

# Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 46 (October 2000)

**Almost a million people are being cheated of their right to vote by complicated forms and baffling manifestos.**

An investigation by a television production company, assisted by Plain English Campaign, showed that just one in 20 people with learning disabilities voted at the last election.

Fulcrum Television's 'Your Voice, Your Vote' aired on Channel 4. The programme showed how electoral registration forms left many people baffled by phrases such as 'Any person failing to comply with or giving false information in pursuance of this requisition shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding £1000.'

The design also came in for criticism. As one potential voter put it, 'My problem isn't that I don't know how to write my name and address, my problem is where do they want me to put it on the form?'

Presenter Simone Aspis (pictured) argued passionately for the rights of people with learning disabilities.

(Continued on page 3)



## In this issue

### PC times 3

Politically correct police constables and jargon-free personal computing in our news round-up

Pages 2 and 3

### A linguistic long shot

Decoding the bookies' banter

Page 4

### The real world

More common sense from our founder-director

Page 4

### Your letters

Fancy logos, baffling wills and 'middle-class pretentiousness'

Page 5

### It can be done

Inspiration from the company secretary of NatWest

Pages 6 and 7

### Simplicity

A look at the systems behind the waffle

Page 7

### Come again?

The latest jargon exposed

Page 8

# Silenced

## Police take offences into account

Greater Manchester Police has issued a guide to its officers on words and phrases to steer clear of to avoid offending people.

The guide suggests avoiding phrases such as 'old codger', 'happy clappy' and 'batting for the other side' to avoid offending the elderly, religious people and homosexuals.

Our spokesman, John Lister, told BBC Greater Manchester Radio that the guide was no substitute for common sense. 'We are all for the idea behind the guide - that police officers should have the courtesy to consider their audience and avoid deliberate offence. But we think most officers already use their judgement.'

'Of course there would be occasions when calling women 'my love' would be patronising. But a police officer on the beat in a Manchester street market will probably find saying it to be as natural as breathing.'

## Named and shamed

The hunt for the wordiest committee name among our councils goes on.

Rotherham Council boasts a 'Support for Vulnerable People and Creating Revitalised, Inclusive and Safe Communities Scrutiny Panel'.

We began our hunt in July when Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council advertised a 'MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY SAFETY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SAFETY/HUMAN RESOURCES SPOKESPERSON DECISION GROUP MEETING AS A SUB-COMMITTEE.'

# Red tape swamps green fields

There's something stinking on the farms of Britain - but it's been produced by the bureaucrats.

The National Farmers' Union recently held a special meeting to help its members break through the red tape.

Spokesman Raymond Hodgson said farmers were 'baffled by jargon and bamboozled by bureaucracy. Farmers can fill in 10 different forms which contain exactly the same information, but have to be sent to different government departments.'

One farmer said he spent an entire day each week on paperwork.

'For every field I own, I have to fill in a form to number it. Then I have to fill in another form giving the field's size. Then



*Bull... what farmers think of gobbledygook*

another form stating what will be cropped on the field.

'Then if another farmer wants to graze his cattle on my land, forms have to be filled in to say where cattle have moved from and to.

'Each animal has a passport which also has to be filled in. And that is all for just one field. Just

imagine the paperwork if I had 40 fields.'

There is some good news though. Our editing staff have come to the aid of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

We've helped edit their latest guide for farmers concerned about tuberculosis among their livestock.

## MPs struggle with taxing task

The self-assessment farce rolls on, with the Inland Revenue revealing the cause of many of their problems. 'We tested tax returns when self-assessment was first introduced in 1996-97,' a spokesman said. 'But we haven't tested the updated form on the public.'

Plain English Campaign staff told BBC's 'Watchdog: Value For Money' programme that we have a great deal of sympathy for the Inland Revenue's staff. Frankly, they are performing a near-impossible job in trying to produce a clear document based on 6000 pages of tax law.

But to produce a form and send it to nine million people without testing it properly is just asking for trouble. If the Inland Revenue was a private firm with competitors, we are sure there would be a stampede of customers taking their business elsewhere. As a government monopoly, they owe it to the public to make sure the form is as clear as possible **before** it goes out to taxpayers.

The BBC took up the issue after a leading tax expert challenged politicians

from every party to complete their tax returns without any help. Richard Mannion, president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation, made the challenge to highlight how complicated the tax system has become.

'I have spent my whole life in the field of taxation,' he explained, 'but I would no longer dare to calculate the tax position of a client with even moderately complicated affairs without the use of a specialised computer program.'

Three MPs took up the challenge. Conservative David Heathcote-Amery found the exercise 'extremely complicated', while Liberal Democrat Paul Tyler described it as 'more complicated than I thought'. Even Labour's Stephen Pound was baffled by the task, particularly the way he had to jump from document to document.

Fortunately most MPs can afford to leave the task to an accountant. Those who can't afford such help will have to continue taking their chances - and hope they get the right answers.

# Easy PC

We are spelling double trouble for internet wafflers as we take the plain English crusade into the 21st century.

We have launched a new scheme to promote plain English on the web - the Internet Crystal Mark.

The scheme is similar to the regular Crystal Mark for printed documents but, rather than a one-off set of tests, we monitor the site's progress.

As well as the usual tests for language and design, we test how easy it is to find your way from page to page on the site.

The best part is that our supporters can add their voice by visiting the sites and keeping an eye out for the Gobbledygook Monster.

Pearl and London Borough of Waltham Forest have already signed up to the scheme. For more details you can visit the scheme's dedicated website at: [www.plainenglishonline.com](http://www.plainenglishonline.com)



We have added a new category to our annual awards ceremony. The Plain English Web Award will find the clearest website of the year.

The award is sponsored by 'eHelp', a firm that produces software for making help systems for computer programs and websites.

For full details, please visit:

[www.plainenglishawards.com](http://www.plainenglishawards.com)



## Freedom's just another word for someone to misuse

Internet firms have been warned that they must not mislead people with offers of 'free' internet access.

The Advertising Standards Authority has announced tough new rules that mean firms can only use the word 'free' when there are no charges at all. This includes connection, monthly fees and phone call charges.

The move follows complaints after many firms failed to live up to their promises of completely free access.

## Silenced

(Continued from front page)

'We are part of the human race. Having a learning disability doesn't mean you aren't concerned with the world you live in.'

Home Office minister Mike O'Brien agreed the forms did not need to be so complicated, but he could not promise they would be improved by the next election.

The documentary's producers then turned their attention to party manifestos. They asked community workers to rewrite what each party said about transport at the last election. The new versions featured larger type, better spacing and more pictures and symbols to highlight the contents.

Plain English Campaign advised the writers on how to make sure the new versions kept the same meaning. We also tested both versions on the public, proving that the plain English versions were easier to understand.

None of the three main political parties would commit to using clearer manifestos at the next election.

Conservative disability spokesman Tim Boswell said the rewriting exercise would be 'fed into the system'.

Andrew George of the Liberal Democrats agreed to propose a more accessible manifesto to the party.

Labour was unable to provide a spokesman but said they would 'take into account' the programme's findings.

Those with learning disabilities may not be impressed with the parties' comments, but until things change, these opinions will not matter. As one person taking part in the programme said, 'If you can't vote, you lose your right to say 'I don't like the way you are doing things.''

## What's in a name?

Our founder-director Chrissie Maher has never been one to use the phrase 'Don't you know who I am?' But it seems British Telecom know exactly who she is.

When she wrote to ask them to install a new line at her house, the computer-generated letter that she received addressed her as 'Mrs Plain English'.

'I've been called a lot of names in my life,' Chrissie said. 'But I can't argue with this one!'

Dear MRS PLAIN ENGLISH

Thank you for your order.

We can do the work without coming to visit you.



# Jargon-busting guide is odds-on favourite

We have teamed up with leading bookmakers Ladbrokes to help demystify the world of betting. They called for our help after a survey showed that nearly half their occasional gamblers admitted to being confused by racing terms. More than one in three regular punters said they were still baffled at times.

The firm plans to produce an A to Z guide to racing terms and they aim to earn the first ever Crystal Mark for a betting document. The guide will cover such terms as 'double carpet' (a 33/1 bet), 'morning glory' (a horse that performs better in training than at the race) and a 'Heinz' (a combination of 57 different bets).

Chrissie Maher said this didn't mean Plain English Campaign was encouraging betting. 'What we do want is for people who do have a flutter to make their own decisions without being baffled by the jargon.

'These gambling terms can be great fun, but they are often off-putting to the inexperienced better. We don't think placing a bet should be a gamble in itself.'

## From the horse's mouth - the origins of gambling phrases

### Carpet (odds of 3 to 1)

One story has it that there was a prison policy which allowed prisoners to have a carpet in their cell when they had been in prison for three years.

Another theory says the term comes from jockeys appearing in front of a panel of three stewards. The jockey would stand on the carpet in front of the stewards' desk - outnumbered three to one.

### Ching a doi (odds of 5 to 2)

This comes from the tradition of Jewish bookmakers at the track. 'Ching a doi' is a rough attempt to write the Yiddish expression for five to two.



### Nevis (odds of 7 to 1)

This comes from the word seven being spoken backwards. It comes from bookies trying to discuss odds without the gamblers overhearing them.

### Morning glory

This is a horse that performs well in training (in the morning) but disappoints during the race itself.



## The real world

The uncensored views of our founder-director Chrissie Maher

**One question I'm often asked is whether people use the pitfalls of gobbledegook as an excuse for their own mistakes. The short answer is to point to the endowment mortgages scandal - surely four million people can't all have understood the risks and gambled their homes regardless.**

But there's no denying that a few people do try it on. Fortunately one of the overlooked benefits of the Crystal Mark is that it does prove what efforts an organisation has made to let customers make an informed decision.

There was a recent case where a woman was convicted of fraud after deliberately leaving out some of her income when she filled in a form to apply for Council Tax and Housing Benefit. She claimed to

have misread the forms and 'got the wrong end of the stick'.

The council concerned told the court how the form had earned the Crystal Mark - proof that the intended audience could understand and act upon it on a single reading.

The government department which checks up on cases like this, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, regularly praises forms that have earned the Crystal Mark. This is because they can prevent people taking advantage by deliberately cheating the system and then blaming it on a complicated form.

Plain English gives us rights and responsibilities. We have the right to clear information, and we can then take responsibility for the decisions we make. That sounds like a fair deal to me.

Dear Editor

I agree with Mr G of Devon's letter in your July issue.

Too many organisations, magazines and labels now put coloured graphics behind text, so making it difficult to read.

Just because computer software makes this possible doesn't make it desirable.

The purpose of text is to convey information, not to make a design statement.

Your own magazine is attractive, but legible - with the possible exception of the address (white over light blue) on the back page!

Yours,

Ronnie Cramond

Edinburgh

(Editor's note: Thanks for the feedback. As you'll see on page 8, we've taken your advice on board. Please do keep us posted with any comments on the magazine - we expect to have a tough audience!)

Dear Ms Maher

Re GOBBLEDYGOOK

Although I appreciate and support your objective of good, plain English in official documents etc, your organisation is guilty of using pretentious language, i.e. the use of the word 'gobbledygook'.

I am from a working class Liverpool background. I can assure you that an unemployed person in your average Liverpool pub would not say to his/her mate 'I can't understand this form I've got to fill in, it's all gobbledygook.'

Yes, they would probably use the coarse word of 'crap', but what is wrong with 'rubbish'? Not all working class peasants (I'm one of them) are coarse, and I would certainly use the word 'rubbish'.

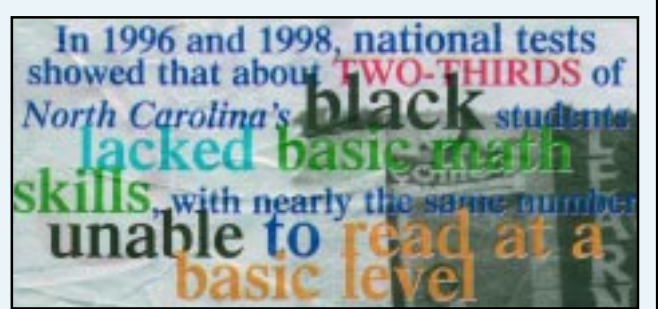
I am Head of Business Studies at a large comprehensive school and encouraging good communication is part of my job. I often have to ask pupils for an alternative word when they call something 'crap' and they never come up with the word 'gobbledygook'.

Incidentally, it is a word much favoured by my middle class colleagues. 'Gobbledygook' is perfectly acceptable if you feel the need to reinforce your social class (e.g. remembering to say 'lavatory' rather than 'toilet'). However, if you really are trying to simplify language for us peasants, forget the word 'gobbledygook' - the most crass word I know!

Yours,

S M Towers (Miss), Wigton, Cumbria

(Editor's note: I think anyone who has read Chrissie's mini-biography 'Born to Crusade' will know she has far more in common with the 'peasants' of Liverpool than the 'pretentious' middle classes. At Plain English Campaign we use the term 'gobbledygook' to distinguish this type of language from 'jargon'. This is language that has a specific meaning but is usually only understood by experts on a particular topic. 'Gobbledygook', which comes from the sound of clucking hens, refers to meaningless drivel.)



Dear Editor

I thought you might be interested in this cutting from my local newspaper here in the States. It's a great example of how perfectly plain words can be useless when the designers get their hands on them. It looks to me like whoever designed this page has just got a new computer program and wants to show it off to everybody!

Keep up the good work.

Yours

Jeff Hardy

Cameron, North Carolina

(Editor's note: Thanks for this example of design at its worst. We've now started a hall of shame on our website for 'typographical offences against plain English'! You can see it at:

[www.plainenglish.co.uk/examples.html](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/examples.html)

Please do send in any other cuttings you may have - the more examples we can build up, the more effective our fight against gobbledygook and ineffective design will be.)

Dear Editor,

John Middleton's experience is unfortunate. It is not surprising that he could not understand the document presented to him. I am an Australian solicitor with experience in drafting wills and I went cross-eyed reading the sample clause!

You may be aware that there has been a strong push for plain English legal drafting in Australia for a number of years. Legislation such as our Consumer Credit Code has formalised the requirement for plain language in some legal documents. Most Australian solicitors are aware of the basic principles of plain English, even if there is not unanimous agreement on the extent to which it can be used in all legal drafting.

Although I still come across legal documents that could use a good 'plain-Englishing', it is becoming less frequent. I personally have not had to deal with a will drafted along the lines of the sample clause for a number of years.

Yours

Vicki McNamara,

Australia

(Editor's note: Our hunt for a solicitor who can write wills in plain English is still continuing. It really doesn't seem too much to ask that people can understand what they are signing when they decide what happens to everything they own.)

# 'Plain English taught us a valuable lesson'

**We've had such a good response to our coverage of Crystal Clear Day in our last issue that we thought we should share one of the most memorable moments from the ceremony with our supporters.**

**Peter Hammonds, company secretary of NatWest, was named as one of our first 'Plain English Champions'. Many guests said they found his honest and straightforward account of working with plain English to be both refreshing and inspirational. We are delighted to share it with you here.**

It's a real pleasure and an honour to be here today. You all know you get invited to a number of events, some of which you don't really want to go to, and there are very few events that are truly unmissable. And for me, in my diary, this is one of those unmissable events.

It's a huge honour. I would like to share some of my experiences of transacting business with Plain English Campaign. The lessons that I can share with you, many will immediately empathise with. But there may still be a few people in the room that still need some converting or haven't had sufficient opportunity to test what Plain English Campaign can do for them.

It all started in the early 1990s. I decided that it really wasn't on that we didn't send new members of NatWest a welcome letter. We found that most companies sent nothing. But there were companies out there that were frankly ahead of us. But what they were sending was not particularly sparkling or exciting. So we set ourselves the target of producing a pack that was better than the rest.

We worked like Trojans on this. I don't know what made me think of it, but it's like that wonderful scene in 'The Snowman' when the boy doesn't know why, but suddenly it

occurs to him to go outside and build a snowman. Suddenly it occurred to me, when we were already 90% of the way through the production, that we should Crystal Mark the document. Because we thought we were the ace team anyway, this was not going to be a particular problem.

There are many people in the room that will recognise the experience that we then went through...



*Peter Hammonds*

The Plain English Campaign editors worked through the document and sent it back. When we opened the package a week or so later, already very conscious of the time that had already gone by, we were astounded to see just how much red ink there was over our 'wonderful' document that we had sent off, basically to be rubber-stamped.

Our initial reaction was of course 'What do they think they're playing at?' But when we came to look at it, we learnt a very powerful lesson – we weren't truly empathising with our customers. We weren't truly seeing it from their perspective and through their eyes.

I have to say that when Plain English Campaign finished with the

document it was supremely better than anything we had ever sent out. I'll never forget the moment when I looked at the document and realised just how much value these people had added by looking at it from the customer's perspective.

Then came the second lesson. I decided that I would go and visit Plain English Campaign and see how they did it. I don't know if you are familiar with the film 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid'. They are chased and hunted down, and several times during the film, the Sundance Kid turns to Butch Cassidy and says 'Who are they?' in genuine inquisitiveness. This is what I thought about Plain English Campaign.

I came up to New Mills on my own and was granted an audience with Chrissie Maher. I sat opposite her at her desk and she told me stories of some of her experiences which many of us will be familiar with – how Plain English Campaign had been born and what her objectives were. And I sat there thinking 'What is this woman on?' She was eulogising, she was evangelising, and I couldn't relate at all to what she was talking about.

What she stated, very plainly, was that people had a right to access to information. It was only later that I had time to think about what she said. To realise and accept just how vital that message really is. For all my intellectual arrogance, it actually applied to me. None of us in our worlds, whether high and mighty or relatively lowly, hasn't come across jargon and complicated material. I came to realise that Plain English Campaign has a wide importance, even beyond the instances that Chrissie herself articulates so passionately.

Then there was the third lesson. We were getting on great, we were beginning to be recognised as working well with plain English. We turned to our employee share

**I could do things and achieve things that I would not have dreamed of doing**



# Simplicity itself

When people ask us how to write a clear document, we often tell them to start with a clear message. As Peter Hammonds explains below, the drive for plain English often means simplifying the process you are trying to explain.

A book by Edward De Bono, the man who invented the concept of 'lateral thinking', tackles this very subject. While consultants are traditionally known for their buzz phrases and jargon, the book 'Simplicity' should strike a chord with plain English crusaders everywhere.

Mr De Bono points out that simplicity doesn't mean dumbing down; in fact you need to have a great understanding of a subject before you can make it simple. The examples he gives could easily apply to language. He explains that many complicated systems still exist long after the reasons for the complexity are outdated.



Brian White MP

Simplicity means deciding what you need to achieve and working out how to do it. The book gives an example of how American space scientists reportedly posed the question 'How can we make a pen that works without gravity?' They then developed, at great expense, a pen using nitrogen to propel the ink.

The Russian space scientists, however, posed the question 'How can we write without gravity?' They used a pencil.

The book's warning that systems will naturally develop more and more complexity will be very familiar to anyone who has attempted a plain English explanation of this country's baffling pensions laws.

The most common complaint we hear is that new pension regulations are simply tacked on to existing laws, rather than starting from scratch to write laws that serve today's needs.

Indeed, in his call for plain English drafting earlier this year, Brian White MP suggested new laws should automatically be reviewed after a few years to see if they were still relevant.

For all the efforts writers make to produce clear explanations, the plain English crusade will always be slowed by needlessly complex systems. Perhaps the people with the power to change those systems might benefit from a dose of 'Simplicity'.

schemes, which had an unsatisfactorily low participation rate. It was a good scheme but all too many of the staff were not choosing to take advantage.

I realised that a lot of this was to do with our poor communications. It wasn't just the words, it was the design and the accessibility and the channels that we were using.

But more importantly than that, and this is the third lesson that I learned, we came to deliver this message in a way that would genuinely appeal to employees and would in reality increase those participation rates.

What we were doing was not only describing shares and share ownership, but we had to describe the operation of the scheme.

When you came to explain a complicated process, in our case to explain what you had to do to join the scheme, you say to yourself, 'Well why on

earth do they have to do that in the first place?'

Our wanting to concentrate on clarity led to us ultimately changing the operation of the scheme – and plain English saved us a lot of money! It was truly astonishing. We were able to take out costs just on the back of trying to create a clear message.

Then the fourth lesson was that we forget just how fortunate we all are as a nation. English has become the business language of the world. What a potentially wonderful opportunity and what a huge advantage this brings to us – and I say potentially because we don't exploit that anywhere near as much as we could.

At my own institute, the Institute of Chartered Secretaries, we were revisiting our constitution through Mark Ashworth. I persuaded the council of the institute that we should rewrite the constitution in plain

English. This was not universally well received at all.

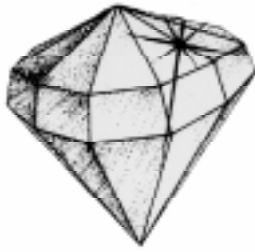
After we won that battle, Mark was the one who turned that document into plain English. I can't help but feel that so much of what we had been doing, both knowingly and unwittingly, was so arrogant when we put it into an international context, where we just expected that they would find their way through our constitution, through the information that we send out. We just expect that they can handle it and come to terms with all the nuances that we ourselves, in our own mother tongue, find so difficult to comprehend.

For this reason, Plain English Campaign has been a huge revelation to me, a huge impetus to do things and achieve things that I would frankly not have dreamed of doing. The inspiration for all of that comes from Chrissie and the staff at Plain English Campaign.

I would like to pay tribute to them too. It's not always easy to do business with Plain English Campaign. They have their own timetables, they have their own needs. In order that we earn the Crystal Mark, our document has to pass their stringent tests. The document mustn't be too patronising or in 'Noddy' language. But as I've done business with them over the years, increasingly they too have adjusted to the needs of the business community and they have been flexible. They have taken a mature approach to allow the Campaign to mature and flourish.

I suspect that without Chrissie and her team, many of us here today would not have achieved the things we have done. If anyone is still unsure whether to put their foot into the plain English waters, please do. I promise that ultimately you will not be disappointed.

# Plain English



The following organisations have earned their first Crystal Mark since our last issue.

Advance Housing Association  
Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC)  
Braintree District Council  
British Bankers Association  
Chaucer Insurance  
Clackmannanshire Council  
Co-op Travelcare  
Covington Hotel  
East Kent Health Authority  
East Riding of Yorkshire Council  
Exchange Health Information  
Hinchingbrook Healthcare NHS Trust  
Home Office  
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council  
Lifetime Careers (Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham) Limited  
Microsoft Limited  
Morphis Holdings Limited  
National Australia Group  
Neat Ideas Limited  
Northcote Housing Association  
Paymentshield Limited  
Practitioner Services for the NHS in Scotland  
Safeway Pension Trustees Limited  
Scottish Homes  
Simplytrading Limited  
South Manchester University Hospital NHS Trust  
Southern Health and Social Services Board  
Sun Bank plc  
Superdrug Stores  
Valuation Tribunal Management Board

## Training courses

We still have places available on several of our one-day open courses. These courses introduce plain English, and are an excellent 'taster' for what we can offer businesses.

The courses also give you the chance to meet people from other organisations who share your interest in clear communication.

The dates are:

- **Tuesday 14 November** (London)
- **Tuesday 21 November** (Manchester)
- **Thursday 14 December** (London).

We also have a series of seminars booked for November and December. These are similar to our open courses, but our trainers will concentrate on particular topics.

The seminars include:

- 'Medical information (NHS Trust information and information on 'over-the-counter' medicines)';
- 'Legal agreements versus plain English';
- 'Accountancy information provided by banks, pension companies and building societies (end-of-year accounts)'; and
- 'Plain English verus Information Technology'

All the seminars will take place in London. We are also planning a seminar on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit forms, which will take place in Manchester in January.

For more details or to book your place, please call our training manager Helen Mayo on **01663 744409**.

## Jargon buster

The latest buzz words from the world of waffle

### 'dotbam'

This is an internet version of a high-street shop. It comes from 'dot' (the full stop in website addresses) and 'BAM' (bricks and mortar – a traditional 'real' shop as opposed to an internet firm).

### 'click-wrap'

A licence or contract that appears on your screen when you are putting a new program on your computer. You have to click a button to agree to the licence.

### 'scarlet-collar worker'

This is a woman who owns or operates a pornographic internet site.

### 'WAPathy'

This is the general lack of interest in WAP (Wireless Application Protocol), the technology that enables web pages to be viewed on the latest mobile phones.

### 'good wood'

Nothing to do with racing, this is wood that does not come from an endangered forest region or from an endangered tree species.

### 'egoboo'

This is the recognition and thanks you get for performing a task, particularly one you have done for free. It comes from 'ego' and 'boost'.

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