally behind the last man.

Yes: it’s draughts. I complained. Lewis’s were more contrite about this one. Cherry Williams, the director of buying (furniture accessories), described it as ‘appalling’ and promised to get it changed. Success.

**Finally**

Nothing changes if you don’t complain about bad writing. I urge everyone to complain. Do it pleasantly and not too pedantically. Don’t give up. Often you’ll succeed in getting improvements. Sometimes, if you’re doing it to gain new business, you’ll succeed in that too.

So, to answer the questions in my title, yes, complaining about bad writing can achieve a lot. And yes, it does make me feel much more cheerful.