

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 52 (Spring 2002)

Government doesn't give a ha'penny for information about Europe

A minister has admitted the Government spends less than half a penny a year for each person to keep the public informed about the European Union.

The figure was revealed during a debate in the House of Lords on a proposal to send a plain English leaflet explaining the Treaty of Nice to each home in Britain. Foreign Office minister Baroness Symons said the idea was impossible because of the limited 'budget for public diplomacy on the European Union'.

She explained that this budget is 'what we have in the kitty for informing the public on these issues.

'We have £250,000, with which we manage to fund a huge range of projects: targeting those who know the least about the EU, giving them information, and trying to stimulate debate.'

According to the latest government statistics, the population of Britain is around 59.8 million. This means

the £250,000 works out at just 0.41 pence for each person.

Our founder director Chrissie Maher said it was no wonder the public feel out of touch with European issues. 'I'll leave it to the political pundits to decide why this budget is so low. All I know is that without plain English information, ordinary people don't stand a chance of having an informed opinion.

'Our supporters, both for and against closer involvement in Europe, tell us that the subject should be one of our top priorities. We will do whatever we can to make sure that everyone, from members of the European Parliament to Tony Blair himself, makes the effort to give the public plain English information. But even if we win the battle for hearts and minds, the Government are going to have to crack open the piggy bank.

'We are all affected by the European Union. We all need clear information about it if we are to have a democratic voice. In my opinion, that democracy is worth more than a ha'penny a year.'

Inside this issue



How are our parliamentarians doing in the fight against gobbledygook?

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What is this man better known as in the crazy world of 'uptitling'?

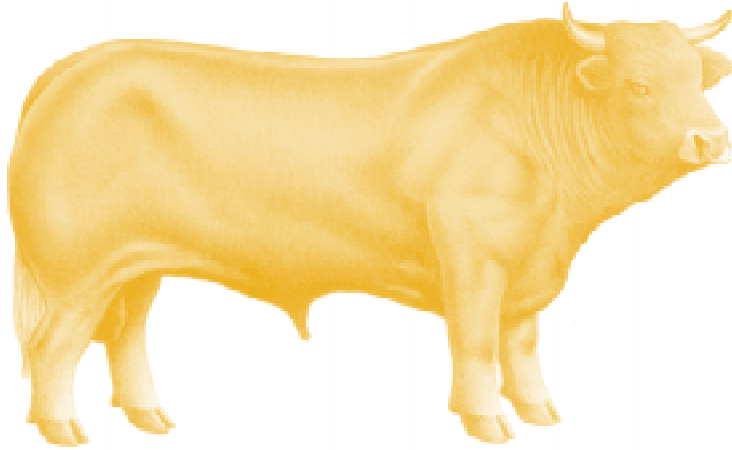
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And where have our globetrotting ambassadors gone now?

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Mystery meat



The Golden Bull - a simple name, but hard to stomach

You may remember the fuss last year when the Government appointed television celebrity chef Loyd Grossman to head a new catering scheme in British hospitals.

Unfortunately his glamorous offerings have run into a problem: patients can't understand the menu.

Staff at Blackburn Royal Infirmary, where the scheme is being trialled, will now rewrite the menus in plain English. 'Beef carbonnade' will become 'a rich beef casserole' while

'kidneys turbigo' will be renamed 'kidneys fried in butter'.

Director of operations Mike Hall said the change was not meant to reinforce stereotypes about the north-south divide. 'We are not saying Blackburn people can understand them any less than anywhere else.'

Local MP Peter Bike said, 'It is quite right that menus should be written in language people understand. They don't want to have to guess at what they are going to eat.'

Tax experts call for inquiry into self-assessment forms

Even the tax experts agree that self-assessment forms are too complicated.

Speaking recently the president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation (CIOT), John Whiting, referred to figures showing that one in ten of those who complete the form miss the deadline for returning it to the Inland Revenue.

'The fact that some 10% of the Inland Revenue's customers could not comply with their basic responsibilities is telling.

'We think that the time has come for proper research into the reasons for so many people failing to meet their responsibilities.'

The CIOT suggested the reasons include 'complexity, poor communication and [poor] perception of tax'.

The problem isn't exclusive to Britain though. A change to the tax return in the United States, where more people complete such forms, has led to confusion.

The change to the form is intended to explain the rules about rebates from the Government following the latest tax cuts. Unfortunately the explanation has not worked perfectly and the Internal Revenue Service (the United States tax authority) has received more than a million forms with mistakes related to this change.



Advert wafflers break rule number one

It's hardly a secret that some advertisers use vague terms to describe the virtues of their products and services. But the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has argued that one firm's interpretation of a phrase was not what the public would expect.

A travel firm, Great Experience Days Limited, claimed to be 'the UK's No. 1 Experience Company', arguing the phrase referred to the quality of the service. But rival firm Red Letter Days Limited said **they** were the true 'No. 1' firm because they had the most sales. The ASA agreed with this second interpretation. The ASA has now applied this rule to another case where a firm claimed to be the 'number one' in its field because it was the oldest firm still trading.

In another case, bosses of the Heathrow Express service (a train that runs from Heathrow Airport to central London) were told to withdraw their offer of a '15-minute journey every 15 minutes' after complaints that the service did not run through the night and that the journey sometimes took up to 25 minutes. Heathrow Express is now searching for an advertising firm to find a better phrase to describe their service.

And catalogue shopping company Argos got a ticking-off for a cheeky defence of the term 'Britain's brightest prices'. After complaints that other firms offered the same products for less, Argos claimed that 'brightest' did not mean cheapest, and was merely 'puffery'. The ASA disagreed and told them to amend the claim in future to avoid any confusion.

VAT's small, folks

British laws say that where a company lists prices in a catalogue, they must always state whether the price includes VAT.

One firm we came across recently seems to resent doing this, choosing to stretch the law to its limits. Computer firm Inmac has written the words 'All prices exclude V.A.T. at 17.5%' at the bottom of the page in 1.5 point text. This is so small that you can fit roughly 48 letters in an inch.

Fax 08705 134 242

All prices exclude V.A.T. at 17.5%

The image below shows the actual size of the text. The notice is in the bottom right-hand corner, below the fax number. And the image above is magnified to show how small the notice is compared with the fax number.

Fax 08705 134 242

While it is legal for a brochure aimed at businesses to print prices without VAT, a 'prominent' notice saying VAT is not included must be printed. We have contacted the relevant authorities to see whether they agree with Inmac's interpretation of 'prominent'.

Westminster waffle watch

Any stereotypes we may have had about members of the House of Lords being out of touch with the 'man in the street' have been shattered by Lord Phillips of Sudbury.

Speaking against a particularly unclear clause in a proposed law, his passion for clarity was crystal clear.

'At first sight it looked gobbledygook; at second sight it looked an abortion; at third sight I was boiling with lawyerly rage. I was boiling with lawyerly rage because I am making a serious point with these two amendments. It is not enough for the Committee to say that this is a technical matter and that this is a technical amendment.

'Human beings have to interpret the statutes that we leave them with, and the danger in this House and the other place is that, week by week and year by year, we enter into legislation that is so alien in its language and so complex in its execution that the ordinary citizen of this land is left totally at a loss.

'I hope the Committee will not think that I am getting too embroiled in a small matter, but we must put a stop to this kind of language.'



Meanwhile, a parliamentary committee has rejected a government regulation for being written in gobbledygook.

The Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments (regulations that do not need to go through the full parliamentary process to become laws) refused to approve a proposed education rule.

The Committee said the regulation was 'drafted in an unnecessarily complex and obscure way' and asked the Government to consider whether the rules 'could have been expressed more simply and clearly'.

It appears this is the first time a statutory instrument has been held up for this reason.

Goodbye my friend

Another piece of legal Latin has disappeared from our courtrooms. The phrase was 'amicus curiae', translated as 'friend of the court'.

It meant a barrister who was hired to give an impartial opinion to a court, rather than to represent either side. The term has been replaced with 'advocate to the court'.

Done by the book

Guardian columnist Michele Hanson recently wrote about a friend who had received instructions on how to teach the book 'Huckleberry Finn' to his pupils.

Apparently he was meant to encourage the study of 'metaphor of artery and artery of microcosm/macrocosm'.

Benefit bafflement

New research suggests more than a billion pounds' worth of benefits go unclaimed by pensioners each year.

The survey by insurance firm Prudential blamed confusion and complexity in the benefit system, covering Council Tax Benefit, Housing Benefit and income support.

Of those questioned, 23% had never heard of the benefits, while another 43% did not realise they were eligible.



A regional head of services, infrastructure and procurement

But what do you actually do?

A couple of years ago we heard about a survey that claimed seven out of ten workers in Britain would prefer a grander-sounding job title to a pay rise. We were sceptical, but it seems employers were listening.

A survey shows around two-thirds of those questioned believed their bosses had adopted the practice of 'uptitling' — awarding job titles rather than giving staff a pay rise.

The survey also uncovered some of the stranger job titles being used in Britain, including:

- optical illuminator enhancer (window cleaner);
- regional head of services, infrastructure and procurement (caretaker); and
- head of verbal communications (receptionist).

We would be sceptical of these findings were it not for our 1997 Golden Bull Award to a supermarket advertising for an 'ambient replenishment controller'. In other words, a shelf-stacker.



Number's up for financial fluffery

The Financial Services Authority (FSA), the Government's financial watchdog, is asking for examples of misleading marketing leaflets and booklets.

The FSA will gather together the complaints to produce general statistics on the types of problems consumers face with terms and conditions. However, they will not be publishing the names or details of any of the offending firms.

You can report any financial gobbledegook to the FSA by calling 0845 606 1234. If you do make any complaints, please send us a copy as well. We are always looking for current examples as ammunition for our campaigning. And unlike the FSA, we're not afraid to name and shame the offenders.

Clumsy sign could be road to ruin

Several journalists contacted us recently after the Government unveiled a series of roadside signs reading 'Don't drive tired'.

While some linguistic experts concentrated on the grammatical failings of this statement, we were more concerned with its effects.

As our spokesman John Lister said, 'There is a danger drivers will

perform a mental 'double-take' when they see the sign and realise it doesn't quite scan correctly. This may only take half a second, but at high speeds a half-second lapse of concentration could be dangerous.'

We also explained how road signs were once written in block capitals but are now printed in sentence case so that drivers can read them more quickly.

There's good news and bad news...

The good news is that British Telecom are replacing the telephone 'call centres' that frustrate so many callers. The bad news is that the replacements will be known as 'next-generation multi-functional customer contact centres'.

Would you credit it?

Credit companies in Britain have agreed new guidelines to avoid confusion over interest rates.

The existing system meant each firm provided an 'Annual Percentage Rate' (APR) figure in their adverts. This represents the total cost of keeping a loan for 12 months, and is designed to allow easy comparison of different lenders.

The changes mean firms that offer a specially-reduced introductory

rate that only applies for a short time cannot describe that rate as an APR. For example, some firms do not charge any interest for the first six months of a loan that has been transferred from another lender.

The change comes as the Government is looking at other possible ways to make loan information clear, such as standardising the way different firms work out their APRs.

The real world

Our founder director Chrissie Maher's inside look at a campaigner's life

On the rare occasions when I get downhearted with campaigning, I only have to look at our bulging postbag to see we still have plenty of support.

Of course, not all the letters are good news. We know that every three months or so we will get several letters telling us where we have slipped up in the magazine. In our position we can hardly complain about that! And we get a lot of letters from people whose concerns are not strictly about plain English, but who see us as a friendly face and the only outlet for their frustration. We always do what we can and, where appropriate, point people in the direction of somebody who can offer more help.

But in this issue I thought I'd share some of the stranger letters we've received. I can only describe these as hazards of campaigning in the public eye. Whenever we have a letter printed in a newspaper, a few days later we are sure to receive some interesting post. The only problem is we are not always sure what it has to do with us...

Take this paragraph from a recent pamphlet that came with no explanation.

'Britain is unlikely to be in danger of a 'Banana Republic' type of coup with an overnight takeover by a military junta ousting the existing government on grounds of financial corruption, and imposing a martial law that prevents any expression of public disapproval. The ordinary front line troops in Britain are too well aware that the law of Treason can reach all the way up the chain of command.'

Well, I'm glad we've cleared that one up. Meanwhile this lady, following up our letter about financial jargon, seems to have mastered the art of changing the subject.

'I read your letter in today's Financial Times. You continue to focus on the fine print when the serious error is in the fundamentals.

'Economics, I must remind you, was rewritten in the plainest scientific/business English compatible with all-angle accuracy, in January 1973, when I imagined myself into the role of the independent management consultant conducting a strategic planning review for the Board, everybody, of a business, Earth Enterprise, in which everybody is also shareholder, trustee for future generations of shareholder, employee and consumer.'

Hmm.

Another letter came accompanied by the writer's CV, including the ancestry of his family back to 1192. He kindly included a copy of a 1988 letter to Lord Carrington at Nato, saying: **'It is now twelve years since I first wrote to you to provide an early cursory rendering of the developing University of Southampton Affair, a most serious local scandal with fundamental global implications.'**

While I must admit that is intriguing, I must have underestimated how important the matter was. As the writer explained:

'I have despatched more than 39,000 letters over the last twenty-three years about the situation referred to. This is really a very large number of letters to despatch for an unaided private individual. The cost of the operation was in excess of £20,000 (excluding labour) and I found it necessary to surrender my retirement pension policy and sell my home to finance it.

'Nevertheless, public response in Britain has hardly been supererogatory.'



In plain English, nobody's taking any notice!

If nothing else, letters like this do keep life interesting, and they are certainly more welcome than a demand from the taxman. And as somebody who gets passionate about a cause, I have to agree with the views of former judge Lord Diplock, who once said:

'The basis of our public life is that the crank and the enthusiast can say what he honestly believes just as much as a reasonable man or woman.'

2002 Awards

Don't forget that you can nominate or enter documents for our awards at any time before 30 September. The categories include:

- **Plain English** (open to any document);
- **Inside Write** (internal government documents);
- **Golden Bull** (the booby prize for gobbledygook);
- **Foot in Mouth** (for a baffling quote); and
- **Web Award** (for the year's clearest website).

Please send entries to us at PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak, SK22 4QP.

Not so quiet on the Eastern front

Our worldwide battle against jargon reached new territory when we became the first plain-language group to visit the former Soviet Union.

George Maher and John Wild spoke at a major journalism and linguistics conference organised by Moscow State University. We funded the trip as part of our campaigning work, using money raised by our commercial editing and training services.

George said plain English was needed worldwide. 'No matter what language they speak, we find people in every country need crystal-clear information. With Russia now having more and more dealings with business in the English-speaking world, we think this is an ideal chance to share our experiences in fighting gobbledygook.

'We also hope the trip will be a chance for us to learn the specific problems Russians have with unclear language, and the way they deal with these problems. Journalists translate official information into plain language every day, so this conference is a great opportunity to find out what is really happening with jargon and waffle overseas.'

Conference head Professor Yassen Zasursky, dean of Moscow State University's journalism faculty, said Plain English Campaign's involvement 'will be a valuable contribution towards a cooperation between scientists and journalists of different countries.'

Founded in 1775, Moscow State University is the oldest university in Russia. The journalism faculty has more than 200 staff and 2200 students. Around 15,000 graduates now work in the media industry.

Irene Alexandrova, the conference organiser, explained: 'The communication system in Russia is complicated. The Russian language



George Maher outside the famous St Basil's Cathedral in Moscow

is represented in five different styles with each having its own peculiarities. These are:

- mass-media style;
- colloquial speech;
- scientific style;
- official style; and
- the style of literature.

'One of our biggest problems is that modern Russian usage is losing its ability to meet the communication needs of the different sections of our society.

'The different styles are beginning to penetrate each other with the result that communications are not always as clear as they could be for the different intended audiences.

'In this new era of 'international' English, obviously it is important that the style of language is as clear as possible. Plain English Campaign has made a valuable contribution to making this a reality.'

As well as spreading the message to Russia, the expedition gained the Campaign some useful publicity back home. The Liverpool Echo wrote a lengthy piece based around former Tuebrook resident George's part in the trip.

We also appeared on radio stations around the country, including John speaking from Moscow to BBC Radio Leeds. This was the first time the station had broadcast a speaker live from Russia.

No kidding with Danish duties

When we were invited to send a speaker to a 'sprogseminar' in Copenhagen, we did have visions of an audience full of grotty kids. Luckily the title referred to the Danish term for language rather than the English slang for a child!

John Wild discussed the history of the Campaign and the way the principles of plain English can apply to any language.

The star speaker at the seminar was author Fay Weldon, who spoke about the way writers have adjusted to the public spending more time watching television than reading.

Jane Hansen, director of Danske Sprogseminarer (the group that organised the event), had visited our awards ceremony last December to learn more about the Campaign. Danske Sprogseminarer offers courses in business English, and their clients consider clarity an important skill when conducting international business.



John Wild and Jane Hansen

**USA
shows
the
way**

He may be a regular candidate for our Foot in Mouth awards, but it seems George Bush has caught the plain English bug.

The foreword to this year's United States budget begins: 'Once in a long time, an established publication presents itself in a new format, and the occasion requires an explanation to readers grown accustomed to the old form... This budget attempts to simplify information, to reduce the use of jargon, and to illustrate its contentions more liberally with charts, tables and real-life examples.'

Meanwhile, the recent much-publicised collapse of energy firm Enron may prove to be a blow against gobbledygook in the United States.

President Bush has asked the Securities and Exchange Commission to require companies to release quarterly reports detailing their financial states in 'plain English'.

The intention is to give investors clearer information when they decide whether to buy or sell shares.

A commonwealth of clarity



We invite visitors to our website to sign up to a free weekly newsletter sent by electronic mail.

Our list is now approaching the 2000 mark, and we have subscribers in more than 50 countries.

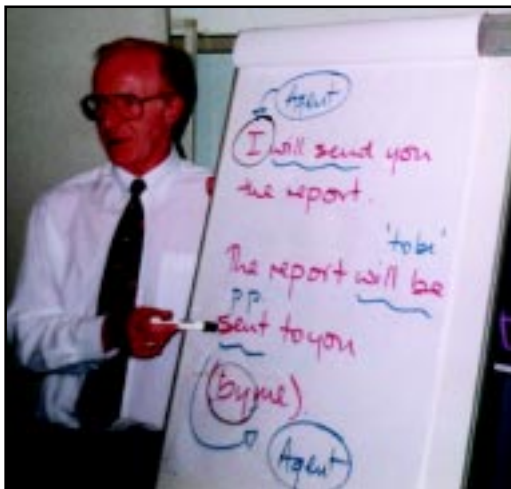
This map shows how far interest in plain English reaches, with the countries where we have supporters marked in green.

Training diary

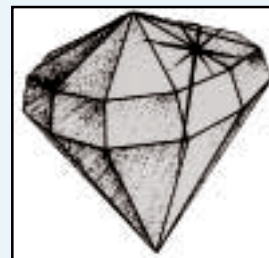
We still have places left on the following courses. For more details on any of the courses, please call Helen Mayo on 01663 744409.

As you will see from the list, we have three special plain English courses, focusing on report writing, design and legal writing. We are working on other special courses, so please call for the latest details.

We also have a range of courses available for learning through the internet. Please visit our website www.plainenglishtraining.com for more details.



Welcome aboard



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

Advocacy 2000
Ash Scotland
Brentwood Borough Council
Carlisle City Council
CESDI (Confidential Enquiry into Stillbirths and Deaths in Infancy)
Cotswold District Council
Daycare Trust Enterprises Limited
English Nature
General Council of the Bar
Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce
HIT
Home-Start
JMC Holidays/Airlines Limited
Landlord Advice Line
Learning and Skills Council
Merseyside Police
Northern Ireland Policing Board
Pharmed (Transcript)
Planet Performance PVC
Ridgehill Housing Association
Rochford District Council
Sedgefield Borough Council
South Cambridgeshire District Council
Strategic Rail Authority
Telford and Wrekin Council
Thameslink
West Oxford District Council
William M Mercer Limited

The Plain English Course

Tuesday 14 May	London
Wednesday 15 May	Manchester
Tuesday 21st May	London (Focus on design and layout)
Thursday 13 June	London
Wednesday 26 June	London (Focus on report writing)
Wednesday 10 July	London
Wednesday 17 July	Manchester
Thursday 15 August	London
Wednesday 11 September	London
Wednesday 11 September	Manchester
Wednesday 11 September	Birmingham
Thursday 19 September	Edinburgh
Wednesday 9 October	London
Wednesday 23 October	Glasgow
Tuesday 12 November	London
Friday 15 November	London (Focus on legal writing)
Wednesday 20 November	Manchester
Thursday 12 December	London

The Grammarcheck Course

Tuesday 9 July	London
Tuesday 10 September	Birmingham
Tuesday 8 October	London
Tuesday 22 October	Glasgow

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