

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Autumn 2008 Issue 73

Some famous voices will be heard at this year's awards



The annual awards of Plain English Campaign will seem to have more celebrities there this year. This is because impressionist and TV presenter Rory Bremner (pictured above) will be guest presenter at the event on 9 December in London.

Campaign founder Chrissie Maher said: "We are delighted that Rory will be presenting the awards. I think we can guarantee that some very well known voices will be heard during his time on stage." Chrissie also predicted as much fun as usual when this year's winners of awards for gobbledygook, Golden Bull and Foot in Mouth are announced.

But the really coveted awards are those in the plain English category. They are presented for crystal-clear English. Encouraging use of such English is at the heart of the work of Plain English Campaign.

Our only rule is that we cannot present an award for documents on which we have worked.

Here are the competition categories:

- Plain English category (for the year's clearest documents);
- Inside Write category (for clear internal government documents);
- Media Awards;
- Web Award;
- Osborne Award (for outstanding achievement);
- Golden Bull (for gobbledygook); and
- Foot in Mouth Award (worst spoken nonsense).

Last year's awards were hosted by actor and comedian Lenny Henry who did a superb job. He cracked jokes and created a terrific buzz amongst the guests.

People are rewarded for good English and others gently mocked for their mistakes. It is all great fun. This year's nominations for the Foot in Mouth

Awards include US President Barack Obama and our own Chrissie Maher. But this is one award Chrissie hopes not to win. Nominations for this year's Golden Bull Awards include City of York Council, Futuremaps website and Rightmove estate agents.

Be sure to use your voice and get your views put before Parliament

See the Plain English website for:

- the "Spelling is important" petition – to be presented to Ed Balls to fight back against trends that rock the foundations of good basic spelling and grammar;
- the Plain English Charter – in the absence of UK legislation sign this people's charter for a democratic right to information that can be read, understood and acted upon at the first reading; and
- the Small Print Bill – currently under discussion in Parliament. We need your examples and experiences where small print has been the cause of your problems.

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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Climbing team mount a peak of charity success

In plain English, seven men from the High Peak achieved great heights for charity. In 34 hours they completed the walks of the three UK peaks of Ben Nevis, Scafell Pike and Snowdon for Cancer Research UK. They also covered the 1,000 miles to and from New Mills, where Plain English Campaign is based, and were rewarded by the Campaign on their return.

They are seen here accepting a donation to the charity from Plain English Campaign's George Maher.

When added to the sponsorship of friends, family and other local businesses such as High Peak Radio and the Royal Oak public house it amounted to over £5,200 towards the work of Cancer Research UK.



There were some tough times on the mountains. But grandfather Cedric Hainsworth, aged 69, said: "It kept me going through the cloud and rain to think of my new grandson's little sunshine smile."

Some walkers, pictured with George Maher (black t-shirt) were (from left) Phil Ashton, Mark Kirby, Sandy MacIntyre, Cedric Hainsworth, Ian Littlewood, Steve Salmon. Walker Brian Pennington is not in the picture.

Lack of clarity earns 0% interest for many families

Revelations from an Office of Fair Trading (OFT) market study have reinforced the damning complaints that Plain English Campaign receive about bank charges.

The OFT finds that the lack of clarity in some communications is a major reason for banks having poor relationships with customers.

Many banks know that plain language enables better financial management for both themselves and their customers. Yet there is an obvious need for legislation in this area to ensure consistency for customers.

Financial organisations have a responsibility to answer and help

people as part of their service. But the current financial climate has highlighted that unclear and misleading information can cause people financial hardship. For instance, recent customer marketing from one major bank claims to counteract the effects of the 'credit crunch' by offering emergency funds.

In fact these funds are no more than an additional overdraft facility at a hugely inflated interest rate.

Plain English Campaign's founder Chrissie Maher said: "The grass roots issue here is that clear communications can make the difference between a family being out on the street, or them getting through this period of financial hardship.

Our message to the banks and finance industries is that clear communications empower the individual.

"Many organisations, particularly in the finance industry, already recognise the valuable contributions that crystal-clear language can offer to prevent the confusion around unnecessary and excessive charges.

"Over the coming months we will continue working with the banks and other consumer groups to get rid of confusion in their documents.

"We have offered our services to the OFT on this matter in the hope of achieving clarity, consistency and transparency throughout the industry."

The Small Print Bill

What are the chances of meeting complete strangers who want to talk about plain English? It is 100% (writes Marie Clair).

And it was no different when I visited the Houses of Parliament to discuss progress of the Small Print Bill with Nick Palmer MP.



Nick Palmer MP outside the Houses of Parliament

Let me tell you about that amazing experience first. Martin Stores, our IT researcher, came with me to make the arrangements for our proposed exhibition at Westminster.

Our main concerns were to review the bill's progress and find ways to gather evidence to support it. But we also got a tour behind the scenes with Nick's long-serving and experienced assistant, Philipa Coughlan.

If you ever have the opportunity to take the public guided tour, be prepared to be stunned.

And not just by the beauty of the architecture or the quirky history anecdotes that are recounted so amusingly. It is the impact of being in the 'eye of the storm'.

These amazing buildings, known throughout the world, are where our worries are voiced by our MPs.

We saw many recognisable faces, but I wanted to see people like the two ladies we met at Euston station on our return journey. Martin and I sat on a bench with the two ladies clearly in a state of frustration and voicing heated opinions. The word 'jargon' was mentioned frequently and we gathered that they had represented their branches of a nationwide housing association.

Their fury at being thrown endless gobbledegook of acronyms and management speak was not lessened by the warning they had been given before attending: 'There may be a fair bit of jargon in the paperwork'.

I saw visions of the forceful, young Chrissie Maher standing before me, helped by the fact that one of the ladies was also a Liverpoolian.

Despite the ladies' best efforts to 'swot up' on the documents the night before, they had been unable to contribute to the meeting and felt excluded and angry.

These are the people that we need to see more of in Parliament. This is the proof that the work Chrissie started 40 years ago is still at the heart of many people's concerns in 2008.

Our language is the foundation of our path for the future. If we don't get words we can understand, then how can people make a real contribution?

We need the Small Print Bill. And we need to dispose of inappropriate language so that those at the helm can steer a clear course with clear communication between constituents and their representatives. Nick Palmer MP writes: "I've been particularly grateful to the Plain English Campaign for their support for my proposed law preventing financial advantage being gained by terms and conditions in small print.



Press Officer Marie Clair outside Portcullis House

PEC have been vigorous and unrelenting in their efforts and it's been a huge help.

"I look forward to sponsoring their event in Parliament later this year, and wishing them all the best for their 30th anniversary next year."

An example of small print

(also known as fine print in the United States) refers to the practice of including necessary legal terms, warnings, disclaimers or other phrases in small writing on commercial or contractual documents. It can mean 'information obscured by small print', as well as referring to the type size.

Small print is usually included at the end or bottom of a document, in a smaller type size (as well as sometimes being in capital letters to make reading more difficult).

In some countries, certain information must, by law, be included on advertisements or leaflets offering goods or services. Advertisers include this information in small print to meet these requirements while drawing the minimum attention away from their sales message.

Unscrupulous businesses may use jargon (which is usually very complicated legal-style writing) in contractual small print to conceal terms which do not benefit the other party, or to obscure legal rights and obligations.

Getting back to our roots – plain English in Liverpool

Liverpool was enjoying its status as European Capital of Culture and we were there to help it celebrate.

Liverpool's City Council held its doors wide open to welcome Chrissie Maher on this occasion. Chrissie, in turn was happy to be joined by supporters and Plain English Campaign staff.

The Town Hall is a beautiful building and its staff made sure that we were made welcome and to feel at home. The atmosphere was light-hearted and friendly with passionate discussions about using plain English.



The Lord Mayor and Chrissie Maher

The arrival of the Lord Mayor of Liverpool, Councillor Steve Rotheram, added prestige to our event. He spoke of Chrissie's and other 'scousers' contributions to the Campaign's amazing success and welcomed the Campaign back to its Liverpool home. He reminded visitors how important an event this was. His speech told about the personal contributions of Chrissie Maher and other 'fellow scousers' who have gained the Campaign its worldwide reputation.



Richard Tuson (pictured left) with students from Chesterfield High School after their training session with trainer John Wild (not in photo).

Another shining star to have Liverpool connections was John Barnes, former Liverpool and England footballer and now coach to Jamaica's national team. His easy-going manner kept the event firmly 'grass roots', particularly when he took to pouring the coffee for Chrissie and other guests!

To round off we were given a debut performance by Kofi Owusu, a young Liverpoolian musician who had been commissioned to write a rap about the sentiments of plain English. Although rapping can be gobbledygook to many, Kofi used this form of creative communication. It cleverly demonstrated not only the passion, but also the disadvantages and benefits of using the appropriate form of communication for the intended audience.

Another young guest, Lucy van Amerongen, also showed how young people are keen to communicate across the generations, despite the negative views of some. Her A to Z of Teen Talk is a texting dictionary aimed to give parents an understanding of the texting language.

A large, 'Plain English Cake' that Chrissie had requested took pride

of place – "We'll put some plain English into their mouths and they'll love it", she said.



Cutting the Plain English Cake

Our exhibitions displayed the background of nearly 40 years of fighting gobbledygook and jargon. The exhibition showed images and stories from the days of the first community newspaper, the Tuebrook Bugle. It showed how Chrissie started the Salford Form Market and later shredded government forms in Parliament Square. These are the roots of where the Campaign began.

We ran free training courses for school-leavers and students during the following week. Students from Edge Hill College and Chesterfield High School were some of those who attended the courses.

The Press Association

Usually only senior politicians or world-famous celebrities get to enjoy their own press conference. But we were given full star treatment when we accepted an invitation to meet journalists of The Press Association (PA) at their London Head Office in August.

All the PA employees who met Marie Clair, our Press Officer, were generous in the amount of time and information they gave. It was not at all typical of the usual media image of ruthless paparazzi.

The Editor in Chief of The Press Association, Jonathan Grun, was keen to note the similarities between our organisations.

Their guiding principles when training new journalists are 'fast', 'fair' and 'accurate'. These reflect the plain English guidelines of clear



Laura Gayler from Client Services and Account Manager Emma Bateman

and appropriate understanding the first time round.

As Chrissie Maher has often noted: "Without the support of the media, our work in the Campaign would have been an even greater struggle."

We have always seen the media, in particular the press, as a mouthpiece for all the public views

that we represent. The fact that Chrissie's earliest tool for campaigning became the first UK community newspaper also demonstrates the power of the press.

Plain English Campaign are pleased to have some of that power behind our messages that continue to reach not only the UK airwaves, but extend to worldwide media coverage. This was recently demonstrated by the repeated press coverage initiated by a Press Association journalist, Brian Farmer.

Our communications with Tesco supermarket resulted in the Chairman's promise to correct the bad grammar on the checkout signs.

This news was picked up in Las Vegas, USA and on Radio ABC Canberra, Australia... as well as the local branch of Tesco in Whaley Bridge, Derbyshire, UK!

Plain English Campaign visit Turkey

Plain English Campaign recently added another country to their globetrotting tally by working in Turkey.

Sony Europe approached us to run a series of training courses for their staff in Istanbul. This is the site of their Eurasian headquarters. The predominantly Turkish staff handle a wide range of communications with their network of dealers throughout Europe and Asia.

These communications are in English and Sony realised that plain English training would improve the efficiency of their communications.



Plain English Campaign Trainer John Wild (standing) alongside delegates from Sony Europe in Istanbul

Our trainer, John Wild, who is now well used to international challenges of this type, was duly despatched to Istanbul in August. He said: "It was a challenge to devise a training program that would be suitable for

delegates whose English abilities varied widely.

"I ran three courses in total and the feedback from the delegates was extremely positive and enthusiastic."

No is plain English for... NO

Irish voters had no problem making their message crystal clear when it came to saying no to the Treaty of Lisbon. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) may wheel out excuses and explanations, but it is obvious that the major problem with the treaty is the impossible language voters were expected to base their vote of support on.

Since the mid-1990s, the European Commission have recognised a need for the use of plain language within all their documents. Plain English Campaign were involved in the discussions that established the 'Fight the Fog' campaign to promote the use of plain language. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany and a former President of the European Council,

gave full support for plain language at the 50th anniversary celebrations of the EU. Colette Flesch, a previous holder of many European Parliament roles, is a known supporter of Plain English Campaign and our work.

Why then do so many vital public documents contain so much gobbledygook? There is no excuse for this obstacle that is being placed in the way of the public's right to clear information.

An honest and clear presentation of the treaty could have resulted in a more positive vote of support. That would have allowed this long-awaited legislation to be progressed after so many years' delay.

For months, Plain English Campaign founder, Chrissie Maher, had been publicly demanding a rewrite of the treaty because of its unclear language.

"What's the true reason why people are still being presented with reams of gobbledygook and Euro-speak? Is it because they seek to confuse the voters resulting in a split vote. This would then allow the European Commission to interpret the vote any way they wanted to. Voters are meant to have an independent choice and not be left to blindly follow the biased views of other parties. It was no surprise that the Irish voters said no.

"Give us a fair chance in plain language and stop hiding behind the fog of jargon."

All about the little semicolon

Most people rarely use semicolons; they seldom see the need. Others consider this small punctuation mark to be a waste of space; they do not appreciate its use in any circumstances.

But those who do use it can be greatly rewarded; they find it to be irreplaceable as a sentence pacemaker.

Some newspaper readers wrote to editors about semicolons in April, after a French writer claimed that the English were killing this punctuation mark through neglect.

We mostly use semicolons in bullet point lists. This is using plain English to communicate information. But discussing the use of the semicolon in literature is different.

Charles Dickens, for example, uses it to great effect in 'Great Expectations'. The central character, Pip, is listing

the things he has learned about his surroundings:

"and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip."

That passage has pace, excitement, poise and flair. The same atmosphere could never be accomplished through use of separate sentences, or commas.

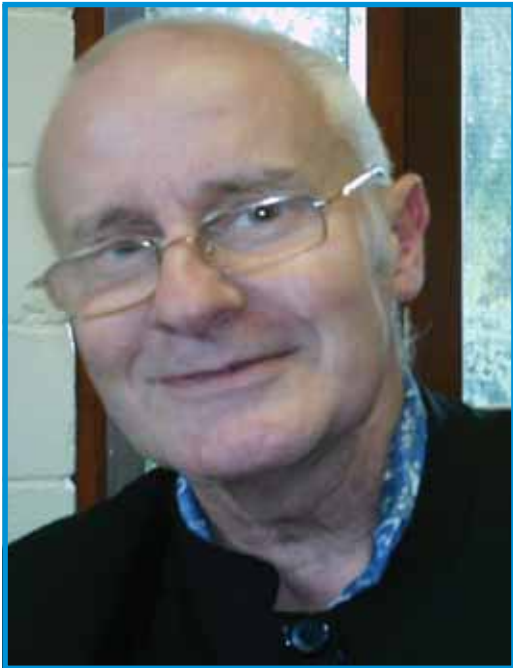
Here are some quotes on the semicolon from the internet: "Proper use of a semicolon creates sophisticated prose that does not fit well with the digital age." George Orwell quoted: "I had decided about this time that the semicolon is an

unnecessary stop and that I would write my next book without one."

Here's a good example from The Guardian Style Book of a semicolon in practice. Their columnist Dave McKie wrote: "Some journalists were brilliant; others were less so."

A comma in that sentence would be almost ignored by the reader. But the semicolon gives slight pause for thought about the brilliance of some journalists.

One view about general use of this little dot and squiggle might be that if you are in the business world, you might well conduct yourself without it. If you are an author, like Dickens, you might only manage with it. Although, as we said earlier, when writing or editing public information we seldom use the semicolon except in bullet point lists, we suggest that it certainly holds an important place in world literature.



Retired Campaign writer Richard Tuson

Training days can teach an old dog some new tricks

This qualified me as an associate of the society at the age of 18.

There is no conceit creeping in here (nor will there be). I am just suggesting that I was becoming a competent writer early in my career. Yet, even when I passed 60, Plain English Campaign taught me ongoing improvements every day.

Meanwhile, I passed the proficiency examinations of the National Council for the Training of Journalists and associateship examinations of the Institute of Public Relations.

During many years of full-time journalism, I worked as a news-reporter, sub-editor, feature writer and chief sub-editor.

When employed by public relations consultancies in Manchester and London I wrote many documents for company chief executives. I planned and wrote newspapers for national companies. So I was used to writing for companies of the stature and prestige of many of Plain English Campaign's clients.

Thus, when I applied for a job with the Campaign, I had some confidence that I was a workmanlike writer.

But at Plain English Campaign, I soon learned, the editors have to have a detailed working knowledge of all the parts of speech. They have to know not only how well-constructed sentences work best but why they work best. And why making sure verbs are active always makes sentences work better.

During the time I worked with the Campaign I learned something new almost every day. I found out more about redundant words and improved both my spelling and punctuation.

On their one-day training courses I had learned things that never crossed my mind when writing for newspapers. I learned how to get rid of faults that were never recognised as faults when writing for other journals. I believe that now I am writing better letters to friends. Solving long-lasting puzzles is now easier such as when to use 'that' and when to use 'which'.

My sentences are now shorter and paragraphs flow better. What I write these days reflects more accurately what I mean.

Sometimes, of course, I made mistakes in my writing. But these days I know better how to detect them and make improvements.

The training courses are not obsessed with parts of speech. The trainers make only brief mention of them. But they are defined in the training manual, with many other helpful tips towards writing clear English.

I have now retired from Plain English Campaign but from what I have learned I will still be watching out for gobbledygook and jargon in the documents I receive or fill in. I will now be especially vigilant on the documents I sign and make sure I read the small print. I wish Plain English Campaign every success and would like to thank them for all the new things they taught me.

This article is about my writing skills, exercised over several decades. I intend to show that Plain English Campaign (PEC) taught me more about plain English than I learned during 45 years in journalism. It took them just two seven-hour training sessions.

First, an outline of my 'old' skills will illustrate why I felt reasonably competent as a writer of clear English. Then I will describe how the PEC courses improved those skills. I wish I had encountered the Campaign at the start of my career instead of towards the end of it.

Here is some evidence of my previous competence. When I was seven, teachers judged my reading age to be eleven and during my 11 plus examination I was able to write an essay about a JB Priestley novel. For each of the next four years I made annual visits to the editor of a local newspaper. He gave me a full-time job as trainee journalist before my sixteenth birthday.

During a day-release journalism course I gained a Royal Society of Arts bronze medal for intermediate English. Their silver medal for advanced English came the next year.

Training dates for 2008/9 (open courses)

For more details, e-mail us at info@plainenglish.co.uk, or phone our training administrator, Terri-Louise Schabel, on 01663 744409.

Thistle Euston Hotel - London

Wednesday 12 November (Plain English)
 Thursday 11 December (Plain English)
 Thursday 22 January (Plain English)
 Thursday 12 February (Plain English)
 Wednesday 18 March (Plain English)
 Thursday 23 April (Plain English)
 Tuesday 19 May (Plain English)
 Wednesday 24 June (Plain English)
 Thursday 16 July (Plain English)
 Wednesday 12 August (Plain English)
 Tuesday 15 September (Plain English)
 Wednesday 14 October (Plain English)
 Thursday 12 November (Plain English)
 Tuesday 8 December (Plain English)

Thistle Hotel - Manchester

Thursday 4 December (Plain English)
 Wednesday 11 February (Plain English)
 Wednesday 15 April (Plain English)
 Wednesday 10 June (Plain English)
 Thursday 13 August (Plain English)
 Thursday 22 October (Plain English)
 Tuesday 8 December (Plain English)

Thistle - Birmingham City

Thursday 19 March (Plain English)
 Thursday 17 September (Plain English)

Thistle Hotel - Edinburgh

Thursday 26 March (Plain English)
 Thursday 8 October (Plain English)

Europa Hotel - Belfast

Tuesday 6 October (Plain English)

Thistle - Glasgow

Thursday 25 June (Plain English)

Jurys Inn Parnell Street – Dublin

Wednesday 13 May (Plain English)

New Crystal Mark holders

Weaver Vale Housing Trust
 Derwentside District Council
 Lancashire County Council
 Bayer Schering Pharma
 Newham University Hospital NHS Trust
 Queen Mary's Sidcup NHS Trust
 Boston Books Ltd
 BP International Ltd
 Faber Maunsell
 Leonard Cheshire Disability
 Ocean Housing Group Ltd
 Broxtowe Borough Council
 Durham City Council
 Rushcliffe Borough Council
 ICUsteps
 British Property Federation
 Step One Technology Ltd
 University of Salford
 Victim Support Northern Ireland
 Local Government Association
 Health Protection Scotland
 Boys and Maughan Solicitors
 RedLine Products UK Ltd
 Verifile Ltd
 Ministry of Justice
 St Georges Community Housing Limited
 Homes for Islington
 Barnet and Chase Farm Hospital NHS Trust
 Anglia Ruskin University
 Evans Easyspace Limited
 Rok Group
 Europ Assistance Holdings
 Shelter
 Greenwich Teaching PCT
 Mental Health Foundation
 Pfizer Healthcare Limited
 Architects Registration Board
 Credit Suisse
 Newham Homes
 Gloucester City Council
 Forest of Dean Council
 East Riding of Yorkshire PCT
 Independent Living Funds
 Sefton Equalities Partnership
 South Yorkshire PTE

New Silver Crystal Mark holders (25 or more)

Ulster Bank Group
 HBOS plc

New Silver Crystal Mark holders (continued)

Sanctuary Housing Group
 Nationwide Building Society
 Department of Health
 Health Professions Council

New Gold Crystal Mark holders (50 or more)

Child Support Agency
 Abbey National plc
 Haringey Council
 Northern Bank
 Bank of Ireland
 Belfast City Council
 Alliance & Leicester plc

New Platinum Crystal Mark holders (100 or more)

Department for Work and Pensions
 Allied Irish Bank
 Environment Agency
 Angus Council

New Corporate Members

Prospects Learning Services
 Nationwide Building Society
 Community Housing Group
 Verifile Limited
 Dacorum Borough Council
 Alsbury Management Solutions Ltd
 C E Electric UK
 Chichester District Council
 Cafcass
 Glasgow City Council
 North East Lincolnshire Council - Revenue and Benefits
 Combined Insurance Company of America

Plain English open course

This is a one-day course to teach you how to write in a clear and effective way. Course materials, refreshments and a buffet lunch will be included in the price.

Who should come on the course?

Anyone who spends time writing to customers and colleagues will benefit.