

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

2005 Awards Issue 63

24-hour chaos

Backlog of alcohol licence applications leaves the Government with a headache

The long-awaited yet controversial change to the UK's licensing laws took place on 24 November 2005, leaving the Department for Culture, Media and Sport with a severe headache as it sifts through the backlog of applications. Way back in July, we warned the Department that the application forms were far too complicated. Thousands of landlords and off-licence owners were frustrated by the process, with many having to get legal help in order to fill in their forms accurately. Some had even contacted us to complain about the system.

At the time, we not only contacted the Department to offer our help, but we also issued a challenge to MPs to see whether they could fill in the forms properly. When we did not receive any reply whatsoever, we decided that all must be well, and that the situation was in hand. However, as the big day approached, it became clear that we were wrong. Aside from the moral and health debates that were preoccupying the media, it appeared that there were thousands of licence

applications that had not yet been processed.

While there were undoubtedly other factors that contributed to people submitting late applications, it is clear that complicated and misleading forms were partly to blame. By 6 August 2005, the deadline for applications, only 20% had been received.

One of our September newsletters had suggested that the Government would be forced to extend the deadline date, which is what happened. In effect, some establishments would be trading illegally while their forms were processed.

During a Commons debate, after the Department for Culture, Media and Sport had suggested that filling in the forms was "much simpler than filling in a tax form", and just a matter of ticking some boxes, Conservative MP Theresa May said, "I do not know what sort of tax form he fills in. It is (...) just a matter of a few boxes. 97 of them, in fact. Those are just the boxes to be ticked, because another 508 boxes require further information."

In fact, the Licensing Act is among this year's winners of a Golden Bull award (quoted on page 5). Many applicants were confused by phrases such as 'I am a person of prescribed description', and 'noise-limiting features', and baffled by the seemingly endless amount of conditions, exceptions and notifications.

Ironically, one of the good points about the new application process is that it should cut out the amount of bureaucracy involved in the future, with a simpler renewal process. But so far the benefits have not been obvious.

Although we enjoy the odd tipple ourselves here at Plain English Campaign, and note the removal of an 'adult curfew', we can't help but feel that the whole thing has been a bit of a mess. In the event, only a small percentage of premises have chosen to stay open 24 hours a day. Meanwhile yet another weary administration department prepares to wade through a mountain of paperwork.

Inside: How (not) to describe hot food, write e-mails and tax guidelines...and the best plain English documents of 2005

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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On the shelf

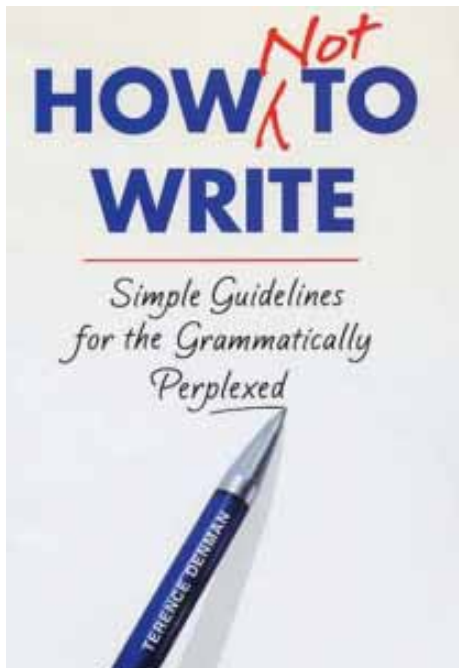
Hands up if you thought learning grammar at school was a waste of time? On second thoughts, as a valued reader of Plain English magazine, you will probably be insulted at such a suggestion. But it is surprising how many adults wish that they had paid more attention as youngsters, once they realise their written communication skills are not quite as good as they thought.

It seemed that grammar had become almost 'cool' back in 2003, when millions trotted down to the bookshops to buy Lynne Truss's 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves - The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation'. Thousands cheered as it was revealed that Radio 4 presenter, John Humphrys - himself an author of a book about good English, 'Lost for Words' - had described John Prescott MP as 'indecipherable'. And with websites, mailshots and direct marketing becoming more and more important as business tools, being able to write for your audience has never been so important. 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves', in particular, was popular as it destroyed the myth that learning grammar had to be boring.

One of our trainers, Terence Denman, has written his own book, 'How Not to Write: A Plain English Approach', which is subtitled 'Simple Guidelines for the Grammatically Perplexed'. Aimed at 'professional writers', which is to say people who spend their working day writing, the book covers all the important rules and techniques necessary for good business writing. It is as entertaining and informative as Truss's book. It has, perhaps unsurprisingly, a greater emphasis on using plain English and avoiding unnecessary jargon and clichés. The pocket-size format also makes it ideal as a handy reference book, to consult on the train, or when the boss is looking!

Denman's conversational, witty style is more likely to attract readers than a stiff

or stern tone. The book is divided into 'Grammar Tips', with each section dispelling a 'Writing Myth', such as 'You can't start a sentence with 'And''. Clearly laid out, with plenty of examples, there is something for all but the flawless writer. One wishes, occasionally, that he might go into more detail but, as he suggests, this is intended as a 'primer' - a quick reference guide - rather than a complete rule book. Although he criticises common mistakes, he doesn't sneer, preferring to explain a



particular problem or misconception clearly. By constantly giving alternative examples as corrections to the mistakes he demonstrates, readers can see for themselves the benefits of plain and correct English.

This is a book to refer to time and time again, as much as one to read in one sitting. From examples that show you how to use personal pronouns correctly, to the section about swapping fancy words ('ascertain', 'discontinue') for simpler ones ('find out', 'stop'), you will learn something you didn't know, or had forgotten. There is even a condensed 10-point version

of the book at the end to learn by heart. He concludes the book by saying "Good writers don't waste words."

Here at the Campaign, we are well aware of the amount of badly-written public information there is out there, and many of those responsible could do a lot worse than buying a copy of this book. In fact, even this reviewer now has a copy on his desk, to remind him to check parenthetical commas and the like! All offices should have a dictionary, thesaurus and other reference books to ensure their staff write well. 'How Not to Write' wouldn't look out of place among them.

'How Not to Write: A Plain English Approach', by Terence Denman (Piatkus Books, ISBN 0749926015), priced £9.99, is available from bookshops and from the internet.

What's in a name?

In the modern marketplace, how you sell your product or service is almost more important than what you sell. But many businesses choose to use 'tried and tested' formulas and jargon, which end up leaving their advertising sounding like everybody else's.

An article by David Meerman Scott, on the EContentMag.com website, suggests that 'Your Buyers Don't Want Gobbledygook'. In order to check whether your company stands out from the crowd, he advises a test.

'Take the language that the marketers at your company dreamed up and substitute the name of a competitor. Are they interchangeable? Marketing language that can be substituted for another company isn't explaining to a buyer why your company is the right choice.'

Wise words indeed. If you don't explain simply and effectively what your product is, people will switch off and go elsewhere.

Following suit

Our awards ceremony has become widely accepted as the Oscars of the language world. Organisations spend weeks biting their nails as they await news of whether they have escaped one of our infamous Golden Bull awards for a sentence in their documents. Our awards for the best plain English documents are sought after.

In November of this year, another awards ceremony, the Good Communication Awards, took place for the first time. These awards recognise excellence in the public sector's efforts towards effective communication with its citizens and workforce. Plain English Campaign, as one of the first partners of the event, was asked to judge the 'Award for Plain English', which was won by Kirklees Council.



Dave Smith and Peter Griffiths with the winners

The event featured a lively debate with a panel including Sir Digby Jones, the Director-General of the CBI, and chaired by the broadcaster John Humphrys. Awards were given for the best campaigns of the year, with categories such as 'Accessibility', 'Innovation' and 'Most Effective Campaign'.

We were glad to lend our support to the event, and hope that it will be as successful next year. The more publicity that plain English and good communication get within the public sector, the better.

Plain English Campaign Awards ceremony 2005

Our presenter, Matthew Parris

Matthew Parris is a leading journalist, parliamentary commentator and former MP, famed for his humorous, yet insightful, writing. Educated at Cambridge and Yale, he was offered a job as a spy, but chose to work for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office instead. Having served as correspondence secretary to Margaret Thatcher, he was MP for West Derbyshire from 1979 until 1986. He left politics to pursue a career in journalism, where he has arguably found his true calling. He worked as parliamentary sketch writer for The Times from 1988 to 2001, and still has columns in The Times and The Spectator. He is widely known as a campaigner for gay rights. He has won several awards for his writing, including Columnist of the Year twice at the British Press Awards, and he regularly appears on television and radio. He has also written several books, one of which, 'Read my Lips: A Treasury of Things Politicians Wish They Hadn't



Said' contains the odd Golden Bull candidate!

He is a keen adventure enthusiast and has led several expeditions abroad, including to Mount Kilimanjaro, the Sahara, Peru and Zaire. A regular London Marathon entrant, he once managed a time of 2 hours and 32 minutes.

Our Master of Ceremonies, John Ward

John Ward has been a leading light in the consumer movement for many years. He retired as Head of Consumer Support of the National Consumer Council at the end of 1996, having previously been its Development Director. John was responsible for NCC's work on public services and plain language. He also led NCC's work on the Citizen's Charter initiative and developed the Consumer Concerns programme. He set up and developed a number of local and national consumer and community bodies, including the Money Advice Association, Tenant Participation Advisory Service, and the County Court Advisors Group.

He has a great knowledge of consumer affairs and the consumer movement, and vast experience of representing consumers' interests in many fields. He chaired a number of voluntary organisations, including London Advice Services Alliance (1990-96), Greater London Citizens Advice Bureaux (1985-91) and Money Advice Support Services (1996). He was also vice-chair of the Prevention of Professional Abuse Network (POPAN), and a trustee of the Money Advice Trust.

He also served on the Legal Aid Board Franchise Appeal Body, and was the Independent Appeals Adjudicator for the London Regional Passengers Committee (now called London Travelwatch). Notably, before he worked at NCC, John worked on the Home Office Community Development Project, where he developed the blueprint for a new and effective form of community-based advice and advocacy service, which became Advice UK.

Another loa

This year's winners of a Golden Bull 'booby prize', awarded to the worst examples of baffling publ

Halton Borough Council, for its concise description of the relocation of a path.

A path from a point approximately 330 metres east of the most south westerly corner of 17 Batherton Close, Widnes and approximately 208 metres east-south-east of the most southerly corner of Unit 3 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, Widnes, proceeding in a generally east-north-easterly direction for approximately 28 metres to a point approximately 202 metres east-south-east of the most south-easterly corner of Unit 4 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, and approximately 347 metres east of the most south-easterly corner of 17 Batherton Close, then proceeding in a generally northerly direction for approximately 21 metres to a point approximately 210 metres east of the most south-easterly corner of Unit 5 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, and approximately 202 metres east-south-east of the most north-easterly corner of Unit 4 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, then proceeding in a generally east-north-east direction for approximately 64 metres to a point approximately 282 metres east-south-east of the most easterly corner of Unit 2 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, Widnes and approximately 259 metres east of the most southerly corner of Unit 4 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, then proceeding in a generally east-north-east direction for approximately 350 metres to a point approximately 3 metres west-north-west of the most north westerly corner of the boundary fence of the scrap metal yard on the south side of Cornubia Road, Widnes, and approximately 47 metres west-south-west of the stub end of Cornubia Road be diverted to a 3 metre wide path from a point approximately 183 metres east-south-east of the most easterly corner of Unit 5 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street and approximately 272 metres east of the most north-easterly corner of 26 Ann Street West, Widnes, then proceeding in a generally north easterly direction for approximately 58 metres to a point approximately 216 metres east-south-east of the most easterly corner of Unit 4 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street and approximately 221 metres east of the most southerly corner of Unit 5 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, then proceeding in a generally easterly direction for approximately 45 metres to a point approximately 265 metres east-south-east of the most north-easterly corner of Unit 3 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street and approximately 265 metres east of the most southerly corner of Unit 5 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street, then proceeding in a generally east-south-east direction for approximately 102 metres to a point approximately 366 metres east-south-east of the most easterly corner of Unit 3 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street and approximately 463 metres east of the most north easterly corner of 22 Ann Street West, Widnes, then proceeding in a generally north-north-easterly direction for approximately 19 metres to a point approximately 368 metres east-south-east of the most easterly corner of Unit 3 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street and approximately 512 metres east of the most south easterly corner of 17 Batherton Close, Widnes then proceeding in a generally east-south, easterly direction for approximately 16 metres to a point approximately 420 metres east-south-east of the most southerly corner of Unit 2 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street and approximately 533 metres east of the most south-easterly corner of 17 Batherton Close, then proceeding in a generally east-north-easterly direction for approximately 240 metres to a point approximately 606 metres east of the most northerly corner of Unit 4 Foundry Industrial Estate, Victoria Street and approximately 23 metres south of the most south westerly corner of the boundary fencing of the scrap metal yard on the south side of Cornubia Road, Widnes, then proceeding in a generally northern direction for approximately 44 metres to a point approximately 3 metres west-north-west of the most north westerly corner of the boundary fence of the scrap metal yard on the south side of Cornubia Road and approximately 47 metres west-south-west of the stub end of Cornubia Road.

Wanadoo.co.uk for 'Wireless and Talk' terms and conditions

The failure to exercise or delay in exercising a right or remedy under this Agreement shall not constitute a waiver of the right or remedy or a waiver of any other rights or remedies and no single or partial exercise of any right or remedy under this Agreement shall prevent any further exercise of the right or remedy or the exercise of any other right or remedy. The rights and remedies contained in this Agreement are cumulative and not exclusive of any rights or remedies provided by law.

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ic information

Australian Taxations Office for a clause in its Goods and Services legislation

For the purpose of making a declaration under this Subdivision, the Commissioner may:

- a) treat a particular event that actually happened as not having happened; and
- b) treat a particular event that did not actually happen as having happened and, if appropriate, treat the event

as:

- i) having happened at a particular time; and
 - ii) having involved particular action by a particular entity; and
- c) treat a particular event that actually happened as:
- i) having happened at a time different from the time it actually happened; or
 - ii) having involved particular action by a particular entity (whether or not the event actually involved any action by that entity).

The Scottish Executive, for its building regulations

The completion certificate must be submitted by the relevant person as defined by the Building (Scotland) Act 2003, that is -

- a) Where the work was carried out, or the conversion made, otherwise than on behalf of another person, the person who carried out the work or made the conversion.
- b) Where the work was carried out, or the conversion made, by a person on behalf of another person, that other person.
- c) If the owner of the building does not fall within paragraph (a) or (b) and the person required by these paragraphs to submit the completion certificate has failed to do so, the owner.

uk2net.com for an e-mail to a customer

YOUR EMAIL DID NOT REACH A HUMANOID. IT ONLY REACHED REPLICANT LEVEL 1. EMAIL ARRIVING FROM HERE ARE SPOOLED FOR AUTOMATIC CHECKING AND WILL NOT BE READ BY HUMANOIDS

Department for Culture, Media and Sport for the Licensing Act 2003

Food or drink supplied on or from any premises is "hot" for the purposes of this Schedule if the food or drink, or any part of it,-

- (a) before it is supplied, is heated on the premises or elsewhere for the purpose of enabling it to be consumed at a temperature above the ambient air temperature and, at the time of supply, is above that temperature, or
- (b) after it is supplied, may be heated on the premises for the purpose of enabling it to be consumed at a temperature above the ambient air temperature.

Pooler Lighting Ltd, for instructions

The switched main live is generally a single black wire and this is connected to the brown wire(s) on the fitting. On a wall light this should be a single red wire. The neutral is generally two black wires and these are connected to the blue wire(s). On a wall light this should be a single black wire. The mains earth wire(s) must be connected to all green/yellow wire(s) or earth terminal on the fitting.

Central Manchester and Manchester Children's University Hospitals NHS Trust for 'Agenda for Change'

Where the combined value of the above payments before actual assimilation remains greater than the combined value of the payments after assimilation, the former level of pay will be protected. These protection arrangements apply to the combined value of payments before and after assimilation, not to individual pay components, excepting the provision relating to retention of existing on-call arrangements.

Plain English

Plain English Award winners

Our 'open' category for the year's clearest documents

- Communications for Housing for the Boston Mayflower Home handbook
- IFA Promotion Limited for the 'Financial advice. The buzzword is independent' brochure
- Jorvik Medical Practice for 'Keeping your heart healthy' patient information leaflet
- National Blood Service for 'Children receiving a blood transfusion - A parents' guide'
- Transport for London for 'Out and about in London - My guide' (A guide for people with learning difficulties)
- Valuation Office Agency for their business rates summary valuation advert



Inside Write Award winners

For internal government documents - civil servants writing for other civil servants. Supported by the Cabinet Office.

- Benefit Fraud Inspectorate for their 'Conventions and Language Guide'
- Defence Estates for the 'DE Ops North Talkback Survey September 2005'
- Department for Work and Pensions for their 'dwpeople' staff magazine
- Government Car and Despatch Agency for their staff magazine 'Active Transmission'
- HM Prison Service (Internal Communications) for a series of intranet articles about the Prison Officer of the Year Awards 2005
- UKvisas for their 'On-line Welcome Pack' for new staff

Foot in Mouth award

This is awarded to the public figure who has made the most baffling comment. This year's winner was Mr Morgan for a comment he made during the 2005 election. Mr Morgan now has the distinction of being the first person to win this award twice, having won it in 1998!

"The only thing we can do for grabs is no comment. I think it's fair to say we can't play for, except for..."

Awards 2005



Media Award winners

For crystal-clear reporting and analysis

- Best National Newspaper: The Guardian
- Best Regional Newspaper: Edinburgh Evening News
- Best National Radio: The Pat Kenny Show (RTE1)
- Best Regional Radio: BBC Radio Jersey
- Best National Television: Sunday AM (BBC1)
- Best Regional Television: London Tonight (ITV)

Web Award winner

For the year's clearest website

- www.scotborders.gov.uk

rd
figure who makes the most
winner is Rhodri Morgan MP,
a debate on 15 November
ubious honour of being the
vice, having previously won

which isn't up
change and I
ay it's all to
or no change."

Plain English Diplomas

These students have been through in-depth training to to make them the plain English expert at their organisation

- Jeff Curtis (Rural Payments Agency)
- Lydia Everitt (Lydia Everitt Training Limited)
- James Jeffrey (Scottish Natural Heritage)
- Mary Kelly (Learning and Skills Council)
- Averill Laing (Ministry of Defence)
- Jenny Munro (Inland Revenue)
- David O'Brien (Scottish Enterprise)
- Andy Telford (HM Prison Service)

Training 2006

Please call our training administrator Heidi Selkirk on 01663 744409 for more details, or e-mail us at info@plainenglish.co.uk.

Belfast

Tuesday 17 October

Birmingham

Tuesday 21 March
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 22 March
(Plain English)
Tuesday 19 September
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 20 September
(Plain English)

Dublin

Tuesday 23 May
(Plain English)

Edinburgh

Wednesday 15 March
(Grammarcheck)
Thursday 16 March
(Plain English)
Wednesday 11 October
(Grammarcheck)
Thursday 12 October
(Plain English)

Glasgow

Wednesday 14 June
(Plain English)

London

Wednesday 25 January
(Grammarcheck)

London (continued)

Tuesday 24 January
(Writing for websites)
Thursday 26 January
(Plain English)
Tuesday 21 February
(Plain English)
Thursday 23 February
(Advanced Grammar)
Wednesday 22 March
(Plain English)
Tuesday 25 April
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 26 April
(Plain English)
Thursday 11 May
(Report writing)
Tuesday 16 May
(Writing for websites)
Tuesday 23 May
(Plain English)
Tuesday 20 June
(Plain English)
Thursday 22 June
(Advanced Grammar)
Tuesday 18 July
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 19 July
(Plain English)
Thursday 17 August
(Plain English)
Tuesday 12 September
(Writing for websites)
Thursday 14 September
(Plain English)
Thursday 21 September
(Plain English and forms design)
Tuesday 26 September
(Report writing)
Tuesday 10 October
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 11 October
(Plain English)
Thursday 9 November
(Plain English)
Tuesday 12 December
(Plain English)
Wednesday 15 November
(Writing medical information)
Tuesday 21 November
(Advanced Grammar)
Wednesday 16 August
(Plain English)
Tuesday 24 October
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 25 October
(Plain English)
Thursday 7 December
(Plain English)

Manchester

Tuesday 7 February
(Plain English)
Monday 14 March
(Writing for websites)
Thursday 20 April
(Plain English)
Tuesday 20 June
(Plain English)

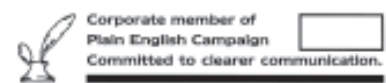


Welcome aboard!

The following organisations have recently earned their first Crystal Mark

British Pain Society
Bro-Morgannwg NHS Trust
Care Services Improvement Partnership
Cherwell Housing Trust
Cognac UK Limited
Effective Service Provision Limited
Evans Property Group
Frank Haslam Milan
Harrogate Borough Council
Horizon Housing Group
National Association of Pension Funds
NHS Connecting for Health
Romans Estate Agency
St Martin's College
Standard Chartered Bank
Westlea Housing Association
Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust

These organisations have become corporate members



Angus Council
Coca-Cola Enterprises Limited
Lloyds TSB Registrars
NHS Connecting for Health
Westlea Housing Association

The next issue of Plain English will be available in March 2006