Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 36, March 2010

International plain-language progress

As part of the United States' Sunshine Week – an initiative to encourage open government, freedom of information and the public's 'right to know' – the House of Representatives passed Congressman Bruce Braley's Plain Language Act by a vote of 386 to 33, on 17 March. The Plain Language Act will require the federal government to write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a 'clear, concise, well-organized' manner that follows the best practice of plain-language writing.

'There is no reason why the federal government can't write these forms and other public documents in a way we can all understand,' Braley said. 'Writing government documents in plain language will increase government accountability and will save Americans time and money. Plain, straightforward language makes it easy for taxpayers to understand what the federal government is doing and what services it is offering.' Braley introduced the bill in February 2009. All that remains now is for the bill to be passed by the Senate.

You can see many examples of how plain language was applied to US federal documents to make them easier to understand at
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/index.cfm.

Linguistic link: Clarity begins at home

The European Commission launched a new Clear Writing campaign at a conference on 15 March. This will encourage everyone in the Commission to write more clearly, making all types of documents, in all languages, shorter and simpler.

As the campaign is internal only, there's no public website, but you can see the campaign's new writing guide – which draws on Martin Cutts's work – at
http://ec.europa.eu/translation/writing/clear_writing/how_to_write_clearly_en.pdf. This guide also contains many before-and-after examples.

Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, suggested the campaign's slogan, 'Clarity begins at home'.

Clearly clarified

Overuse of the passive voice (see *Pikestaff 8* for our tip of the month on this) is common among business writers who are trying to sound legal, posh or both. We spotted this passive-fest on a promotional flyer for packs of PG tips green tea:

> To the Customer: This coupon can be used in payment or part payment for PG tips Green Tea (any variant) up to a maximum value of 50p. Where the product is priced above 50p, the difference must be paid by you. Only one coupon can be used against each item purchased at participating UK stores only (excluding online) … This coupon cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer and cannot be exchanged for cash.

Here's how we would rewrite this piece, avoiding the passive voice:

> To the customer: This coupon is worth 50p off any type of PG tips Green Tea. If the tea costs more than 50p, you must pay the extra. You can use only one coupon against each pack you buy at participating UK stores. Sorry, but you can't use this coupon online or with any other offer, or exchange it for cash.

If, as we suspect (we'd check if we were editing this for PG tips), you'd never find a packet of their green tea for 50p (the coupon wording is probably standard), you could also delete the second sentence.

Here's a summary of what we changed and why:

- We removed the upper-case letter from 'Customer' – there's no need for it here.
- We eradicated passive-voice verbs by rephrasing sentences (in the first one, to remove 'can be used') or by switching to the active-voice verb – 'is priced' to 'costs', 'must be paid' to 'must pay', 'can be used' to 'can use', 'cannot be used' to 'can't use', and 'cannot be exchanged' to 'or exchange'. (As our tip in *Pikestaff 8* explained, there are a few times when the passive is fine, but all verbs in this example work better in the active voice.)
- Changed a few long or unusual words to shorter, more common ones – 'variant' to 'type', 'difference' to 'extra', 'purchased' to 'buy', and 'excluding' to 'not'.
- Contracted 'cannot' to the less formal 'can't' – more on this below.

Tip of the month: don't labour to avoid contractions

The issue
Contracted verbs (often known just as 'contractions') are shortened forms of verbs, for example *can't* for *cannot*, *we'll* for *we will* and *that's* for *that is* or *that has*. The apostrophe marks the place where a letter or letters have been omitted.

Some people think contractions shouldn't appear in written English. For example, one of our customers received a complaint letter from a customer of theirs who believed contractions to be 'improper English'.

Our advice
The Cambridge Guide to English Usage, which draws on many style guides, research studies and data from large corpuses of British (and American) English, summarizes the situation well:

> Contractions … appear increasingly in writing, in newspaper columns and magazines across the range from popular to quality press … In the past they were felt to be too colloquial for the written medium, and editors of academic journals are still inclined to edit them out. The writers of formal documents may feel that they undermine the authority and dignity of their words. But the interactive quality that contractions lend to a style is these days often sought, in business and elsewhere. They facilitate reading by reducing the space taken up by predictable elements of the verb phrase, and help to establish the underlying rhythms of prose.

As this implies, uncontracted forms lend a formal, authoritative tone to writing. For a modern organization that wants to be seen as approachable, a more informal tone of voice is better. Using contractions – as well as other linguistic devices (such as 'you' instead of 'the customer', and 'we' instead of 'the company'; active-voice verbs; and shorter sentences) – are key to achieving this tone.

A half-way house between using no contractions and all contractions – which we quite often apply to documents we edit – is to use contractions for phrases that include 'not' (which tend to sound more stilted in their full form), but not for others.

Examples
[Using no contractions] We have rewritten this strategy but we cannot print it yet.
[Using all contractions] We've rewritten this strategy but we can't print it yet.
[Contracting 'not' only] We have rewritten this strategy but we can't print it yet.

Plain Language Commission launches new service

We are now offering readability reports. Here are some questions and answers that explain more about this service.

What is readability?
Readability refers to how easy text is to read and understand. The readability of a document depends on a range of factors, including content, structure, style, and layout and design.

Why worry about reading ease?
The average reading age in the UK is about 13 (according to data from the National Literacy Trust website). So if you're writing for the public, it's important to tailor public information to this level if you want most people to understand it. Of course, it's important too to treat the audience with respect: more on this below.

We can assess the readability of any text – printed or electronic. Maybe you'd like to check that your own organization's document is pitched at the right level. Or maybe it's your job to monitor other individuals' or organizations' writing and you'd like an objective assessment from language experts.

What will you provide?
We'll use specialist software to calculate the reading level of your text, and identify any problem areas. We'll explain clearly what we've done and why, and what the results mean.

We recognize that computerized tests have shortcomings. For example, they ignore aspects of readability such as use of appropriate headings, logical argument, lack of ambiguity, good grammar and good punctuation. As Martin Cutts comments, 'Assessing a document's clarity on test results alone is therefore likely to be misleading.'

Discussion groups and one-to-one interviews are better than readability testing alone for assessing clarity, but are usually feasible only where cost and speed don't matter. As Martin observes: 'This means that in deciding whether a document is at an appropriate level for its audience, editorial judgment based on experience will be the best aid.' And that's exactly what we offer you to accompany the software results: a qualitative expert assessment of your document, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses.

My document contains technical terms – will these affect your report?
For the computerized scores, yes: it's an inevitable shortcoming of software. But our qualitative assessment is more sophisticated.

We believe it's often a good thing to include technical terms in documents for the public, so long as you explain them well. And if you're writing for members of a profession or other group, technical terms are valuable shorthand, allowing you to express specialist concepts concisely.

How much will it cost?

It's hard to give set prices for readability reports in the way we do for our editing and accreditation services, as the cost depends not only on the size of your document but also on:

- its format (for example, Word documents are easier to test than PDFs)
- the type of document it is
- your needs: what you plan to use the report for, and so the type of information you'd find most useful. For example, we can focus on particular areas of the text, or aspects of language. We can even provide a comment from our research director, Martin Cutts, if you'd like this for a press release or other publicity, for example.

Please contact us if you'd like a quotation – we believe you'll be pleasantly surprised by our charges for this rare and specialist service.

The Simple Secrets of Writing and Speaking (Almost) Like a Professional: College Edition

Written by Philip Yaffe, a former journalist and marketing consultant, this book adapts his previous book, *In the 'I' of the Storm: the Simple Secrets of Writing & Speaking (Almost) like a Professional* (Story Scientia, 2006). The first edition was aimed primarily at business executives and other professionals, while this second edition is for college students. Philip has kindly agreed that we may include the second edition on our website: you can download it free of charge from the Books page of our website, at http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=18 (scroll right down).

If you would like a hard copy of the book, you may like to buy Philip's new improved version, *The Gettysburg Approach to Writing & Speaking like a Professional*, published in February by Indi.

More listlessness at LGA

The Local Government Association (LGA) has published its third annual list of 'words the public sector shouldn't use'. The latest 250 words have been taken from the European Union, central government, quangos, regional government, business management and public relations. Council leaders are 'concerned that in the midst of such a tough financial climate a failure by the public sector to explain to people the benefits from what they pay in taxes could make the difference between an individual staying afloat or going bankrupt'. You can download the full list at http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=9422797.

The list includes words and phrases such as:

- trialogue
- wellderly
- goldfish bowl facilitated conversation
- tonality
- webinar
- under-capacitated
- clienting
- disbenefits.

Reactions to the list have, as before, been mixed – see what others think and add your own views at http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=17636724. But has public-sector language changed as a result of the LGA lists? The LGA claims that 'councils up and down the country are working to eradicate from their work as many of these

words as possible', and gives four examples of councils working on plain-English initiatives.

Our own corporate members include Bromley Council and Hampshire County Council, and many other councils hold our Clear English Standard for individual documents. We also offer preferential rates for training in-house groups of council staff. See our website for full details of our editing and accreditation services, and face-to-face and distance-learning courses.

A reader writes

Last month, we covered unusual personal names, and appealed for interesting or amusing examples of place names, organizational names and job titles. This month, we look at interesting place names, with some especially descriptive ones sent in by Canadian Diane Macgregor. She writes: 'For interesting place names, it's hard to beat the province of Newfoundland in Canada. It was settled by many English and Irish in the 1700s and 1800s, and also fishermen from Western Europe.'

Examples include Bareneed, Black Tickle, Indian Burying Place, Horsechops, Jerry's Nose, Joe Batt's Arm, Muddly Hole and Mosquito. It's doubtful that even the intriguingly named Conception Bay and Dildo Island, however, cause their inhabitants as much hassle as the Austrian village of Fucking, 'driven to distraction', *The Week* reports, by tourists posing in front of their road signs and even stealing them. 'We just want to be left alone,' said former mayor Siegfried Hauppl. 'There is nothing funny in the name to us. After all, Fucking [now there's an upper-case letter that does matter to the sentence sense] has existed for 800 years, probably when a Mr Fuck moved into the area.' But residents of the German town of Wank have advised them to relax, cash in and enjoy it. According to a local official, the Wank guest house does very nicely, and Wank postcards go like hot cakes.

In the UK, where such matters make us blush, place names have sometimes been changed to avoid sounding rude. In Dorset, there is the River Piddle, but in Victorian times, related towns were renamed to avoid English embarrassment – hence Tolpuddle, Affpuddle and Puddletown. Another town that was renamed was Shitterton, which became Sitterton, but has since reverted to the original. Although two other UK places bear the same prefix – Shittlehope and Shitlington Crags (both in north-east England) – Shitterton is the only one to be named after excrement; mathematician Keith Briggs believes the name is derived from a river called Shiter, 'a brook used as a privy'.

Yet some find it hard to stomach the unsavoury connection, with one resident reporting that personalised notepaper ordered from a local printer, with the village name carefully spelled out as Shitterton, came back without the 'h'. And although Ordnance Survey has changed the name back to Shitterton on its maps, you'll have to stick with the sanitized version to get there using satnav: GPS databases are still sitting on the Sitterton side of the fence. But be careful just how you input your destination: a Swedish couple found themselves up Shitterton creek when they arrived in the industrial town of Carpi in northern Italy, instead of the resort island Capri.

Next month it's time for unusual, unearthly or intriguing organizational names and job titles; if you've come across any, do share!

[*The Independent*, 21 May 2008: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/shitterton-the-village-that-dare-not-speak-its-name-831420.html; and *The Week*, 1 and 15 August 2009]

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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