

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Winter 2014

Boris talks sense shock!



Normally a contender for one of our 'bad' awards, Boris Johnson stunned us this year by sticking up for clarity in Westminster. We thought his comments, made during an interview with Evan Davis, were worthy of our 2014 Plain English Communicator award. We can only hope his suggestions are taken on board. Here are examples of what he had to say on the need for MPs to speak plain English.

"I think one thing that is incredibly important is to try to speak ...and I fail totally on this and I catch myself endlessly on the radio... you're waffling and blurbling and using all sorts of endless Latinate words in exactly that way. What people listen to are short Anglo Saxon words that readily correspond to some object in the universe that they can identify. So in other words talk simply, use plain English and talk about stuff in the real world.

"What's going on is that politicians are using complicated words and concepts in order to polyfilla over a difficult bit in the argument and that's what cheeses people off ...because they can detect that ...they can spot it...and they want to hear it put more simply and ...I mean I'm a terrible offender myself ...I know I do it...I try not to ...but if you want to be heard you have to speak plainly and I believe that completely.

"That is I think at the heart of much of the problem...it's a problem of language and it's a problem of style but that reflects an unwillingness to be honest about the issues.

"People want to engage in the argument, and you can't engage in the argument if it's cloaked and swaddled in a load of waffle that nobody can get to grips with.

"I would much rather be understood and much rather get my case across than just to sort of jazz everything up in a lot of meaningless waffle."

Russell's brand new jargon



Photo: copyright – Featureflash

Making considerably less sense in 2014 was our Foot in Mouth winner Russell Brand, who had an awful lot to say, most of it half-baked gibberish. Russell had a 'Revolution' to promote, which seemed to us a fair bit nonsensical, vague, poorly edited and, of course, over-reliant on jargonistic, insubstantial waffle. Here's a classic bit of Brand from 2014.

"This attitude of churlish indifference seems like nerdish deference contrasted with the belligerent antipathy of the indigenous farm folk, who regard the hippie-dippie interlopers, the denizens of the shimmering tit temples, as one fey step away from transvestites."

Crapple

Apple recently launched their 'Apple Watch' to much worldwide interest, and it's a typically sleek product from a great, innovative company. Though Apple's Senior Vice President of Design, Jony Ive, was a little too creative when describing their latest device.

"The digital crown is a remarkable input device," Ive said. "It fluidly zooms into apps. It enables nimble, precise adjustment. And critically, you can use it without obstructing the display."

What Jony Ive might have said, instead of 'digital crown', is 'knob', but 'knob' is obviously far less exciting. Nonetheless, that's what he's talking about.

Ive went on to describe the watch as having "...a custom-designed chip that integrates many sub-systems into one remarkably compact module, which is then completely encapsulated to protect the electronics. It's essentially miniaturizing an entire computer system onto a single chip."

PC Mag's Will Greenwald's take on what Apple are offering is dismissive.

The Government benefits as claimants miss out

An independent report written for the Department for Work and Pensions by a former economic adviser to the Treasury has seriously criticised how the Government imposes benefit sanctions.

The report, written by Matthew Oakley, suggests that poor communication and a reliance on legalese and jargon leaves the more vulnerable claimants unable to understand why they have been affected or what they can do about it.

Hardship payments, potentially a lifesaver for the hardest hit, are not being claimed as the language used to explain their availability is confusing and unclear, the report suggests.

Letters sent out to those having money taken from them 'were, on the whole, found to be complex and difficult to understand'.

"System-on-chip (SoC). What he describes is an SoC. It isn't a new feat of engineering or a breakthrough in semiconductors, it's just an SoC. It's like saying, 'unlike other companies that use microprocessors, we've created a device that houses millions of transistors in a single tiny square.'"

Ive then mentions that a 'simple leather classic buckle references traditional watch vocabulary'.

As Greenwald says, "More syllables does not mean more significance. It's a leather band with a buckle, and a metal pin in that buckle goes through a hole in the watch band to secure it once you've found a proper fit. It's like nearly every other leather watch band made since clocks first were strapped to wrists, because that's how clocks were first strapped to wrists."

Greenwald captures our thoughts on the whole thing perfectly when he states:

"Obfuscating every little element with unnecessarily long words that sound smarter than they actually are seems wrong. It's the worst kind of jargon: the kind that takes concepts that could be accessible and readily understood by customers and puffs them up to make them seem magical when they're not."

"Actual and sample letters that the review team saw were hard to understand (even for those working in the area), unclear as to why someone was being sanctioned and confusingly laid out."

The report also describes the letters as 'particularly difficult for the most vulnerable claimants to understand – meaning that the people potentially most in need of the hardship system were the least likely to be able to access it'.

Matthew Oakley deserves great credit for his work, and we can only emphasise the seriousness of his findings. As he says:

"No matter what system of social security is in place, if it is communicated poorly, if claimants do not understand the system and their responsibilities and if they are not empowered to challenge decisions they believe to be incorrect and seek redress, then it will not fulfil its purpose. It will be neither fair nor effective."

Our 35th Plain English Awards

It's hard to believe that 35 years of Plain English Campaign have already passed. It's also incredible to consider those things we've helped to change in that time and the battles we've won for those previously snubbed and sidelined by unchecked jargon and gobbledegook. We're proud to have led big changes in communication right across the board – from benefit forms to bank accounts, and instruction manuals to medicine labels.

Unfortunately, we haven't managed to kill off jargon and gobbledegook. Many do and will continue to rely on it to deceive themselves and others. We will, though, as we do this year with our 35th selection of awards, continue to highlight the worst examples of jargon and gobbledegook. We know that badly written documents and confusing terms and conditions are no accident. We remain a source of help for those struggling to get their message across in an accessible way, and there is never a good excuse for retaining bad

habits. We also know that ambiguous or over-complex language will always be useful to those keen to keep their message away from those who often depend on such information.

We will continue to provide the benchmark for clear communication in English. We will also further strengthen our ties with many of the world's leading organisations while remembering those doing great plain English work on a smaller but no less valuable scale. We pay tribute to the latter once again in this year's awards. Such work is vital and often only seen by those very few who are reliant on it.

Here's to the next 35 years of taking the worst offenders of nonsense to task for their failure to communicate properly, and for hiding behind our old foes – jargon, gobbledegook, legalese, waffle and an overall lack of clarity and accessibility for all. And here's to everyone continuing to keep to our principles for the benefit of all.

The very best of Foot in Mouth over 35 years

We've heard an enormous amount of utter nonsense in 35 years. We've shared with you what we saw as the best of it, since we started life in 1979. We were rarely thanked for our well-intentioned focus on the most mealy-mouthed gibberish from each year, but we hope that you found, and continue to find, our celebration of the worst in waffle at least amusing.

Trying to pick the best from all those years is impossible, but here are a few of the more memorable Foot in Mouth winners.

Former England football manager, Steve McClaren, for the following comment he made to Radio 5 Live.

"He (Wayne Rooney) is inexperienced, but he's experienced in terms of what he's been through."

Naomi Campbell for "I love England, especially the food. There's nothing I like more than a lovely bowl of pasta."

London Mayor Boris Johnson for his remark on the BBC news quiz programme, 'Have I Got News For You'. "I could not fail to disagree with you less."



Former United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for comments in a press briefing. "Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know."

Hollywood star Alicia Silverstone for her comments quoted in the Sunday Telegraph.

"I think that [the film] 'Clueless' was very deep. I think it was deep in the way that it was very light. I think lightness has to come from a very deep place if it's true lightness."

Plain English Campaign 2014

Steven Poole – Who Touched Base in My Thought Shower? A Treasury of Unbearable Office Jargon

'If modern office jargon makes you want to throw up, this book is for you.' It was definitely for us, and we're delighted to award Steven Poole for his eloquent and funny attack on the kinds of nonsense that seem to flourish in far too many offices. We doubt, sadly, that those responsible for the examples ridiculed in the book will read it, but read it they should.



An easy read guide to motor neurone disease

An introduction to motor neurone disease

These are clear, well-written guides on a difficult subject.



Handle with care. A guide to keeping your baby safe

Simple conversations to keep your child safe from abuse

These booklets are excellent, clever, attractive guides for keeping children safe.



Annual report and accounts

This report is colourful and well-presented with great use of white space and clear, well-placed text.

John Lanchester – How to Speak Money

How to Speak Money makes plenty of sense out of a typically incomprehensible minefield and provides valuable, entertaining information on a difficult subject.



Young Persons' Guide to Fostering
Children's Guide to Fostering

Excellent guides written to help children and young people understand fostering.

Plain English Standard Bearers

Winston's Wish, the charity for bereaved children, and Age UK deserve a special mention for continually reaching exceptional plain English standards. They have once again achieved the levels of clarity, attractive and accessible design and overall excellence that we now consider our benchmark. Well done to our 2014 Plain English Campaign Standard Bearers.

Winston's Wish
the charity for bereaved children



Award winners and diplomas

Foot in Mouth Award



Russell Brand

Russell was out on his own in the 2014 'Foot in Mouth' stakes. While we admire Russell's determination to open up a debate about democracy and the dire state of the world, we struggle to make sense of most of his comments and wonder if that might be due to the fact that he's lost beyond sound-bite self-promotion.

International Award

Steven Pinker – for his book **The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century**

Plain English Communicator Award

Boris Johnson – for his comments on gobbledygook in politics.

Pat on the Back Award

Robert Fisk

Mr Fisk has been doing fantastic work for many years, and his work in 2014, particularly on Isis and Syria, offered the clearest, most insightful voice on an extremely difficult matter. He helped make some kind of sense of what was and is largely senseless.

Media Awards

John Rentoul

For his **The Banned List**, first a book in 2011 and now an ongoing blog.

Stephen Fry – Fry's English Delight (BBC Radio 4)

Fry's English Delight isn't the only language-based programme on the radio, but it is the best. It's an always-entertaining show, fronted by the ever affable and erudite Fry, and managed to devote an episode to Plain English in 2014 – all the more reason to celebrate it.

Osborne Memorial Award

Matthew Oakley –

Independent inquiry into benefits.

Matthew led an independent inquiry into benefits that found that claimants are misled, denied crucial information and ultimately let down by the Department for Work and Pensions who used 'legalistic, unclear and confusing' language.

Plain English Diplomas

Peter Taylor – Skills Funding Agency

Georgia Jerram – Southern Housing

Martyn Well – Capital One

Christine Worsley – HM Courts and Tribunals Service

Web Award

Change are a leading human-rights organisation led by disabled people. Their website is clear, with uncluttered text and navigation that is easy to follow. Attention has clearly been paid to making the site content as accessible as possible.

The language is in plain English, and it avoids jargon.

www.changepeople.org

Chrissie Maher Award

Peter Rodney, who sadly passed away in November, worked tirelessly to bring plain English into legal language for many years. Peter campaigned, taught and argued eloquently on the Campaign's behalf and his contribution was enormous. He will be sadly missed.

Kick in the Pants Award

Jony Ive



Apple released an apparently (and typically) great product in 2014 – the 'Apple Watch'. However, Apple's Senior Vice President of Design, Jony Ive, was a little too creative when it came to selling the product.



Golden Bull winners 2014

The following 67-word paragraph, taken from Local Action Cornwall's Local Development Strategy, has been sent to us by a supporter who wants to remain anonymous

In the absence of the detail of the LEADER National Operational Manual the proposed decision making process is outlined below and this has been based on previous delivery of the LEADER in Cornwall and closely mirrors the process outlined in the European Network for Rural Development Guide (Nos:10) which outlines best practice for LEADER delivery and is based on experiences in the Argyll and Islands LEADER Group.

Here's a BBC Media Action advertisement for a 'Senior Adviser, Economic Security and Opportunities', whatever one of those is (the job description makes it no clearer)

Role Responsibility

The Senior Adviser, Economic Security and Opportunities will lead on work within the focus area of Economic Security and Opportunity as part of a wider approach to resilience.

The role has influence across the whole organisation and involves external engagement across a range of development, policy and research actors. You will take a lead on the development of internal strategies, work intensively on specific development projects, provide technical support to a major thrust on business development, and build relationships with major external stakeholders.

James Hambro and Partners LLC sent a letter containing this paragraph to one of their clients

So a relevant comparator investment for your case was Comparator 3. This comparator is a return equal to a 50/50 combination of the APCIMS Balanced Index and the IMA Mixed Investment 40-85% Shares sector. This comparator has a listed equity exposure of 40-85% (IMA) and 67.5% (APCIMS).

Michael Marshall is confused about why NCP thinks this email, containing proudly trumpeted changes, 'makes it easier...to select a car park' when to him and us it seems more confusing

We recently told you about our plans to change the names of our car parks at Birmingham Airport. The good news is the changeover was successfully completed this morning. We believe this change makes it easier for you to select a car park that suits your needs.

What's changed?

Old name	New name	Car park features
Short / Medium Stay 1	<u>Car Park 1</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Multi-storey car parkWithin a 2 minute walk of the terminal building
Short / Medium Stay 2 & 3	<u>Car Park 2 & 3</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Multi-storey car parkWithin a 2 minute walk of the terminal building
Long Stay 1	<u>Car Park 5</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Within a 10 minute walk of the terminal buildingShuttle bus provides frequent transfers to terminal
Long Stay 3	<u>Car Park 7</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Within 2 miles of the terminal buildingShuttle bus provides hourly transfers to terminal

One of our supporters sent us this from HMRC's web pages on drawdown pensions

Can I switch from flexible drawdown to capped drawdown?

[Schedule 165 (3B) Finance Act 2004]

No - the test on whether or not you qualify for flexible drawdown is only at the start of flexible drawdown. The decision to move to flexible drawdown is irrevocable under the tax rules and you can't lose the ability to take drawdown pension using flexible drawdown. Once you are in flexible drawdown it is for you and your scheme administrator to decide how much you take out and how often. The amounts drawn under flexible drawdown may be similar to or different from the amounts allowed under capped drawdown. However, there are tax consequences if you subsequently make contributions to or resume active membership of any registered pension schemes after taking flexible drawdown.

One of our supporters wasn't keen on Scottish Power's definition of Maximum Power Requirement

In respect of an Application Form the maximum power requirement specified as the Maximum Power Requirement in the Application Form or in respect of a Verbal Agreement, the maximum power requirement identified as the Maximum Power Requirement in the Letter failing such specification or identification the maximum amounts which you are entitled to take through the Connection Point.

Buckinghamshire County Council Consultancy Services Framework sent by Ashley Baxter

Buckinghamshire County Council is seeking to establish a Framework Agreement to create a flexible base of external consultancy expertise to assist with the implementation of its Transformation programme and other change projects across the organisation. The Framework is intended to provide flexible and agile access to resources in support of the core and additional services identified in the specification.

Through the Framework, the Council is also seeking to channel its spend in a way that provides enhanced value for money and helps to shape a single view of change.

We are seeking to appoint a number of capable and innovative service providers to the Framework who can deliver against a multi-project portfolio of work over the next few years. We will be looking to our Framework partners not just to respond to our needs and we will also welcome a proactive approach and partners that will bring fresh ideas and boundary-pushing proposals to the table.

Southeastern Railways' website

2. What are the times for peak and off-peak travel?

Our peak time services run Monday to Friday, from 06.59 to 09.59, and from 16.00 - 18.59. Off-peak services run at all other times.

Although it is considered peak between 16.00 and 18.59, if you purchase a ticket to travel at this time, the ticket is sold as off-peak.

This is because off peak tickets are generally available for travel after 09.30 in the metro area, and on services which arrive in London after 10.00 from Kent mainline.

Tim Day sent this from the City of Edinburgh Council's 'Programme Momentum Progress Report'

The case review workstream has been established which now includes the legacy Joule case reviews and the deferred case reviews. Activity to date has included amendments to the case review deliverables to make them appropriate for deferred cases. Work is now progressing on the re-programming and re-prioritisation of the case reviews and confirming the number of cases to be reviewed by Deloitte and the internal CEC team. The interface and dependencies between the case review and billing teams are also being reviewed to improve and streamline the process. Deloitte will begin to work with CEC technical resource, once identified, to transfer knowledge and skills for future case review work.

British Telecom email error message

The string too long is refused or truncated and the service works fine.

Pensions Ombudsman

'Police and Firefighters' pension schemes - update number 16

We appreciate that there is considerable interest in the progress of the lead complaint that we are investigating and in the outcome given the effect that this will have on other retired members. However, the issues concerned need careful consideration. They are complex and the consequences of the Ombudsman's decision potentially very significant for the affected parties. We are currently obtaining the parties' comments on certain preliminary views expressed by the Ombudsman on the lead complaint. This is an important procedural step and we expect that the next step will involve the issue a comprehensive preliminary decision by the Ombudsman with his views on all relevant aspects of the lead complaint and the likely outcome. We hope that this will happen in November and at that stage we will be able to say when we envisage that the complaint will be finally determined.

(Our supporter reasonably asked why they couldn't simply state: 'We're still looking into it.')

Weird AI's mission statement

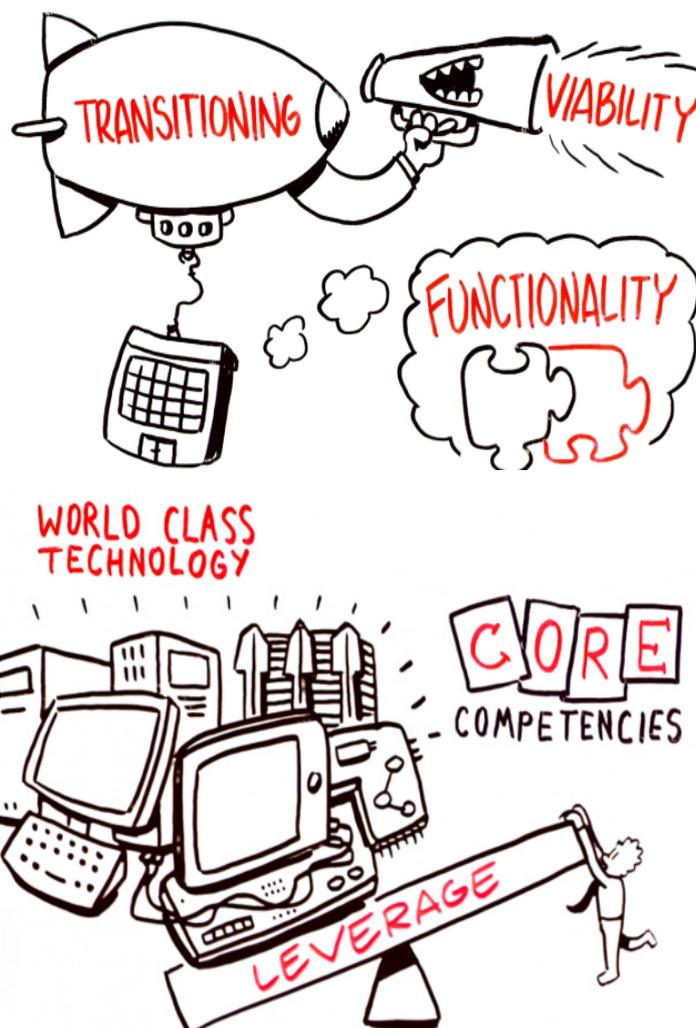
'Weird' AI Yankovic and Plain English Campaign probably don't have much in common. It seems, though, that we do share a dislike of management jargon.

Yankovic, who built a career out of mocking much bigger stars with alternate, puerile versions of their hit songs, has now decided to take on office jargon. And, his efforts have pulled in well over a million views online.

His latest trick – a few decades after his heyday which chiefly involved turning Michael Jackson's 'Beat It' into a comedy alternative version called 'Eat It' – is to incorporate examples of business gobbledegook in his latest song 'Mission Statement', and let them speak for themselves.

That so many people have shown amused interest in the results can only be good for the general perception of corporate gibberish, although it has always seemed immune to ridicule. Those using it tend to have little in the way of a self-critical sense of humour.

Nonetheless, we should thank 'Weird' AI for the focus of his efforts. We can only hope that some of those tuning in are cured for good. Any potential for using such language, or at least taking it seriously, deserves ridicule, and Yankovic has hopefully provided at least a little embarrassment for the worst offenders.



Training dates for 2015 (open courses)

If you have any questions about our range of open courses, phone us on 01663 744409 and ask for Terri Schabel.

Manchester – Thistle Hotel

Wednesday 18 February – plain English
Wednesday 18 November – plain English

London – Thistle Euston Hotel

Thursday 29 January – plain English
Wednesday 18 March – Grammarcheck
Thursday 19 March – plain English
Thursday 7 May – plain English
Wednesday 15 July – plain English
Wednesday 16 September – Grammarcheck
Thursday 17 September – plain English
Wednesday 25 November – plain English

Edinburgh – The King James by Thistle

Wednesday 25 March – plain English

Special open course dates – Thistle Euston hotel

Thursday 19 February – Writing for websites in plain English
Wednesday 17 June – Advanced grammar
Tuesday 20 October – Report writing

Diploma course dates

London – Thistle Euston Hotel

Tuesday 20 January
Wednesday 21 January

Manchester – Thistle Hotel

Tuesday 21 April
Wednesday 22 April