

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 55 (March 2003)

A clear success



The 2002 Plain English Campaign awards proved to be our most successful ceremony so far.

Newspapers from Belgium and Brunei to the United States and Uganda covered the event. Magazine coverage ranged from Hello! to Christian Science Monitor. And we even spoke live to Radio Colombia's Bogota studio with the help of a weary interpreter who struggled to translate the Golden Bull-winning gobbledegook into Spanish!

A standing-room-only crowd joined us at the Brewery Centre in London to see a witty and entertaining performance by our guest presenter Sandi Toksvig (pictured right). Award winners such as BBC newsreader Michael Buerk (pictured above) shared their enthusiasm for the fight against waffle.

And we didn't stop there. The day after our awards we held a one-day conference. The sold-out event, which included delegates from Belgium and Russia, involved a mix of guest lectures and practical workshops.



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Labelling row gets fruity

A charity campaigning for better food and farming has accused manufacturers of misleading customers through food labels.

The row is about the World Health Organisation's guidelines suggesting that people eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. The label on one Heinz product boasts that the tin contains one portion. However,

the product is spaghetti and sausage, and the 'portion' comes from the tomato sauce.

Catherine Fookes of the charity Sustain said, 'Companies are cynically hijacking the healthy fruit and vegetable message and using it as a marketing tool.' Heinz spokesman Michael Mullen said, 'We believe we are being open and honest.'

No claims of clarity

Anyone who has followed the recent woes of the Enron corporation will realise the situation is filled with complexity. This certainly helps explain the following clause in a notice to potential claimants against the firm.

'You should not file a Proof of Claim if... your Claim is limited exclusively to the repayment by the applicable Debtor of principal and interest (a "Debt Claim") under notes or other debt instruments issued by such Debtor pursuant to an indenture (collectively, the "Notes") or the indenture in respect of any such Notes (the "Indentures"); provided, however, that (i) the foregoing exclusion in this subparagraph shall

not apply to the indenture trustee under each of the Indentures (the "Indenture Trustees"), (ii) each of the Indenture Trustees shall be required to file a Proof of Claim on account of the applicable Notes and Indentures for which it is trustee, on or before the Bar Date, and (iii) each Indenture Trustee and any holder of Notes that wishes to assert a Claim arising out of or relating to the Notes or the Indentures, other than a Debt Claim, shall be required to file a Proof of Claim on or before the Bar Date, unless another exception identified in this paragraph applies.'

In contrast, the following passage explains: 'You should not file a proof of claim if you do not have a claim against any of the debtors.'

Can't see the wood for the trees

Three customers of computer supplies firm jungle.com have written to us about an intriguing explanation for cancelled orders.

The three, who ordered a keyboard, blank CDs and software respectively, each received the same e-mail:

'We are writing to advise you that we are currently in the process of consolidating our product range to ensure that the products that we

stock are indicative of our brand aspirations.

As part of our range consolidation we have also decided to revisit our supplier list and employ a more intelligent system for stock acquisition.

As a result of the above certain product lines are now unavailable through jungle.com, whilst potentially remaining available from more mainstream suppliers.'

Where in the world?

The Food Standards Agency has issued guidance to make references to 'country of origin' clearer on food labels.

Terms such as 'produce of', 'product of', 'origin', 'British', 'Scottish', and 'Welsh' should only be used 'where all the significant ingredients come from the identified country and all of the main production/manufacturing processes associated with the food occur within that place or country'. The only exception to this is for 'products, such as chocolate, where certain ingredients (in this case cocoa beans) cannot come from the country in question'.

With meat, 'single country origin declarations should only be given where animals have been born, reared and slaughtered in the same country. Otherwise, information on each of the countries of birth, rearing and slaughter should be given.' (This does not cover beef or veal, which already have their own rules.)

If the place of origin of the food is not the same as the place of origin of the primary ingredients, it may be necessary to provide information on the origin of these ingredients. For example, bacon or ham made in Britain using Danish pork should not be described as 'British ham' but could be described as 'Danish pork cured in Britain'.

Manage without jargon says minister

A government minister has warned his party colleagues to abandon 'managerial language' when promoting policies.

Ian McCartney, who chairs Labour's national policy forum, told the Financial Times: 'Managerial language is fine in its context but in communicating with people about your values it fails to connect.' He told colleagues: 'Don't throw away a good idea by using language that nobody understands.'

Mr McCartney's frustration with jargon may have something to do with him being the Minister for Pensions!

A meaty matter

We are all familiar with the problem of manufacturers producing 'obvious' statements on labels to deflect potential legal action.

But the American website for Burger King has a statement of the not-so-obvious:

'Burger King Corporation makes no claim that the BK Veggie Burger or any other of its products meets the requirements of a vegan or vegetarian diet.'

Right on the money

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) has asked the public to report misleading adverts by financial firms.

The FSA has powers to order firms to stop using particular adverts. In extreme cases, firms may have to write to any customers who responded to the offending advert and give them the chance to pull out of a deal if they have been misled.

You can report adverts by phoning 0845 606 1234. The FSA has also published a guide to advertising 'tricks'.

Junking the jargon

A local authority in Merseyside has announced that its New Year's resolution is to give up jargon and acronyms.

Councillor Jim Keight, leader of Knowsley Council, said: 'I recently received a letter from an outside organisation which had 27 acronyms in four paragraphs! We aim never to do that in Knowsley from now on.'

Techno twaddle

You might think business jargon was the way to get ahead in the world of information technology (IT). But a survey of IT employers suggests such language is the best way to make sure a job application ends up in the bin.

More than 60% of those surveyed said phrases such as 'thinking outside the box' were the biggest turn-off on CVs, ahead of unexplained career gaps, poor-quality paper and irrelevant hobbies.

Not all fun and games



Some of our youngest supporters reported that it isn't always the most technologically advanced toys and gifts that have the most complicated instructions.

A mobile phone booklet was one of the clearest in a study, while a 'Lord of the Rings' game caused utter confusion.

The testing project was the idea of fifteen-year-old Katey Brown, granddaughter of our founder director Chrissie Maher. She and a group of friends (pictured above) tested the instructions for six popular gifts for children: a digital camera, a card game, a 'build your own robot' set, an electronic game, a mobile phone and a board game.

The group praised the Samsung T100 mobile phone's instruction booklet, describing it as 'easy to understand, clear and reliable'. But they were less impressed with Tiger's 'Lights Out' electronic game. Katey said, 'It is hard to imagine anyone playing this game without reading the booklet five or six times at least.' She also condemned a 'Lords of the Ring' card game, saying, 'I certainly would not recommend this game to anyone unless they have the patience of a saint.'

According to Katey, there are four main ways manufacturers could improve instructions:

- using one (not too long) booklet rather than several different leaflets, a huge piece of paper that folds up, or a computer spreadsheet;
- writing instructions in a logical order, for example, explaining how to put the batteries in an electronic game before explaining how to play the game;
- including accurate pictures or photographs so that you can see if you are following the instructions correctly; and
- saying clearly on the box if you need anything extra to use the toy or game, such as tools or special computer equipment.

Plain English Campaign spokesman John Lister said parents and children should not stand for unclear instructions. 'As far as we're concerned, duff instruction leaflets are just as bad as having part of the gift missing. Katey and her friends have shown how testing instructions can uncover problems. It's time manufacturers followed their lead instead of risking Christmas Day being riddled by frustration and misery.'

2002 Golden Bull award winners

A letter from [Wrexham County Council](#).

'Dear Sir

I thank you for your letter dated 29 April 2002.

Under Rule 312 of the Land Registration Rules 1925 every notice issued or sent by the Land Registry must fix a time within which any act or step required by such notice to be done or taken thereunder is to be done or taken, and shall state what will be the consequence of any omission to comply therewith. The notice period is therefore discretionary and fixed by the Land Registry. In this particular case the Registry have allowed for a notice period of twenty one days plus a further period of seven clear days for the delivery of the notice to ourselves which is allowed by Rule 313 of the Land Registration Rules 1925.

If no objection is received from ourselves the Land Registry will presumably proceed to register the title in the name of Mr (deleted by Plain English Campaign).

If however we were to object then the Land Registry would take into consideration our objection and the reasons for that objection before deciding whether or not the registration should proceed.

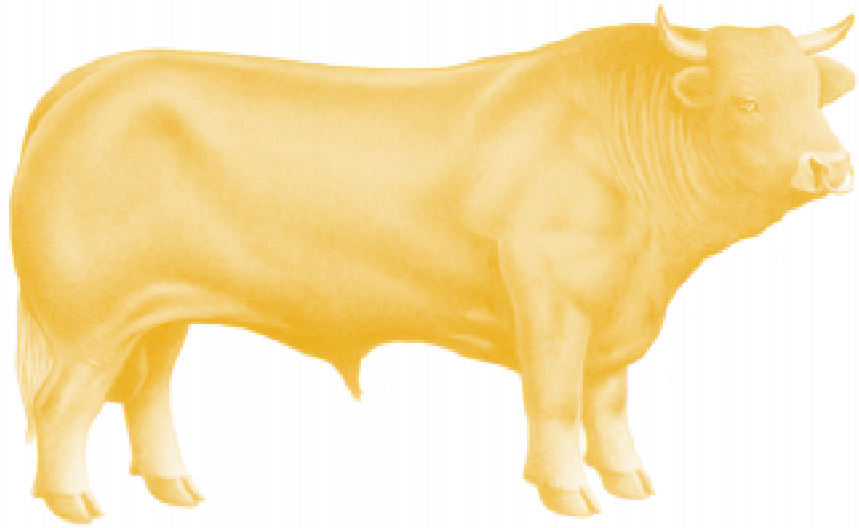
The Council's position is that they have no objection to the application and presumably unless any other objections are received, the registration can proceed.'

A label on [Waitrose](#) mushrooms.

'MUSHROOMS CULTIVATED ON SUBSTRATE FROM EXTENSIVE AGRICULTURE WHICH IS PERMITTED IN ORGANIC FARMING DURING A TRANSITIONAL PERIOD'

A document for a [bricklaying NVO](#) (National Vocational Qualification), describing the act of laying a brick in a wall.

'to install a component into the structural fabric'



An unnamed lawyer's suggested replacement for the word 'container' in a patent application.

'a receptacle having at least one exterior surface and a plurality of walls defining a discrete object receiving volume.'

A letter from [Halifax General Insurance Services Ltd](#).

'I can confirm that you have not inform us a conservatory that has never been built and that you have not been charged any extra for one built.'

A proposed employment contract for management consultants [Gleeds Group](#).

'13. Waiver

No forbearance of failure by the Employer at any time to require performance of any provision of the Agreement or to enforce strictly the obligations of the Employee or to take action to suspend the Employee or to determine the Agreement forthwith upon discovering cause therefor shall effect the right of the Employer so to do any time and no waiver by the Employer of any condition or breach of any clause whether by conduct or otherwise shall constitute a continuing or further waiver of any such condition or breach or as the breach of any other clause.'

A reorganisation announcement by [Marconi](#)'s EMEA (Europe, Middle East, Africa and Australasia) division.

'The benefit of having dedicated subject matter experts who are able to evangelise the attributes and business imperatives of their products is starting to bear fruit.'

Part of an evening student's 'Credit Record' folder from the [Open College Network](#).

'Entry Level

The acquisition of a limited range of basic skills, knowledge and understanding in highly structured and self-referenced contexts which permit the identification of progression from the learner's point of entry to the learning process.'

Paragraph 59 of the [Freedom of Information \(Scotland\) Bill \(2002\)](#), Part 5.

'The Scottish Ministers may by order amend subsection (1) of section 57 or paragraph (a) or (b) of subsection (2) of section 58 so as to substitute for the number of years for the time being mentioned in the provision in question such other number of years (not being a number which exceeds that being mentioned in the provision as originally enacted) as may be specified in the order.'

...and the one that got away

One of our Golden Bulls went to web design firm anadrom ltd (www.anadrom.net) for the following mission statement.

'Please browse the site to see our full range of services, we can remain customer focused and goal-directed, innovate and be an inside-out organization which facilitates sticky web-readiness transforming turnkey eyeballs to brand 24/365 paradigms with benchmark turnkey channels implementing viral e-services and dot-com action-items while we take that action item off-line and raise a red flag and remember touch base as you think about the red tape outside of the box and seize B2B e-tailers and re-visualise innovative partnerships that evolve dot-com initiatives delivering synergistic eyeballs to incentivize.'

We first came across the page last February and, having guessed something may be amiss, decided to consider it for a Golden Bull award only if it was still there in November. We then unsuccessfully attempted to contact whoever was behind the site to get an explanation.

Simon Watkins, the creator of the page containing the passage, wrote to us shortly after the ceremony. He explained that the words were 'filler text' while the page was in development.

While we have a touch of sadness that such gobbledegook turned out to be too good to be true, it does say something about the state of communication today that we ever considered it plausible!

Perhaps most worryingly, Mr Watkins explained that the text was created with a 'Business Mumbo Jumbo' feature on the software (called Macromedia Dreamweaver) that he used to create the page. Our next task will be to make sure this feature comes with a safety warning!

In the meantime we will consider the Golden Bull to be an honorary award for genuine business-jargon users everywhere!



The 'Foot in Mouth' Award

This is awarded to the public figure who produced the year's most baffling quote.

This year's winner is actor [Richard Gere](#). He was quoted in a Sunday newspaper as saying:

'I know who I am. No one else knows who I am. If I was a giraffe and somebody said I was a snake, I'd think, 'No, actually I am a giraffe.'

Media Awards

For crystal-clear reporting

Best National Newspaper: [The Mirror](#)

Best Regional Newspaper: [Western Mail](#)

Best National Television Programme: [BBC News At Ten O'Clock](#)

Best Regional Television Programme: [BBC London News](#) (6.25 pm)

Best National Radio Programme: [Today](#) (BBC Radio 4)

Best Regional Radio Station: [LBC](#) (London)

The 2003 awards ceremony will take place in London on Tuesday 2 December. The closing date for nominations for all categories is Tuesday 30 September. Our address is on the back page.

The Plain English Web Award

[BBC Newsround \(www.bbc.co.uk/newsround\)](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround)

One of the secrets to plain English writing is tone – picking the right words for the intended audience. Writing for teenagers and young children can be a difficult task. You have to write clearly, but without patronising the reader. The Newsround site's team have shown such a balance is possible. We were particularly pleased to see a site where the designers have used the internet to improve the product rather than to show off their technical abilities.



Inside Write Awards

For internal government documents - civil servants writing for other civil servants

[The Court Service](#)

for 'Our journey towards excellence - Your Guide to Communications in the Court Service'

[Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency](#)

for 'Business Skills Toolkit'

[Jobcentre Plus Internal Communication](#)

for 'Jobcentre Plus Organiser'

[Maritime and Coastguard Agency](#)

for 'MCA Business Plan 2002-2003' and 'Forward Look'

[Ministry of Defence](#)

for 'Munitions Matters' magazine (Winter 2001 issue)

[Scottish Executive \(three separate awards\)](#)

'Aiming for Excellence - An introductory guide for managers' (Directorate of Corporate Development's Business Development Unit)

'Staff Handbook' (Scottish Court Service)

'Training and Learning Strategy' (Student Awards Agency for Scotland)

'Plain English' category

Open to any document except for those edited by Plain English Campaign staff

[Department of Health](#)

for 'Keep Warm Keep Well'

[London Borough of Ealing \(Cemeteries Office\)](#)

for 'Ealing Bereavement Service Information Pack'

[Help the Aged](#)

for four leaflets

[MENCAP](#)

for four booklets

[Newcastle City Council \(Social Services Directorate\)](#)

for 'Ever thought about adoption?' and 'Adoption for Newcastle - Our children need your family'

[Redhouse Lane \(working for British Waterways and the Environment Agency\)](#)

for 'The Boater's Handbook'

[Royal National Institute for Deaf People](#)

for a series of leaflets

[Social Security Agency \(Belfast\)](#)

for three booklets

Swimming against the bandwagon

Author Gordon Thorburn discusses the irritating side of modern language

Costiveness cleared up

It's almost touching, the innocent way that advertising people believe a change of name will bring about a change in perception. At Angus McTruck Road Haulage, recently renamed Angus McTruck International Logistics, the PR agency recommended a new corporate livery based on the legend '**AMIL Total supply chain solutions**'. Mr McTruck kicked the PR monsters out of the door, saying he had recently seen '**Access solutions**' on a set of scaffolding, '**Interment and cremation solutions**' at an undertaker's, and fully expected shortly to see '**Solution solutions**' on a notice board beside the sewage works.

Grill-grilled or steamer-steamed?

There was consternation at The Old Bull when a customer in the dining room pointed to '**Pan-fried calves' liver**' on the menu. He asked for liver from a single calf, rather than little bits from several, and said he did indeed want it fried but not in a pan. He thought a squash racket would be ideal for the job.

Greatness thrust upon her

Mrs Felicity Mousepad (51) of Lower Peover, Cheshire, rang up

the telephone company to find out what was meant by its claim '**Great Prices**' — sorry, '**Great Prices!**' Did this imply that the prices in question were stout, thick or pregnant, or perhaps that they were well up the measure, that is, the opposite of small or low? No, the Customer Services Consultant (CSC) didn't think that was the intention. Well then, said Mrs Mousepad, were the prices eminent, godlike, lofty or of surpassing excellence? No, probably they were not. All right, were they connected with the study of '**literae humaniores**' at Oxford University? No, said the CSC, they're just great, that's all.

Honest and truthful

Boogle, Bogle, Bartle, Bimble and Bogtrotter, the hottest of adland hot shops, has decided on a new, improved and laboratory-tested advertising stratagem called '**Coming Clean with BBBB&B**'. Early examples include:

'**Nothing acts faster than Scrimpomboop**' so you may as well take nothing, really. It's faster, as we say, and very much cheaper.

'**You can't buy a better crandrabble**', so the other crandrabbles in the shops are just as good but we know where you

can nick a really superb one.

'**Nobody works harder than Drinkwater**' but then Drinkwater is a lazy swine.

So, there it is. Coming Clean with BBBB&B. '**Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again**' as King Lear said to his favourite daughter.

More is less

On corporation vehicles, it used to say (for example) '**Whitby Rural District Council**', or just '**Whitby RDC**'. Now it might say (for example, and to be geographically even-handed) '**Cumbria, The Lake District, Working Towards Caring for the Future Together**'.

'**Ambulance**' has become '**Naffshire Health Authority Trust Patient Transportation Service. Working Towards Caring Together for the Future.**'

Apart from securing the employment of the nation's signwriters, it's that same touching innocence, isn't it? Thing is, do we smile indulgently at those who commission such grandiose drivel, or do we have them put down?

(Gordon Thorburn's latest book, '**Men and Sheds**', has recently been published by New Holland Press.)

New services from Plain English Campaign

'Introducing business writing'

This is a new internet-based course covering the basics of writing in a business environment. The short course is particularly useful for businesses looking for a simple way to train new recruits. The course covers:

- parts of speech;
- clear writing; and
- different types of business writing.

The course costs £20 plus VAT (£23.50 total). Please visit www.plainenglishtraining.com for more details.

New types of corporate membership

More than 100 organisations have benefited from our corporate membership scheme, where a single payment each year gets you discounts on most of our commercial services. But as well as our standard package, we now offer special deals for single departments, partnerships and sole traders. We also offer a special life-membership package. Each package gives members the same discounts, but the number of free training places we offer varies. For more details, and to discuss which scheme is best for you, please call our manager Tony Maher on **01663 744409**.

Training diary

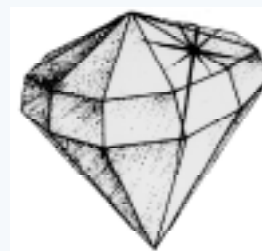
For more details on any of these courses, please call Helen Mayo on 01663 744409.

We also have a range of courses available for learning through the internet. You can get more details at www.plainenglishtraining.com

As you can see, we have a range of special courses. These events look at plain English in particular types of writing.

If there is another subject you think we should cover in similar courses, please let us know.

Date	Venue	Course
Tuesday 11 March	Birmingham	Grammarcheck
Wednesday 12 March	Birmingham	Plain English
Tuesday 18 March	Edinburgh	Plain English
Wednesday 19 March	London	Plain English
Wednesday 2 April	London	Report writing
Tuesday 8 April	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 9 April	London	Grammarcheck
Thursday 10 April	London	Plain English
Tuesday 13 May	London	Plain English
Wednesday 14 May	London	Medical writing
Wednesday 21 May	London	Advanced grammar
Wednesday 11 June	London	Plain English
Thursday 12 June	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 18 June	Glasgow	Plain English
Wednesday 9 July	London	Grammarcheck
Thursday 10 July	London	Plain English
Tuesday 12 August	London	Plain English
Wednesday 20 August	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 10 September	London	Plain English
Wednesday 17 September	Birmingham	Grammarcheck
Thursday 18 September	Birmingham	Plain English
Tuesday 7 October	London	Grammarcheck
Wednesday 8 October	London	Plain English
Thursday 9 October	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 15 October	Edinburgh	Plain English
Thursday 13 November	London	Plain English
Tuesday 2 December	Manchester	Plain English
Tuesday 9 December	London	Plain English



Crystal clear converts

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

Alba plc
 Association of Teachers and Lecturers
 Bramall Construction
 Breast Test Wales
 Coastal Homes Action Group
 Craigmillar Partnership
 Department for International Development
 Department for Regional Development
 DHSSPS (Northern Ireland)
 Equitable Life
 Festival Housing Group
 Guildford Borough Council
 Huntingdonshire NHS Primary Trust
 Improvement and Development Agency
 King's College Hospital NHS Trust
 Langlands
 Llwydcoed Crematorium
 Magellan Medical Communications
 MBNA Europe Bank Limited
 National Cancer Alliance
 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
 Office of the Telecommunications Ombudsman
 Parkhead Housing Association
 Portsmouth City Council
 Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
 Royal College of Anaesthetists
 Scottish Courage
 South Somerset District Council
 Surrey Heath Borough Council
 The Hire Alliance Trading Company Limited
 Thyssenkrupp Accessibility
 West Gloucestershire Primary Care Trust

PO Box 3
 New Mills
 High Peak
 SK22 4QP

Phone 01663 744409
 Fax 01663 747038
info@plainenglish.co.uk
www.plainenglish.co.uk