

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 51 (Winter 2002)

Spreading the word



Find out who earned praise and who suffered disgrace at our latest awards on pages 5 to 7



(Anti-clockwise from top left: The Mirror, Western Daily Press, Lincolnshire Echo, Birmingham Post, Evening Telegraph (Dundee), Sunday Express)

In plain English, it's all gobbledegook

Unsophisticated discourse of a straight-forward nature, intended to adequately convey its communication without the necessity for additional explanation

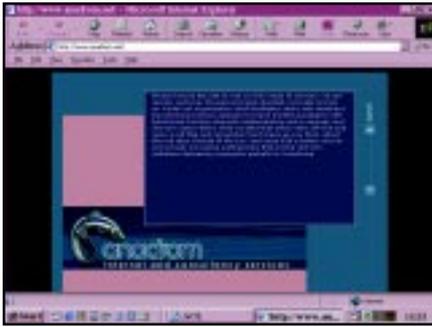


WHAT'S SHE SAYING? Artist Tracey Emin won the Campaign for Plain English's award in 2001 when she was interviewed about her novel.

...in other words plain English

Logo lingo earns uni a Golden Bull





Sticky eyeballs raise red flag - apparently

When we read about the following 'mission statement' in Private Eye, we assumed it was a joke. Now we have been to the site, www.anadrom.net (pictured above), and found that the passage does exist, we can only hope it is a joke.

'Please browse the site to see our full range of services, we can remain customer focused and goal-directed, innovate and be an inside-out organization which facilitates sticky web-readiness transforming turnkey eyeballs to brand 24/365 paradigms with benchmark turnkey channels implementing viral e-services and dot-com action-items while we take that action item off-line and raise a red flag and remember touch base as you think about the red tape outside of the box and seize B2B e-tailers and re-envisioner innovative partnerships that evolve dot-com initiatives delivering synergistic earballs to incentivize.'

Lambeth talk hit by jargon barrier

An officer from a project to promote ethnic-minority involvement in community affairs says jargon is a major barrier.

'Getting Engaged' is a three-year project in Lambeth, South London. Project officer Esther Sullivan said local people 'suggested that jargon [was among] the main barriers to their involvement.

'As a group, we tried to break down what regeneration words meant in plain English which showed residents that it's a lot more than buildings. It covers issues like health, crime and education.'

Instruction corruption

If you've been floored by baffling instructions on flat-pack furniture, the law could be on your side.

Since New Year's Day, a European directive has been in force in Great Britain covering consumer goods. The Department of Trade and Industry's wording says:

'If installation forms part of the contract of sale, incorrect installation of the goods by, or on behalf of, the seller is deemed to be equivalent to lack of conformity of the goods. This also applies if the product is incorrectly installed by the consumer due to a shortcoming in the installation instructions, providing the product is intended to be installed by consumers.'

In plain English, this appears to mean that if your self-assembly goods do not work because the instructions are not clear, your legal rights are the same as with any other product fault. We look forward to the first attempts to get a refund over this problem.

Don't drink and draft

Legal drafters trying to justify their lack of clarity often warn that laws need to be complicated to avoid imprecision. So we were surprised to see drafters in New Zealand mistakenly banning alcohol just before Christmas.

The New Zealand government had intended to give police chiefs the power to designate particular areas as alcohol-free. Unfortunately the law was worded wrongly, using 'of' instead of 'and'.

It became illegal to possess alcohol in public. Carrying home your shopping from the off-licence could theoretically earn you a 500 New Zealand dollars fine.

Jargon junked

The latest batch of crackdowns by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has seen various examples of legal jargon removed from contracts.

Enforcing their powers under the Unfair Contract Terms regulations, OFT officials have forced a range of firms to stop using terms such as 'indemnify', 'E&OE' and 'tort'.

The OFT has also produced a guide to terms which are acceptable or unacceptable in tenancy agreements.

The guide mentions that groups like Plain English Campaign can help in producing clear documents, saying that 'In practice, contracts produced or revised with [such groups'] assistance give rise to relatively few concerns about contractual fairness.'

Translation troubles

The bad news is that our name has appeared at the end of a truly baffling piece of writing. The good news is that there is an honest explanation!

We were searching the web for an article about our work when we came across a page written in Spanish but containing our name. We used a computer translation device and were delighted to find that it was a Spanish version of our guide to web design.

Unfortunately the translation back to English had not been entirely successful.

Our original text of:

'Too many designers find out everything technology can do and then try to think of something to do with this technology.'

became:

'Many designers discover first what can be done with the technology and luego tries to think about what to do with her.'

Our suggestion that:

'having a phone number and a 'real-life' address will reassure visitors'

became:

'having a telephone number and a direction of the real life will tranquilize its visitors'.

If you've ever wondered why the European Union spends so much money on human translators, you may just have the answer there!

Westminster waffle keeps on coming

It's been a busy few months for plain English in Parliament. Guardian columnist Simon Hoggart wrote about a local government debate in the Commons, highlighting such phrases as 'receipts taken into account mechanism', 'unitarianism by creep' and the truly baffling 'focusing on input and relegating the achievement of outcomes'.

In the House of Lords, The Lord Renton led a debate asking the Government 'what steps they will take to make the wording of Acts of Parliament easier to understand and more certain in their legal effect'.

One of the most important points raised in the debate was the confusion caused by the way our laws are amended. Rather than reprinting laws with the changes made, each alteration is simply listed at the very end of the document. This can lead to some extremely complicated writing, as in this example from Lord Brightman:



'A neat example of unacceptable patchwork amending came before this House recently in the form of amendments to Section 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. The section had already been amended by Acts passed in 1982 and 1994. The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill was designed to introduce further amendments. Instead of repealing Section 1 of the 1967 Act, which was divided into six subsections, and inserting a new section in its amended form, the reader was left with the following formidable task. Line 2 of subsection (1) was amended by Schedule 11 to the 1994 Act. The rest of subsection (1) was amended by Section 145 of the 1994 Act and Clause 2(3) of the Bill. Lines 1, 2 and 8 of subsection (3) were amended by paragraph 34(a) of Schedule 1 to the 1982 Act. A new subsection (3A) was inserted by paragraph 34(b) of Schedule 3 to the 1982 Act. Subsection (5) was repealed by Section 146 of the 1994 Act. Subsection (6) was inserted by Section 145 of the 1994 Act and amended by Clause 1(2) of the Bill.'

Former Chancellor Lord Howe spoke of his efforts on the ongoing project to rewrite British tax law in plain English.

'We are rewriting 9,000 pages of tax law but have produced 333 pages. Meanwhile, down at the other end of this building, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, urged on by people on all sides, is annually introducing 600 pages of new legislation. As I have said, it is as though we have been contracted to repaint Brighton pier while the Chancellor and his gang are busy trying to extend it to reach the French coast.'

Encouragingly, though, the general conclusion seemed to be that there was no shortage of support for the idea of making laws as clear as possible. Turning this idea into reality will be the real problem.



We have honestly tried very hard to avoid two subjects in recent months: events in Afghanistan and John Prescott's unique public-speaking style.

But we just couldn't resist sharing this quote from Mr Prescott in Parliament. The Daily Mail printed this direct transcript of his comments, which he uttered without a pause.

'The objectives remain the same and indeed that has been made clear by the Prime Minister in a speech yesterday that the objectives are clear and the one about the removal of the Taliban is not something we have as a clear objective to implement but it is possible a consequence that will flow from the Taliban clearly giving protection to Bin Laden and the UN resolution made it absolutely clear that anyone that finds them in that position declares themselves an enemy and that clearly is a matter for these objectives.'

Is that clear?

Fortunately the staff at Hansards, the official record of Parliament, used their plain English editing skills to produce the following translation.

'(The objectives) remain the same. In a speech yesterday, my Right Honourable friend the Prime Minister said that our objectives are clear. Achieving the removal of the Taliban is not a clear objective, but it is a possible consequence of the Taliban giving protection to Bin Laden, because the United Nations resolution made it absolutely clear that anyone in that position declares themselves to be an enemy. That is clearly relevant to our objectives.'

Tony Blair MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Plain English Campaign

Dear Mr Blair

As you may know, Plain English Campaign spends a lot of time testing documents on the public to make sure that they are easy to understand. We speak to people from across the country and from all walks of life.

As well as testing the documents, we ask people which types of document concern them, and where they feel there is not enough use of plain English. Until recently the usual suspects were legal documents, financial contracts and medical information. Now, though, the subjects mentioned most often are European issues – European politics, European laws and the European currency. So this year we are going to concentrate on European issues.

We have already contacted all of Britain's MEPs, and many of them have promised to do their best to explain European issues in plain English. For example, one MEP has a 'brief guide to the European Union' on her website (www.erylmcnallymep.org.uk) that explains the subject in everyday language.

One of the European Commission's committees has proposed that the Parliament pass a resolution that 'calls on all the Union's institutions to use simple and clear language in all official documents, wherever possible'. The committee has warned: 'There are many reasons for the regrettable lack of democratic legitimacy. One important reason is the unsatisfactory lack of quality in public information and communication.'

We are delighted to see the issue of plain English is getting support within the European institutions. But we also need to make sure the British public is not isolated from European issues by jargon and waffle. This is where you can help.

We would like you to pledge to use your influence to make sure everyone in Britain gets a chance to debate European issues with the benefit of plain English information. Naturally you cannot take responsibility for every document on the subject in the country, but you can set an example for others to follow.

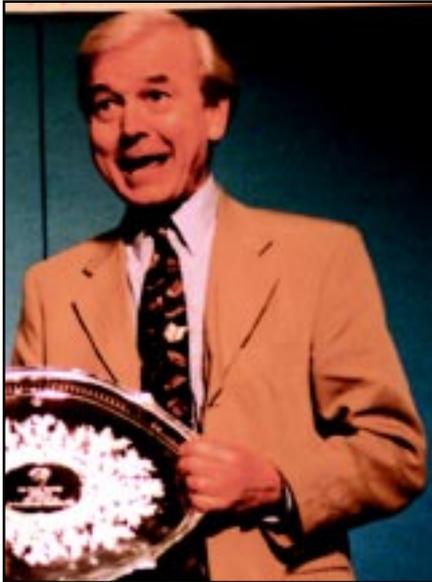
Back in 1998, you said: 'We should make our [European] documents... more comprehensible to the average citizen on the street.'

It's time to make that ideal into a reality.

Yours

Chrissier Maher
Founder-director

2002 Plain English Campaign award winners



'Plain English' category

Open to any documents

Camden Social Services

for 'Opportunities for older people'

Gwent Healthcare NHS Trust

for 'Inpatient information booklet'

Inland Revenue

for 'Starting up in Business'

Legal & General Assurance Limited

for 'Your choice of pension' and 'Helping you to understand your Personal Retirement Pension Plan'

NHS Pensions Agency

for 'Pensions on divorce'

UK Detention Services Limited

for 'A rough guide to Forest Bank'

Winston's Wish

for 'As Big as it Gets' and 'Beyond the Rough Rock'

Media Awards

For crystal-clear reporting

Best Morning Newspaper

[Metro](#)

Best Evening or Weekly Newspaper

[Evening Standard \(London\)](#)

Best National Television Programme

[Sunday with Adam Boulton \(Sky News\)](#)

Best Regional Television Programme

[North West Tonight \(BBC North West\)](#)

Best National Radio Programme

[You and Yours \(BBC Radio 4\)](#)

Best Regional Radio Station

[BBC Radio Humberside](#)

Web Award

For the year's clearest website

[Community Legal Service](#)

(www.justask.org.uk)



Inside Write Awards

For internal government documents. Presented by Sir Richard Wilson (pictured below), head of the Civil Service

[Defence Communication Services Agency](#)

for 'GDG 3/00 Project Report: Defence and the Environment'

[Employment Service Communications Unit](#)

for 'Inside ES' magazine

[HM Customs & Excise](#)

for 'Cultural Awareness' and 'Guide to Part-time Working'

[Home Office - Crime Reduction College](#)

for 'Course Passport'

[Inland Revenue Accounts Office \(Shipley\)](#)

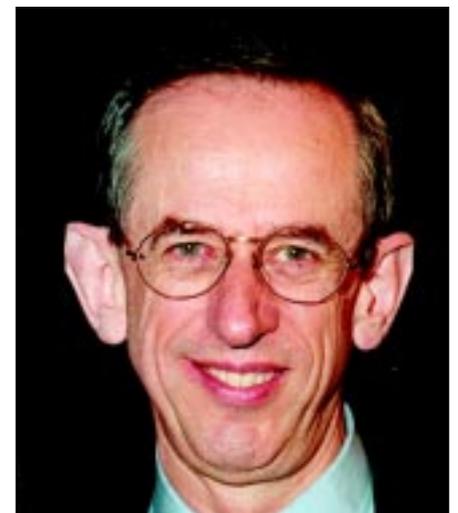
for 'A guide to video conferencing' and 'Helping you with your letters'

[The Prison Service - Staff Care and Welfare Service](#)

for their 'Handling Stress' training pack

[Scottish Executive - Information Age Government Unit](#)

for 'Scottish Executive Learning Strategy 2001'



Plain English Champions

In June 2000 we announced the first seven people for our list of Plain English Champions – a hall of fame for those who make outstanding contributions to the fight against gobbledeygook.

At the 2001 awards ceremony we added two new names to that list. [Adam Shaw](#) and [Adrian Chiles](#) are the presenters of BBC 2's Working Lunch programme.

They cover all aspects of finance and business, but they explain what the numbers and statistics mean for our daily lives.

Adam's speciality is the financial markets – instead of bombarding the viewer with figures, he explains why they are going up and down and what this means for our mortgages, pensions and savings.

Adrian concentrates on making sure every guest on the show gives a straight answer, whether they bring good news or bad for consumers. Many firms with something to hide have come unstuck when they appeared on Working Lunch. But Adrian's greatest achievement was surely the day he answered back to Chrissie Maher and survived!

The 'Foot in Mouth' Award

This is awarded to the celebrity who produced the year's most baffling verbal statement.

This year's winner is controversial modern artist [Tracey Emin](#). Talking about her new novel, she told the Observer newspaper:

'When it comes to words I have a uniqueness that I find almost impossible in terms of art - and it's my words that actually make my art quite unique.'

Golden Bull Awards

Booby prizes for the year's most baffling documents

[Technomatic](#) for its standard terms and conditions

Among this computer firm's collection of epic sentences is this 142-word beauty.

'Except in respect of death or personal injury caused by the Company's negligence the Company shall not be liable to the Customer by reason of any representation (unless fraudulent) or any implied warranty, condition or other term or any duty in common law or under the express terms of the Contract for any indirect, special or consequential losses or damages (whether for loss of profit or otherwise) costs, expenses or other claims for compensation whatsoever (whether caused by the negligence of the Company, its employees, agents or otherwise) which arise out of or in connection with the supply of the Goods or their use or resale by the Customer and the entire liability of the Company under or in connection with the Contract shall not exceed one and a half times the price paid for the Goods in question by the Customer.'

The good news is that these are merely 'a summary of the terms and conditions' and that 'full terms and conditions are available on request'.

[British Forces Cyprus](#) for a letter

Unfortunately this letter in Cyprus was all Greek to the reader.

'The allocation is based on a balanced equity share using the same formulae as last year. Should the DE methodology or a division by category methodology have been used then some PROPAN areas would have been severely disadvantaged.'

[Wheale Thomas Hodgins plc](#) for a job advert

The advert is for a 'Workplace & Diversity Director' for the 'Business in the Community' organisation. The lucky candidate will help 'make the most of UK Plc's Human Resources by changing its people landscape through inclusivity'. They will also make 'Business in the Community' 'the primary catalyst for change and centre of excellence on all things inclusive'. Apparently applicants will need to 'possess the leadership, gravitas and currency to impact upon your peer group'.

[EDI Group \(Edinburgh\)](#) for 'Craigmillar Masterplan Design Guide'

This document is 'a Manifesto for the upbeat possibilities for new settlement at Craigmillar' (an area of Edinburgh). It opens by explaining: 'Many guides are repetitive. Lack of repetition in this one should not be taken as equivocation.'

The guide goes on to describe proposals for 'an ambitious new approach to the urban form of the suburb'. It explains that 'Any reading as an archaic walled city or fortification is obviated by the sinous form of the boundary buildings allowing swathes of green to penetrate the actual edge.'

Later the guide describes plans for 'sustainable urban drainage systems'. It says the plans 'shall include attenuation of increased flow generated by development, localised biological treatment by SUDS, flood alleviation by avoidance of further culverting, soft engineering the channel edges, and day lighting the culvert'.

University of Dundee for 'Corporate Identity Design Rationale'

Have you ever wondered how the University of Dundee chose its logo? You'll soon wish you hadn't.

'The geometric foundation of the design is based upon a circular form, which makes reference to the Institution's global perspective and international reputation in teaching and research. The typographic elements demonstrate a hierarchy which promotes the importance of the location within the nomenclature. The group of circles represents the incremental growth of knowledge and experience and the progressive development of the University as an educational leader. This thematic device continues through to the linear band on the right of the Shield of Arms and describes the cyclical movement of time, indicating progression and new directions.'

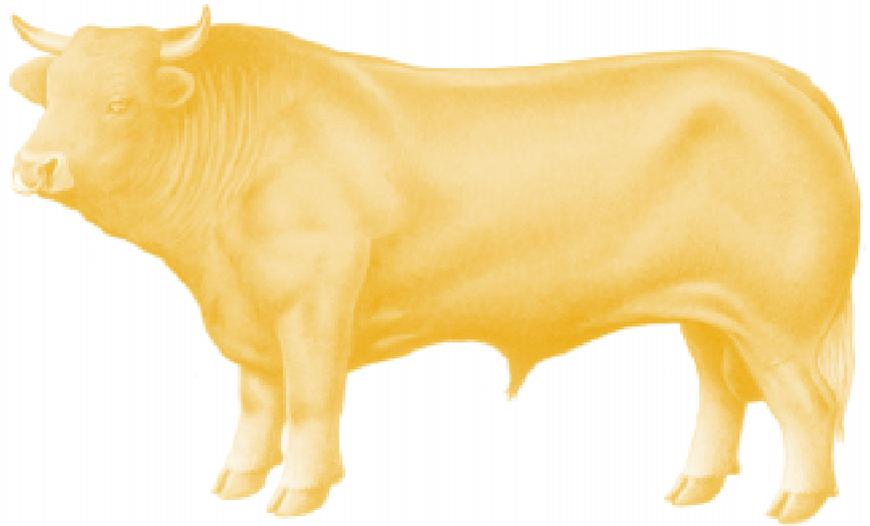
RSA Examinations Board for 'Levels 3 and 4 advice and guidance standards'

These are guidelines for people taking a course in guidance. Unit 4 ('Develop and maintain interaction with clients') suggests that 'tensions between resource constraints influencing ending and client requirements are managed'. In other words, the client should know how long the interview will last.

The guidelines add the need to be sure that 'interactions avoid disabling and exploitative behaviour and encourage clients' autonomy'. Or to put it another way, clients are treated with respect.

Meanwhile, in unit 23 ('Work with the caller on the telephone'), the reader discovers that 'verbal gesturing provides reassurance to caller of continued presence and sense of safety which provides encouragement to express their feelings and wishes'.

In plain English, you should make sure the caller knows you are still on the line and they can talk openly to you.



Financial Services Authority for part of a consultation paper (CP98) on mortgage regulation

The Government's financial watchdog really wants to drive the message home in this part of the paper:

'3.7 Unsolicited real time qualifying credit promotions

MEANING OF 'SOLICITED' AND 'UNSOLICITED' REAL TIME QUALIFYING CREDIT PROMOTION

An unsolicited real time qualifying credit promotion is a real time qualifying credit promotion which is not a solicited real time qualifying credit promotion.'

Department for Education and Skills for 'Instrument and Articles of Government for Further Education Corporations'

Earlier this year, a government order set out new rules for Further Education Corporations (or colleges as they were once known). Several of the rules set out how a Corporation can go about sacking or suspending a member of staff.

Rule 14, paragraph 2 explains that 'Paragraph (1) is without prejudice to any action which the Corporation may take in relation to a clerk who is also a member of the staff by way of suspension from or termination of the appointment as clerk under the terms of any separate appointment as clerk.'

Plain English Diploma course graduates

As part of the awards ceremony we presented diplomas to four students who had completed our intensive course.

Over the last year they have been through in-depth training to learn the skills to make them the plain English expert at their organisation.

The final exercise of the course involves a major rewriting project. To make the course as useful as possible, we encourage all students to work on real documents in their organisation.

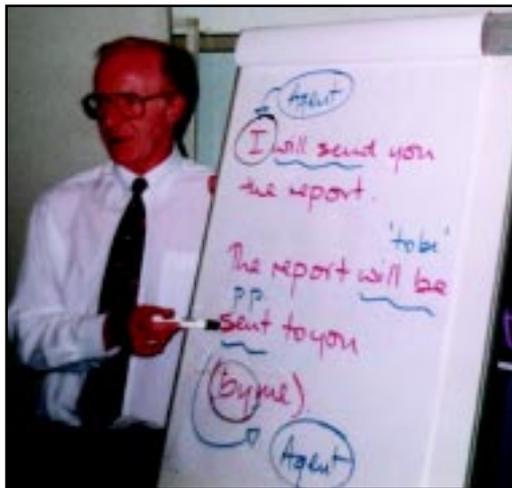
- Andrea Hodge (Bradford & Bingley)
- Louise Davidson (Standard Life)
- Anne Jones (Triskel Communications)
- Chris England (Benefit Fraud Inspectorate)

Training diary

We still have places left on the following courses. For more details on any of the courses, please call Helen Mayo on 01663 744409.

Although we are still working on the details, we are planning to repeat our series of special courses focusing on plain English and a particular topic. Please call for the latest news.

We also have a range of courses available for learning through the internet. Please visit our website www.plainenglishtraining.com for more details.



Welcome aboard

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

Baines & Ernst Limited
Boston Borough Council
British Medical Association
Cleanaway Limited
Congleton Borough Council
CSC Computer Sciences Limited
Ecclesiastical Insurance
Experian
Further Education National Training Organisation
Genzyme Therapeutics
Health Shield Friendly Society
Highway Insurance
HSBC Invoice Finance (UK) Limited
Le Spa International
Legalpulse.com Limited
mhs homes
Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
North Cornwall District Council
Open & Direct Insurance Services
Patent Office
Primary International Limited
Public Health Institute of Scotland
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
Servite Houses
Sovereign Housing Association
Standards Board for England
Tendring District Council
Thames Trains
Thanet District Council
Turning Point
Vale Housing Association
Yorkshire Cancer Network

Conference call

We are planning a one-day conference for Friday 6 December, the day after our annual awards.

The event is scheduled for the Brewery in London's Chiswell Street (the same venue as the awards). We are planning a mixture of guest speakers and practical workshops.

For the latest details, please call Jennie Eley on 01663 744409.

The Plain English Course

Tuesday 12 February	London
Wednesday 6 March	Glasgow
Wednesday 13 March	Manchester and Birmingham
Thursday 21 March	London
Thursday 11 April	London
Tuesday 14 May	London
Wednesday 15 May	Manchester
Thursday 13 June	London
Wednesday 10 July	London
Wednesday 17 July	Manchester
Thursday 15 August	London
Wednesday 11 September	London, Manchester and Birmingham
Wednesday 9 October	London
Tuesday 12 November	London
Wednesday 20 November	Manchester
Thursday 12 December	London

The Grammarcheck Course

Tuesday 12 March	Birmingham
Wednesday 10 April	London
Tuesday 9 July	London
Tuesday 10 September	Birmingham
Tuesday 8 October	London

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