

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

November 2009 Issue 75

Welcome to the new Plain English magazine – available online every three months. If you have any suggestions on how to improve it, or any articles that you want to contribute, please send them to us at info@plainenglish.co.uk.

Plain English Campaign talking money at Wall Street

Plain English Campaign recently welcomed a banking specialist from the famous Wall Street in Manhattan to the lesser-known Wall Street of Buxton in Derbyshire, home of plain English.

Sara Muñoz, journalist with the Wall Street Journal, interviewed Chrissie Maher OBE, founder of Plain English Campaign, about whether financial jargon had contributed to the credit crunch.



Unfamiliar and unclear language in information from private and public financial organisations costs people time and money.

The increase in the number of complaints the campaign receives about all kinds of poor financial information is the result of people struggling financially, and against the waves of jargon and small print in energy bills or mortgage documents.

Chrissie says: “It hurts me to admit that this problem is getting bigger than any campaigning I can achieve in one lifetime. Any power in my small voice is being drowned out by the rubbish from the so-called ‘financial experts’, who are losing our trust and respect. The voice of the press has the power to reach so many. Newspapers have helped to spread the words of the campaign. They can show what really goes on in the world of big finance and just how it affects you and me.”

President Barack Obama recently took time out from wrestling with the global economic crisis to reinforce a call on action to deal with the issue.

With many millions struggling to make ends meet, many credit card companies have continually increased their interest rates in an opportunistic free-for-all. As part of a suggested clampdown, Obama wants a tightening of credit card regulations, and for all communications from credit card companies to be free of business jargon and purposefully confusing terminology and legalese.

“No more fine print, no more confusing terms and conditions. We want clarity and transparency from here on out.” Obama said.

Plain English Campaign – working for clearer communication

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Plain English Day and the annual awards ceremony

This year marks Plain English Campaign's 30th anniversary, and on 8 December we will have a 'special celebration' annual awards ceremony in London.

The day will also see a re-enactment of our famous shredding of unclear documents in front of the Houses of Parliament.

Lenny Henry has agreed to reprise his role (he hosted the awards bash in 2007) as presenter. There will be the usual Golden Bull awards for gobbledegook and jargon-heavy written communications, and the Foot in Mouth awards for a nonsensical comment made by a well-known public figure.



As well as singling out miscreants, we also commemorate clear communications with our Plain English, Media and Web awards. Last year, Cancer Research UK, The Times Of India and the BBC were amongst the winners.

We also commemorate an individual or organisation making a major contribution to the plain English cause with the 'Osborne Memorial award', won last year by Baroness Thatcher.

Past worthy winners of the Foot in Mouth award include George W Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and John Prescott.

Previous examples of dubious utterances include the following.

"I could not fail to disagree with you less." – Boris Johnson, 2004

"In life, there are all colours and the Teletubbies are a reflection of that. There are no nationalities in the Teletubbies – they are techno-babies, but they are supposed to reflect life in that sense." – Nick Underwood, 1997

"Maybe we are in the wrong sign. Maybe Venus is in the wrong juxtaposition with something else. I don't know." – Ted Dexter, 1993

"I think that [the film] 'Clueless' was very deep. I think it was deep in the way that it was very light. I think lightness has to come from a very deep place if it's true lightness." – Alicia Silverstone, 2000

"I do not believe that. At this moment in time, if that changes in years to come I don't know, but what happens here today and changes as we go along that is part of life's learning and part of your inner beliefs. But at this moment in time I did not say them things and at the end of the day I want to put that on record because it has hurt people." – Glenn Hoddle, 1999

So, 30 years on, and we're still campaigning. Is there still work to be done?

Clearly hoping to be considered when we look for potential Golden Bull nominees in years to come, we'll let The Dachis Group speak nonsense for themselves.....

About Dachis Group

Founded in 2008 by Jeffrey Dachis, Dachis Group was created to unlock the value of social technologies for large corporate enterprises through Social Business Design, via our global advisory practice and technology implementation program. The company's strategy is backed by a commitment from Austin Ventures to build and grow organically and through acquisitions.

Our Practice Areas

Customer Participation and Engagement, Workforce Collaboration, and Business Partner Optimization make up our practice areas.

Social Business Design

We've created a robust, integrated, and holistic framework for adapting to and capitalizing on the commercial, societal, and technological trends facing every global business today.

Strength in Numbers

Our Technology Alliance provides a disciplined and proactive approach to identifying, integrating, innovating and managing technology relationships over time.

Buffling

'Thinking outside the box' is Britain's most despised business jargon term according to a recent poll.

'Buffling' – becoming familiar with and consistently using business-related 'buzz' words – has become rife amongst office employees trying to make a good impression on their superiors. The use of such terms as 'thinking outside the box' and 'going forward' – nonsensical alternatives to easier-to-understand terms – has become a serious problem and seems to be worsening, according to a survey, commissioned by Ramada Encore hotels of 2,035 adults.

Such terms illustrate an attempt to exclude, overcomplicate relatively simple matters and disguise a lack of substance, and are nearly always an attempt to lend kudos and significance to ordinary processes.

Take 'cognitive dissonance' as one example. It basically means 'holding two contradictory thoughts'. But which sounds best? The fact is, the term is redundant in terms of conveying information in an easy-to-understand way – as is the case with so much business jargon.

A term in vogue at the moment, for whatever reason, is 'blue sky thinking'. Clearly, 'being positive' doesn't cut it. It's another example of a basic term being re-jigged and made far more vague – for no other reason than tinkering, presumably from boredom or a deep-seated realisation that their actions would be understandable to all if they were simplified and 'plain Englished'.

If that were to happen, a carefully cultivated illusion of complexity would be exposed as the sham it is. But as it is, such modish, pointless terms continue to thrive and emerge from the world of business at a frightening rate.

The livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of business employees seem to rest on nurturing such toxic abuse of English, as adopting such terms can increase the number of people using them in the workplace.

Newsletters are 'cascaded' as opposed to 'handed out'. 'Singing from the same hymn sheet' is preferable to 'thinking alike'. 'At this moment in time' needlessly extends 'right now'. You may no longer merely 'talk to' someone and instead 'touch base', and so on.

Worse still, such terms have started to become popular with people wanting to sound informed as opposed to speaking clearly and concisely. I recently noticed a television presenter overemphasising the use of 'blue sky thinking' while talking about someone having their house renovated.

The disease is clearly spreading. 'Credit crunch' is painfully familiar, but at least it doesn't outstay its welcome, as opposed to other offenders on the list.

The 'buffling' list of shame.

- Thinking outside of the box
- Touch base
- At the end of the day
- Going forward
- All of it
- Blue sky thinking
- Out of the box
- Heads up
- Singing from the same hymn sheet
- Pro-active
- Downsizing
- Ducks in a row
- Brainstorming
- Thought shower
- 360° thinking
- Flag it up
- Pushing the envelope
- At this moment in time
- In the loop

Glimpses of the future of English

“Teenglish”

We are often asked about the emergence of new words, and a worrying recent phenomenon is responsible for a fair number of recent additions to common usage.

With society being geared more towards young people than ever before, it is hardly surprising that teenagers are developing their own coded language that excludes adults, potentially making us feel like complete fudges (idiots).

So, if a teenager said the following to you, would you be flattered or offended?

“You’re chung and shabby, wanna cotch down my yard?”

You should be flattered, as that actually means: “You are extremely sexy and cool, do you want to go and hang out at my house?”

You could be forgiven for being baffled by such talk, but much-needed help is at hand with ‘Pimp Your Vocab’, in which Lucy Tobin translates the jargon teenagers and young people use, and possibly gives you a little more insight.

Tobin is hopeful that the dictionary can help to bridge the communication gap between teachers and students.

She said: “Language changes fast and that can scare the hell out of parents, teachers and anyone who no longer braves the clubs on Friday night for fear of being ‘too old’.

“In communicating with a teenglish-speaking randomer (that’s an outsider to your social group) their words can seem like a new language.

“Meaning is not an exact science, but depends on mutual agreement between reader and writer, speaker and listener, teenager and adult.”

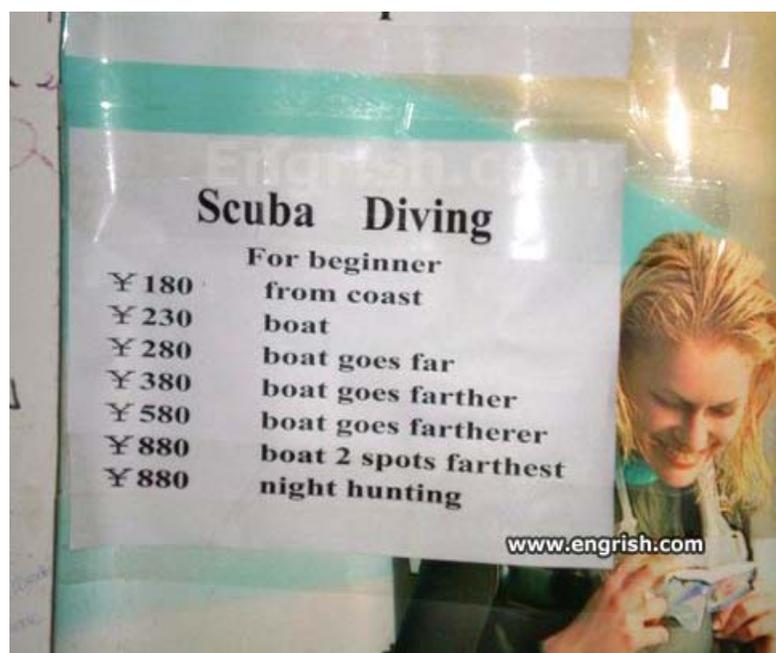
Other teenglish words include ‘bungalowed’ (completely drunk), ‘floss’ (showoff), ‘nang’ (brilliant) and ‘swipeout’ (when your cash card stops working).

We at Plain English Campaign think the whole thing is ‘breeze’ (rubbish).

English as a foreign language

There are increasingly large numbers of people who need to use English as a second language.

Unfortunately, the shortage of teachers in some parts of the world result in some interesting uses of the English language.



“He speaks English, Spanish, and he’s bilingual too.” — Don King

“From the waist down, Earl Campbell has the biggest legs I’ve ever seen on a running back.” — John Madden

“Predictions are difficult, especially about the future.” — Yogi Berra

Life and death quotes

“If you have intercourse you run the risk of dying and the ramifications of death are final.” — Cyndi Lauper

“Smoking kills. If you’re killed, you’ve lost an important part of your life.” — Brooke Shields

New corporate members

Alliance Medical Limited
 A4E Limited
 SKILL: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities
 New Look Retailers
 Counter Context Ltd
 npower Ltd

New Silver Crystal Mark holders (at least 25 Crystal Marks)

Combined Insurance
 Notting Hill Housing

New Gold Crystal Mark holders (at least 50 Crystal Marks)

Birmingham City Council

New Crystal Mark holders

NHS Fetal Anomaly Screening Programme
 Watford Community Housing Trust
 South East Coast Ambulance Service
 Liverpool John Moores Student Union
 NHS Leeds
 Berwick Borough Housing
 E-ON UK
 Shepherds Bush Housing Group
 High Court Enforcement Officers Association Limited
 South Yorkshire Housing Association
 POhWER
 Teignbridge District Council
 Central Lancashire Primary Care Trust
 National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA)
 Artemis Investment Management Limited
 Merck Serono
 Connexions Buckinghamshire
 Connexions Milton Keynes
 Astellas Pharma Limited
 Three Barrels Brandy
 Manchester Airport Group
 Arun District Council
 AJ Parks (Intellectual property lawyers and patent attorneys)
 Christie's Auctioneers
 Finance Capital Limited
 Southampton Solent University
 Stockport Homes
 Esporta Health Clubs
 Construction Workers Pension Scheme (CWPS)

Help the public to understand your documents – with a Crystal Mark. More than 18,300 documents now carry our Crystal Mark as a sign of clarity.

We will not allow the Crystal Mark to appear on any document unless the intended audience can understand and act on it.

If you have a document you would like us to look at, and would like a quote for the work, please email info@plainenglish.co.uk, or phone Tony Maher on 01663 744409.

Editing offers

We will edit and Crystal Mark several documents of up to 4500 words in total for £995. As an indication of savings, editing and Crystal Marking three documents of up to 4500 words would normally cost £1995. The savings would be even greater if you send us four or more short documents with a word count of up to 4500.

About our courses

We offer a range of training courses to teach you how to write in plain English.

In-house courses

Our trainers will come to your organisation's offices where your staff can take the course.

Online courses

We offer some of our training, including our business-writing course, online.

Open courses

We hold these courses regularly at various hotels around the country.

Plain English Diploma

This is a course that you take over a period of a year.

You may also be interested in our training pack, which gives you all the tools to train your own staff in plain English techniques.

If you have any questions about our range of courses, please phone us on 01663 744409 and ask for Terri Schabel, our training administrator.

Training offers

One free place on an online course for every two places you buy.

One free place on an open course for every two places you buy.

Plain English training kit offer

If you have your own trainer, you can run your own courses with one of our plain English training kits. If you order more than one, we are offering a 10% discount on every kit you buy.

Compact plain English course

Do you need to train your staff on a budget? Then try our compact plain English course.

This new course caters for people in a hurry. We know that many people would like to go to one of our one-day training courses but lack the time to commit a full day.

So, we have taken some of the main parts of the one-day course and put them into a three-hour session. In that time you will learn the basics of plain English, and you will take away the same workbook we give to delegates on our full one-day course. You can then practise your new plain English skills, and extend your knowledge of plain English techniques, in your spare time.

The price for up to 15 delegates is £795 + VAT. (We may charge travelling expenses if our trainer has to travel more than 50 miles.)

For more details, or for details about any of our other courses, contact Terri Schabel on 01663 744409.

“I’ve never really wanted to go to Japan. Simply because I don’t like eating fish. And I know that’s very popular out there in Africa.” — Britney Spears

“So, where’s the Cannes Film Festival being held this year?” — Christina Aguilera

“I cried over beauty, I cried over pain, and the other time I cried because I felt nothing. I can’t help it. I’m just a cliché of myself.” — Keanu Reeves

Training dates until the end of May 2010 (open courses)

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

Thistle Euston Hotel (London)

2009

Thursday 10 December (Plain English)

2010

Wednesday 13 January (Plain English and forms design)

Wednesday 20 January (Grammarcheck)

Thursday 21 January (Plain English)

Thursday 28 January (Writing for websites)

Thursday 11 February (Plain English)

Wednesday 10 and Thursday 11 March (Plain English diploma, two day course)

Thursday 18 March (Plain English)

Wednesday 21 April (Grammarcheck)

Thursday 22 April (Plain English)

Tuesday 18 May (Plain English)

Wednesday 19 May (Writing for websites)

Thistle Hotel (Birmingham City)

2010

Wednesday 17 March (Grammarcheck)

Thursday 18 March (Plain English)

Thistle Hotel (Manchester)

2009

Thursday 10 December (Plain English)

2010

Wednesday 13 and Thursday 14 January (Plain English diploma, two day course)

Tuesday 9 February (Grammarcheck)

Wednesday 10 February (Plain English)

Thursday 18 February (Advanced Grammar)

Wednesday 14 April (Plain English)

Edinburgh

2009

There are no more dates in Edinburgh in 2009.

2010

Wednesday 24 March (Grammarcheck)

Thursday 25 March (Plain English)