

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 60 (December 2004)

Report encourages Schwarzenegger to terminate jargon

The governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, may soon order the state's workers to use plain English.

He has been given a draft executive order after a government review condemned long-winded sentences such as "No person shall exercise the privilege or perform any act which a licensee may exercise or perform under the authority of a license unless the person is authorized to do so by a license issued

pursuant to this division."

Or to put it another way, "You can't do this without a license."

Among the other cases highlighted by the review was an employment form asking "Did you work or earn any money, whether you were paid or not?" Helpline staff said they received calls about this question from confused readers every day.

The draft order says, "Californians who better understand their government are more

likely to trust it and feel a part of it." It recommends "the use of common everyday words, the use of personal pronouns, the active voice, easy-to-read design, short sentences, descriptive headlines and sub-headlines and avoiding jargon, technical terms, acronyms and other abbreviations."

If Mr Schwarzenegger signs the order, it is unlikely to lead to legal action against anyone who doesn't follow it, partly because it



doesn't have an enforceable definition of 'plain' language. But the publicity could inspire government workers to think again about their writing, as well as letting the public know that they should expect clear communication as standard practice.

Waffle leaves sour taste

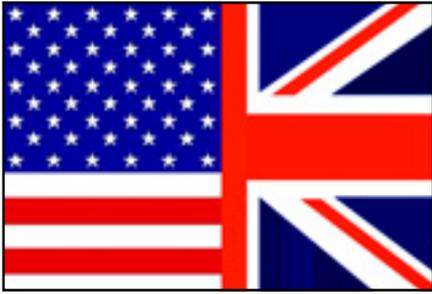
According to a survey, French office workers are most likely to be irritated by waffle in e-mails.

The survey, which also covered staff in the UK, Germany, Spain and Italy, found that across all the countries it was senior

staff who were more likely to take offence at waffle.

Spelling and grammar also cause problems, with 81% of people saying mistakes create negative feelings about the writer. Nearly half of senior managers said such mistakes were a sign of laziness or disrespect.

The telephone company palmOne, which commissioned the survey, followed up with a sensible list of guidelines for sending effective e-mails. But we weren't too impressed by their newly-coined phrase to describe this approach — "a smarter E-ttitude".



The debate continues

In our last issue, Dr John King wrote about his personal dislike of the effects American English has on the language spoken in the United Kingdom.

He concluded, "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."

We asked for your views, and reader Sarah Carr of Warrington wrote with these thoughts.

"If it's any consolation, Dr King, I am pedantic too (though at age 38, not yet prepared to call myself an old codger!). I agree entirely that American English creeping into our mother tongue is highly irritating. But I do think your friends are right to tell you to chill out.

"Like everything else, languages change all the time – it's natural and there's no more we can do to stop it than King Canute could do to stop the tide coming in. Some countries have academies to try to maintain or raise standards in language, but I'm glad that we don't. There are better things to spend public money on.

"Accepting that we can't beat them, I do draw the line at joining them completely. I measure how acceptable or otherwise language is by how plain it is. If people understand American English phrases quickly and easily, then that's fine by me. If they don't, then yes, we should avoid using them — or, should I say, max out on so not buying into that concept?"

Voting verdict

The Electoral Commission has concluded that forms used in June's postal ballot experiment were not clear enough.

Their report 'Delivering democracy? The future of postal voting' included the following conclusions.

"The prescribed Instructions to Voter and Declaration of Identity were overly complex and not broken down into step-by-step instructions. Many of the expressions or words used were too sophisticated. Further, election material, including the ballot packs, was generally not produced in accessible formats or to current best practice accessibility guidelines. For example, small font sizes on important documents were relatively common.

"The Commission received many comments about the complexity of the postal ballot papers and the

detrimental effect on the experience of voting. The complex nature of the instructions that accompanied the ballot papers, and the process of detaching papers and inserting them into envelopes with barcodes visible, was said by many to have led to ballot papers being disposed of rather than used. Comments from electors that the font size was too small, the language inappropriately complex and the instructions overly complicated have all been made repeatedly. Future efforts clearly need to focus on simplifying information that perplexed at least a PhD student and even a lawyer.

"On a practical level, the Commission will continue to advocate more accessible ballot stationery. As noted above, the language currently used is inaccessible to many native English speakers. We are concerned that the complexity of instructions can expose some electors to coercion through their need for translation and assistance."

Alphabet soup

A reader sent us a copy of the following e-mail. Can you work out what the abbreviations stand for?

"The CoLP COG and the MPS wish to work together to create a DCPCU. The EIDU, in partnership with BDB, has been assisting AC SCD with securing s93 or s25 PA funding from APACS and HO once approval has been given from HMC&E regarding the VAT issues."

The answer is below. Well done to those of you who got them all right! Of course, there's nothing wrong with abbreviations when the intended reader is familiar with the terms. But we thought this would be a fun way of showing how difficult it can be to decipher unfamiliar abbreviations, particularly when there are so many of them, or there isn't enough context to guess the meaning.

"The City of London Police Chief Officer Group and the Metropolitan Police Service Management Board wish to work together to create a Dedicated Cheque & Plastic Card Unit. The Events and Income Development Unit, in partnership with Bircham Dyson Bell, has been assisting Assistant Commissioner Serious Crime Directorate with securing Section 93 or Section 25 Police Act funding from the Association of Payment and Clearing Services and the Home Office once approval has been given from Her Majesty's Custom & Excise regarding the Value Added Tax issues."

Finance watchdogs still on the money

Officials in the United Kingdom and Ireland are continuing to work to reduce the confusion caused by financial gobbledeygook.

Callum McCarthy, the chairman of the Financial Services Authority, the UK's financial watchdog, has warned that consumer education and clearer documents are needed to make financial competition work. Speaking to the Reuters news agency, he said:

"In Britain, 23 per cent of adults, if presented with the Yellow Pages directory and asked to give from it the name of a plumber, cannot do so; over 20 per cent cannot do simple percentages — they are unlikely to understand either of my last two statements. Yet as a country we are moving a number of the most important financial decisions — for health provision, for education, for pensions — from institutions to the individual, even when many individuals are poorly equipped to take those decisions. Nor is the position a good one in terms of relevant and comprehensible information being given to customers by providers of financial services: too often the product, already complex, is made still more complex by a specialised and difficult to understand vocabulary.

"We are requiring firms to provide basic information in standard form (to make comparison of competing

products easier), and requiring fuller and clearer disclosure (of life products, for example). So we expect progress towards clearer, relevant information."

As part of National Adult Literacy Awareness Week in Ireland, the country's Financial Services Regulator has said it will work for "all consumers [to] have access to information on financial services and products that is clear, consumer-friendly and explains complex financial terms".

Their research shows:

- 75% of people find information on financial products confusing;
- 92% would read more information on financial products if it was written in plain English; and
- 63% of people do not shop around because they do not fully understand what they should look for when considering a financial product or service.

Consumer director Mary O'Shea said "The financial services industry itself has a vital role to play in ensuring that people are given information that clearly explains financial products and services. Our research shows the need for independent information in plain English. The lack of plain English in written information about financial products is one reason why people are not more informed about their choices."

And on a lighter note...

The Financial Times reported on a press release announcing a company's decision to buy a stake in an Australian mining project.

Or, as the release's headline put it, "Anglo Pacific Group announces exposure to uranium."

A man named Ian Cockerill, of the company Gold Fields, received a letter this week addressed to Ian Cockrill (missing out the 'e') at Gold Fileds. The letter made three points, numbered 1, 2 and 2.

And the purpose of this letter? It was the formal offer in a proposed four billion pounds takeover deal.

A reader, who quite understandably wants to remain anonymous, tells of a recent message from management at his firm, issued amid rumours of impending redundancies.

The company admitted to staff that there are plans for "a descending flight path in respect of headcount".

Thanks also to reader Alan Crocker for telling us about an intriguing sign in a Canterbury supermarket.

It read, "If you wish to change your baby, please see the lady at the salad bar."

Agency makes mincemeat of 'lean' label claim

The Food Standards Agency is proposing to remove a loophole in labelling laws by which expensive 'lean' minced meat can have more fat than the 'standard' equivalent.

Existing laws say meat described as 'lean minced meat' can have no more than 7% fat. However, if manufacturers use any other phrase, such as

'extra lean mince' or even 'minced meat — lean', there is no legal restriction on the fat content.

The Agency studied 561 samples (made up of 152 different products) and found that while some 'standard' meat had as little as 1.9% fat, the lowest fat content among the 'lean' products was 4%! Some 'super lean' or 'extra lean' meat had as much as 17.7% fat.

The Golden Bull

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

■ **The GENIUS project** (based at the University of Reading) for a project overview

The project is structured around multifaceted incremental work plan combining novel content design based on new pedagogical paradigms blended with the e-learning environments to facilitate hybrid mode of delivery. This is combined with series of educational experiments on the target learner groups with possibilities to adjust the approach and disseminate the interim and final results.

Our pedagogical approach is based on the educational model which assumes that the learning process is an interactive process of seeking understanding, consisting of three fundamental components: Conceptualization, Construction and Dialogue. The relevant modules of the New Curricula are mapped onto these three components and a hybrid way of delivery is investigated through different scenarios.



■ **TriMedia** for a press statement by CEO Chris Schwartz about a partnership to promote Captain Scarlet

The combination of Gerry Anderson's creativity and state-of-the-art high-definition animated production and production facilities, Sony's global strength in providing a one-stop global solution to develop Captain Scarlet product iterations across all media platforms, ability to define and launch a business management strategy leveraging Sony's market strength in each category and our ability at TriMedia to converge the film and music worlds independently with vertical and street marketing expertise will prove to be of great benefit for all involved. I believe that a cross-pollination of creative properties in multiple media formats with a vertical market approach allows companies to maximize the return for their investment in creative properties and talents and will prove to be the economic engine for our industry in the future.



■ **British Airways** for terms and conditions

CHARGES FOR CHANGES AND CANCELLATIONS
NOTE – CANCELLATIONS – BEFORE DEPARTURE FARE IS REFUNDABLE. IF COMBINING A NON-REFUNDABLE FARE WITH A REFUNDABLE FARE ONLY THE Y/C/J-CLASS HALF RETURN AMOUNT CAN BE REFUNDED. AFTER DEPARTURE FARE IS REFUNDABLE. IF COMBINING A NON-REFUNDABLE FARE WITH A REFUNDABLE FARE REFUND THE DIFFERENCE /IF ANY/BETWEEN THE FARE PAID AND THE APPLICABLE NORMAL BA ONEWAY FARE.
CHANGES/UPGRADES- PERMITTED ANYTIME.



■ **Panorama Software** for a brochure advertising a seminar with Microsoft

Accountability has taken on a new meaning. Any employee that can impact results must be empowered to make decisions. How do you provide information access and business visibility universally across your enterprise?

The Panorama Software and Microsoft Roundtable is gathering leading minds in business intelligence and the analyst community for expert consensus on the answer. Dialogue and discourse will focus on how business intelligence can address key strategic challenges concerning customers, costs, competition and change.

Industry experts will highlight how you can leverage business intelligence to provide visibility into business critical information.



■ **Bank of Scotland** for a letter to Scottish Widows and a customer

We hereby give you notice that Bank of Scotland have retrocessed, reponed and restored Executors and Assignees, in and to their own right and place in the undernoted policy of Assurance by our Office, Videlicet...

Private Eye Awards

■ **Department of Health** for a definition of a container in the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004:

“Container”, in relation to an investigational medicinal product, means the bottle, jar, box, packet or other receptacle which contains or is to contain it, not being a capsule, cachet or other article in which the product is or is to be administered, and where any such receptacle is or is to be contained in another such receptacle, includes the former but does not include the latter receptacle.”



■ **European Commission** for ‘Innovate for a Competitive Europe’ consultation document

Highlights include:

- The Commission will introduce aid to innovation in the future “LASA” (aids without a significant impact on competition) instrument 46. Before the end of 2004 it will elaborate a Vade-mecum on the State aid rules applicable in the field of innovation.
- In the context of Better Regulation, the Commission will develop ex-ante assessment of the impact of regulations and standards on innovation.
- The Commission and the Member States will work to unlock clusters, through internationalisation, inter-regional cooperation and cross-sector fertilisation. Sector-specific benchmarking and dissemination of best practices will be encouraged by extending the current PAXIS initiative 38 to local systems of innovation and clusters.



■ **Trilogy Telecom** for an e-mail to a customer

BT have started processing the first stage of our MPF orders i.e. the line test and production of a line characteristics report. However with the second stage (i.e. physically installing the metallic facility path between the customers line and the Trilogy equipment) they will only walk one or two orders through the system Thursday of next week.

(“Physically installing the metallic facility path” appears to be better known as “laying the cable”!)



The ‘Foot in Mouth’ Award

This is awarded to the public figure who makes the most baffling comment. This year’s winner is **Boris Johnson MP** for the comment on the 12 December 2003 edition of Have I Got News For You?

“I could not fail to disagree with you less.”

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.

- **Ann Allsop** (Sheffield Hallam University)
- **Sarah Barnes** (Berneslai Homes)
- **Louise Judges** (Bristol and West plc)
- **Joanna Lillely** (Communities Scotland)
- **Manda Marsden** (Suffolk County Council)
- **Mary Scott** (Inland Revenue)
- **Caroline Wither** (Inland Revenue)

Our presenter



Our guest presenter for the 2004 Awards is **Ian Hislop**, editor of Private Eye. Through the magazine’s Pseud’s Corner section, he regularly pokes fun at overblown language from public figures and businesses. He is also a team captain on Have I Got News For You, so he should enjoy our choice for the Foot In Mouth award!



Plain English Awards

Our 'open' category for the year's clearest documents

- **Age Concern Scotland** for a series of factsheets for elderly people
- **Colchester & Tendring Women's Refuge** for a series of publicity and information leaflet
- **Dudley Zoological Gardens** for their annual review
- **Haynes Publishing** for 'Cancer, Any Age, Any Time'
- **Lekker Design** for two practice leaflets
- **Nomad Housing Group** for their tenants' handbook
- **Sherforce** for three information leaflets

Inside Write Awards

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

- **Government Car and Despatch Agency** for 'Active Transmission' magazine
- **Home Office** for 'Anti-fraud and Corruption Guidance'
- **Jobcentre Plus** for 'Helping employers fill vacancies in the contact centre industry: A guide for advisers'
- **National Assembly for Wales** for 'Rules for Text'
- **Royal Navy** for 'Freedom of Information in the Naval Service'
- **Rural Payments Agency** for 'TellUs' magazine
- **Scottish Executive Modernising Government Team** for 'Better Speeches Guidance'

We are also making a special presentation to the staff of **Navy News** to recognise their consistent efforts to communicate clearly during their 50 years of publication.



Media Awards

For crystal-clear reporting

- Best National Newspaper: **The Independent**
- Best Regional Newspaper: **Yorkshire Post**
- Best National Radio: **The Today Programme** (BBC Radio 4)
- Best Regional Radio: **BRMB FM**
- Best National Television: **Newsnight** (BBC 2)
- Best Regional Television: **BBC Look North** (Yorkshire edition)

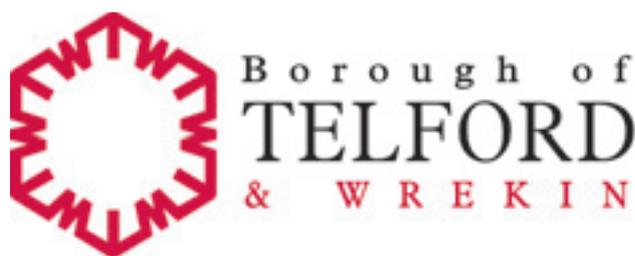
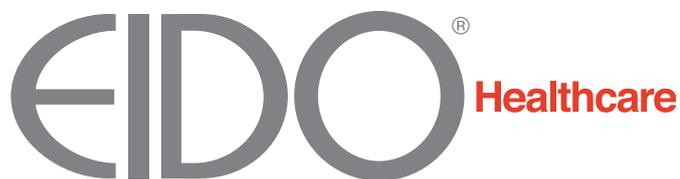
Web Award

For the year's clearest website

Advice Services Alliance for Advicenow (www.advicenow.org.uk)



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



We are already accepting entries for our 2005 awards. For the Plain English and Inside Write Awards, please send us a copy of the document and details of any work you have done to make it suitable for the intended audience. For the Media Awards, please send us sample issues or tapes.

Our address is Plain English Campaign Awards 2005, PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak, SK22 4QP. Please mark your envelope with the category.

For the Web Award, please send us an e-mail (info@plainenglish.co.uk) with the site address. Bear in mind that we normally assess the nominated sites during October each year.

You can also contact us with nominations for winners in any of these categories, as well as the Foot in Mouth and Golden Bull categories. And don't worry - we never reveal the details of nominators without permission!

Training dates for 2005

Please call our training administrator Heidi Tinsley on 01663 744409 for more details.

Manchester

- Wednesday 9 February (Plain English)
- Tuesday 26 April (Plain English)
- Tuesday 14 June (Plain English)
- Thursday 18 August (Plain English)
- Wednesday 12 October (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 13 October (Plain English)
- Tuesday 6 December (Plain English)

Birmingham

- Tuesday 8 March (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 9 March (Plain English)
- Wednesday 14 September (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 15 September (Plain English)

Edinburgh

- Wednesday 2 March (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 3 March (Plain English)
- Tuesday 18 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 19 October (Plain English)

Glasgow

- Wednesday 15 June (Plain English)

London:

- Tuesday 18 January (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 19 January (Plain English)
- Tuesday 25 January (Writing for websites)
- Wednesday 9 February (Plain English)
- Tuesday 22 February (Advanced Grammar)
- Wednesday 16 March (Plain English)
- Tuesday 26 April (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 27 April (Plain English)
- Wednesday 11 May (Plain English)
- Tuesday 17 May (Report writing)
- Tuesday 24 May (Writing medical information in plain English)
- Wednesday 25 May (Writing for websites)
- Wednesday 15 June (Plain English)
- Tuesday 21 June (Advanced Grammar)
- Wednesday 22 June (Plain English and forms design)
- Tuesday 5 July (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 6 July (Plain English)
- Thursday 11 August (Plain English)
- Wednesday 7 September (Plain English)
- Wednesday 21 September (Writing for websites)
- Wednesday 5 October (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 6 October (Plain English)
- Tuesday 11 October (Report writing)
- Thursday 10 November (Writing medical information in plain English)
- Tuesday 15 November (Plain English)
- Tuesday 22 November (Plain English and forms design)
- Thursday 24 November (Advanced Grammar)
- Thursday 8 December (Plain English)

Welcome aboard

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

- Ashfield Homes Limited
- Audi Finance
- Capita Business Services
- Clarke Willmott
- Commission for Social Care Inspection
- Continuing Education Gateway
- Co-operative Funeralcare
- Countryside Access and Activities Network for Northern Ireland
- Cross Keys Homes
- Eastern Valley Housing Association
- GE Financial Insurance
- Golden Gates Housing
- Guinness Trust
- Hillingdon Homes Limited
- Janssen-Cilag Limited
- Medina Housing Association Limited
- Meningitis Trust
- Merseytravel
- Newsquest
- NHS Quality Improvement Scotland
- North Eastern Education and Library Board
- O₂
- Premier Custodial Group Limited
- Seat Finance
- Single Homeless Project
- Slough Estates Plc
- Torbay Council
- Volkswagen Financial Services (UK) Limited
- West Yorkshire Strategic Health Authority
- YWCA

Contact details

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