

pikestaff

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

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January 2012

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Style guides aim to be engines of change at transport department

Transport minister Justine Greening has produced a five-page report telling civil servants and MPs how to write letters, including:

- *Do not put in too many adverbs. For example avoid phrases like 'strongly opposed' and just say 'opposed'.*
- *Do not use abbreviated forms such as 'don't' or 'couldn't'.*
- *Avoid passive construction at the start of sentences eg 'it is essential to note that'.*
- *'However' should only be used at the start of a sentence and do not use the word 'firstly'.*

The guidance also states that for correspondence with MPs, 'the Secretary of State would like to keep letters to under a page where possible'.

Other ministers give even more detailed advice, with Theresa Villiers, Ms Greening's deputy, instructing her civil servants to write 'while' rather than 'whilst', 'in legal terms' for 'legally', 'on to' for 'onto' and 'with regard to' or 'as regards' rather than 'with regards to'. She's also a clear fan of 'elegant variation' (using different words to refer to the same thing), instructing staff: 'Try to avoid repeatedly using the same words in close proximity, for example "challenges" and "challenging".'

There's clearly a place for such style guides. Their use derives from the fact that although, in some areas of written English, there are definite rights and wrongs (for example, bad grammar and punctuation), in others you must choose. All publishers and newspapers, and many other organizations, have their own style guides to ensure a consistent house style within and between their publications. However, it's important to do the following:

- Apply the style guide as widely as you can – ideally across the whole organization, but otherwise at least across a whole department (unlike Greening and Villiers, who apparently have separate guides) – and don't change it every time the person in charge moves on.
- Ensure that the style guide doesn't make linguistic slips of its own (a sure way to get people to ignore or laugh at it) – for example, in Greening's guidance bulleted above, 'it is essential to note that' may be an impersonal construction, but it's not a passive one.

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- Present your guidance as just that – not as rules. There are always occasions when going against the guidelines may be sensible. For example, using the passive voice is the right thing to do in some contexts.
- Make sure the style choices you recommend are based on research evidence (ideally) or at least logic, rather than personal whim (or ‘pet grammatical hates’, as the Daily Mail refers to Greening’s bugbears) – for example, why shouldn’t ‘however’ be used in the middle of a sentence, and what’s wrong with ‘firstly’?
- Select points for your style guide that link properly to the needs of your target readers. For example, elegant variation may well be more likely to confuse readers than to make things clearer to them.

Norman Baker, the Liberal Democrat junior minister in the department (and a former English teacher) does at least state a preference for ‘down-to-earth’ language instead of ‘hyperbole’. His guide gives this example: “‘I am absolutely delighted that this new scheme has the potential to be a true gateway to increased public transport’ should read ‘I am pleased that this new scheme will help get more people on to buses’”.

The Guardian’s *Passnotes* column neatly sums up Greening’s guide as follows:

Do say: “*It may sound a bit pedantic, but good grammar is essential to clear and effective communication.*”

Don’t say: “*Sorry Minister, but when I took out all the adverbs, passive constructions, whilsts and howevers, I was just left with today’s date. Send it anyway?*”

Greening recently got a dose of her own pedantic potion when Daily Mail reporter Quentin Letts ticked her off for saying ‘haitch ess 2’ instead of ‘aitch ess 2’ in her Commons statement about HS2, the multi-billion-pound railway planned to run through the Chiltern Hills. With admirable self-knowledge, he admitted: ‘It is southern-nancy-boy of me to say such things.’ A contrite Greening referred to ‘High Speed 2’ in her follow-up statement the next day.

Over the years, we’ve written style guides for many organizations. You can download our own style guide at <http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/plcdev/files/117/original/PLCstyleguide2Dec2011.pdf>. This comprises the guidelines we usually include in style guides for others, as well as some extra ones. But if you’d like a more detailed style guide, or one that uses examples specific to your organization, we’d be pleased to work with you to develop your own corporate style guide.

[Sources: Daily Mail, 10 December 2011: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2072524/Ms-Greening-Minister-Grammar-MP-sends-page-essay-telling-staff-write-letters.html#ixzz1jiJqF7XM>; Daily Mail, 13 January 2012: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2085915/HS2-Hard-pressed-commuters-Would-haitch.html>; and Guardian: 12 December 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/dec/12/pass-notes-justine-greening>]

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New Pikestaff design

We hope you like our new Pikestaff design – but if you have any constructive criticism, please do tell us. We're always pleased to hear readers' ideas for improvement. For example, Dave Skinner wrote to us with this suggestion: 'I know that layout and typography are to some extent a matter of taste – and habit – but I would like to see a clearer differentiation between your own text and passages you are quoting.'

When we thought about it, we agreed, so we've changed the way we present quoted passages, setting them in blue italics.

New website design

In Pikestaff 53, we announced our new website design and invited comments on this. Several readers said it was hard to see how to download our style guide. We've fixed this now. Like many websites, it remains a work in progress.

News and views, and jottings

Our website now includes:

- news and views – links to stories in the media that relate to plain language
- jottings – our commentary on lighter linguistic snippets.

At the end of each Pikestaff, we'll list all the new items on our website since the previous issue. Do click through and have a read.

Spelling is pronounced chaos

Doing the rounds on Facebook recently has been the classic 1922 poem *The Chaos* by Dutchman Gerard Nolst Trenité (also known by the pseudonym Charivarius). It contains some of the trickiest irregularities in English spelling and pronunciation, and first appeared in an appendix to the author's 1920 textbook *Drop Your Foreign Accent: engelsche uitspraakoeeningen*. Thought to be written for Susanne Delacruix, one of Nolst Trenité's students, the poem has appeared in various versions: the author's first version had 146 lines but 'the most complete and authoritative version ever likely to emerge' was published in 1992–93 by the Spelling Society. The society aims to 'raise awareness of the problems caused by the irregularity of English spelling and to promote remedies to improve literacy, including spelling reform'.

Described by Chris Upward as 'a virtuoso feat of composition, a mammoth catalogue of about 800 of the most notorious irregularities of traditional English orthography', the poem starts and finishes as follows:

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Dearest *creature in creation*

Studying English *pronunciation*,

I will teach you in my *verse*

Sounds like *corpse*, *corps*, *horse* and *worse*.

I will keep you, *Susy*, *busy*,

Make your *head* with *heat* grow dizzy;

Tear in eye, your dress you'll *tear*;

Queer, fair *seer*, hear my *prayer*.

It's a dark *abyss* or *tunnel*

Strewn with stones like *rowlock*, *gunwale*,

Islington, and *Isle of Wight*,

*Housewife**, *verdict* and *indict*.

Don't you think so, reader, *rather*,

Saying *lather*, *bather*, *father*?

Finally, which rhymes with *enough*,

Though, *through*, *bough*, *cough*, *hough*, *sough*, *tough*??

Hiccough has the sound of *sup*...

My advice is: GIVE IT UP!

*Pronounced 'hussif' when the poem was written

You can read the full version – and its fascinating history – at

<http://www.spellingsociety.org/journals/j17/caos.php>.

Clarity news

Record numbers attend Clarity breakfast

A plain-English lease attracted a record turnout to December's Clarity breakfast in London. Clive Ashcroft, Head of Legal Services of Land Securities, and Keith Hutcheson, a solicitor in Nabarro's Commercial Property team, together described their experience of developing and launching the Clearlet lease, used so far in more than 300 leases of mostly retail premises.

The Clearlet terms, first drafted by Nabarro and developed with Dundas & Wilson and Eversheds (Land Securities Panel firms), are reviewed regularly with tenants and, as often as possible, their lawyers. Clearlet terms are not copyright-protected; all are welcome to use them. You can see the current version at <http://www.clarity.shuttlepod.org/Resources/Documents/Clearlet%20terms.doc>.

Commercial contracts on one sheet of paper

The next breakfast event will be on 8 February, and will focus on the Pathclearer

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approach to commercial contracts, pioneered by Steve Weatherley seven years ago when he was Head of Legal at Scottish & Newcastle plc. Steve will explain how a massive supply agreement, and many other commonly used commercial contracts, can be reduced to a single sheet of paper, relying on commercial forces and English contract law to regulate the relationship.

Other topics for meetings in 2012, including an evening event, include:

- writing for the computer screen
- wills in plain English
- drafting problems in public and in commercial organizations (jointly with the Statute Law Society).

Conference

Clarity's fifth international conference will be held on May 21–23 in Washington DC, with the Center for Plain Language and Scribes (The American Society of Legal Writers) as co-hosts. The conference will focus on learning from, and encouraging, activity responding to the US Plain Writing Act.

For more information on all these events, see <http://www.clarity-international.net/conferences.html>.

Watershed for Waterstones

The UK's biggest high-street bookseller sparked controversy during its recent rebranding when it decided to drop the apostrophe from its name, changing from Waterstone's to Waterstones. The company says it's phased out its apostrophe because it's no longer practical in the modern world. Managing director James Daunt said:

Waterstones without an apostrophe is, in a digital world of URLs and email addresses, a more versatile and practical spelling. It also reflects an altogether truer picture of our business today which, while created by one, is now built on the continued contribution of thousands of individual booksellers.

Predictably, prescriptive linguists have come out in force, with John Richards, chairman of the Apostrophe Protection Society, commenting:

It's just plain wrong. It's grammatically incorrect. If Sainsbury's and McDonald's can get it right, then why can't Waterstone's? You would really hope that a bookshop is the last place to be so slapdash with English.

Meanwhile English-language expert and descriptivist Professor David Crystal is relatively relaxed about the change. Crystal describes the history of the apostrophe – which was 'one of the last punctuation features to come into English orthography, and ... has never settled down'. He also cites the US Board on Geographic Names, which ruled in 1890: 'Apostrophes suggesting possession or association are not to be used within the body of a proper geographic name.' Yet hundreds of US places

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continued to use apostrophes, and the board concluded that these names 'are best left to the organization that administers them'. Pointing out that there are many 'apostrophe anomalies' in British English – such as Lord's Cricket Ground but Earls Court, and McDonald's but Starbucks – he concludes:

So if Waterstone's wants to become Waterstones, that's up to the firm. It's nothing to do with expressing possession or plurality or anything to do with meaning. It's simply an identity marker. I hear that the CEO of Waterstones has tried to defend the change on two grounds. He says that dropping the apostrophe suggests plurality – there are lots of the stores. That's definitely not a good defence, for there are not lots of Harrods. He's on much stronger ground when he cites motivation from the constraints of the Internet. Or refers to the trend to make public print less cluttered in appearance – a trend which goes back many decades, and began with the dropping of periods in Mr, BBC, and the like.

It's important to realize that whatever Waterstones does has no immediate bearing on the way we use the rest of the language. An apostrophe is still required in standard written English – whether we like it or not – to make such distinctions as it's vs its, and boy's vs boys', and enough people consider that to be critical to mean that there's still a lot of life in this punctuation symbol. On the other hand, when a prominent firm makes a decision like this, it does reinforce a climate of change, so those whose life depends on the use of the apostrophe are right to feel threatened.

It would be a pitiful editor who felt threatened by the potential death of apostrophes: after all, sorting 'em out, though a regular task for us, represents a tiny fraction of all we do to clarify text. We accept that language evolves, so we won't be getting too het up about Waterstones' change.

[Sources: <http://www.waterstones.com/waterstonesweb/pages/waterstones-card/200001592/>; Daily Mail, 23 January 2012: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2085471/Waterstones-gives-apostrophe-changes-logo.html>; and DC Blog, 13 January 2012: <http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2012/01/on-waterstones.html>]

Readers write

Reader Graham Guest sent us this limerick he'd composed:

*A budding young writer called Jo'
Wrote verse's with effortless flow
Apostrophe's were
Thing's of wonder to her
But sh'e never knew where they should go*

Meanwhile, Jiban Majumdar posed us a question: 'I learnt English as a second language and I have some doubts about some of its usage, eg which one is correct, "types of companies" or "types of company"?'

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We replied:

This is a problem that even native speakers wrestle with. Pam Peters advises (in the Cambridge Guide to English Usage):

When it's this type of, the word following is normally singular, as in this type of accident/game/garden/sausage. The corresponding plural phrase: these types of is much less common in both American and British English, by a factor of 1:7 in CCAE [Cambridge International Corpus of American English] and 1:10 in the BNC [British National Corpus]. These types of takes both plural and singular nouns following, as in these types of drama and these types of plays.

So in short, we'd use 'type of' where you can, but if the plural ('types') is needed, then it doesn't really matter whether the following noun is singular or plural, so long as you are consistent.

Let's get quizzical

In Pikestaff 53, Ray Ward (a Queen's English Society committee member and trustee) posed this quiz question: what connects Lord Lytton and Snoopy?

The answer is that Snoopy, in *Peanuts*, was always trying to write a novel beginning 'It was a dark and stormy night', and Lytton's novel *Paul Clifford* actually does begin with those words!

Here's this month's question (the answer to which relates to a couple of the pieces in this issue), again from Ray: what is the name of the figure of speech in which an absent person is addressed as if he or she were present?

So we don't keep you on tenterhooks for two months, you can find the answer at the very end.

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8 December	Excel's misleading signs: pressure mounts
8 December	UK literacy rises (a bit)
9 December	Plain English Campaign: another year, another loopy ceremony
19 December	Great Barrier, Christmas spelling
20 December	Excel Parking at Ebbw Vale – local MP takes up campaign
9 January	Judge blasts 'mind-numbing' legalese
9 January	New article scotches myths on plain English

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Jottings

30 November	Curse of blankety blank
2 December	Remorseless writing style of unrepentant burglar
8 December	Diet of worms is Hobson's breakfast choice
8 December	'Refute' denied its conventional meaning
8 December	'Surreal'
18 December	'Enormity'
18 December	'prior to' (yuk)
18 December	Sum torque on heterographs
19 December	'defused' + 'diffused' = confused
9 January	Bad drink and bookless households cast a spell
9 January	'Lay' and 'lie'
9 January	Proofreading blu's
9 January	Weigh too heavy

Facebook

Pikestaff has its own page on Facebook, thanks to colleague James Fisher, who has kindly set this up for us and is posting regular features there. So visit <http://www.facebook.com/PikestaffNews> and have a look for yourself. What's not to 'like'?

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.

A free newsletter that provides hints and tips, links to language-related websites, amusing sidelines, updates on our services, and short news articles.

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mail@clearest.co.uk Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177

Let's get quizzical: answer

Apostrophe