

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 54 (Autumn 2002)

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Crystal-clear tax forms a step closer

There is finally some good news for taxpayers after six years of frustration and confusion with self-assessment forms.

According to Inland Revenue sources, the standard 12-page form sent to most taxpayers covered by the system will be replaced by a more straightforward four-page form. The extensive calculation guide will also be simplified.

The details of the changes, which may be getting a trial run next

spring, are still uncertain. Because projects to simplify the tax system itself are far from finished, the immediate changes seem likely to involve cutting out those questions that are not relevant to most people filling in the forms.

The news came after a committee of MPs warned that the self-assessment system remains too complicated for ordinary people.

A report by the Treasury Committee quoted the Institute of Chartered

Accountants in Scotland as saying: 'The tax calculation guide (even in its simplified version) is a confusing document that can baffle the most experienced professional tax specialists.' Another tax expert said that 'the tax calculation could be used as the entrance exam for MENSAs.'

A recent survey of the public's 10 most stressful activities put filling in a tax return in second place. The top place went to bank-holiday traffic jams.

Television star to present Plain English awards

Plain English Day is coming on Thursday 5 December and we have a real woman of words presenting our awards.

She is writer and comedy performer Sandi Toksvig. As well as being a regular guest on 'Call My Bluff' and 'Whose Line Is It Anyway?', she has written plays and children's books.

As we went to press with this issue, our judges were making their final decisions. The good news is that the judges said entries for the Inside Write (civil service) category were particularly strong this year. The bad news is that the winners of the Golden Bull booby prizes are as baffling as ever.

We'll have a full report on the awards next issue.



Lord junks jargon free of charge

Lord Woolf, the man who banished Latin and legal jargon from the civil courts in 1999, is back on the warpath.

He has ordered staff in criminal courts to replace 'amicus curiae' (literally 'friend of the court') with 'advocate to the court'. He has also said judges should use the phrase 'minimum term' rather than the less well-known 'tariff'.

Lord Woolf has also suggested replacing the phrase 'pro bono', used to describe lawyers giving their services free of charge. He said, 'I think one reason why pro bono is not playing its part in the provision of legal services as it should is because of the very words.'

The proposals come as another peer, Lord Auld, continues to examine suggestions to use clearer language in court oaths and in the judge's instructions to juries.

One former barrister is not so keen on the idea. In his new book 'Lawyer's Latin', John Gray claims: 'To attempt suppression of Latin in a civilised country is, in the scale of cultural atrocities, on a par with burning books.'

As far as Plain English Campaign is concerned, the best word is the one the intended reader can correctly understand, whatever its linguistic roots.

Left and right united in waffle

One of our readers wrote to us suggesting we had displayed an unconscious political bias against the Labour Party, particularly in recent editions of our weekly e-mail newsletter.

This worried us, as one of the principles of our campaigning is to avoid any involvement in party politics. After all, Chrissie Maher has had the public backing of both Margaret Thatcher and the Socialist Worker newspaper over the years!

We can promise you that any apparent bias is unintentional. By the nature of politics, Labour's use of language will come under greater scrutiny because, as the party of government, their actions have a greater effect on our daily lives. But we are always looking for crimes against clarity by any party.

By way of proof, we bring you the curious case of the Conservative shadow cabinet reshuffle. Party Chairman David Davis left his post for a new role as the shadow of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, a move most saw as a demotion.

Asked if his former chairman 'jumped or was pushed', Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith 'explained' that 'The reality is we all went forward together.'

In case there was any confusion about Mr Davis's new role, a spokesman for Mr Duncan Smith later explained that '[Mr Davis] is

not Shadow Deputy Prime Minister. He is Shadow Secretary of State for the Office of Deputy Prime Minister.'

And in the spirit of politically impartial waffle-hunting, we were intrigued by comments made on the radio by John Prescott himself.

The Today programme's host John Humphrys asked whether Members of Parliament would be allowed to debate the issue of military action in Iraq and whether they would be allowed to make any decisions.

Mr Prescott explained: 'The Prime Minister has said when the matter becomes a decision or if these matters are taken into consideration, there will be a debate on it.' Later in the interview he said: 'The Prime Minister has made it quite clear that at the appropriate time there will be a discussion in Parliament if such decisions have been taken.'

'There will be a decision in Parliament?' enquired Mr Humphrys.

Replied Mr Prescott: 'There will be a kind of decision. Because every time we have had decisions on these matters they've usually been on the adjournment of the House, but that will be judged at the appropriate time. The Prime Minister will make the decision. That is why he is the Prime Minister, and Parliament will be involved in the debate.'

Call for continental clarity

Our campaigning for clearer information on European issues took a step forward recently when Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said a proposed European Union constitution should be written in plain English.

But we warned that the document should be

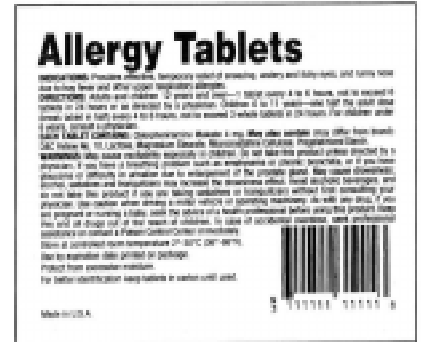
tested on the public to make sure it can be understood.

Mr Straw said that the constitution should be a 'simple set of principles [which] sets out in plain language what the EU is for... it would help to reconnect European voters with the institutions which act in their name.'

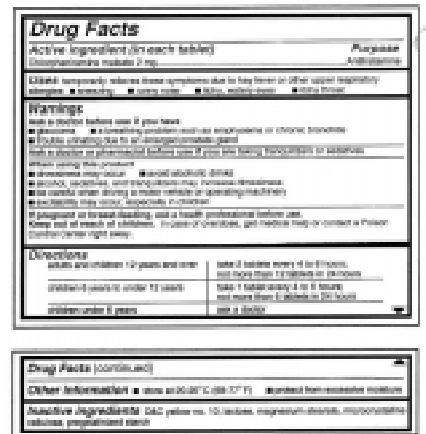
Our spokesman John Lister reminded reporters that Plain English Campaign was not taking a political stance on where power should lie in Europe. 'However, we do believe everyone in an EU country deserves a clear account of how the EU affects their lives. This 'constitution' shouldn't be bogged down in legal details. Instead it should give people a general idea of the main points that affect their daily lives.

'If anything comes of Mr Straw's call, we hope the constitution will be tested on the public for clarity. It's no good churning something out through a system of linguistics sub-committees and then declaring it to be crystal clear despite not having proper testing. If ordinary people can't understand a constitution that the EU claims is in 'plain language', then they will quickly lose any interest in the whole affair.'

United States sets standard for medical labels



The old (above) and new labels



The United States Food and Drug Administration has announced a system of standard labels for over-the-counter medicines.

The labels are similar in design to those already used for nutritional information on packaged foods. The labels will include information on:

- the active ingredients in the medicine;
- the purpose of the medicine;
- safety warnings (such as side effects or when not to use the medicine);

- instructions on dosage and when to take the medicine, listed in age categories;
- other information such as storage instructions; and
- inactive ingredients such as colourings or flavourings.

The design of the labels will follow regulations to make sure all labels are consistent. This will make it easier for consumers to find specific information whatever medicine they buy.

MPs call for clearer credit card choice

We reported in our last issue about Parliament's Treasury Committee hearing evidence from a mathematics professor who admitted struggling to compare interest rates from rival credit card companies.

The evidence came as part of an investigation into banking for the public and small businesses. In its final report the committee made two specific recommendations about credit cards.

'The Committee believes that the lack of transparency in the credit and charge card industry acts against meaningful competition, and is therefore against the consumers' interest. The Committee recommends that credit and charge card companies should publish, with equal prominence, all the variables that make up the actual cost of credit. This should be done in a way which allows consumers to make

straightforward comparisons between the costs of credit offered by all credit and charge card products.'

'The Committee recognises that product differentiation can be an important feature of competition and satisfying customers' differing needs, but is concerned that for individuals to understand interest rate calculations requires an unreasonable amount of time and effort. The Committee recommends that every credit and charge card statement shows the "estimated interest charge if only the minimum balance is paid by the due date", as a number do already.'



Around half a million people in Ireland could not follow the instructions on a packet of aspirin according to a study by the country's National Adult Literacy Agency.

They found that around one in four adults has serious trouble:

- reading medical labels;
- filling in medical forms;
- following signs in health centres and hospitals; and
- reading leaflets and booklets about health issues.

The agency is now looking at specific ways for health professionals to deal with this problem.



The OFT has cracked down on misleading credit adverts. They ordered Comet, Courts, Powerhouse, Time Computers and Dabs.com to stop using the term 'interest free' in certain cases.

The firms had all used the term to describe deals where a customer could take goods home and pay for them at a certain date in the future without paying any extra for interest.

However, the adverts did not make it clear that if the customer did not pay the entire amount when it was due, they would also be liable for interest backdated to the day they got the goods.



United against confusion

Labelling laws are still under debate in the United States. You may remember last year we reported on politician Nita M Lowey's proposed law to:

- 'require that food statements list, in common language, what, if any, of the eight main food allergens (peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, soy, and wheat) are contained in the product;
- close the additive loophole by requiring ingredient statements to take into account if any allergens were used in the spices, natural or artificial flavourings, additives, and colourings; and
- require food manufacturers to include a working telephone information number on food labels.'

That proposal is still going through the House of Representatives, but a similar proposal, introduced by Senator Edward M Kennedy, is now going through the Senate (the upper chamber of the United States 'parliament').

Kennedy's proposals originally also covered design and typography. However, this aspect has been dropped as part of a deal to get support from both major political parties.

Michael F Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said 'if this bill becomes law, parents won't have to worry that the most common and dangerous allergens are lurking behind unfamiliar words, or hidden in 'natural flavourings'.'

No more porkies



According to new rules on food labelling, one man's meat is another man's mechanically recovered sinew sludge.

The Food Standards Agency has worked with European Union officials to produce the new rules. The main change is that producers must be more specific about the origin of 'meat'. For example, a beefburger currently labelled as '82% beef' might instead become '71% beef plus beef fat and beef connective tissue'.

The rules may also mean that only 'pure' meat, rather than gristle or fat, can count towards minimum meat contents in products such as 'pork sausages'.

French food not so plain

The European Commission (EC) has overturned a French law insisting all food labels in the country are written in French.

The European Court of Justice declared the law, passed in 1994, invalid in 2000. The French government has so far failed to change its laws, but the EC has now threatened legal action to enforce the change.

An EC spokesman pointed out that the rules only affected the names of food (for example, 'cornflakes' rather than 'petales de maïs'). Ingredients must still be listed in the local language.

And for those with weak stomachs, the good news is that the rules apply equally in the United Kingdom, so producers of 'foie gras' will not have to describe their product as 'fatty liver'.

Co-operative call for the plain truth



The Co-op supermarket chain launched a campaign to change British laws to make food labels more honest.

The group is calling for:

- greater control over 'low-fat' labels (for example, firms describing products as '95% fat free' — the 5% fat level is comparatively high);
- firms to list sugar and salt content;
- drinks makers to list caffeine content in all products, not just tea and coffee;

- no meaningless health claims, such as describing orange juice as 'fat free'; and
- using labels large enough for people to read.

The group also proposed that firms should be forced to list any caffeine content above a certain limit. Rules on this subject are currently under debate in the European Union's political system.

The Co-op now plans to make the point by testing clearer labels on their own-brand products even though these labels may break existing regulations.

A tall story

The business diary in the Guardian uncovered an intriguing use of the language by international coffee-shop chain Starbucks.

Customers in Britain have often noted the strange way that the larger cup size is known as 'grande', while the smallest cup size is a 'tall'. (This smallest size is comparatively large by British standards.)

It now appears that an even smaller size is available after all and it is more along the lines of a traditional cup of coffee in Britain. However, this size is not listed on menus, and anybody who makes the mistake of referring to 'small' or 'regular' in their order is served with a 'tall'.

The only way to get what is the smallest-sized drink is to specifically ask for a 'short' (a phrase more commonly used in



Britain to describe spirit alcohol such as vodka or gin).

And the reason this small (or short or regular) option isn't listed on the menu? According to a Starbucks spokesperson, there isn't room.

Mystery meat

Supermarket chain Asda has admitted to exploiting a loophole in labelling laws to sell beef from Brazil without clearly stating that it did not come from Great Britain.

The only details given on the label were the name and address of British firm Anglo-Beef Processing (ABP).

Laws requiring the country of origin to be listed only apply to beef sold without any processing. But in this case, the only processing ABP did was to add salt and pepper to the meat.

Asda has offered a full refund to any customer who bought the beef under the impression it was produced in Britain.

Ingredient list is damp squib

There is at least one label with no room for argument.

Visitors to Manchester's Piccadilly rail station were recently offered free samples of bottled water through a promotion by a utilities company. The bottle's label has nothing to hide:

'Ingredients: Water.'

News in brief

Obscured view

Daily Mail columnist Lynda Lee-Potter recently wrote about a feature in the magazine *Country Life* where readers nominated their favourite view.

To most readers, a 'view' is what you see when you look out of the window. But Jonathan Meades, one of the judges in the competition, had other ideas. He said the word 'implies a fresh understanding of the compact between human prospector and the found world, of the ocular ability to discern in nature and in humankind's amendments of nature happenstantial beauty, awe by chance.'

A journey to jargon

A new book by New Zealand columnist Joe Bennett includes a piece titled 'In the bad lands' made up almost entirely of jargon, buzzwords and clichés. To give you a flavour, one section reads as follows.

'We knew what we were looking for. We sought a window of opportunity, just a small one that would grant a view of the knowledge economy from the top of the learning curve. But windows of opportunity are few and far between and the going was tough. Obstacles abounded. We waded through income streams and held each other back from cunningly concealed poverty traps. After twenty-four hours we were on the point of calling it a day...'

Label lunacy

Thanks to supporter Michael Conroy Harris who noticed a sign in a do-it-yourself store. He said: 'Obviously keen to offload end-of-line bathroom equipment a sign had been put up to draw one's attention to 'deranged bathroom accessories'.'

Meanwhile, a letter in *The Times* shared some baffling instructions on a sweater label: 'Please wear dark coloured undergarments for the first few washes.'

Holidays from heaven... brochures from hell

New-style holiday brochures are making it harder to work out the real price of a holiday according to the Consumers' Association.

The confusion comes because some firms now break down the package into a wider range of separate charges. For example, meals on a plane, pre-booked seats and larger luggage allowances may all involve costs added to the basic price of a trip.

Our founder director Chrissie Maher explained to *The Times* newspaper that we had already come across this problem. 'We start most of our plain English training courses by

looking at a baffling page from a holiday brochure. We usually find every delegate comes up with a different price from the same information.

'We have no objections to travel firms giving customers more choice about their holidays. But there is no excuse for brochures that leave customers uncertain what they are paying and what they get for their money.'

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is now investigating complaints by trading standards groups about potential confusion caused by unclear brochures.



The Government has relaunched its 'Don't get by... get on' campaign to improve literacy.

The campaign is inspired by research showing that one in five adults is functionally illiterate. This means they cannot perform everyday tasks that involve reading or writing. As the logo to the left shows, the campaign's theme is 'getting rid of the gremlins' of illiteracy.

Callers to a freephone number, 0800 100 900, can get a free information pack and details of literacy courses in their area.

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Sometimes we get a contribution from a supporter that makes us check the calendar to make sure it's not 1 April. But reader Keith Mann assures us he saw the above phrase written in the daily orders sheet issued by the captain of the Royal Navy warship that he served on a few years ago.

Amazingly this turned out not to be some form of Enigma-machine secret code. Instead it was an abbreviation for: 'Special Sea Dutymen Close Up, Assume Damage Control State 3 Condition Yankee, Hands To Harbour Stations, Hands Out Of The Rig Of The Day Clear Off The Upper Deck, Close All Screen Doors And Hatches, All Seamen To Carry Knives.'

The real world

Our founder director Chrissie Maher speaks her mind



Ignorance is bliss

As I showed a couple of issues back, we get some very odd letters at our offices. But one that came to us left me (briefly) lost for words.

'Sir, Madam,

On your 'website' you purport to have begun the Plain English Campaign in order to make people's everyday lives easier (this is not a direct quote). What you are in fact doing, by lobbying for greater clarity in legal and bureaucratic documents, is making life inestimably more difficult for the majority of people who previously were able to ignore these opaque documents or claim ignorance (legitimately) of their meaning.

If your organisation has its way we will all be forced to read, understand and act on every single contract, letter and directive we receive from petty-minded and pedantic bureaucrats.

This will, in fact, in our already busy lives, make everyday existence for the average citizen more difficult. How is this helping?

Are there not better things you could do with your time? How about a children's charity? Or have they all been taken? I don't expect a reply to this as I'm sure you consider your activities utterly beyond reproach.

Yours, etc.'

Pension tension

The problem with any campaign is that you have to set limits to what you concern yourself with. Our 'patch' is documents: how they are written and designed, and how this affects people's lives. We try to keep out of the subjects involved in those leaflets.

But from a personal viewpoint, I have to say something about pensions, and it's a simple statement. It's time to start again.

I've lost count of how many 'simplification' projects and studies and consultations and reviews there have been

over the years. But every new idea that filters through into new laws just adds to the problem, despite the good intentions.

It's like the episode of the comedy 'Father Ted' where the priest gets a dent in his car and tries to knock it out with a hammer... but just makes it worse... and he tries again... and that makes it even worse... and the picture fades to black and when we return, the car is a heap of crumpled metal, but Ted still thinks one more tap will set it straight.

There are now so many rules affecting pensions that, as hard as some firms work to use plain

English, it's virtually impossible for people to tell if they are getting a good deal.

It's probably too late for those of us already working, but it seems to me the only solution is to pick a date after which anyone starting work is no longer affected by any of the existing laws. For this generation we need a fresh start with new laws that simply aim to make sure nobody gets cheated, and everyone pays their fair share to the taxman.

If we don't do something soon, the only decision most young people will be able to make is the simple one: don't bother. And that could be the worst choice for everyone.

As I write this column, we are looking through the candidates for the Golden Bull awards.

Naturally we're looking for those examples that stand out as particularly atrocious.

But it's not always such obvious gobbledygook that causes problems. The real danger comes from needlessly complicated documents that are merely 'typical' of an industry. Every year we have to discount countless entries because the gobbledygook is just too 'ordinary'.

That tells you a lot about why Plain English Campaign is still going. Our job won't be done until unclear writing can no longer hide in the sludge of mediocrity.

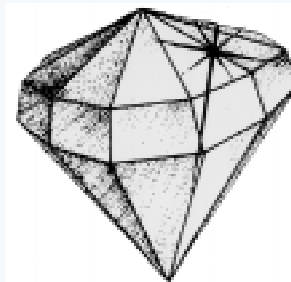
Training diary

For more details on any of these courses, please call Helen Mayo on 01663 744409.

We also have a range of courses available for learning through the internet. You can get more details at www.plainenglishtraining.com

As you can see, we have a range of special courses between now and Christmas. These events look at plain English in particular types of writing.

If there is another subject you think we should cover in similar courses next year, please let us know.



Crystal clear converts

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

Broadacres Housing Association
Craigavon Borough Council
Darlington Building Society
Denbighshire County Council
Department of Health Disability Rights Commission
Lisburn Borough Council
Lothian University Hospitals NHS Trust
North Kesteven District Council
Somerset County Council
South Downs Health NHS Trust
South Staffordshire Council
Telewest Broadband
Testway Housing
The Prince's Trust
Trade Partners UK
University for Industry

Date	Venue	Course
Tuesday 12 November (2002)	London	Plain English
Friday 15 November	London	Legal writing
Tuesday 19 November	London	Forms
Wednesday 20 November	Manchester	Plain English
Tuesday 26 November	London	Advanced Grammarcheck
Wednesday 27 November	London	Medical writing
Thursday 12 December	London	Plain English

2003

Tuesday 7 January	London	Grammarcheck
Wednesday 8 January	London	Plain English
Tuesday 11 February	London	Plain English
Wednesday 12 February	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 19 March	London	Plain English
Tuesday 8 April	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 9 April	London	Grammarcheck
Thursday 10 April	London	Plain English
Tuesday 13 May	London	Plain English
Wednesday 11 June	London	Plain English
Thursday 12 June	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 9 July	London	Grammarcheck
Thursday 10 July	London	Plain English
Tuesday 12 August	London	Plain English
Wednesday 20 August	Manchester	Plain English
Wednesday 10 September	London	Plain English
Tuesday 7 October	London	Grammarcheck
Wednesday 8 October	London	Plain English
Thursday 9 October	Manchester	Plain English
Thursday 13 November	London	Plain English
Tuesday 2 December	Manchester	Plain English
Tuesday 9 December	London	Plain English

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