

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Issue 78 Spring 2012

Peers propose a Plain English Award

An unusually clear and easy-to-understand piece of law-making has been praised in the House of Lords for 'clarity'.

The Policing Protocol Order 2011 came into force on 16 January 2012.

During a debate in the House of Lords earlier in the month, Baroness Browning called for the document to be considered for a Plain English Award.

"It isn't perfect – there are a few journeys into jargon and a few unexplained words like 'attestation' which don't help", said Plain English Campaign (PEC) founder Chrissie Maher. "However, someone has made an effort. This is much better than many of the documents which become law. On the last page of the document there is a helpful explanation of 'policing protocol'. Government should sit up and pay attention to this. When laws are made, the language used needs to be easy to understand. Plain English Campaign urges every Secretary of State to use plain English when making laws."

Another step in the direction of plain English came after the Campaign's communications with the recently appointed First Parliamentary Counsel, Richard Heaton (pictured right), a supporter of clear law. Below is an excerpt from a recent email to PEC from Mr Heaton.

"I mentioned that this Office has produced Drafting Guidance for drafters here. It is published on our website and I attach a link to it. You may find Part 1, on clarity, particularly interesting. (<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/drafting-guidance-office-parliamentary-counsel>)



"I am sure that you are familiar with legislative drafting, but we thought you might like to see some examples of recent Acts:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/24/contents>
(Public Bodies Act 2011)

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/41/contents>
(Loans to Ireland Act 2010)

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/11/contents>
(Cluster Munitions (Prohibitions) Act 2010)

"Time and the policy are always constraints for drafters of legislation. But I hope you will see from Drafting Guidance and recent legislation that we see achieving clarity, within those constraints, as a central aspect of drafting.

"Given our shared interest in clear legislation, we look forward to working with you."

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak, Derbyshire, SK22 4QP

Phone: 01663 744409

Fax: 01663 747038

E-mail: info@plainenglish.co.uk

Website: www.plainenglish.co.uk

Scotland pipes up for plain language

On Thursday 8 March 2012, Thorfinn Johnston, a Plain English Campaign trainer, attended a reception at the Scottish Parliament. This is part of the showcase for work by the Inclusive Communications team in the Scottish Government.

The reception opened with an address by Michael McMahon MSP. This was delivered to representatives from the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government, public services and charitable organisations keen to provide clearer public communications.

At the annual Plain English Awards in 2011, Chrissie Maher, founder of Plain English Campaign acknowledged the efforts of the Scottish Government with a 'Pat on the Back' award.

This award recognised their independently written 'Inclusive Communications Guide', and the Scottish Government's launch of their 'Write Well' campaign.

Their initiative encourages employees throughout Scottish Government offices to use plain English in public communications.



Thorfinn Johnston, one of our Plain English trainers, and a Glaswegian, who has trained hundreds of plain-speaking Scots.

With over a million people in Scotland believed to have some form of communication support needs, plain language is essential for them to be able to access their rights, and for their well-being.

Sir Peter Housden, Scottish Government Permanent Secretary, said "We are absolutely delighted by the recognition from the Plain English Campaign Awards for the quality of our written material. High-quality writing is central to the effectiveness of our work across the Scottish Government and the award is testament to colleagues throughout the organisation who strive for continuous improvement."

Save words, save money, save council services

Communications from housing departments or adult and social care teams can account for much of the public contact within council services. Budget cuts have reduced resources and are challenging local government offices in many ways.

Plain English Campaign has over 30 years of experience in public communications. We have proof that plain English training and communications give a visible and immediate return with recent users confirming that they can save resources at twice the initial spend.

Budget restrictions can affect the use of external services, or memberships for plain English services.

Latest news of councils' ongoing commitment to plain English training comes from the communication teams at Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and Birmingham City Council.

Councillor Darren Cooper, Leader of Sandwell Council says, "I believe this to be a very important

issue and in the longer term will save the Council money."

A Plain English Campaign training course can be a cost-effective solution that:

- responds practically to directives for efficiency savings;
- can be shared by several departmental budgets;
- satisfies commitments for continual professional development, and other staff training;
- addresses legislative needs for accessibility and equality;
- places the expertise in-house for future development; and
- delivers the crucial elements of an organisation's clear communications policy.

Food labelling failing healthy eating

Plain English Campaign wants to lift the lid on food labelling that can be dangerously confusing. The Campaign feels that regulatory bodies and manufacturers in the UK have lost the plot when it comes to food labelling. Tiny text with figures and words from a science laboratory can drive customers away from the supermarket shelves, instead of increasing sales and helping the customer.

A typical pot of cottage cheese can bombard shoppers with information that can be unclear and unhelpful in making healthy choices. Foodstuff measurements alone come in all forms and combinations - percentages, fractions, kcals, kJs and gs, and don't forget your GDAs and RDAs.

As well as the numbers and calculations, the shopper has to deal with scientific terms and industry abbreviations that could add to your weight, as well as your frustration.

For example, shoppers hoping to reduce their sugar intake, will need to look for the right type of sugar, and all its various forms. Just because the ingredients don't list the word 'sugar' it doesn't mean to say there won't be sugar somewhere in there. Glucose, fructose, syrups and concentrates are all sugars. And these might be noted under the 'nutrition information' rather than in the list of ingredients.

Chrissie Maher, founder of Plain English Campaign, has been fighting for clear public information for over 40 years and challenges the supermarket giants to lead the way.



"Give us plain English information in food labelling. It's all well intentioned and clever stuff, but how many customers really understand the information plastered over these packs and pots?"

"Apart from needing a magnifying glass to read it in the first place, shoppers are faced with doing calculations in the supermarket aisles. I would feel much happier with my cottage cheese if I could find a mention of tablespoons and teaspoons, something we're all used to.

"My worst nightmare is when these measurements are given 'per portion'. Is that my child-size portion or some muscle-bound builder's serving?"

"I'll take responsibility for eating healthily, but the food manufacturers need to give us information we can digest without getting heartburn!"

The Campaign echoes the sentiments of the US Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) who have recently issued Warning Letters to food manufacturers to review their current labelling.

Here are some common food labelling terms that can be confusing.

Use by

You will see 'use by' dates on food that goes off quickly, such as fish, meat products and ready-prepared salads.

Don't use any food or drink after the 'use by' date on the label, even if it looks and smells fine.

Best before

'Best before' dates appear on a wide range of frozen, dried, tinned and other foods.

Except in the case of eggs, 'best before' dates are about quality, not safety. When the date is passed, it doesn't mean that the food will be harmful, but it might begin to lose its flavour and texture.

Display until and sell by

Date marks such as 'display until' or 'sell by' often appear near or next to the 'best before' or 'use by' date. These are instructions for shop staff, not for shoppers.

The important dates for you to look for are the 'use by' and 'best before' dates.

Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!

by Steve Jenner

Plain English Campaign's roots were showing as the Campaign headed for the scouse bowl for our annual awards!

It was London two years ago. Then Manchester in 2010. And in 2011, it was the turn of the birthplace of Plain English Campaign – Liverpool – as the Campaign hit the road for the annual awards ceremony at The Cavern Club, birthplace of The Beatles.

Now that's all very well for the Maher family, and supporters of the Campaign from the North West but I'm definitely playing away. I love Liverpool; it has a fantastic atmosphere all of it's own, but I don't understand it. It's a city by the sea for a start. Those of us who hail from rural Derbyshire struggle with this. You either have a city, or the seaside. You know, donkeys and ice creams and all that good stuff. Not both. In Liverpool huge American skyscrapers rear up out of the sea with weird seabirds clinging to them. And despite it's reputation for post-industrial decline and unemployment, the city gave us genuine British rock n' roll, some of the best modern poetry and Plain English. And I've not even talking about the football. Or the Grand National.

The news that I was playing away came as a bit of a surprise to Mrs. Jenner, who for the first time would accompany me to the awards. I hoped it would explode the myth she clearly believed up to this point that it was all hospitality and rubbing shoulders with the award winners.

But first, to work. I present the breakfast show on Ashbourne Radio, a commercial station in the Derbyshire Dales. I flew out of the studio trailing bags, phones and shirt tails at just after 10am and headed for the Peugeot that time forgot. Then Liverpool.

The customary stooge around an unknown city without satnav or safety net usually ends in the same way and sure enough we lost our way. We then had one of those frank exchanges of views that sometimes take place between those who have been married for a while.

We eventually ended up in the right car park to make our way to our hotel. The Mersey looked raw and slate grey as we trudged along on a cold December afternoon.

Spirits were soon lifted though by a shower and a coffee in our extremely comfortable hotel room in the Comfort Hotel. You've got to admire the logic in the branding.

Preparing to present the Plain English Campaign Awards is an interesting experience. I'm normally well briefed by Marie in the Plain English Campaign press office and this was no exception. But what I find I'm usually looking for are opportunities for quick one-liners, odd quips and comments that might raise a chuckle amongst the award winners. It seems to me the trick is to try to strike a balance between congratulating the award winners who are often organisations dealing with matters of life and death and stirring these in an at appropriate points. It would be crass in the extreme, for example, to try and drop in a witty aside while presenting the Plain English Award to the Prostate Cancer Charity, for example. I'm quite happy to leave the 'shock jock' stuff to Ricky Gervais. But at the same time you can't blame me for congratulating Russell Hobbs whose vacuum cleaner instructions 'cleaned up' at the awards. Oh, all right - maybe you can. Please put the gun down and we'll talk about this sensibly.



Steve Jenner, Master of Ceremonies at the 2011 Awards

For more of Steve's story see our website www.plainenglish.co.uk

Clear skies ahead?

Plain English weather reports

Rock Radio's five-word weather report ('its raining, don't even bother') achieved a Plain English award in 2010 for its clear and straightforward weather news.

In 2011, the Met Office was at the other end of the scale, for the second time since 2008, with another Golden Bull. Their use of 'probabilities of precipitation' caused a downpour of differing opinions from the public. You can judge the clarity of the information for yourself from this graph.

| SO CAN YOU UNDERSTAND IT? | | |
|--|--|---|
| TODAY | TOMORROW | SATURDAY |
| North Temperature: 11-13c (52-55f) Feels like: 9c (48f) Probability of precipitation: 20-40% Humidity: 96% UV index: 1 | North Temperature: 10-11c (50-52f) Feels like: 7-9c (45-48f) Probability of precipitation: 20-40% Humidity: 89% UV index: 1 | North Temperature: 11-13c (52-55f) Feels like: 8-12c (46-54f) Probability of precipitation: 60% Humidity: 97% UV index: 1 |
| South Temperature: 13-15c (55-59f) Feels like: 11-14c (52-57f) Probability of precipitation: less than 5% Humidity: 82% UV index: 1 | South Temperature: 11-14c (52-57f) Feels like: 10-14c (50-57f) Probability of precipitation: 20-40% Humidity: 93% UV index: 1 | South Temperature: 13-16c (55-61f) Feels like: 12-15c (55-59f) Probability of precipitation: 20% Humidity: 86% UV index: 1 |

Paul Danon nominated the Met Office for their dubious honour in 2011, after spending time researching the language of weather reports and reporters.

Below is Paul's acceptance speech for the Golden Bull award, in the absence of any representative from the Met Office.

His blog and website will give a fuller insight to the gobbledygook of weather.
<http://weatherforecasts.blog.com>

"The Met Office has eighteen hundred staff and taxpayers spend four hundred and forty thousand pounds on it every day.

"We all know about its faulty predictions of mild winters and barbecue-summers, but I think the forecasters do themselves no favours either by the language they use.

"On Saturday, the Met Office website forecast 'blustery showers across northwest UK' and 'showers' is a favourite weather-word meaning something-or-other coming down from the sky, though we're not really sure when or where or how heavy or for how long."

"The 'across' in 'across northwest UK' is equally non-committal. It's like the forecasters' favourite 'towards'.

"Saturday's forecast went on: 'falling as snow over the high ground but to lower levels of Scotland later' and you wonder what this 'but to lower levels of Scotland' means and just when 'later' is going to be.

"Back in March 2011, the same website said it would be 'generally cloudy', which sounds OK, but does 'generally' mean 'for most of the time' or 'in most places' and, anyway, in what places?

"These are some mild examples, and you should hear how mangled the message gets once it passes through the BBC's hands.

"It's not that the forecasters use meteorological jargon; rather, they speak and write a sort of spivvy bookmakers' slang which isn't just grammatically lumpy but also obscures the facts and avoids commitment.

"Next time you hear, watch or read a forecast, ask yourself: 'Did I really understand that and do I actually know what it's going to **do** here tomorrow?'"

Some typical weatherese that Paul has collected:

- Overnights tonight
- A rash of beefy showers
- The winds fall light
- Seeing showers though these should ease from the north-west
- It's mainly settled
- Excess surface water
- Temperatures really struggling
- Clearing showers in the far east
- Squally showers
- Wintry showers
- Summer showers
- Changeable

Weather continues to be a favourite subject with the Golden Bull nominations, but with the Met Office now working towards clearer skies, it seems the BBC weather presenters are getting lost in the mists of their creative phrases, such as 'droughted parts', nominated for the 2012 awards by frustrated viewer Oliver Williams.

Send us your favourite 'weather words' for our award nominations by email to info@plainenglish.co.uk, or on our online form at <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/entry-details-awards.html>

Quotations for this quarter

“All politicians are guilty of slipping into jargon - and all of us deserve scrutiny from the Plain English Campaign. Complicated sets of initials, official jargon, bureaucracies that over-complicate things to boost their own self-importance - all of these things help to build barriers between government and people.

“When important information is being provided by officials or government departments, that is especially serious. So I congratulate the Campaign on all it has achieved to date, and wish it well.”

David Cameron MP, Prime Minister

“The Plain English Campaign has played a major role in improving the way public bodies communicate with citizens. However, there is still plenty of room for improvement - not least from politicians - so the campaign’s work is far from over.”

Tony Blair MP, former Prime Minister

“We need to ensure that official documents - from Social Security forms to White Papers - are useful and comprehensible. The Plain English Campaign has a splendid track record in nudging us all towards making this happen.”

Sir John Major, former Prime Minister

“Human relationships depend on communication. Bad writing is a barrier to communication. When a large organisation such as the Government tries to communicate with the man and woman in the street the scope for misunderstanding is enormous. Too often clarity and simplicity are overwhelmed by pompous words, long sentences and endless paragraphs.

“If we all wrote in plain English, how much easier - and efficient - life would be. It is no exaggeration to describe plain English as a fundamental tool of good Government.

“Some people think that flowery language and complicated writing is a sign of intellectual strength. They are wrong. Some of our greatest communicators were - and are - passionate believers in the simplicity of the written word. As Winston Churchill described a particularly tortured piece of ‘officialese’: ‘This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.’

“The Civil Service and public administration generally have made great strides in the use of plain English in recent years. Jargon and ‘officialese’, while far from extinct, are dying out. I would like to see them banished forever. Plain English must be the aim of all who work in government.”

Baroness Thatcher, former Prime Minister

Jargon jungle

To the uninitiated, the language used in some industries and professions can be impenetrable and may appear deliberately exclusive. This issue looks at the language of the horseworld where they say much more than ‘neigh’!

Dishing

When the horse throws one or both front feet out sideways with each stride.

Daisy cutting

Not to be confused with dishing — the horse flicks its toe upwards when in trot.

Plaiting

When the horse’s feet cross over in front when they land on the ground.

Plain English Champions 2012

Plain English Campaign are making this year a ‘Healthy, happy 2012’ for public communications in recognition of the coming Olympics.

We want nominations for the most proactive supporters of plain English communications in your organisation to be recognised as our Plain English Champion of 2012. The top three candidates will be selected by Chrissie Maher, the founder of Plain English Campaign. They will receive a personal award and take part in a video demonstrating how using plain English has benefited their organization and their audiences.

The video will be uploaded to our website, and distributed to our media contacts. The winners will also be invited to take part in our annual awards in December.

Just send us an email before Friday 29 June 2012. See our website for full details for nominations. www.plainenglish.co.uk

The stamp of clarity

For over 30 years Plain English Campaign has been a leading influence in promoting the use of plain English in public information. Our expertise has been recognised as best practice in the UK Parliament, government offices and private businesses all over the world.

Readers view our accreditations as:

- a universal standard of clarity and accessibility, that makes the information they receive easier to understand and deal with; and
- a sign of the organisation's intent to provide information that is as clear and accurate as possible.

After many year's success with the globally recognised Crystal Marks for printed leaflets, documents and online information, we have accreditations suitable for lengthier material. For websites, where information is frequently updated, we provide a yearly review and recommendations to improve the useability and accessibility of your website content. This can result in achieving our Internet Crystal Mark.

When regular printed or online publications like newsletters or magazines contain mixed sources of

content, we are able to accredit the clarity of the overall layout and communication style with our 'Approved by' logo.

In recent years, we have been asked by writers and publishers to provide a stamp of approval for larger publications of non-fiction. This newly-launched accreditation is our Plain English Book Mark. This allows the book to be reviewed for its use of clear language that is appropriate for the intended readership, without affecting the writing style.

We are proud to have already accredited the first of a range of educational history books from Folens Publishers, who act as the educational agent in Ireland for Pearson, the global publishing house. Other books awaiting accreditation are in the pipeline from a variety of publishers on the subjects of communication, business writing and financial information.



Getting their teeth into plain English

Earlier this year, Malcolm Lewis, a Plain English Campaign trainer, gave a light-hearted presentation on the benefits of using plain English in the medical profession. The audience was orthodontic consultants who work in the NHS.

Our plain English trainers are often asked to draw from their individual areas of expertise for speaker opportunities.

With NHS reforms making the public more responsible for decisions about their healthcare, it is essential that communications from all healthcare professionals are clear and easy to understand.

They should be free from jargon that can have serious consequences when it is misunderstood.

If you would like to book a speaker for your event, contact us by email info@plainenglish.co.uk



Good health and clear healthcare information are matters close to Malcolm's heart.

The photo shows him reaching the end of a recent charity half-marathon and in good shape - apart from the wig!

Training dates for 2012 (open courses)

If you have any questions about our range of courses, please phone us on 01663 744409 and ask for Terri Schabel, our training administrator.

Plain English courses

Thistle Euston Hotel - London

Wednesday 16 May
Thursday 21 June
Thursday 12 July
Thursday 13 September
Thursday 11 October
Friday 9 November
Wednesday 5 December

Thistle Hotel - Manchester

Thursday 7 June
Thursday 9 August
Thursday 18 October
Thursday 6 December

Thistle Hotel - Birmingham

Thursday 13 September

Grammarcheck courses

Thistle Euston, London

Wednesday 11 July
Wednesday 10 October

Writing for websites

Thistle Euston, London

Tuesday 17 May
Thursday 27 September

Advanced Grammar

Thistle Euston, London

Thursday 14 June
Thursday 25 October

Report writing

Thistle Euston, London

Thursday 20 September

Plain English and forms design

Thistle Euston, London

Thursday 4 October

Plain English for medical writers

Thistle Euston, London

Wednesday 7 November

About our courses

We offer a range of training courses to teach you how to write in plain English.

In-house courses

Our trainers will come to your organisation's offices where your staff can take the course.

Online courses

We offer some of our training, including our business-writing course, online.

Open courses

We hold these courses regularly at various hotels around the country.

Plain English Diploma

This is a course that you take over a period of a year.

Crystal Mark numbers climbing

This cost-effective mark of clarity is finding increased favour at a time of budget cuts, when large scale communication campaigns or reviews are being postponed. The Crystal Mark gives high-profile accreditation of individual documents that demand clear public information.

More than 20,000 documents now carry our Crystal Mark as a sign of clarity.

If you have a document you would like us to look at, please email info@plainenglish.co.uk, or phone Tony Maher on 01663 744409.