

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Spring 2007 Issue 67

Our survey says

Plain English Campaign survey reveals that the public is still baffled by politicians

Over the last six months, visitors to our website have been giving us their views on plain language and how it affects them. Our 'plain English' survey was filled in by over 1500 people, and the results are very interesting. We are very grateful to everyone who took part.

It is the first time we have ever run such a survey, but we plan to run more surveys in the future to find out what the public think about various issues concerning communication.

The survey suggests that nearly 90% of people think that politicians should communicate more clearly - proving that those in power need to look at how they present themselves and their decisions to the public. 73% of those who responded claimed that they would be more interested in politics if it was more accessible.

We also asked people to tell us which sector is the worst at



How well are they doing?

Do you think that politicians communicate clearly with the public?

Yes: 9% No: 88% Don't know: 3%

Have you ever been confused when filling in an official form?

Yes: 91% No: 7% Don't know: 2%

communicating clearly. The legal profession will not be pleased to learn it drew 35% of the vote, closely followed by finance and by Government.

Meanwhile, it seems that, despite huge amounts of progress, many councils are still alienating their residents. Nearly 60% of those polled thought their local council 'could do better'.

On a more general note, only 7% of people who filled in the survey could say that they had never been confused by an official form, while 83% believe that organisations and companies sometimes deliberately

make their publications difficult for the reader to understand.

It appears from the results that we are not alone in our fight to convince public organisations of the benefits of using plain English. 79% of you think that your workplace would benefit from plain English techniques, while 81% of you even think that teaching pupils to write in plain English should be added to the national curriculum.

You can see the results of the survey by visiting our website which you will find at www.plainenglish.co.uk

Inside: Humphrys on the attack, Grundtvig update, a look at the communications industry, latest course dates and more

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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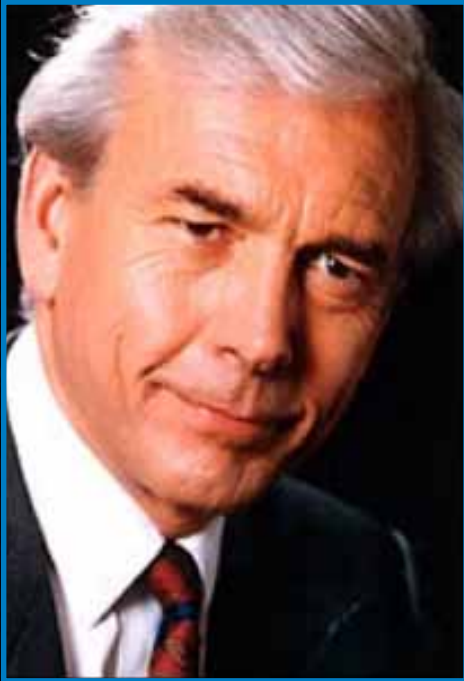
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Humphrys on the attack...



John Humphrys is not just the scourge of pompous politicians who try to wriggle out of answering a question on Radio Four's Today programme. He's a champion of plain English and a good friend of the Campaign. In 2001 he presented our annual awards and entertained us with a wonderful impersonation of some of our famous politicians manipulating our language to avoid straight answers.

Now, in a fascinating new book, *Beyond Words*, he uses his terrier instinct to ridicule much of modern and sloppy language. The full title of his book is *How Language Reveals the Way We Live Now*, and it is published by Hodder & Stoughton.

Bits and pieces

Filling thought

McDonald's, filing for patents on sandwiches in Europe and the US, defines some aspects of making a sandwich. It talks of the 'simultaneous toasting of

The target this time: bad English

John draws attention to the 'pseudo management speak' that is entering some schools. There are teachers now being invited to make a 'personalised learning offer' to children.

Children in turn are being invited to become 'co-investors with the state in their own education'.

Using the well-known Humphrys technique of ridiculing nonsense, John writes:

'And yet when it comes to giving our children a taste of Shakespeare and English at its most beautiful, then suddenly we're all terrified. Might, like, turn off the kids ... know what I mean. Instead they are offering alternative texts, issued by educational publishing houses, that supposedly make our greatest writer more palatable.

Here's a taste. Take a few original lines from Macbeth:

Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?

Compare them to the guide version:

Oooh! Would you look at that.

Yes I know it sounds as if I am making it up, but you can check it for yourself.'

a bread component and heating a meat or cheese filling'. A 'sandwich assembly tool' is used to place the garnish in the bread. The patent is quoted as saying: 'Typically the sandwich filling is the source of the name of the sandwich, for example ham sandwich'.

'There are other ridiculous examples.

- The world of charity, formerly known as the voluntary sector, is now gradually turning into 'the third sector'.
- A conference of retailers discussing business opportunities among the elderly was entitled – 'Turning Grey into Gold: Blending cutting edge population knowledge with innovative marketing to segment and connect with the older market'.
- Universities were referred to by a minister as 'UK Knowledge plc' which needs to keep up its market share.
- An official source described Guantanamo Bay as the 'different care providers'.

Quote from John Humphrys
"The simple fact is we cannot afford to be careless with our language, because if we are careless with our language then we are careless with our world and sooner or later we will be lost for words to describe what we have allowed to happen to it."

Plain Martin

Aston Villa manager Martin O'Neill – a plain-speaking Ulsterman – was asked if he had got his tactics wrong in the first half against Manchester United. He replied: "We were 3-0 down. I defy anyone to tell me I got my tactics right!"



All the original editorial team of the Liverpool News. From left to right are: Mel Akers, Lou Hunt, Don Welch, Tony Hood and Chrissie Maher



Peter Griffiths (left) with delegates at the Lier meeting

Progress with our partners

By Peter Griffiths

I went to Lier in Belgium for three days in January to help with the Grundtvig project. This is the EU programme to deliver improved adult education across Europe.

Plain English Campaign has been working with partners across Europe to create new ways of teaching adults and several promising projects are developing.

The delegates from Sweden have developed an 'easy-to-read' newspaper and want to encourage their readers to participate by sending in articles and videos. They also want to support the exchange of articles between EU countries by first translating them into English and from English into the other European languages. I had already told them about the original easy-to-read newspaper for adults – the Liverpool News. This was the brainchild of our founder Chrissie Maher who published it with great success in the early 1970s.

The Finnish delegates' website included a magazine with 'turning pages'. It really did look like you were reading a magazine. You could search for a name or subject and it would tell you which issue, page and paragraph to look in.

The Danish delegates had produced an inventive website which included an easy-to-read newspaper and magazine for people who found the printed ones too difficult. Readers can get back issues and sound versions for people who can't read. There is an emphasis on fun with lots of games.

Our contribution was to show:

- how we market PEC;
- the changes to our website;
- Chrissie's blog;
- our new courses; and
- our rewrite of an Act of Parliament.

Our online training courses caught everyone's attention and they could see the potential of a powerful teaching tool.

There was a lot of interest in how we ran our annual awards. The highlights for the audience were the Foot in Mouth Award and the Golden Bull Awards which caused lots of laughter.

We then agreed on some of the things we would do next. These include producing a brochure on the learning partnership. Each member is to produce two pages of A4 about what they do and to include photographs of their people. Members will also exchange articles and PEC will check the English language articles.

I left Lier a little sadly having met some wonderful people but knowing that we were heading into the next stage with some worthwhile objectives.

Text in school exams? Just nonsense

Chrissie Maher, Director of Plain English Campaign, hit out at some exam boards for accepting text message words in school exam papers. She said: "It will confuse

students who are already struggling with their English. So, however tolerant examiners are when they allow text words, they are ultimately harming young people's futures.

Please encourage plain English at every step. Leave texting to the mobile phones it was intended for and don't confuse our students. The youngsters deserve better."

Communication

As the telecommunications watchdog OFCOM prepares to launch a new

The communications industry, perhaps surprisingly given its name, is not renowned for its ability to communicate clearly with its customers. But nowadays, all of us are becoming reliant on electronic devices which allow us to take advantage of the benefits of technology. From shopping on the internet to booking a concert ticket from a mobile phone, the way we live has changed considerably over the last decade. Millions of us have a variety of gadgets which we carry around - phones, laptops, 'Blackberries' and DVD players. The major companies strive to create the ultimate 'all-in-one' device which provides everything any consumer could wish for - allowing access to every kind of information, from any location in the world. But, while the advances in technology have been enormous, the quality of instruction and information about these advances is still fairly poor.

It is probably true to say that communications equipment is the most complicated electronic equipment that we use on a daily basis. Often, the accompanying user manuals are indecipherable to all but the most technically-minded consumer. Engineers charge huge amounts to install broadband or satellite equipment in our homes which we could quite easily install ourselves, were the instructions clear and easy to understand. We feel comfortable operating the various buttons and switches in our cars, but it takes a lot longer to learn how to program the car radio system! Manufacturers and service providers have a responsibility to

their consumers to make their products easy to use. And it makes sound business sense - after all, a company will quickly see a drop in profits if it develops a reputation for producing complicated information. At Plain English Campaign we have edited a number of user manuals, mobile phone contracts and other documents relating to communication products. But it does seem that the industry as a whole is still reluctant to change its ways - we certainly don't get to see as many documents as we would like to. We get a stream of e-mails and phone calls from members of the public who have found a particular product or service confusing, and at times very stressful. Many people sign up to mobile phone contracts, for example, without really understanding what it is they are agreeing to and, in some cases the blame lies with the company which wrote the contract.

The average household expenditure will perhaps feature monthly payments for broadband internet, mobile phones, a landline telephone and a digital television subscription. All of these services carry their own terms and conditions, and the equipment which we use to access them also come with various manuals, guarantees and disclaimers. It is a huge amount of information to trawl through. But much of it is written clumsily, or contains impenetrable jargon and technical language. Older generations find this language much harder to learn than young people. We want to see companies spending as much time

getting their public information right as they do fine-tuning the actual technology.

How many of us have arrived home with a new DVD player or video, only to be bewildered by the instruction manual? We stare hopelessly at pages and pages of jargon and complicated diagrams. Even the remote control units seem to be more complicated than a household desktop computer.

There is no point in manufacturing a product with hundreds of features if most people only use a small percentage of them because they cannot understand the manual. Again, it makes business sense to be clear - customers will buy other products if they appreciate ease of use. It is no coincidence that Apple Corporation inspire brand loyalty - their products are consistently user-friendly, while the manuals and packaging are clearly written and laid out.

Last year, the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that Carphone Warehouse, under its 'Talk Talk' name, had misled customers by announcing their free broadband package. Like many 'free' offers advertised by internet, phone and TV companies, the cost was in the small print. Often companies argue that all the 'hidden' costs are there for everyone to see in the contracts, but rarely are these costs displayed prominently next to the word 'free'.

As consumers, we should be wary

ns breakdown

ow usability strategy, we take a look at how the industry communicates



of anything that looks too good to be true, but there are already standards and rules in place governing advertising, and they should be kept to. Our own conversations with the Advertising Standards Authority revealed that many of these standards and rules do not yet apply to internet-based advertising, which is concerning, given that so many people take up these offers online.

It is not our place to comment on individual design issues in terms of the actual equipment, but we can be useful when advising companies about how to design and lay out their customer information. It has been argued in the past that some companies deliberately make it difficult for

consumers, by burying minimum contract lengths, cancellation fees and warranty invalidity terms deep in their conditions. It is always possible to simplify complicated language and design. It merely requires thought and some effort on the part of the writer. People need to be able to understand things that affect them and it seems only fair that everyone should have access to new technologies.

Of course, sometimes only a skilled engineer will do. After all, we would not expect everyone to be able to install and activate their own telephone exchange, but it shouldn't take hours of sweat, concentration and tears to tune a new television.

Companies must also remember that their customer base does not necessarily have English as a first language. Not only that, but recent CBI surveys show that nearly 20% of people born in the UK have a 'low', or 'very low' standard of literacy. This makes it absolutely essential that documents are written as clearly as possible.

We will be happy to help or advise anyone who plans to look at the way they produce information for their products. It is encouraging to see that there is a move to regulate the standard of this information in the future. Hopefully the research audit will show companies that there is a need for clear, accurate information in the communications industry.

The people versus gobbledygook

Ordinary voices of Britain take aim at irritating pompous jargon

Plain English belongs to the people. That has been our message for nearly 30 years. In that time we have had some wonderful support, from prime ministers and princes, leaders of industry and education, civil servants and ordinary people. And, of course, the media.

Plain English Campaign welcomes them all. Our fight to keep language clear and gobbledygook on the run goes on so our latest welcome is to the letters page of the Daily Telegraph, one of Britain's biggest selling quality dailies. Its readers have been getting things off their chests – pompous phrases, weird words and meaningless mumbo jumbo.

Now Daily Telegraph readers have poured public scorn over a new batch of phrases. It started as a letter to the editor, with reader Noel Pepperall criticising the phrase 'draw down' (applied to the withdrawal of troops from Iraq).

There was no stopping the angry readers. One counted Tony Blair saying 'y'know' 40 times in a radio interview. Others were sick of 'no problem', 'no worries', 'cheers', 'mate' or 'there you go'. Politicians were attacked for using refute when they meant reject. Another reader guiltily confessed to using the abominable 'bear with me'. The floodgates were open.

Hundreds of letters arrived. This is a sample:

- With reference to Mr Springate's letter on cliches, I see where he is coming from.
- Why in the workplace where once we were at work? Why are we focusing instead of concentrating?

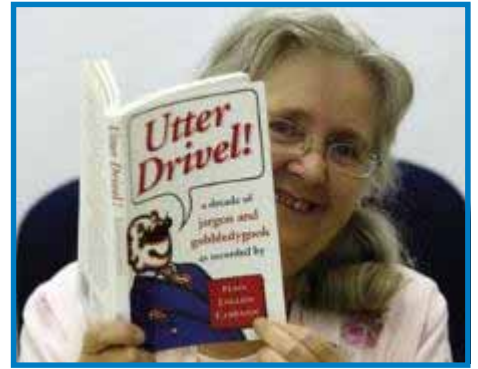
- What, please, is a robust national debate?
- I want to get something free, not 'for free'. I do not want to be told to 'listen up' or what programme is 'next up' on the television.
- Nowadays, politicians have apparently turned into errand boys by delivering everything from policies to timetables and targets. Whatever happened to produce, achieve, attain etc?
- Whenever I hear a politician saying 'the fact of the matter is' I know it is nothing of the sort.

Other hated phrases and words:

I'm good
 Are there any issues?
 Morphed (American for metamorphosed)
 Humanitarian disaster (instead of human disaster)
 Gobsmacked
 Engage
 To cut a long story short
 Plan ahead
 Wake up call

We did an exercise in 2004 when we asked people for their most disliked phrase. Then it was 'At the end of the day...'. It's still around, of course, along with such favourites as:

- I hear what you are saying
- move the goalposts
- the fact of the matter is
- touch base.



Chrissie says....

Over the years, I have got used to people murdering the English language. They happily pour gallons of gobbledygook over anything they can, and turn a piece of plain language into something that would puzzle a professor.

I've been fighting the assault on plain English now for nearly 30 years. I have a great team of experts, seeking to help government departments and large companies keep their message simple.

Sometimes you despair at what people do to our beautiful language. They take out the clean simplicity - which everybody can understand - and turn it into complicated, puzzling phrases that hide the message from ordinary people. And that's depressing!

But then, something comes along to remind us that there are millions of people throughout this country and all over the English speaking world who stand up for their plain English. They won't accept gobbledygook without a fight.

Help us pick our 2007 awards

2007 Plain English Awards – it's never too soon to spot a winner (or a loser!). Send your best examples of plain English and worst examples of gobbledygook to: Plain English Campaign, Awards desk, PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak SK22 4QP.

Blackpool Council's success

Blackpool Council has established a group of volunteer staff from services across the council. They meet every two months and act as ambassadors for plain English, using their skills to improve publicity and raise standards. Carol Barnes, of the ICT (information and communications technology) solutions team and a member of the 'ambassadors' group, writes:

We are responsible for the quality standards and distribution of over 50 council information leaflets. These are now available in every reception point across Blackpool, promoting our wide range of services. We want to make it as easy as possible for our customers to get the response they need.

We have made improvements to the language used in our leaflet, got rid of the jargon and made sure that all the publications we promote are easy to read and understand. We have also written a number of 'life event' themed packs, a valuable source of information about such things as moving home, bereavement and having a baby. More of these publications are planned for the next few months.



The group members from left to right are: Carol Barnes, Felicity Cross, Elaine Midgley, Peter Marsden, Susie Tucker and Al Humphries

We have found Plain English Campaign to be a valuable source of information and we regularly use their website as a point of reference. We have received training in the use of plain English and found this vital in making improvements to the way we communicate with all our customers.

Our latest project has seen an improvement in the standard of letters about debt, sent out by the council. This has been welcomed. However, we realise that there is still a lot to be done. We will continue to monitor our publications and make

improvements in all areas of communication with our customers. We are committed to delivering an excellent level of customer service at all times.

Some of the quotes from our customers are:

"The leaflets produced by Blackpool Council are so easy to read. They are clear and you can even get them in other formats if you need to."

"You always know the leaflet has come from Blackpool Council. They are printed in a certain, easy to recognise style and are easy to understand."

Plain English numbers - what next?

Figuring it out

Police forces throughout America once used figure codes as verbal

shorthand on their radios. 10-54 meant livestock on the highway, 10-50 a traffic accident, and 10-32 an alarm. But over the years police forces and other agencies gradually changed the meaning of the codes in their local areas. A 10-54 in one county was no longer animals on the road, but a breathalyser. A 10-13 was a request for a tow truck in one

county, and in another area an emergency message that an officer was under attack. Now Virginia, fed up with the confusion, has scrapped the figure codes and introduced plain English for police messages. Welcome to the world! We have always believed that plain English is the clearest as well as the safest communication anywhere.

Training dates for 2007 (open courses)

For more details, please call our training administrator, Heidi Selkirk on 01663 744409. Or e-mail us at info@plainenglish.co.uk.

Belfast

To be confirmed
(Plain English)

Birmingham

Tuesday 11 September
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 12 September
(Plain English)

Dublin

Thursday 24 May
(Plain English)

Edinburgh

Wednesday 28 March
(Grammarcheck)
Thursday 29 March
(Plain English)
Tuesday 9 October
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 10 October
(Plain English)

Glasgow

Thursday 21 June
(Plain English)

London

Wednesday 18 April
(Grammarcheck)
Thursday 19 April
(Plain English)

London (continued)

Tuesday 22 May
(Writing for websites)
Thursday 24 May
(Plain English)
Thursday 31 May
(Advanced grammar)
Wednesday 20 June
(Advanced grammar)
Thursday 21 June
(Plain English)
Wednesday 11 July
(Grammarcheck)
Thursday 12 July
(Plain English)
Tuesday 14 August
(Plain English)
Thursday 20 September
(Plain English)
Tuesday 25 September
(Report writing course)
Thursday 27 September
(Writing for websites)
Tuesday 2 October
(Plain English and forms design)
Tuesday 16 October
(Grammarcheck)
Wednesday 17 October
(Plain English)
Tuesday 6 November
(Writing medical information)
Thursday 15 November
(Plain English)
Thursday 29 November
(Advanced grammar)
Tuesday 11 December
(Plain English)

Manchester

Tuesday 17 April
(Plain English)
Thursday 7 June
(Plain English)

Manchester (continued)

Thursday 9 August
(Plain English)
Wednesday 24 October
(Plain English)
Wednesday 5 December
(Plain English)

Welcome aboard!

The following organisations have recently earned their first Crystal Mark.

Ability Housing Association
Albyn Housing Society Limited
Arriva East Midlands
Catalyst Event Management Ltd
Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Cross Country
East Midlands Airport
Electoral Office for Northern Ireland
Electrical Safety Council
Firmus Energy
Independent Airport Park and Ride Association
Michael W Halsall Solicitors
Midland Software Limited
NHS Business Services Authority
NHS Centre for Involvement
Npower
Office of Rail Regulation
Prime Care Community Services Limited
Prostrate Cancer Research Centre
Rentokil Initial
School of Distance and E-Learning (SDEL)
Scottish Gas
Sheffield City Council
Solihull Community Housing
Sony UK Limited
Suffolk GPs
Total Pension Company UK Limited
Worcestershire County Council

Help the public to understand your documents

Nearly 15,000 documents now carry our Crystal Mark as a sign of clarity.

Our testing shows that documents carrying the Crystal Mark can be read, understood and acted upon by the intended audience

For more information please contact Tony Maher on 01663 744409 or e-mail info@plainenglish.co.uk.

The next issue of Plain English will be out in May