

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 47 (January 2001)

Chaos

Untested form causes US election fiasco

It's well known that confusing forms waste time and money, and that they can lead to misery and distress. But one unclear document has earned prime position in the gobbledygook hall of shame.

A Florida woman's failure to test a ballot paper before it was used may have irreversibly changed the result of the United States presidential election.

Extensive research suggests that thousands of supporters of Democrat Al Gore may have mistakenly voted for a rival candidate - enough to cost Gore the entire election.

In a special feature in this issue, we look at the most convincing argument in history for testing public documents for clarity.

What was the confusion with the paper?

The controversy began in Palm Beach, one of 67 counties in Florida. Each county in Florida designed its own ballot paper for last November's election.

Rather than writing a cross in a box, voters in some Florida counties punch a hole in a card which is then read by machine. Normally this type of ballot has candidates for president in one vertical column, with a punch hole by each name.

(Please turn to page 7.)



Television personality Gavin Campbell presents Samantha Turnbull of Capital One with her Plain English Campaign Diploma at our 21st annual awards ceremony.

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It's an honour

Plain English crusader earns MBE - and all the other news.

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Cream of the crop

The good, bad and utterly baffling are rewarded at our annual awards.

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Jargon buster

Your guide to the latest sightings from our team of waffle watchers.

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Westminster waffle watch



The politicians are back at work, and we're pleased to say that they aren't all being silenced by gobbledegook.

Lord Lucas, speaking about the Freedom of Information Bill, supported rewriting a clause to 'greatly improve its accessibility in terms of plain English. A great many people who will care deeply about the provisions in the Bill will wish to read them in plain English rather than in legalese.'

Lord Mackay of Ardbrecknish agreed. 'If ever a Bill needed to be written in plain English, it is this one - especially if it is to be used by plain people, like myself, who wish to understand the Bill.'

Over in the House of Commons, pensions minister Jeff Rooker announced that the application form for the new pension credit scheme will be crystal clear.

He said that 'the application form for pension credit will be unlike any other form ever issued by my Department. It will be short, simple, easily understood and an absolute joy to fill in.'

And it's not just Westminster where the call for clarity is strong. Speaking in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Eamonn O'Neill asked for public information to be crystal clear.

'Plain English is a major requirement here. Even the explanatory notes outlining these changes are difficult to read; I guarantee that any Member in this Chamber would have to read some sections three or four times just to begin to make sense of them.'

'What about the people on the ground? What are they going to think of such convoluted language? Please let there be some common sense here; please produce information that people can understand.'

Route to success

A former bus driver found new regulations were driving him round the bend - so he produced a one-way ticket to clarity.

Guy Gibson, training officer at Trent Buses, was baffled by the standards set for drivers working towards a national qualification. The guide was in such overblown language that the words 'bus stop' and 'ticket machine' did not appear anywhere.

Mr Gibson rewrote the guide in plain English, and his new version has been adopted by the national bus industry body.

One of the passages read 'Ensure awareness and anticipation of other road users in the vicinity of the manoeuvre is maintained.'

In Mr Gibson's version, drivers were simply told 'Look where you're going.'

Chrissie Maher welcomed the guide. 'It's great to see ordinary people trying to break down the wall of gobbledegook.'

'We often joke about plain English being the language of the man on the Clapham omnibus. We just never realised that man was the driver!'

Gobbledegook hit by global destruction

The Crystal Mark has continued its globetrotting, with finance firm AMP becoming the second organisation in New Zealand to earn the honour.

They met our tough standards with their 'Survival Insurance' brochure. Almost 200 staff at the company have now been trained in plain English techniques. Local firm The Write Consultancy helped them share our decades of experience.



We've also spread plain English to the Far East thanks to a new book published in Korea. Yun Jae Jung of the English Forum has produced a guide to everyday English for Koreans working abroad.

Our international experts George Maher and John Wild (pictured above) helped make sure the guide covered the phrases for day-to-day conversation as well as more formal business language.

It's snow joke

Art historian Dr Tricia Cusack has described a figure whose 'masculinity and its ritual location in the semi-public space of garden or field help to substantiate an ideology upholding a gendered spatial/social system, marking women's proper sphere as the domestic/private and men's as the commercial/public. His location just within the private sphere emphasises masculine stewardship, his presence a reminder of masculine dominance, ordering and surveillance.'

This figure is pictured right.



We spell it out: do it the English way

Our campaigners are still celebrating a famous victory for the English language.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), which governs school subjects, had proposed changes to the way spelling is taught. Their plan would have replaced scientific phrases such as 'sulphate' and 'foetus' with the American versions 'sulfate' and 'fetus'.

On hearing the proposals, we argued that the plan was inappropriate for schoolchildren. Our spokesman John Lister told reporters on both sides of the Atlantic that

'although this makes sense for those in international science and research, it's not relevant for children aged 11 to 14. English children go to school to be prepared for everyday English life.'

We also warned that children learning these spellings would face problems when they went into the real world and appeared to be making mistakes in the eyes of the older generation.

Our voice was heard. By the end of the day, the Schools Minister Estelle Morris had listened to public opinion. She stepped in and ordered the QCA to drop the plans.

A South African man has found a novel solution to complicated tax forms.

According to the Cape Times, a letter recently went to the 'Collector of Taxes, Harare'.

'Dear Sir,

I refer to the attached form. I regret I am unable to complete the form.

However, I am not interested in this income service.

Would you please cancel my name from your books as this service has upset my mind and I do not know who has registered me as one of your customers.

Yours faithfully...'

Silver screen smokescreen

It seems Hollywood is home to a new form of waffle. A study of the entertainment industry magazine 'Variety' has shown a dialect peculiar to the film world, dubbed 'slanguage'.

A story in the magazine could see a 'laffer' (comedy) being 'skedded' (scheduled for release), suffering the 'BO Blahs' (performing poorly at the box office), but recovering with good 'overall vid coin' (earning high revenues through video releases).

Variety's London correspondent Erich Boehm says the dialect is nothing new.

'Our most famous headline was from the 1930s: 'Hicks Nix Sticks Pix'. It meant that people in 1930s rural America didn't want to see films about 1930s rural America.'

More critical Hollywood observers have suggested the only people to use the style in real life are 'wannabes' trying to look the part.



Campaigner honoured for wading through Scotch mist

You may remember that on last June's Crystal Clear Day, we announced Scottish Power's Sybil Law as one of our first honoured Plain English Champions.

It looks like our choice earned royal approval - Sybil (pictured above with our trainer John Dwyer) has now been awarded the MBE for services to plain English.

Sybil said she was 'thrilled and delighted. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would get anything like this.'

Our founder-director Chrissie Maher, who earned the OBE in 1994, was delighted when she heard of Sybil's latest honour.

'It's fantastic to see plain English recognised as a worthy cause in itself. Not only has Sybil swept plain English across Scottish Power, but many of the people she has trained have taken clear communication into other organisations.

'And if anybody thinks letters after her name are going to stop Sybil fighting for plain English, they've obviously never seen her in action!'

Sybil agreed. 'I will continue to do all I can to promote plain English inside **and** outside my company. I believe people have a basic right to understand everything that is written down.

'There are still more gobbledygook monsters out there so our work continues.'

Golden Bull Awards

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

Luton Education Authority, as reported in the Daily Telegraph on 9 March

'Excluded kids were being given go-karting lessons. The authority claimed the scheme was 'a multi-agency project catering for holistic diversionary provision to young people for positive action linked to the community safety strategy and the pupil referral unit.'

Britannia Building Society rules

Delete the definition of 'Special Resolution' and replace with 'Special Resolution'

(i) in relation to a resolution proposed or to be proposed, means any resolution that the Statutes or these Rules require to be passed as a Special Resolution if it is to be effective for its purpose or which is a resolution (not being a resolution which if passed would purport to interfere with the Directors' right and duty to manage the affairs of the Society) which is specified in a Members' requisition referred to in Rule 31 (3) (a) or in a Members' Notice referred to in Rule 33 (1) (c) and which as its only or main object or consequence or as one of its main objects or consequences seeks that

A proposed rule change for a 'prestigious golf club'. The person who nominated the passage insisted on strict anonymity for fear of being barred from the clubhouse!

The Club is a mutual undertaking not carried on for profit or gain.

It is not subject to any commercial influence and no Member shall, except for professional services rendered at the request of the Committee, receive any profit, benefit or payment from or at the expense of the Club nor any commission or percentage with reference to the purchase or provision of intoxicating liquor nor any direct or indirect pecuniary benefit from its supply by the Club to its Members, Guests or Visitors apart from any benefit accruing to the Club as a whole and apart also from any benefit which a person derives indirectly by reason of the supply giving rise to, or contributing to the general gain from the carrying on of the Club.

Department of Social Security Housing Benefit and Council Tax circular

12) The rate of Child Benefit for the eldest child will be increased from £14.40 to £15.00 and the rate of Child Benefit for the second and subsequent child will be increased from £9.60 to £10.00. The element of these increases which represents an above inflation increase are reflected in the income-related benefits, including the rate of Family Premium (Lone Parent) which has previously been frozen since April 1997.

13) As a result the uprated child allowances are increased by the above inflation increase to Child Benefit for the second child. The uprated Family Premium and previously frozen rate of Family Premium (Lone Parent) are increased by the difference between the above inflation increases to Child Benefit for the eldest and second child.

A letter to an investor from **NPI Portfolio Managers Limited**

'On 22 January 1999, we converted the range of unit trusts available to our PEP Taxbeater Investors to an Open Ended Investment Company (OEIC) structure. If this is the first statement that you have received since the conversion, the enclosed PEP Transaction Statement will show the transactions related to the conversion. They appear as AS- and AS+ transactions. The AS- transactions show the removal of your unit trust holdings and the AS+ transactions show the addition of a holding of shares in the replacement OEIC Fund(s) which, combined with any residual cash holding, have an equivalent value to your unit trust holding.'

A section from the terms and conditions of Internet company **Yahoo**

18 LIMITATION OF LIABILITY

YOU EXPRESSLY ACKNOWLEDGE AND AGREE THAT YAHOO! SHALL NOT BE LIABLE FOR ANY DIRECT, INDIRECT, INCIDENTAL, SPECIAL, CONSEQUENTIAL OR EXEMPLARY



objects or consequences seeks that the Board consider, investigate, effect or supply information in relation to a transfer of the Society's business to a commercial company or a merger with another building society or a dissolution or winding up of the Society.

A draft deed of indemnity from the [Ministry of Defence](#)

We agree ...

that we shall not be discharged or released from our obligations under this deed by any arrangement or agreement made between you and the contractor or a receiver, administrative receiver, administrator, liquidator or a similar officer of the contractor, or by any renegotiation, substitution, alteration, amendment or variation (however fundamental) and whether or not to our disadvantage, to or of, the obligations imposed upon the contractor or any other person or by any forbearance granted by you to the contractor or any other person as to payment, time, performance or otherwise or by any release or variation (however fundamental) of, any invalidity in, or any failure to take, perfect or enforce any other indemnity, guarantee or security in respect of the obligations to which this deed relates or by any other matter or thing which but for this provision might exonerate us and this notwithstanding that such arrangement, agreement, renegotiation, substitution, alteration, amendment, variation, forbearance, matter or thing may have been made, granted or happened without our knowledge or assent;

[Liverpool Architecture and Design Trust](#) advertisement

Heritage open days 2000...

A unique annual opportunity to see the hidden gems of Merseyside's heritage.



A leaflet ('Regional Strategy for the South West of England 2000 - 2010') from the [South West of England Regional Development Agency](#)

Unlocking the Regional Strategy

Aligning the Drivers, Values and Principles with the Objectives is the key to unlocking the strategy. When they are fully aligned, they will illuminate the actions that need to be taken in the region.

A tree preservation order by [Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council](#)

TAKE NOTICE that the Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, in pursuance of their powers as Local Planning Authority under section 198 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, has made a Tree Preservation Order (a copy whereof together with the map included therein is enclosed herewith) in respect of:...

The Foot in Mouth Award

This is awarded to the celebrity who produced the year's most baffling verbal statement. This year's winner was Hollywood star [Alicia Silverstone](#) for her comments quoted in the Sunday Telegraph.

'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.'

DAMAGES, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DAMAGES FOR LOSS OF PROFITS, GOODWILL, USE, DATA OR OTHER INTANGIBLE LOSSES (EVEN IF YAHOO! HAS BEEN ADVISED OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGES), RESULTING FROM: (i) THE USE OR THE INABILITY TO USE THE SERVICE; (ii) THE COST OF PROCUREMENT OF SUBSTITUTE GOODS AND SERVICES RESULTING FROM ANY GOODS, DATA, INFORMATION OR SERVICES PURCHASED OR OBTAINED OR MESSAGES RECEIVED OR TRANSACTIONS ENTERED INTO THROUGH OR FROM THE SERVICE; (iii) UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO OR ALTERATION OF YOUR TRANSMISSIONS OR DATA; (iv) STATEMENTS OR CONDUCT OF ANY THIRD PARTY ON THE SERVICE; OR (v) ANY OTHER MATTER RELATING TO THE SERVICE.

US consultants [Kline & Co](#)'s business manager Garrett Gee, quoted in [Plastics and Rubber Weekly](#)

Traditional value chains and relationships in the plastics industry are under the threat of being deconstructed by e-commerce activities. New business models are emerging to more effectively manage the flow of mission-critical information among value chain participants, which in turn is creating new value propositions for customers.

However, we are very surprised to find that the number of early adapters in the plastics industry can be counted on your finger tips.

...changing the plastics industry's mindset ... to an information based paradigm is a paramount transformation.

... plastics companies need to invest resources immediately in analytical programmes to improve their understanding of channel options and emerging business models associated with e-commerce initiatives.

The 21st annual Plain English Campaign Award winners

'Plain English' category

Open to any documents

BBC Learning Support

for 'fighting FAT – fighting FIT'

Channel Four Television

for 'When somebody dies'

Diabetes UK

for 'Would you know if you had diabetes?'

Edinburgh City Council

for 'Lead in water – advice to property owners and residents'

Exchange Health Information

for 'The Safer Injecting Handbook'

National Blood Service

for 'Feeling Faint' and 'Your questions about Blood Transfusion answered'

Royal National Institute for Deaf People

for 'Age-related hearing loss'

Whittington Hospital NHS Trust

for a series of patient information leaflets

Plain English Web Award

For the world's clearest website
(Award sponsored by eHelp Corporation)

Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

(www.yorkshiredales.org.uk)



Cassandra Tebb and Andrew Osborne of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

Plain English Media Awards

For crystal-clear reporting

Best National Newspaper: [The Daily Telegraph](#)

Best Regional Newspaper: [News North-West](#)

Best National Television Programme: [Channel 5 hourly news bulletins](#)

Best Regional Television Programme: [Week In, Week Out](#) (BBC Wales)

Best National Radio Programme: [Sunday Service](#) (BBC Five Live)

Best Regional Radio Station: [BBC Radio Northampton](#)

Inside Write Awards

For internal government documents

Driving Standards Agency

for their Training and Development booklet

Employment Service Communications Unit

for 'Labour Market Activity Annual Performance Agreement Support Pack'

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

for their Business Plan 2000/2001

Inland Revenue Accounts Office (Shipley)

for 'Emergency Instructions'

Ministry of Defence

for 'What do you know about... Conservation on the Defence Estate?'

Scottish Executive

for 'SCOOP' (the magazine of the Scottish Executive)

Training and Employment Agency (New Deal Branch)

for issue 23 of 'New Deal News'

I would like to thank Plain English Campaign for the award you gave to 'The Safer Injecting Handbook' in December. I've never won an award before, and can't think of a better one to win first. It was a fantastic and well-organised event.

I am glad that the content of the book didn't put off the judges, and that they were able to give the award to a publication from a field that doesn't meet with universal approval.

Injecting drug users are a marginalised group and I am sure that the award will be appreciated by both service providers who buy the book and the injecting drug users who read it.

Many thanks,
Andrew Preston
Exchange Health Information

American election chaos

(Continued from front cover)

Theresa LePore, the Supervisor of Elections in Palm Beach, designed a form with names running down two facing sides of paper, with a column of punch holes in the middle. This design earned the name 'butterfly ballot' during the election fiasco. It had never been used in Palm Beach before.

Where did the problems surface?

Eight minutes after voting stations opened, the complaints began. Two elderly gentlemen realised they may have voted for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan instead of Democrat candidate Al Gore. According to Theresa LePore, 'I just passed it off as maybe it was just they who were confused.'

Throughout the day, Democrat voters began complaining that they may have mistakenly voted for Buchanan. Although Gore was the second name listed, his punch hole was third.

Theresa LePore acknowledged the potential confusion in the afternoon and issued an 'explanatory' note.

'Attention all poll workers. Please remind all voters coming in that they are to vote for one (1) presidential candidate and that they are to punch the hole next to the arrow next to the number next to the candidate they wish to vote for. Thank you!'

Was this likely to have been a widespread problem?

Pat Buchanan, a third party candidate, received 3407 votes in Palm Beach. Across the rest of Florida he picked up an average of just 209 votes in each county.

Buchanan himself found the figure in Palm Beach to be strange. 'It seems to me that these 3000 votes people are talking about — most of those are probably not my vote and that may be enough to give the margin to Mr Gore.'

Even Theresa LePore admitted that her ballot design may have given

extra votes to Buchanan. 'I'm sure he probably got a few more.'

Why was the problem so significant?

The presidential election across the country was extremely close. Results in other states meant that the candidate who received the most votes in the whole of Florida would win the presidency.

The race in Florida was almost a dead heat. The official final result saw Republican candidate George W Bush with 2,912,790 and Al Gore with 2,912,253.

This means that if just 538 of Buchanan's votes were actually meant for Gore, the Palm Beach ballot put the wrong man in the White House.

Plain English Campaign broke the news to the British press the morning after voting day.

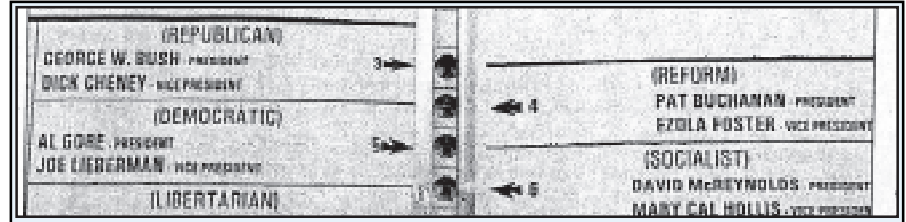
How can we tell if this was the case?

There is no way to be certain how many 'Gore' votes went to Buchanan. Countless academics have made statistical studies of voting figures across Florida. The vast majority of them give similar results to Professor Henry E Brady of the University of California, Berkeley.

He concluded that 'there is a strong likelihood that over 2000 of the Buchanan votes in Palm Beach County were cast by Gore supporters who mistakenly punched Buchanan's name. There is no evidence for the proposition that the extra Buchanan voters were Bush supporters.'

Why did nobody realise the problem beforehand?

Election officials published the ballot paper before the election and nobody complained. But the example ballot paper did not have the punch holes marked.



Al Gore supporters should have punched the third hole down in the centre column. Those who punched the second hole down were mistakenly voting for Pat Buchanan.

This is a perfect example of why documents aimed at the public need to be **tested** rather than holding a survey.

After the controversy, a Canadian professor carried out a test with ordinary people passing in a shopping centre. He simulated a vote with a copy of the Palm Beach 'butterfly ballot', and an identical ballot with the candidates listed on one page.

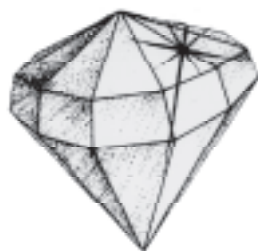
When he checked the results, every 'voter' using the normal one-page ballot had punched the hole for the candidate they intended to vote for. But 7.5% of those using the 'butterfly ballot' had recorded a vote for the 'wrong' candidate.

'I'm not a lawyer, I'm a social scientist interested in the truth,' said Robert C Sinclair, the University of Alberta psychologist who led the study. 'And the truth is, this kind of ballot is confusing and causes errors. It cost me about \$30 (£20) to do this study. Somebody should have had the foresight to look at this in advance.'

What lessons can we learn from the fiasco?

- The only way to be sure of spotting confusion on a document is to test it practically on the intended audience rather than survey opinions.
- Even a design that seems 'obvious' can cause confusion if it is unfamiliar.
- The most effective designs are logical ones. People naturally read lists in straight lines rather than skipping back and forth.
- Settling for a form that 'most' people understand correctly is not good enough. Even a small error rate can have a very significant result.
- With most forms, a mistake can be corrected at a cost. With a ballot paper, there is no second chance.

Plain English



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

Appeals Service
Bradford & Bingley PLC
British Liver Trust
City of Edinburgh Council
Cosmopolitan Housing Association
Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority
Driver & Licensing Agency
English China Clays
Eurobell (Holdings) PLC
Grosvenor Housing Association Limited

Leicestershire Health Promotion Centre
London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (Local taxation department)
North Cheshire Health Authority
Northamptonshire County Council
ntl
Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland
Rent Service
Rodney Housing Association
Royal Liverpool University Hospital Trust
Scottish Parliament
Selby District Council
Southport and Formby Primary Care Group
Staffordshire Careers
Stonham Housing
TRANSFED
Valuation Office Agency



And special congratulations to the four organisations that have taken our Honesty Mark pledge for one of their documents for the first time.

London Borough of Camden
Grosvenor Housing Association Limited
Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland
Coverclick Services Limited

Training courses

We still have places available on several of our one-day open courses. These courses introduce plain English, and are an excellent 'taster' for what we can offer businesses.

The courses also give you the chance to meet people from other organisations who share your interest in clear communication.

- Tuesday 13 February (London)
- Thursday 15 March (Manchester)
- Thursday 22 March (London)
- Thursday 12 April (London)
- Tuesday 15 May (London)
- Thursday 17 May (Manchester)
- Thursday 14 June (London)

There will be a special 'Grammarcheck' course in London on Wednesday 11 April.

We are also planning another series of seminars after the success of those held last year.

These are similar to our open courses, but our trainers will concentrate on particular topics. These will include:

- legal agreements;
- medical information; and
- benefit forms.

We can also send our trainers to your offices on a date convenient to you. We will tailor the courses to cover documents from your industry.

We also have a diploma course where one of your team can learn all the skills they need to become the plain English expert at your organisation.

For more details on any of our courses, please call our training manager Helen Mayo on **01663 744409**.

Jargon buster

The latest buzz words from the world of waffle

Tri-channel

A company that sells goods or services through:

- a real shop;
- a mail order catalogue; and
- a website.

Blobject

Something that has a curved design such as a Volkswagen Beetle.

Mallternative

A style of rock music publicised as 'alternative', but actually so bland it is played in shopping malls and lifts.

Deprivation cuisine

Food that is healthy but tasteless.

Moon the giant

To publicly attack a larger business rival.

Hyper-local

News selected for a very small geographical area such as one particular town.

Nap nook

A room provided for workers to have a short sleep to 'recharge their batteries'.

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