

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Issue 82 Winter 2013

Pension scheming

While we at Plain English Campaign applaud the cap on charges for workplace pensions, we're less happy about the lack of transparency regarding the nature of any such charges.

We would like the Government to insist on pension providers clearly explaining their services and charges and to make it a legal obligation to make all information on these matters easy to understand and free of jargon.

We're not merely talking about dubious terms and conditions here. We're talking about the future livelihood of families and the security of those wanting to protect themselves from unforeseen obstacles affecting what will be crucial income at a vulnerable age.

The Office of Fair Trading have already recommended that the Department for Work and Pensions take a serious look at the confusing charges and poor transparency of pension schemes. Around £30 billion rests in old-fashioned and high-charging schemes (often single-employer schemes) that are too complicated and badly need modernising.

Angela Seymour Jackson, Aegon's Managing Director of Workplace Solutions, emphatically agrees.

"Some have valuable features, but not all may meet today's value-for-money standards. Others would benefit from technological advances." She added, "A detailed audit is the right next step to developing industry-wide value-for-money principles allowing for different features and charging approaches."

Jonathan Lipkin, Public Policy Director at the Investment Management Association (IMA), suggested that due to their unique status and vulnerability to ever-changing factors,

pensions need a unique approach and rigorous, carefully implemented standards.

"EU fund regulation offers a useful conceptual approach in the form of the Ongoing Charges Figure (OCF), calculated and presented in a comparable way in every UCITS (Undertakings for Collective Investments in Transferable Securities)," said Lipkin. "Pensions are clearly not the same as investment funds, but they need their own equivalent of the OCF – a consistent standard that cannot be disputed."

"A consistent standard that cannot be disputed" would put a lot of pension scheme investors' minds at rest and is surely long overdue.

The demise of plain speaking

Redundancies are still an unfortunate reality for a lot of organisations. But there are ways of getting rid of members of staff.

HSBC got it badly wrong in April. Around 3000 staff members were, according to the bank, "demised".

As part of a money-saving rejig, HSBC will be creating a number of new roles which will accommodate almost two-thirds of the "demised" staff, but over 1000 will remain "demised".

Unite National Officer Dominic Hook wasn't impressed. "This jargon is demeaning to HSBC staff who are at the end of their tether with cuts to sick pay, holidays and pensions. These cuts are about putting profits before people."

At least people can deny they have been sacked: but it's yet another example of crazy, unnecessary jargon being employed (as opposed to demised, which it should be, with immediate effect).

Poor state of affairs

Back in February The Daily Express ran a piece titled "The death of plain English". It suggested that the UK had been "...conquered by its own public sector" and an "...impenetrable dialect of cobblers".

While we couldn't agree with the rabble-rousing title, it was a fine piece that we couldn't otherwise help but advocate.

The paper also cited "the background hum of the state" and its "truth-burying circumlocutions...breeding faster than ever".

It criticised two worthy targets: a feeble government happy to dole out incomprehensible information with which to stifle and trick the population, and a public sector faced with a dilemma of whether to please government go-betweens by using such nonsense, or instead convey something complex or incomplete in plain language and take the blame for revealing the true nature of unpopular policy.

It's a point worth repeating. It's not just a question of poor eloquence or untidy grammar, nor is it garbled communication. It's extremely deceitful.

The Daily Express also seemed to suggest that the terminology, daftly-inflated job titles and curious redefinitions of well-known matters within the public sector were an attempt to:

- lend pointless gravitas to roles; and
- devalue any possible attempts at questioning the functionality of such things. (In other words, if we can't understand a word of it, even though it affects us daily, and we pay for it, we will be put off getting involved.)

So standards drop and no-one can complain unless they want to wade through the mire of gobbledygook they are inevitably faced with. Not to mention the by-now familiar reliance on never actually referring to anything

recognisable and specific, so in the future there will be no danger of accusations of hypocrisy or failure.

From the article:

"It can be boring or even bleakly amusing but then it's used to cover up lethal public incompetence, as it has been throughout the MidStaffordshire hospitals debacle, and that's when the fun stops. Public-sector chiefs use words and phrases that are so uncoupled from any underlying reality that there is nothing to check or refute, nothing for blame to hook on to.

"In the NHS improvement plan I quoted just now, the word 'workstream' occurs 34 times but the word 'nurse' does not occur once. If that plan fails, nobody's name is attached to anything real and measurable. It's pre-emptive coverup – deception in depth. It makes you nostalgic for good, honest lies."

Navy jargon

There's a fight going on in the US Navy over a distinct lack of plain English communication.

Rear Admiral John Kirby admirably wants to "say it in plain English" rather than "jargon and gibberish".

"The world isn't a dangerous place. It's a 'dynamic and complex international environment,'" he said in an email to military colleagues.

"We didn't tell people we were reducing to one the number of carriers in the Middle East," he continued. "We told them we were responding to a '1.0 carrier presence requirement in the CENTCOM AOR.'"

With a potential deployment of yet more overseas troops a genuine possibility, such a vocal check on military communication is welcome. Whether it's heeded or not is another matter. But as Kirby suggests:

"We can no longer afford to say nothing. Each word must count."

Plain English Campaign Annual Award Winners 2013

It's Plain English Awards time again and, as usual, we have a suitable selection of heroes and villains for your appreciation and entertainment.

We congratulate those who are committed to clear communication and deliver their message in a way fit for as wide an audience as possible. They provide a great service that has not gone unnoticed, and here's our chance to appreciate and thank them.

Sadly, those failing to keep to our principles are failing dramatically and are, if anything, getting worse. There are some culprits within the following pages producing textbook examples of what not to do – but they are, as usual, not necessarily trying to be clear. They're using impenetrable language to mask their lack of eloquence and to deliberately confuse.

So, little changes. There are those happy to adopt our principles and make life easier for everyone and those still happy to use the same tired and empty buzzwords.

And yet, we have the opportunity once again to pour scorn on the year's atrocities of language and speech and, more importantly, bring to your attention those we feel show the way forward.

Such as Gary Neville, so impressively clear as a communicator for Sky Sports that he arguably contributed to a shake-up at BBC Match of the Day. And Elmore Leonard, great US crime author, who sadly passed away in 2013, but not without leaving an impressive legacy of plain English and some well known guidelines for writing clear, unpretentious prose.

Out goes 'innit'

Back in October, Harris Academy in south London took the bold step of banning a selection of words it deemed unsuitable. So out went 'innit', there was much less of 'extra' and 'bare' was quickly blanketed, among other slang terms.

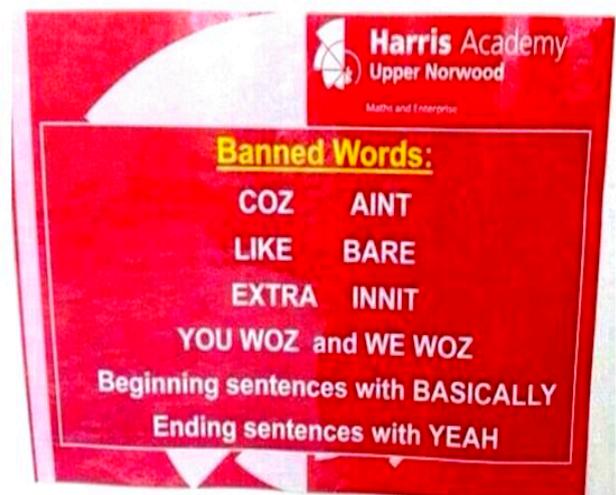
Plain English Campaign does not have any problem with slang terms, but agrees with MP David Lammy that there's a time and a place for them.

"The issue here isn't about slang itself, but about the context it is used in," said Lammy. "Language is an important part of any culture, and young people will always have their own slang.

"But young people need versatility; using slang is fine in some situations, but the ability to also speak good English is absolutely crucial in any workplace, and it is something that every school should be teaching its students."

Harris Academy deserves a lot of credit for taking such a stand. Some critics have poured scorn on the move as outdated, overly interfering and pointless.

This is nonsense: slang will always thrive outside the classroom. It needs to be kept in check during school hours for the good of students' prospects once they've left.



It would, in any case, be impossible (not to mention unethical) to traffic and control the spontaneous exchanges between young people. But schools are there to set an example, and Harris Academy has made an impressive one. No-one expects conversations, let alone those between kids, that stick to rigid rules of perfect English, but standards are slipping, and measures such as this may turn out to be hugely important.

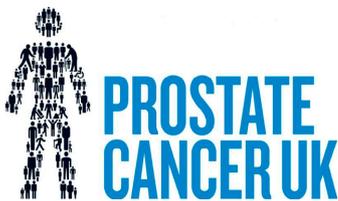
Plain English Campaign 2013



**You just don't understand
Our impact 2012/2013**

The family has been informed

These publications are written to help parents and professionals deal with the aftermath of a death and they are written in a clear, unambiguous language and style. Although dealing with a difficult subject, the books are well-designed, bright and contain invaluable support.



Prostatitis

Diet, activity and your risk of prostate cancer

What do you know about your prostate?

Follow-up after prostate cancer treatment

What is my risk of prostate cancer?

These well-written and well-designed booklets and leaflets give straightforward answers to many of the questions men and their families may have. The information is clear, easy to read and presented in a conversational, non-threatening way.



Feel more like you

This book explains changes that might occur to skin, hair and nails during cancer treatments and how to deal with these changes. It is written in clear, straightforward language and presents information in short paragraphs and bulleted lists. At a stressful time, clear, well-written information is vital and this booklet provides just that.



Staff handbook

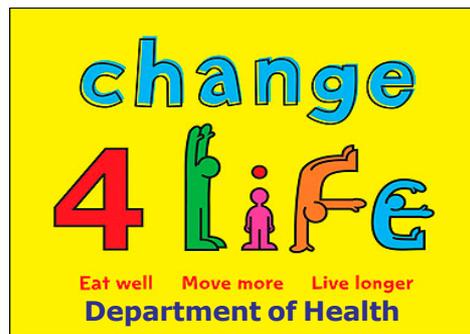
This is one of the best staff handbooks that we have judged for a Plain English award. It is clear and unambiguous. It explains quite simply what the company expects of an employee and what an employee can expect of the company.



Recycle week special

Recycle for Pendle

Although recycling is not the most exciting of subjects, staff at the Borough of Pendle have produced material that is well-written and attractive. If residents need encouragement to read anything about recycling, this is the sort of material that will get their attention.



Don't let drink sneak up on you

Although this booklet doesn't conform to our usual design guidelines, we feel that its 'cartoon' feel and bright colours are likely to appeal to its intended audience.

The tone is friendly and the emphasis is on changing behaviour to reduce drinking rather than stopping drinking altogether. The language is clear and even though cartoonish characters are used, the serious message about cutting back on alcohol is not lost.

Imagine Publishing



These magazines give clear, simple explanations and instructions that even the most inexperienced photographer can follow. As you would expect, the illustrations are excellent and support the step-by-step instructions.

Although the title is 'Photography for beginners' it is hard to believe even more seasoned photographers won't find something of interest in these well-written and designed publications.



Social care jargon buster

This jargon buster explains what 52 commonly-used social care words and phrases mean. It uses clear language and short sentences to explain some of the terms which are widely used. It is written for people in the care system and, by using personal pronouns (you, your) it makes the definitions relevant to the reader.



Healthy eating 5 a day recipe pack

This book, with its emphasis on tasty, healthy food, would encourage anyone to have a go at cooking. Each ingredient, each piece of equipment and each stage of the recipes is illustrated, making this ideal for anyone who has problems reading and understanding standard recipe books.

award winners and diplomas

Plain English Diplomas

Tracey Dawson – Pensions Advisory Authority

Tony Geudens – IdeoScript

Fiona Gordon – MOD

Rebecca Guntrip – Kent County Council

Steve Harrison – Sandwell MBC

Liisa Lehtio – Skandia

Alison Muir – Hertfordshire Partnership

Guy Robinson

Sam Wooller – Skandia

Kick in the Pants Award



Helen Grant
Minister for Sport, Tourism and Equalities

Leicester City Council

Pat on the Back Award

Andrew Rawnsley
(Observer)

The Observer's award-winning Chief Political Commentator and Associate Editor.

Plain English Media Awards

Best Newspaper
The Times

Best Radio Programme

Radio 4 Thinking Allowed

International Award

Health Canada
The Plain Language Labeling Project

Best Publication
The Week

Best Television Programme
Amanpour (CNN)

Plain English Communicator Award

Gary Neville (Sky Sports)

This much-praised football commentator for Sky Sports is also a member of the England coaching staff. He has been praised for his meticulous research and the fact he appears neutral despite his long career with Manchester United.

Web Award

The Automobile Association
www.theaa.com

The Woodland Trust
www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

Chrissie Maher Award

Charles, Prince of Wales

For putting the spotlight on the pensions industry.

Foot in Mouth Award



Godfrey Bloom
Independent MEP
Criticised recently when he referred to "bongo-bongo land" and joking that a fringe meeting was "full of sluts" who did not clean behind their fridges.

Osborne Memorial Award

Elmore Leonard

The late American novelist and screenwriter wrote westerns, crime fiction and thrillers. His 10 rules of writing are frequently quoted.

Golden Bull winners 2013



We received this notice about an open seminar at the University of Essex Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies

Between the unspeakable and the speculum:
Poetry and Psychoanalysis

This paper will be a reflection on what endures and on the archaeology of utterance – an archaeology that is intimately connected to castration. As a Symbolic artefact poetry stands between the darkness of the unknowable – Freud’s navel – and Lacan’s mirror of semblance in which false architectures of the self, emerge as a parody of the truth.

Alan Cox of Swanage nominated this paragraph from a letter sent by Alliance Trust Savings

How will I be impacted?

We have confirmed with the Fund Managers that the rebate paying share classes you are invested in, listed overleaf, have an equivalent within the ‘clean share’ class. The new share class has a lower or equal net AMC to the fund that you are currently invested in and so you will either pay the same, or less, than you did previously when taking any previous rebates into account.

One of our supporters received a long letter from The Department of Energy and Climate Change about the energy grants system. It included the following useful information

The second part consists of an Occupancy Assessment (OA) that adjusts the standardised EPC estimates based on information about the occupants...

GDARS build upon the information in the EPC by incorporating additional information gathered from the OA about how the occupants in the property actually use energy... I hope this is helpful.

An anonymous jobseeker sent us this Celtic Carvery & Alehouse ‘Bar Manager / Manageress’ job advert

Job Purpose

Provides beverages by procuring beverage ingredients.

Duties

Accomplishes bar human resource objectives by recruiting, selecting, orienting, training, assigning, scheduling, coaching, counselling, and disciplining employees.

Achieves bar operational objectives by contributing information and analysis to functional strategic plans and reviews. Plans beer, wine, and spirits drink menus by researching mixology techniques.

Here is a quote by SEGRO’s Chief Investment Officer about its sale of a business park

The sale is very much in line with our ongoing focus on recycling capital out of assets at the appropriate time in the cycle in order to crystallise gains from higher value uses and redeploy into other profitable growth opportunities in our core markets.

One of our supporters received this response from HMRC after attempting to email them a file

The submission of this document has failed due to departmental specific business logic in the Body tag. Your submission contains an unrecognised namespace.

Brian Garner sent us Manchester City Council’s proposals about the sale of the former BBC site on Oxford Road

The former BBC site sits within the Corridor: Manchester which is Greater Manchester’s (GM) central business and education district, critical to the flow of people, goods and ideas through the GM area.

Key development principles:

- Create enhanced public pedestrian connections and active frontages along Charles Street and Brancaster Road.
- Provide a legible framework of linked public spaces.
- Create a positive response to the River Medlock frontage...

The Gove-rnor speaks out

In the middle of 2013, Michael Gove was a welcome Government voice against poor communication.

He chided civil servants for using “inflated political rhetoric”, warned against “general formulaic replies” and provided a set of guidelines that would hopefully get them writing in a “concise, polite and precise” way.

He also provided the following example.

“Rather than writing ‘the policy that we are introducing is intended to drive a change in behaviours on the part of teachers with respect to the poorest and most disadvantaged children and young people’ write ‘the policy will change how teachers behave towards poorer students.’”

Gove goes on to list a selection of writers from which lessons in clarity and eloquence might be learned, including George Orwell, Christopher Hitchens and Jane Austen. He also attempts to lay foundations through 10 guidelines. Coming in at number 5 is, “Would your mum be able to understand it? Would mine?”

Although, it’s fair to point out, efforts such as this have been made before. Justine Greening,



in 2011, sent a five-page essay about writing in plain English to her staff in the Transport Department. Last year, Owen Paterson, Environment Secretary, was also forced into drafting advice to officials on using clauses and semicolons for clarity.

Gove’s guideline 7 is interesting, and quite correct: “Always use concrete words and phrases in preference to abstractions.” If only such a suggestion were taken on board across all political rhetoric. Nonetheless, a promising move from such a senior minister.

Bill jargon takes a hike

While you shouldn’t expect to see an end to energy costs rising any time soon, you should at least be able to understand the next hike in prices.

Welcome new reforms mean that energy companies can no longer rely on indecipherable or confusing information and must be transparent when dealing with their customers.

A survey carried out in February by uSwitch found that 37% of the four in 10 customers who didn’t trust their energy supplier blamed “a lack of transparency and openness”.

The reforms, introduced by Ofgem, which outlaw the use of jargon in any

communication, are a direct response to a withering attack from MPs in July. The attack accused Ofgem of “failing consumers by not taking all possible steps to improve openness and increase competition in the energy market”.

So, from now on, you should be dealt with in a clear, transparent and easy-to-follow way, whether you are reading your bill, being sold a product or receiving a response to your complaint.

We will keep an eye on such matters and await, with interest, the success of the reforms...

From Russia with dub...

You do get used to some odd requests being one of Plain English Campaign's media gunslingers but this was decidedly 'different'. These days I've grown accustomed to one-person film crews arriving, where the camera operator is the interviewer, the producer and the gopher all rolled into one, so it was strangely refreshing to have a gang of four turn up from the vast expanses of the Russian steppe, all climbing all over each other and talking at once.

And they took ages: clearly they were serious about getting this right. If you go on the telly, you have to do 'walking shots' where you walk past the camera so they can dub you promenading casually past while the voiceover intones darkly about what you are about to say, do, and so on. Normally this is a one-take job.

Not this time. I had to stroll repeatedly along four extremely public areas of that hotbed of international media prominence, Chapel-en-le-Frith, where a reliable supply of electricity is still an occasional and welcome surprise, to the amusement of those busy in hair salons and pubs.

All this was taking place, of course, while being pursued by my loud and enthusiastic camera-toting Russian friends. In no time we had attracted a small crowd of intrigued onlookers.

The Russia 1 crew were quite taken with the idea that I worked at the local radio station and we spent quite a while in the High Peak Radio studio shooting me in conversation with colleagues and whoever could be persuaded to pass the time of day. The female member of the team made my day when she said I had "film star looks" and then spoiled it by referring to "Danny Devito" and asking for my autograph.

The Russians were interested in the language of the media and the way we occasionally use euphemisms, and wanted to know about the language of political correctness. I spent quite a while in the broadcast studio waving my arms about and prattling on. A thought then occurred about language. "Is this an English language service or.."

"No," came the reply. "We're going to dub it all in later..."

So whatever I said, I hope it's what I said! I think so, anyway...!

Steve Jenner

Training dates for 2014 (open courses)

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

Plain English open courses

Manchester – Thistle Hotel

Thursday 27 February (plain English)
Wednesday 28 May (Grammarcheck)
Thursday 29 May (plain English)
Wednesday 6 August (plain English)
Wednesday 12 November (Grammarcheck)
Thursday 13 November (plain English)

London – Thistle Euston Hotel

Wednesday 15 January (plain English)
Thursday 13 February (plain English)
Thursday 20 March (Grammarcheck)
Friday 21 March (plain English)
Thursday 17 April (plain English)
Wednesday 14 May (plain English)
Wednesday 11 June (Grammarcheck)
Thursday 12 June (plain English)
Tuesday 22 July (plain English)

London – Thistle Euston Hotel (continued)

Thursday 21 August (plain English)
Tuesday 16 September (Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 17 September (plain English)
Wednesday 15 October (plain English)
Thursday 20 November (plain English)
Wednesday 10 December (plain English)

Special open course dates – Thistle Euston hotel

Wednesday 29 January – Writing for websites
Tuesday 24 June – Advanced grammar
Tuesday 23 September – Report writing

Diploma course start dates

Thistle Euston

Wednesday 26 and Thursday 27 February

Thistle Manchester

Monday 24 and Tuesday 25 November