

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Issue 61 Spring 2005

Plain-speaking politicians

We were heartened to see that plain English is not extinct in Parliament, despite the best efforts of some politicians. Tessa Jowell's warning to her fellow politicians that the language they use separates them from the voting public is one we think they should listen to, especially with the approaching general election.

Apparently Ms Jowell makes a note of all the gobbledygook spouted by her fellow ministers, and has compiled enough to produce a book. (We think she may be being kind - surely there is enough to fill several encyclopedias!)

Naturally we are delighted that the need for clear communication has been recognised at such a high level. With the election so near, MPs really need to think carefully before they open their mouths. The British public are not impressed with long-winded political jargon. What we all want is for politicians to use real language, not make up their own!

Some of the examples we found particularly obscure are: "regional cultural data feedback roll-out" and the overwhelmingly mystifying "weaning the profile".



Secretary of State, Tessa Jowell

Of course, office workers have long entertained themselves in dull meetings with Boardroom Bingo (which also goes by other, less polite, names). Unfortunately we suspect a sitting of Parliament would yield a full house in less than half an hour! For those who have never played it, Boardroom Bingo consists of a list of jargon words, often tailored to suit an individual company. Players secretly cross words off the list as they are used and note how long it takes them to get a full house.

Unfortunately, Ms Jowell's own staff aren't immune to contamination by jargon, with Junior Minister Estelle Morris announcing only a week earlier that the Government "may be able to announce a culture entitlement that in itself may be universal".

We will continue to monitor and evaluate the ongoing Parliamentary linguistic clarification roll-out.....

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Wibble wibble

From the States comes news of a new 'language of love' for those people who have chosen to ignore monogamy and traditional relationship values, in favour of a polyamorous (loving more than one person) lifestyle.

Apparently this self-proclaimed 'community' have been forced to evolve a new set of words to describe the various emotions which their relationships inspire. Meg Barker, a psychologist who is polyamorous, says that Western 'emotional language' is based on monogamy. 'Jealousy', for example, is not apparently an issue, as a 'warm feeling' is experienced while seeing 'one of their partners getting on with another of their partners', described as 'frubble'.

Other terms include 'wibble' (any insecurity experienced during the 'frubble') and 'NRE' (new relationship energy).

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

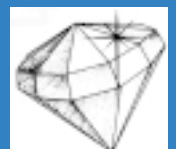
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‘Plane’ speaking

A recent report by the Airport Transport Users’ Council (AUC) called for airlines to include all taxes, fees and charges when quoting fares. This follows on from a study showing that the ‘hidden’ charges made by airlines varied widely, but that this was often not appreciated by customers, who assumed all airlines added on the same amount.

We back the AUC’s criticism of airlines for hiding a mystifying range of extra costs in the ‘taxes and charges’ element of fares. These costs are often not broken down fully so it is hard to see what is being included.

You wouldn’t expect to go into a shop and be charged more than the price displayed when you get to the till. Yet this seems to be standard practice for airlines. And often the taxes and charges part of the price is not broken down so you can’t see if you are being charged a wheelchair supplement for example, or if one airline charges a higher fuel surcharge than another.

We also want to see standardisation in the way fares are calculated. For example, the age at which a person is considered an adult varies from 12 to 19, depending on which airline you are flying with. We think it’s wrong for an airline to consider a child of 11 or 12 as an adult, particularly if they then add on a supplement for that person to travel unaccompanied.

What do you think about fare advertising? We’re interested to know if this has affected you. Was the advertised price actually the same as the price you paid? Let us know!

Thought for the day

Why do ‘budget’ airlines insist on advertising ‘one-way’ fares? Are they specifically targeting emigrants?

The rise of the machines

Regular readers will know that we run mini campaigns in an attempt to rid the English-speaking world of unnecessary jargon and gobbledygook. ‘Management-speak’, mobile phone ‘TXT LNG’, and other perversions of English have all tested the mettle of Plain English Campaign in the past.

There was a time, at least when we were at school, when admitting to being fascinated with computers, technology and speaking in ‘machine code’ was a ‘red rag to a bully’. Nowadays, in the Internet age, it seems that times have changed. Indeed, one school pupil was recently found to have answered an entire exam paper using mobile phone ‘text-speak’.

The Worldwide Web is a wonderful invention, in many ways. Indeed, we would find it difficult to gain as many new supporters as we do without it. Unfortunately, with it comes a great deal of jargon, much of which makes its way into everyday language. Even we would have to concede that most people in this country nowadays have some understanding of the words ‘download’, ‘on-line’, ‘web surfing’ and even ‘google’!

During the last few weeks, though, we have become inundated with people seeking advice as to the meaning of

various words they have seen in official letters.

- ‘This form has been pre-populated with your personal information’
- ‘We apologise for the server outage’

‘Pre-populated’ will bring back memories for jeans shoppers, used to buying ‘pre-worn’, ‘pre-washed’ and ‘pre-sold’ trousers, or to film buffs, used to picking up ‘pre-owned’ video cassettes in the local shop.

The English language is constantly evolving and incorporating new words into its archives. That is its beauty, and we have no complaint with certain new words that become acceptable through common use. The trouble is that, out of context, some of the newer words are clumsy and jarring to the reader. ‘Populate’ and ‘outage’ are computer technicians’ terms that confuse the 80-year-old pensioner when ‘fill in’ and ‘not available’ would not.

Jargon and technical language are fine among consenting users, where they are commonly understood. But it is clear (to us anyway) that confusion is happening as a result of jargon leaking into official letters and documents. If you receive something you really don’t understand, please let us know.

Jobsearch

Essex County Council Highways Department have been advertising a vacancy for a ‘Decriminalisation of Parking Enforcement Project Implementation Manager’.

Or how about applying for the post of ‘Community Compost Development Officer’ in Scotland?

Plain English jokes (groan!)

What do you say to a builder at his wedding?
Concrete-ulations

Why did the window fall asleep?
Because it was shattered

Did you hear about the religious fishmonger?
He dedicated his life to serving Cod

Laws of the land

“101: Defendant’s bad character

(1)(d) it is relevant to an important matter in issue between the defendant and the prosecution,

103: “Matter in issue between the defendant and the prosecution”

(1) For the purposes of section 101(1)(d) the matters in issue between the defendant and the prosecution include-

- (a) the question whether the defendant has a propensity to commit offences of the kind with which he is charged, except where his having such a propensity makes it no more likely that he is guilty of the offence;
- (b) the question whether the defendant has a propensity to be untruthful, except where it is not suggested that the defendant’s case is untruthful in any respect.”

(Criminal Justice Act 2003)

Top of the class

“Many young people live in a Matrix world in which there is often no consensual reality... Young people want more real-life gumption, more initiative, more stickability, just as prospective employers and anxious governments do. More fundamental even than the concern with literacy and numeracy is the need to protect and develop young people’s learnacy.’

Professor Guy Claxton: Learning to learn: a key goal in a 21st century classroom”

(from Bristol University’s newsletter)

Talking politics

“I never make predictions. I never have and I never will.”

‘Current’ Prime Minister, Tony Blair

Roy Dean

A man of many words

Keen crossword enthusiasts may well recognise the name Roy Dean, especially if they regularly attempt the Times’ puzzle. Although also a talented broadcaster, songwriter and author, Roy is perhaps most famous for holding the world record for completing the Times crossword in the fastest time.

A recent article in the Guardian told the story of how Roy honed his crossword skills during the 1970s.

‘At the time he was living in Bromley and had a 23-minute train journey into London each day. At first that was his target, but soon he was trying to complete the puzzle before the train reached Brixton, then Herne Hill and so on. Soon he would solve the puzzle in the five minutes between arriving at the station and the time his train departed. He wrote to the Times saying so, and at 6am on the day the letter was published, the BBC invited him into the Today programme studio to cross swords with Brian Redhead.’

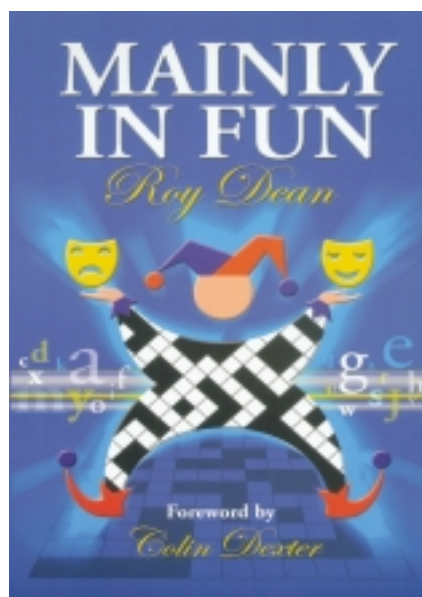
On being challenged on air to do that day’s Times crossword, Roy finished it in three minutes 45

seconds, which remains unbeaten. Roy has also won The Times’ National Crossword Championship.

Roy held several high-ranking posts within the Commonwealth Office and the Diplomatic Service. He played an important role in the arms-control negotiations which led to the end of the Cold War, while working as Director of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Arms Control and Disarmament Research Units. Before he retired he was the acting British High Commissioner in Ghana.

Since then he has enjoyed a career as a writer and broadcaster, writing and presenting three series of programmes on Radio Four on the ‘Poetry of Popular Song’, and is also vice president of Bromley Arts Council.

Roy’s book, *Mainly in Fun*, is a fascinating collection of verse, puns, essays, lyrics and spoofs. Described by author Bill Bryson as “The English Word-Master”, Roy reveals himself as a master of wordplay and manipulation. Any fans of linguistic humour will enjoy the book, which also contains a selection of crossword clues, anagrams and quizzes. The back of the book also contains scores for several of Roy’s songs.



Special offer to Plain English magazine readers - 22% off!!

We are delighted to be able to offer readers of Plain English a special discount on Roy Dean’s book, *Mainly in Fun*, which normally sells at £8.95.

Interested readers should send a cheque for £7.00, made payable to The Book Guild Ltd, to:

Mainly in Fun PEC Offer
c/o Press Officer (QES)
7 Strone Court
Wallace Avenue
Worthing
BN11 5RD.

The signs of



What are they trying to say?

The best of the month

Each day more and more promotional codswallop lands on the mat here at PEC Towers (well actually, we go looking for it...), courtesy of direct marketing departments up and down the land. Here are some of our favourites from the last few months.

- 'PHU is currently seeking to establish new affiliate education campuses around the world and we want you to be an integral part in the anointed uprising of strong-blended education leaders.'

- 'NIG-owned premium finance provider Finsure has joined forces with Misys to develop its first fully integrated electronic data interchange personal lines premium solution.'

- 'Your body is as unique to you from the inside out, as your persona is to the next individual.'

- 'The company's ability to attack additional data stacks in the enterprise and capture share in the prosumer market remain the key challenges.'

the times...



Competition news -

Plain English crossword

The next issue of Plain English (summer issue) will feature a prize crossword set by master compiler Roy Dean (see feature on page 3). The puzzle will be themed around the history of Plain English Campaign and related topics. Our thanks to Roy and to David Roberts at the Queen's English Society for organising this.

Oxford University Press have very kindly donated a fantastic prize for the winning entrant, which is the latest CD-ROM version of the Oxford English Dictionary.

This fantastic resource contains definitions for around 300,000 English words. The CD contains many other features such as a powerful search tool, abbreviations and sound recordings of standard British pronunciations. This prize would cost nearly £200 in the shops. The runner-up will receive the Shorter English Dictionary on CD-ROM, which normally retails at £95.

In the meantime, here's our favourite crossword clue to keep you going.

E (13)

Answer on page 7.

bits and pieces

Queen's English Society

Hopefully you have noticed an additional brochure and envelope inserted into your copy of Plain English. Don't worry, we're not going to start an avalanche of junk mail.

This insert comes from our friends at the Queen's English Society, a worthy bunch of people who believe that good English is important and should be preserved and nurtured.

Like us, they take great delight in pouring well-deserved scorn on people who try to abuse English! The envelope contains details of Queen's English Society membership, so please read it (and we promise not to make a habit of inserting other things into your copy of Plain English)!

You know what I mean?

Our efforts to find the most irritating phrase or cliché towards the end of last year resulted in 'At the end of the day' being voted the worst (or is it the best?). The story even made it overseas, appearing in a number of American papers and on radio stations.

Since then we've received hundreds of e-mails from people demanding that we consider a particular phrase or word that really annoys them.

Interest from those people who saw the story in America has resulted in a few suggestions that we've never heard of, such as 'It's no more than a bee's knee out' (apparently a favourite saying of plumbers). It's always refreshing to come across a new cliché to annoy your friends, family and colleagues with, so we'll produce a list of our favourites towards the end of the year.

So far, 'You know what I'm saying?' is leading the poll, along with variants such as 'You know?' Management buzzwords are making a big appearance this year with the notion of 'speaking to' a document causing noticeable friction, as is 'ramping up', 'leverage', 'stakeholders' and 'going forward'.

We'll be announcing the winner later in the year, so please send us your suggestions – you'll feel better for sharing your frustrations!

Plain English website

We were delighted to see our website featured in the Times' Webwatch column as a recommended site. The reviewer wrote "Do everyone at the office a favour by taking a few minutes studying this site. Clearly-written memos and reports make a huge difference to communication in the workplace. You can also extend your knowledge of business jargon exponentially, using the 'infamous gobbledygook generator'."

We couldn't agree more. You can find us at www.plainenglish.co.uk.

Golden Bull Awards 2005



The Annual Plain English Campaign Awards are months away, yet entries flood in for the best and worst examples of written and spoken English. We are still accepting entries for this year's 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 printed on the back page of the magazine. Please mark your envelope with the category.

For the Web Award, please e-mail us (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 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!

The things they say...

"Freedom is not a discriminatory thought, at least in the White House — in other words, if you say certain people should be free, but others shouldn't free. It's a universal thought, as far as I'm concerned." **(President G. W. Bush)**

You are what you eat

Our continuing battle with misleading food labelling continues and it seems we aren't alone.

A recent report in the Daily Telegraph (14 March 2005) highlighted the poor nutritional content of children's favourite, chicken nuggets. You might assume, from the name, that chicken nuggets would be a source of protein. However, close reading of the packets shows how little chicken a lot of these products contain, with the remainder of the ingredients being starch, water, sugar, flavourings and additives.

Even worse, the Food Standards Agency discovered pork proteins in some samples of Dutch chicken and an Irish study found bovine samples in Dutch chicken.

	Claim	Reality	Difference
UNSATURATED FAT (per 100g)			
Global Cuisine prime beef joint	2.5g	4.8g	92%
Cauldron Cumberland veggie sausage	6.7g	11.3g	68%
Cadbury light trifles	7.3g	9g	23%
Bernard Matthews dinosaur turkey roll	10.2g	12.4g	21%
SATURATED FAT (per 100g)			
Rivington Pink Panther wafers	10.6g	30.5g	187%
Lambs Navy rum & raisin ice cream	5.1g	8.2g	60%
Tesco deep pan hot & spicy chicken pizza	1.8g	2.6g	44%
Aunt Bessie's chunky croquettes	3g	4.1g	36%
SODIUM (per 100g)			
Aunt Bessie's oven-ready toad in the hole	0.6g	0.9g	50%
CARBOHYDRATES (per 100g)			
Ye Olde Oak premium hot dogs in brine	3.5g	5.3g	51%
SUGARS (per 100g)			
Tesco Kids hot dog pizza	2.1g	3.1g	47%

(from 'Which?' magazine survey)

A third of chicken nuggets tested by Leicester Trading Standards officials in 2002 did not match the pack labels. One pack contained 16% meat while the label stated that it was 46% meat.

The EU is looking to introduce strict regulations that will enforce clear and accurate labelling on food products, and even launched an on-line survey of European consumers in order to find a standardised definition of 'veal'.

What constitutes a good constitution?

Those readers with long memories (or a supply of back issues) may remember that in Plain English Issue 59 (August 2004) we wrote about the problems faced by translators working for the European Union (EU).

When 10 more countries became EU members in May last year it meant that meetings and documents had to be translated into 22 languages. The task is made more difficult if the original document or speaker uses unclear or ambiguous language.

Sadly, the problem looks like it will only get worse. A quick look at the European Constitution itself is enough to convince us that those poor translators must have one of the least enjoyable jobs in the EU.

However, a more serious point is that unclear and ambiguous language will create endless questions and no doubt lead to constant courtroom challenges. To take one example, the Charter of Fundamental Rights contains 54 articles taking up an excessive 14 pages. Maybe we should take note of the American Constitution – the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” seems a bit clearer to us!

Furthermore, a recent 'Which?' survey revealed that just 7% of the foods it tested contained the levels of nutrients stated on their labels. With food seemingly higher on the agenda these days, we would hope that these legislations are rushed through the European and British parliaments.

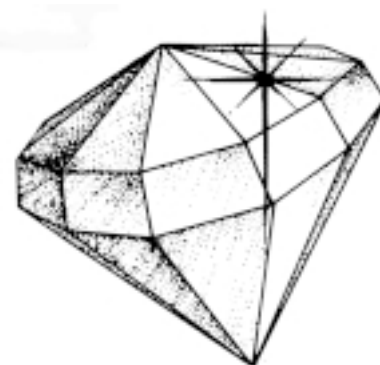
So, next time you think of shopping for food, take a good look at the ingredients label – we think that if you don't understand what it's made of, you probably shouldn't consider eating it!

Answer to crossword clue:

SENSELESSNESS (take mess away from sense and you are left with an E)

Training dates for 2005

Please call our training administrator Heidi Tinsley on 01663 744409 for more details or e-mail info@plainenglish.co.uk



Birmingham

- Wednesday 14 September (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 15 September (Plain English)

Edinburgh

- Tuesday 18 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 19 October (Plain English)

Glasgow

- Wednesday 15 June (Plain English)

Manchester

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

London

- 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)

London (continued)

- 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)
- Monday 12 September (Legal writing)
- 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)

The next issue of Plain English will be available in summer 2005

Welcome aboard!

The following organisations have recently earned their first Crystal Mark.

Alliance and Leicester
 ARVAL PHH Business Solutions Ltd
 Blyth Valley Borough Council
 Ceredigion County Council
 Conwy County Borough Council
 Co-operatives UK Limited
 Countryside Agency
 DebtCred
 Fascia Mania Limited
 FCH Housing and Care
 First Step Trust
 Gloucestershire Housing Association
 HBOS
 Hertsmere Borough Council
 Institution of Civil Engineers
 Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service
 PCHA
 Pesticides Safety Directorate
 Poplar HARCA
 Plymouth City Council
 Stonham
 Tesco Stores Limited
 Vehicle and Operator Services Agency

The organisations below have become Corporate Members of the Campaign

Brandon Trust
 East Sussex County Council
 General Teaching Council for England
 Governor Services - Essex Council
 HBOS plc
 Nottingham City Homes Limited
 Office of the Legal Services
 Complaints Commissioner
 Pesticides Safety Directorate
 Poplar HARCA
 South Oxfordshire DC - life member