

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 59 (August 2004)

The letter of the law

Last issue we told you about plans to tighten the laws on credit advertising. Not only have the Department of Trade and Industry now outlawed gobbledegook in adverts for credit and hire agreements, but they did it in a refreshingly clear fashion (see right).

The change is part of a series of regulations aimed at tightening up the credit laws, including the following measures.

- All firms must use the same method of calculating the Annual Percentage Rate (APR), allowing a true and fair comparison.
- The APR must now be the most prominent financial information in an advert.
- Any products or services other than the loan itself (such as payment protection plans) must have a separate signature box. This will stop people signing up to these extra services without realising they are 'bundled' with the loan.

Our founder-director Chrissie Maher said the battle wasn't over. "We'd like to see the credit agreements themselves be clear and fair, as well as the adverts. But this is a tremendous first step."

"Every credit advertisement or hire advertisement shall:

- (1) use plain and intelligible language;
- (2) be easily legible (or, in the case of any information given orally, clearly audible) and
- (3) specify the name of the advertiser."

In this issue

European Union

Neil Kinnock warns officials to keep it clear and concise — or face chaos.

Page 2

American English

A reader's personal article explains why he "will never be a regular guy".

Page 5

25th anniversary

Chrissie Maher recalls the day Plain English Campaign became official.

Pages 6-7

Keep it clear and concise, Europe's translators plead

European Union (EU) writers are on the lookout for wasted words as part of a scheme to cope with the addition of eight new languages.

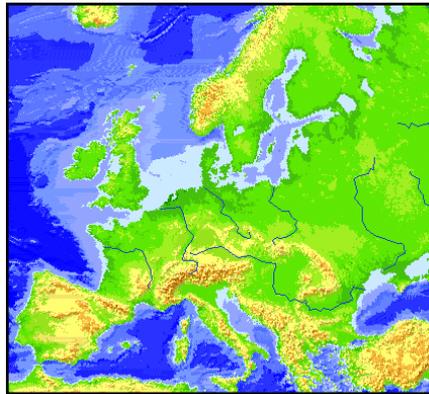
Neil Kinnock, the European commissioner responsible for administration, has ordered writers to keep documents brief and to the point, to reduce the workload for translators.

According to spokesman Eric Mamer, "We want, under normal circumstances, our political documents to be 15 pages long, but obviously if a document has to be longer, it will have to be longer. This is a sort of target, not a legal constraint... but then again, everybody wants officials to be short and to the point, so it's an objective you cannot say no to."

At the moment, the average document is 32 pages long. The backlog of documents to translate is 60,000 pages and, without this crackdown, the backlog could rise to around 300,000 pages within three years after the number of official languages rose from 11 to 19.

We have often written about our admiration and sympathy for the translators working for the various organisations in the EU. Documents produced by a political and administrative system are often far from clear, and trying to convey the same meaning in another language is surely a challenge. In fact the European Commission's translators have their own informal campaign, 'Fight the Fog', which urges writers and speakers to be as clear as possible in the original language and avoid using too many similes and metaphors.

We don't know how true the story is, but apparently a German commissioner's



suggestion that a meeting was progressing at the pace of a hedgehog was once translated as, "This meeting is slow, ponderous and full of pricks."

After the expansion of the European Union this year, the number of official languages used by politicians and civil servants originally rose to 20. This took the number of potential combinations of languages to 190. In practice, the translators use a relay system to cover all possibilities. A speech in English may be dealt with first by a translator who speaks English and German, and then passed on by a second translator who speaks German and Swedish. The expansion led to a particularly memorable quote in the Guardian:

"If you know anybody who can translate from Maltese to Finnish," said [translation] head Karl-Johann Loennroth, "please let us know."

The plea was unsuccessful, and Maltese was suspended as an official language for three years because of a lack of translators.

Following the expansion, reports said some legislation may be delayed for up to six months while a translation backlog is cleared.

Language difficulties have also led to the collapse of plans to allow inventors to get a single

Waffle a threat to the EU's future

Ireland's minister for Europe has warned that a lack of plain English could seriously damage the European Union (EU).

Speaking at a conference to discuss communication in Europe, Dick Roche said: "If citizens are not better informed about, and engaged in, the EU, the future of the union itself could be threatened."

According to Mr Roche, the EU needs to:

- introduce plain language and anti-jargon measures;
- simplify and improve forms;
- set up an agency to audit forms (which, for example, would identify any duplicated or otherwise unnecessary forms);
- simplify legal texts; and
- develop a code of administrative practice.

patent valid across the EU. Some countries have called for the proposed system to use just English, while others have argued that English, German and French is the best compromise. And Spain says each patent should be written in all the official languages.

Our spokesman John Lister told the BBC World Service that now was a particularly important time for such measures. "EU translators estimate they will work on around two million pages this year. Documents need to be clear in the original language to allow the translators to work to their full potential and give every EU citizen the clear information they deserve."

Tax and benefit chaos hampers clarity efforts

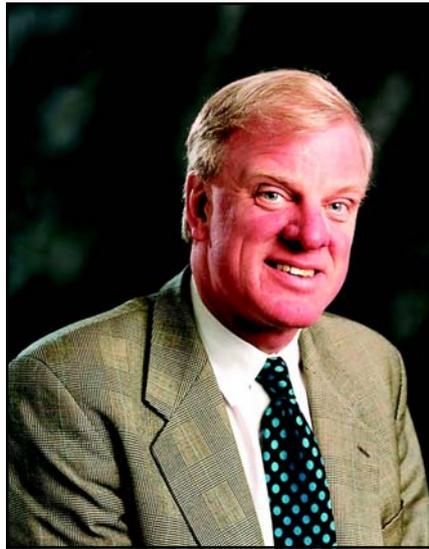
We've often noted the way that attempts to clarify government forms are hampered by the sheer complexity of the tax and benefits system.

Further proof comes from a recent report by Parliament's Public Accounts Committee which revealed that mistakes are made in processing about 20% of benefit claims. The cost of these problems (including genuine mistakes and fraud) is somewhere between three and seven billion pounds a year.

The report also says that the error rate for one benefit, Disability Living Allowance, is almost 50%. You may remember that five years ago the Government admitted that six billion pounds a year was not being claimed by people who were legally entitled to the benefit.

Edward Leigh, chair of the committee, said that there was only one real solution: "Unless someone gets a grip and simplifies the system, nothing will improve."

There is some good news, though. Self-assessment tax forms will, for most users, be getting shorter. Rather than giving everybody the full 12-page form (which contains questions irrelevant to most users), the Inland Revenue will send a simplified four-page form to people with simpler tax affairs. Tax officials will look at



Edward Leigh MP

previous returns to identify people suitable for the shortened form.

And it seems the Inland Revenue has another reason to promote plain English. They've found a new problem with tax-avoidance schemes (unlike tax-evasion schemes, these are legal ways of reducing tax bills): tax advisors are baffling them with complicated language and legal jargon.

A spokesman said "A small number of promoters will, we expect, expend time and money in trying to disguise the scheme under layers of detail — so promoters will be expected to comply by providing a plain English description of the scheme."

MPs get three minute warning

MPs may need to brush up on their plain English skills.

Following a report by the House of Commons procedure committee, the Government has agreed to try a scheme to allow more people to speak during a debate. This will involve lengthy debates having a half-hour or hour-long period during which speeches will be restricted to as little as three minutes.

At an average speaking speed, this will only allow around 500 to 600 words — though this is still enough to read the Gettysburg Address twice!

It's that man again

We couldn't resist bringing you these words from a Prime Minister's Question Time where John Prescott stood in for Tony Blair.

Mr. Peter Luff: What are the Government planning to do to help the Plain English Campaign celebrate its 25th anniversary this year? What will the Deputy Prime Minister do personally to help it wage its war on gobbledegook?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Honourable Gentleman, from time to time, may get his grammar right, but his thinking on politics and his common sense are often missing. And to that we can add the sketch writers as well. But I will not be addressing the conference.

(Fortunately, we aren't planning to hold a conference!)

Builders have been warned to take care using slang when they have colleagues from overseas.

The Construction and Industry Training Board issued the guidance after finding that up to 20% of builders in the UK speak English as a second language.

The advice, described as "common sense aimed at keeping workers safe", gives particular emphasis to avoiding irony, and explaining common safety warnings. A building consultant quoted in the Scotsman newspaper said, "At the moment, if you shout 'Duck!' on a building site in London, half of the workers would throw themselves to the floor and the other half would look up at the sky."

Finance watchdog adds bite to bark

We have previously reported that the Financial Services Authority were planning to tighten the rules on reference to past performance in financial advertising. The changes have now come into force and include the following.

- If there is any mention of past performance, the advert must include a standardised table showing annual returns (as a percentage) for the past five years.
- If less than five years' worth of information is available,

the advert must include details going back as far as possible. If less than 12 months' worth of information is available, the advert cannot refer to past performance.

- Firms cannot make past performance the most prominent feature of their advert.
- A warning that past performance doesn't guarantee future results must appear as part of the main body of the advert rather than being buried in the small print.

One name — one problem

The railway system has always had its own curious use of English: customers have to “alight” or “detrain the unit”. But now a train company's name has caused communication problems.

Four organisations in London and the East of the country merged to form London Eastern Railways, a logical enough name. But consultants then advised the new company to use the trendier brand name 'One'.

The problem comes with platform announcements. Passengers have been confronted with messages such as, “The next train to depart platform 4 is the 7.20 One service.”

Water mouthful

A reader in the United States was delighted to hear some words of expertise on a university radio station.

As it was monsoon season in his area, our reader had assumed the heavy rain was to blame for flooding incidents. But according to the station's expert the cause was “repeated rain precipitation events”.

Clearer contracts come to Caribbean consumers

Barbados has followed the European Union's lead by forcing companies to use plain English in consumer contracts.

As with the European rules, the country's new Consumer Protection Act also bans certain types of unreasonable terms and limits the situations where firms can disclaim liability.

The Barbados Advocate reports that some of the contracts most likely to be affected are those for mobile phones, health and fitness clubs, credit card agreements and banking documents.

The Act “clearly states that all terms in consumer contracts must be in intelligible language and not contain onerous cross-references”.

Verwaltungsvereinfachungsmaßnahmen

Austria is the latest country to promote plain language. Six departments of the country's government have launched a campaign titled ‘Vienna Speaks Plainly’.

Businessman Roland Machek told the Associated Press that unclear language was very common among public officials. “They use very old-fashioned words that our grandfathers

used — and often very specific terms that you don't normally use in everyday life,” he said. “It's been a tradition in Austria since the emperor's time. They loved to create an exclusive fraternity that shut out everyone else. It's ridiculous, and it has to be changed.”

The campaign has involved asking 100 citizens to make suggestions for improving a set of standard letters and forms.

There is also a telephone line for making complaints against excessive legalese.

The campaign has even created a new word for the process of clarifying documents, which appears as the headline of this article.

It's not as much of a mouthful as it seems. It simply means ‘simplified administrative procedures’.

Why I'll never be a regular guy

A personal viewpoint by reader John King

'Take a few moments to read the following', opened the patient information sheet from the University of Oxford. 'Take time to reach your decision', it continued, and 'thank you for taking the time to read this', it concluded. All of us now use these catchphrases obliviously, and it takes an old-fashioned codger like myself to pick them out and register a pedantic objection.

Our mother tongue is getting a linguistic makeover, big time. At its heart is the awesome speed of global communication. No sooner have catchphrases caught on in California, than they are rolled out worldwide. On the internet, we check out upcoming events (where before we just looked to see what was happening), we check boxes (where before we ticked them), and much, much more. A phrase such as "Mrs Smith called yesterday" used to mean that she visited your house, but now it means that she telephoned. Nobody rings any more, and phones are never engaged — they are just busy.

A recently broadcast period drama, 'The Gathering Storm', had Winston Churchill's manservant call out, "On my way", an expression straight out of Star Trek. In the 1930s he would have said "I'm coming", but history distorts the past. It is because the Americans won two world wars that BBC commentators now talk about "the Military" instead of the Armed Forces. It is also no doubt why in Germany, a new hybrid language called "New Deutsch" has taken over, which is half German and half American English.

At international conferences, summaries and recent findings have gone, replaced by

overviews and emerging data. Our English idioms are disappearing as we speak, vanishing faster than species in the rain forest. They are being replaced by their cuter transatlantic counterparts, as swiftly as American grey squirrels are replacing our native red. "Patient did not attend" becomes "patient did not show", drug names in the British National Formulary have given way to those used across the pond, and it is only a matter of time before all patients get sick, rather than falling ill.

And when they get sick, they will likely be "diagnosed with" a disease. That expression is ubiquitous, yet when I was at medical school you diagnosed patients with a stethoscope and tests, as suffering from a disease. But then, a disease — a disorder of communication — is almost what it amounts to in some cases. The memo on my desk reads, "During the building work, the psychologists will be working out of their usual offices." Well if they are out of their usual offices, where are they, I wonder? Nobody knows, but nobody is exactly sure what month of the year we are in at my hospital either, since half of us are writing the date backwards, 9/11 style.

Another sign of the disorder is changed intonation. A musical "uh-oh" is beginning to be heard, if things are not quite as they should be. Like the cuckoo, it has displaced the indigenous "oh dear" from the nest. Many of us now speak as if we are asking a series of questions, the constantly upturned voice echoing the accents on innumerable imported television shows. Not long ago I heard a voice on the radio, delivering what is now called "breaking news", talking about about something called "Severe Acute Resper-tory Syndrome". Respiratory they meant, of

course. I experienced a momentary irritation — what is it with these announcers? But I must think positive. Hey, no worries! The English language just got smarter. And at least they're not saying, "labor-tory" or "appendectomy". That's down for tomorrow's broadcast.

Mostly, I notice the changes within my own field, medicine. But I suspect the trends are pretty much universal. To object is to be considered reactionary, a dinosaur. On the positive side, the new speak can be catchy, expressive, a neat intuitive way of communication. Cool down, chill out, get a life, is what my friends advise me. In plain English, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Sensible advice, which is why for over a year now I've been practising turning my voice up mid-sentence, as if I'm asking a question. The trouble is, I can't get it right. I'm a resistant case, that's my problem. No matter how hard I try, I'll never get to sound like a 'regular guy'. That's why I remain, as I say, a pedantic old codger, taking the time to register these words of protest.

(Dr John King is a consultant psychiatrist who has written several plain English articles about the scientific basis of aromatherapy. His clear style has led to appearances on Medicine Now and Tomorrow's World.)

We'd be interested in our readers' response to this personal article. Do you share Dr King's dismay at the influence of American English on the written and spoken word? Or do you feel that the style of language used in the United States should be defended?

Our contact details are on the back page. We'll print a selection of responses in our next issue.

“I still wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing. I nearly called it off.”

This summer marked the 25th anniversary of the official launch of Plain English Campaign, when protestors shredded “official gobbledeygook” on Parliament Square. But, as our founder-director Chrissie Maher reveals, the launch caused a few nervous moments... before a stroke of luck made the stunt a huge success.

When we arrived the night before the launch, we found a spot where we could park the van without getting towed and went to have a look at the Square itself. I’d been there during the lobbying of the past couple of years but I’d never noticed exactly how imposing the place was. Big Ben seemed huge.

The major problem seemed to be how to get the boxes and the shredder from the van to the grass. It involved crossing the main road and, although the boxes were light, they were bulky and obvious. The police

would see us coming a mile off. I’d never seen so many police. They were everywhere.

The problems seemed too great. There were two zebra crossings to navigate with a shredder, countless boxes, and a flat-folding wallpaper pasting table - all this in one of the most security-conscious areas on mainland Britain.

It seemed a big risk, just to give the British public an image of shredded paper standing on a rickety table. And the press mightn’t even be interested. We drove away from the Square in silence. It just didn’t seem as if it was meant to be.



The launch in 1979 (Chrissie is on the right of the picture)

That night was one of the worst I’ve ever had. There was so much at stake for me personally and the campaign I believed in. Mixed with the fear, though, was excitement and anticipation. I had to build myself up into the same brass-necked Chrissie who’d sat for hours outside the offices of public officials just to get a chance to have my voice heard.

I still wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing. I nearly called it off. Then I thought of the press; if they did turn up and we didn’t, there would never again be a chance to let the whole country hear our plea.

The next morning we found a parking place

round the back of Big Ben. I took a peek into the Square . . . and there were camera crews! By now I was in a panic. I could see them and they could see me; the only question was, were the police watching us both?

We started moving. All the boxes were ferried across the road with little regard for the cars. I dragged the paste table across the road and then someone banged down the shredder. I looked over towards the big Parliamentary gates and sure enough, the police were talking into their radios.

We arranged the boxes in a nice photogenic wall behind the table

and the press were descending on us from all corners.

So were the police. With scores of pressmen crowding in to hear the conversation, one of the policemen spoke.

"I must ask you to leave." Cameras clicked, and the hand shredder churned away. I just stood there and said nothing, so he repeated the order.

"Under what law are we being asked to go?" I was amazed at the amount of fuss that was being caused. Even in my wildest fantasies I hadn't expected so many pressmen.

I could hear the radio on the policeman's shoulder. A nervous voice was saying, "What's going on over there? I repeat: what's going on over there?"

The constable at his side took off his radio and replied, "Demonstration, peaceful. I'm moving them along." Then he told me he was ordering us to disperse by his powers under the Metropolitan Police Act 1839.

What happened next was a stroke of luck that couldn't have been any more helpful for the Campaign if we'd set it up ourselves. It turned out that for the order to be effective, he had to read the relevant passage from the Act. It was filled with legal jargon, and it was so long-winded that reading it took about five minutes. The press were delighted and so was I. They were all shoving microphones under his nose and cameras were clicking like mad.



Chrissie pictured this summer (Photograph courtesy of Andrew Yates)

The policeman was gracious enough to help the broadcasters get a clear recording by running through it a second time. I could have kissed him, but I'm sure he would have locked me up then! I think he knew that we were sincere in our campaign and had a little sympathy with us. He really did us a great favour.

When he had finished reading it for the second time, there was a short pause. I looked him in the eye and said, "So, in plain English, you mean we've got to shove off!" It was a historic moment for Plain English Campaign. There were many more to come.

The police were now trying to wrap

everything up and, after the help they had given us, we tended to agree. Both policemen wished us luck and started to move away. Then one of them turned back and told us there were plenty of documents in his force that needed a good going over!

We told the reporters that all we'd wanted to do was come to Parliament Square and bring their attention to the everyday problems of language, and now we were on our way! The press went wild. By the time we had got the last of the boxes and the table and shredder to the van, I was shaking. It had gone far better than even I had hoped. We had many radio and

television interviews hooked in and press interviews by the score.

We arrived home that night an exhausted group of demonstrators. The next morning, though, it hit us. How on earth were we going to live up to all this and how were we going to keep the momentum going?

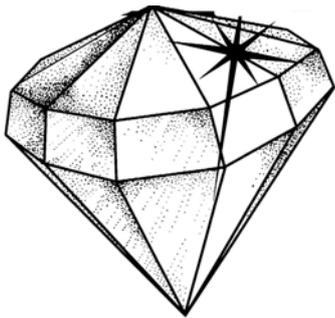
There was still no money and no political support, but we didn't care. The ball had started rolling and we were sure the Campaign would grow.

I thought to myself, "Look out forms, we're coming to get you!"

If only I'd known what a long battle it was going to be...

"So, in plain English, you mean we've got to shove off!"

Welcome aboard



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

ACE Dental Surgery and Implant Centre

Advanced Medical Optics (AMO United Kingdom Limited)

Airparks Services Limited

Alliance Pharmaceuticals Limited

Athena Medical PR

Audiences London

AWE plc

Bedford Borough Council

Big Lottery Fund

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Brent Teaching Primary Care Trust

Brick-Tie Limited

Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust

Bromford Housing Group

Central Suffolk Primary Care Trust

Children are Unbeatable (Northern Ireland)

City of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council

Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health

Corporation of Lloyd's (Lloyd's of London)

Council for the Regulation of Healthcare Professionals (CRHP)

Derbyshire Dales District Council

Employment Tribunals Service

Fastbucks UK Limited

Forest of Dean Housing

Freeth Cartwright LLP

Genesis Housing Group

Govanhill Housing Association

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

IBM UK Pensions Trust Limited

Kettering Borough Council

Leeds North West Homes

Leeds South East Homes

Legal and General Retail Investments

Macmillan Cancer Relief

Malvern Hill District Council

Medicines Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MRHA)

Mendip Housing Limited

Muir Group Housing Association Limited

Munro and Forster Communications

Nash Partnership

National Deaf Childrens' Society

National Screening Committee

Network Q

Northamptonshire PCT

Office of Government Commerce

Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner (Dublin)

Praxis Community Projects

PromoCon Disabled Living

Ribble Valley Borough Council

Richmond upon Thames Churches Housing Trust

Richmondshire District Council

RMC Group plc

Roche Products Limited

Rosebery Housing Association

Sedgemoor District Council

Simon Miller and Company Estate Agents

Somerfield and Kwik-Save

South Central Connexions Partnership Limited

Sport England

StepForward

Sutherland Housing Association

TF Sampson Limited

The DIPEX Charity

Tiscali UK Limited

Ultralase Limited

University Hospital of North Staffordshire

Warranty Direct Limited

Watford Borough Council

West Devon Borough Council

Wight Cable (and Wight Cable North)

Worcestershire Royal Hospital

Wychavon District Council

Training diary

All dates are for our standard 'Plain English' course unless we have said otherwise.

Belfast

- Wednesday 3 November

Birmingham

- Wednesday 15 September (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 16 September

Edinburgh

- Wednesday 20 October (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 21 October

London

- Thursday 9 September
- Wednesday 22 September (Writing for websites in plain English)
- Tuesday 5 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 6 October
- Tuesday 12 October (Report writing)
- Tuesday 2 November (Writing medical information in plain English)
- Friday 5 November (Plain English in legal agreements)
- Thursday 18 November
- Tuesday 23 November (Plain English and forms design)
- Wednesday 24 November (Advanced Grammar)
- Wednesday 8 December

Manchester

- Wednesday 13 October (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 14 October
- Tuesday 7 December

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