

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 57 (December 2003)

Watchdog warns of baffling forms

An independent report suggests the sheer complexity of government forms is undermining the benefits of plain English.

'Difficult Forms', published by the National Audit Office, says: 'Forms used by departments and agencies tend to be colourful, use large fonts for print and employ plain English, but they also often have complex internal structures, where users become unsure what bits to fill in. Forms often mix up questions answered by large groups of people with other questions relevant only for small groups of citizens.'

Our spokesman John Lister told the Financial Times that the report was consistent with the accounts we hear from our supporters. 'The real underlying problem is still the amount of information being asked for. People question if it's all really necessary.'

According to the report, an average form used by the Government asks for between

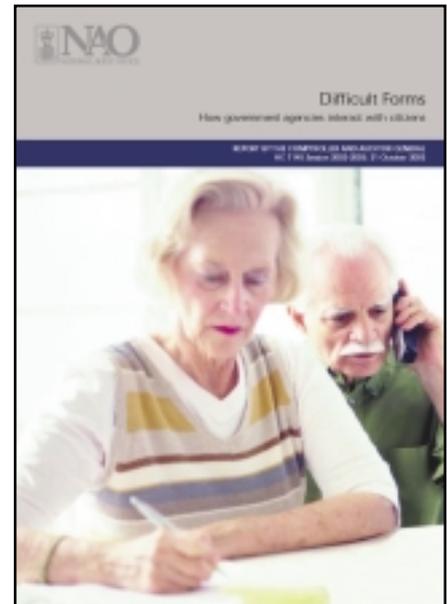
40 and 60 pieces of information, but some ask for more than 200. Forms concerning welfare and benefit payments tend to be the longest - despite the fact that people claiming such benefits are more likely to struggle with deciphering complicated information.

Around two-thirds of the 519 forms surveyed explain any jargon or unfamiliar terms. But the report suggests the major problem with forms is now poor organisation rather than incomprehensible language:

'Until recently some agencies seem to have approached the design of forms in a formal and legalistic way, assuming an ideal citizen who conscientiously reads all the information given with a form and can cope with very complex information. Our case studies show that questions on forms are often not independently intelligible, often include long preambles and signature declarations, and are accompanied by very lengthy and complex guidance notes. Guidance leaflets make very limited use of pictures or icons and rarely provide any 'quick start' advice to help citizens complete their task easily.'

Edward Leigh (pictured left), chairman of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee, said: 'Too many government forms are structured like a baffling labyrinth and seem longer than the average novel.'

'It is no laughing matter. This excessive bureaucracy not only wastes the taxpayer's time, but our money as well.'



According to the report, five specific changes could significantly reduce the problems.

- Forms should be much shorter.
- Information technology should be better used to reduce the amount of questioning needed.
- Guidance leaflets that accompany forms need to be shorter and clearer.
- Form producers need to consider better the point of view of the person filling in the form.
- Writers should realise that it is not always appropriate to use the same form for everybody - different groups have different needs.

Plain English Campaign Awards 2003 - full list of winners on pages 4 to 6

Double trouble

A recent legal case had an interesting twist: the firm involved claimed their language was ambiguous, but the court argued it was still clear.

The case was about Wrigley's attempts to register 'Doublemint' as a trademark for their chewing gum.

First the European Union's Office for Harmonisation in the Internal Market turned down the

trademark application because of a rule that descriptive phrases cannot be registered.

Then Wrigley appealed to the EU's Court of First Justice, saying 'Doublemint' was ambiguous as it could mean the product had twice the usual amount of mint, or that it involved two varieties of mint. The court agreed that this dual meaning meant that logically the phrase could not be an effective description.

However, the Office for Harmonisation took the case to the European Court of Justice, which decided the term was still a description. The Court's Advocate-General said that 'Doublemint' implied 'a mint flavour somehow doubled'. According to the ruling, the fact that the method of doubling was uncertain 'in no way detracts from the fact that the term designates a characteristic of doubled mintiness'.

A memorandum of understanding?

One of our readers sent us a copy of an office memo that they received. It's a good example of how style and content can have a combined effect.

In this case, the message itself is not particularly unreasonable (though arguably petty). And the style isn't particularly unclear (though certainly a little pompous). But the message and style together left readers 'both amused and exasperated'.

'Dear All

Can I remind all users of stationery and all demanders of the same that demands for stationery should be kept to a minimum and stationery should not be demanded more than once a week except in an emergency. Can I also remind everyone that there is a core list of items available and these are the items that should be demanded. Individuals should not be demanding items not on the list when a suitable item is already listed. Furthermore, the requirement for demanding stationery should be by need not nicety.

All demands will be vetted and where necessary non core items removed or substituted.'

No surrender to the linguistic offenders

Radio presenter John Humphrys has condemned 'management speak' in the introduction to a new book.

Writing in 'Between You and I, A Little Book of Bad English' by James Cochrane, Mr Humphrys says: 'It is an outrage that the phrase 'human resources' was not strangled at birth. A moment's thought tells you that

'resources' are exploited, used up, squeezed for every last drop of value and then replaced. Are we really meant to regard human beings in that light?'

The Today presenter, who hosted Plain English Campaign's annual awards in 2001, added: 'It is silly to imagine that this evolution can be halted. But that is different from hoisting the white flag and surrendering to linguistic anarchy.'



Don't forget we offer on-line plain English, grammar and design courses. Please visit www.plainenglishtraining.com for details.

Clearer pensions earn a special mention

A set of plain English pensions materials has won an industry award.

The Safeway scheme won the award for defined benefit communications in the ceremony, run by industry magazine Professional Pensions.

Consultants Hewitt Bacon & Woodrow produced the scheme materials, including leaflets, benefit statements and booklets.

They worked with us to make sure the documents reached Crystal Mark standard.

**Hewitt
Bacon &
Woodrow**

Flat-pack theory pales in practice

A research officer at the University of Derby has created a formula for measuring the complexity of flat-pack furniture assembly.

In his paper 'Identifying the task variables that influence assembly complexity', Miles Richardson says there are seven things that affect the difficulty of assembling a particular piece of furniture. They are:

- the number of parts;
- the number of fastenings (such as screws);
- the number of fastening points (such as screw holes);



- the variety of parts;
- whether the parts will fit together in more than one way;
- how many times you need to select a part; and
- how easy it is to visualise the product.

When asked by the Guardian to put together a bathroom cabinet to demonstrate his formula, Mr Richardson came across another problem.

'There's a problem with these instructions,' he said three minutes into the exercise. 'There's a lack of clarity.'

We may have a contender for the shortest potentially ambiguous phrase of the year.

While many will feel the cause is worthy, Handicap International's slogan for a new campaign is, while only three words long, perhaps unfortunately worded.

It simply says: 'Stamp out landmines.'

Plain English Campaign

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Who's the boss?

Many abbreviations and technical phrases serve a useful purpose, accurately describing a particular process.

The Guardian's business diary column reported on such a process recently. It involved a variation on a standard management buyout, where senior staff get funding to buy their company.

This is an alternative to a buy-in, where people from outside buy the company.

In this particular case, a combination of senior staff and outsiders had bought the company together, a situation described as 'buy-in management buyout'.

All fine so far. The only problem was the choice of acronym. As a cover note put it:

'Please find attached a press release relating to the bimbo of the Clinovia Group.'

The Golden Bull

The booby prizes given to the year's worst examples of baffling public information

■ Yousef El-Deiry, for an article in JMC airline's 'Intercom' magazine

In an article of about 250 words, Mr El-Deiry manages to squeeze in 15 trite clichés.

- 'Once bitten, twice shy'
- 'It is in the latter stages of a race or championship that fortunes are made and lost'
- 'where heroes are born or die'
- 'It ain't over until the fat lady sings'
- 'Our lines of defence will weaken'
- 'positive spin'
- 'light at the end of the tunnel'
- 'jewel in the crown'
- 'sprint to victory'
- 'to lead from the front'
- 'final stages of the race'
- 'unite the team'
- 'draw on each other's strength'
- 'rally the troops'
- 'a force to be reckoned with'



■ Marks and Spencer, for a 'food to go' salad label

The label said 'roast chicken salad', but had a special flash on it saying 'Now with roast chicken'. So what was in it before?



■ Warburtons Bakers, for an advertisement in 'The Grocer'

One sentence in their insert baffled even hardened marketing professionals. 'With a launch burst of 550 TVRs — and £34m in 'premiumisation' opportunities — we're confident you'll rise to the challenge.'

■ SMEG, for their dishwasher instructions

For a top-of-the-range manufacturer of dishwashers to produce an instruction manual like this is a disgrace. It has presumably been poorly translated into English from its original language, and contains such gems as the following.

- 'At this point you must press contemporary the P1+P2 buttons and then you will see that the first 3 pilot light programs will lid up.'
- 'during this phase the writing 'Time to end' flashes up.'
- 'This allows to make function the dishwasher at the time you want. By pressing one after the oter button DELAY PROGRAM (5), it will be seen on the display the vizualisation of delay hours numbers in which you want to make start the machine from 12 hours onward.'
- 'The display will be turned on with a vizualisation that will depend on the state of the dishwasher.'
- 'By pressing the relative button of desired program (see table) it will lid up the relative pilot light to confirm that the operation did occurred on the DISPLAY (9) will appear a program duration forecasting ('h.mm').'



■ Lloyd's Pharmacy, for a letter of apology

Rather than simply admit an assistant had dispensed the wrong strength of tablet, and that this mistake had not been picked up by the pharmacist, they waffled on about staff making a 'cognitive error'. This is just part of a 181-word passage.

'The cognitive process that staff will go through when interpreting prescriptions and selecting drugs is almost intuitive in that the prescription will be read, a decision is then made in the mind of the individual concerned, they will then make a selection based on what they have decided.

When an error is made either mentally or in the physical selection process it is difficult for the individual concerned to detect their own error because in their own mind they have made the correct selection.'

l Awards

■ Standard Life, for a trust deed

In the 21st century it is inexcusable that a company should still be using legal jargon that belongs to a bygone age. The clause in question is one sentence of 108 words.

'THE SETTLER HEREBY ASSIGNS unto the Original Trustees who, by their execution hereof accept the position of trustees, each of the policy or policies, particulars whereof are set out in the Schedule hereto, and the monies assured thereby and all other monies which may become payable in respect of the said policy or policies of assurance BUT ALWAYS EXCLUDING any policy or policies which may constitute a Protected Rights Fund of the Standard Life Appropriate Personal Pension Scheme or the Standard Life Stakeholder Pension Scheme (hereinafter referred to as 'the Policies') to hold the same unto the Original Trustees upon the irrevocable trusts hereinafter declared concerning the same.'



■ Jungle.com, for an e-mail

They were asked a simple question – Do you still sell blank CDs? Instead of simply saying 'No', the company replied: '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 for more mainstream suppliers.'



■ The Social Fund maternity and funeral expenses (general) regulations

These contain the following impenetrable clauses.

'For the purposes of these Regulations, a person shall be treated as a member of a polygamous relationship where, but for the fact that the relationship includes more than two persons, he would be one of a married or unmarried couple.'

'In these Regulations, unless the context otherwise requires, any reference to a numbered regulation is a reference to the regulation bearing that number in these regulations and any reference in a regulation to a numbered paragraph is a reference to the paragraph of that regulation bearing that number.'

The 'Foot in Mouth' Award

This is awarded to the public figure who makes the most baffling comment.

This year's winner is 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.'

The Plain English Campaign diploma

As part of the awards ceremony we will present diplomas to students who have completed our intensive course.

Over the last year they have been through in-depth training to learn the skills to make them the plain English expert at their organisation.

- **Esther Alupke** (London Borough of Newham)
- **Malcolm Boyce** (Hammersmith Medicines Research)
- **David Cooke** (Hewitt Bacon & Woodrow)
- **Judith Coutts** (Standard Life)
- **Kate Dunn** (Hammersmith Medicines Research)
- **Annette Gray** (Inland Revenue)
- **Peter Hargreaves** (Seaboard Power Networks)
- **Mary Hemming** (Zurich Financial Services Limited)
- **Jane Leathley** (South Yorkshire Funding Advice Agency)
- **Tracey Lockyer** (Inland Revenue)
- **Sheila O'Kelly** (National Adult Literacy Agency Ireland)
- **Yvonne Palmer** (Leeds City Council)
- **Gillian Stanger** (Gateshead Primary Care Trust)
- **Leanne West** (Inland Revenue)
- **Julie Witana** (Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative)



'Plain English' Awards

Open to any documents

- **Alzheimer Scotland** for 'Getting help from your doctor'
- **Meningitis Trust** for 'Meningitis support services'
- **National Osteoporosis Society** for 'Osteoporosis – Are you at risk?' and 'Osteoporosis in Men'
- **Newcastle New Deal for Communities** for 'New Deal News' magazine
- **Stop it now! UK and Ireland** for 'What we all need to know to protect our children' and 'Child's play? Preventing abuse among children & young people'
- **Wolverhampton City Council** for a set of guides for carers and people with learning difficulties

'Inside Write' Awards

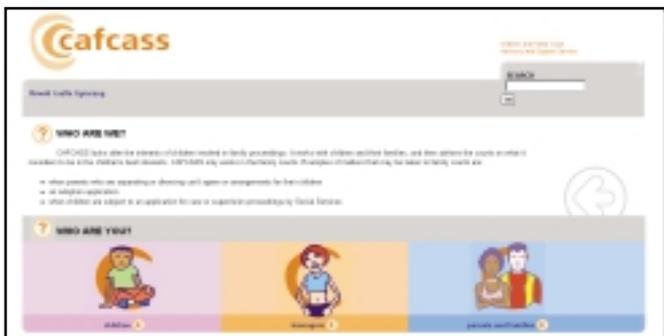
For internal government documents - civil servants writing for other civil servants. Supported by the Cabinet Office.

- **COI Communications with Department for Work and Pensions** for 'Working Letters'
- **Department of Trade and Industry** for 'DTI News' staff magazine
- **Employment Tribunals Service** for 'ETS Today' staff magazine
- **Home Office** for 'Presentation Skills: Handling Nerves'
- **Ministry of Defence** for 'Navy News'
- **Office for National Statistics** for 'Becoming World Class'
- **Welsh Assembly Government** for 'The Approval of Surveys'

Web Award

For the year's clearest website

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (www.cafcass.gov.uk)



Media Awards

For crystal-clear reporting

- Best National Newspaper: **The Independent**
- Best Regional Newspaper: **Western Daily Press**
- Best National Radio: **Wake up with Money** (BBC Radio 5 Live)
- Best Regional Radio: **Minster FM**
- Best National Television: **Channel 4 News** (7pm)
- Best Regional Television: **BBC Look North** (Yorkshire edition)

Thank you to the following organisations for supporting the Campaign by sponsoring tables at this year's awards ceremony.



Training dates for 2004

Please call Helen Mayo on 01663 744409 for more details.

Birmingham

- Tuesday 9 March (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 10 March (Plain English)
- Wednesday 15 September (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 16 September (Plain English)

Edinburgh

- Wednesday 3 March (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 4 March (Plain English)
- Wednesday 20 October (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 21 October (Plain English)

Glasgow

- Tuesday 15 June (Plain English)

London

- Tuesday 13 January (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 14 January (Plain English)
- Wednesday 11 February (Plain English)
- Tuesday 16 March (Plain English)
- Wednesday 21 April (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 22 April (Plain English)
- Thursday 13 May (Plain English)
- Tuesday 18 May (Report writing)
- Thursday 20 May (Writing medical information in plain English)
- Wednesday 16 June (Plain English)
- Tuesday 22 June (Plain English and forms design)
- Thursday 24 June (Advanced Grammar)
- Tuesday 6 July (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 7 July (Plain English)

London (continued)

- Wednesday 11 August (Plain English)
- Thursday 9 September (Plain English)
- Tuesday 5 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 6 October (Plain English)
- Thursday 18 November (Plain English)
- Wednesday 8 December (Plain English)

Manchester

- Wednesday 11 February (Plain English)
- Tuesday 27 April (Plain English)
- Thursday 17 June (Plain English)
- Tuesday 17 August (Plain English)
- Wednesday 13 October (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 14 October (Plain English)
- Tuesday 7 December (Plain English)

Welcome aboard

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

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| • Accountant in Bankruptcy | • Credit Action (DebtCred) | • Isgus International | • Penwith District Council |
| • Air Miles Travel Promotions | • Cube Housing Association | • learndirect West Yorkshire | • Philanthropy UK |
| • Benenden Healthcare Society | • Dignity Funerals | • London Borough of Hillingdon | • Rural Payments Agency |
| • Berneslai Homes | • East Sussex Disability Association | • Minster General Housing Association | • Stadium Housing Association |
| • Britannic Asset Managemet | • Evesham and Pershore Housing Association | • Molesworth Bright Clegg | • Swan Housing Association |
| • Bupa Hospitals | • Flintshire County Council | • National AIDS Trust | • The Football Association |
| • Business Link Kent | • General Physics (UK) | • Neurolink | • United Kingdom Association of Cancer Registries |
| • Cambridgeshire County Council | • Gravesend Churches Housing Association | • Newcastle Primary Care Trust | • University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire |
| • Carrick Housing | • Greater Manchester Revenues and Benefits Consortium | • Ofcom | • Walsall MBC |
| • City and Islington College | • Hammersmith Medicines Research | • Optima Community Association | • Wear Valley District Council |
| • Computershare Investor Services | | • Orange PCS | |
| • Court Funds Office | | • Oxboode Housing Association | |