



CABINET OFFICE

From the Minister of State

Lord Gowrie

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nbpm
DMS
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Dear Minister

PLAIN ENGLISH BOOKLET

You may have seen some Press reports recently that the Cabinet Office (MPO) have sent out a leaflet to their staff encouraging the use of plain English. I thought you might like to see a copy. The booklet was written by the Plain English Campaign for MPO. You might find the idea of a similar booklet for your department worth considering as one way of showing your personal support for the forms review.

Some departments have already issued guides on forms design which include advice on writing. But whilst these are helpful to staff who are already trying to write well, they are, I gather, often not read by those who most need the advice. And I understand that forms units sometimes have to convince the form sponsor in the policy or operational division of the need to write simply and clearly before they can get down to designing a form.

The purpose of this booklet is to arouse interest in plain English across the department and to show that it has top-level support. It also provides a good opportunity to draw attention to what the department is doing on forms. The booklet has been welcomed by heads of divisions in MPO who have been asked to follow it up with their staff.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the need to alter the example quoted on page 4 was challenged immediately and you might like to see the alternative version. This has been accepted by the responsible division. I think it makes the point of plain English rather well!

/I am

I am copying this letter to other Ministers in charge of departments and I hope they too will consider whether a similar booklet would be appropriate for their departments.

*Yours,
G. J. G.*

LORD GOWRIE

REVISED DRAFT OF FIRST PARAGRAPH OF THE CODE INTRODUCTION

The Minister for the Civil Service has authority to introduce regulations to direct the conduct of the Home Civil Service.

(Article 5 of the Civil Service Order in Council 1969.)

These regulations come mainly from the following sources:

- legislation which applies to all employers including the Crown;
- legislation which does not apply to the Crown but which Ministers have agreed to apply as if it did; and
- agreements negotiated with the National Staff Side or with Staff Associations.

They are consolidated and communicated to departments in the form of instructions by means of the Code memoranda.

Departments employing civil servants must follow the instructions. Sometimes the Code specifies how they must be followed; sometimes it states the principles behind the instructions and allows discretion to departments on how to apply them.



*The word
is...*

PLAIN

ENGLISH



So far we've asked you to read only five words and look at a coat of arms.

Maybe it took you five seconds. We'd like just another ten minutes of your time to read the rest of this booklet.

That's a small cost to a professional writer like you. Professional, because you probably spend a fifth of your working day writing — and even more time reading what other civil servants write.

The written word is your main currency. Stop reading now if yours is in mint condition. But read on if you think a word on plain English could add extra value to your skills.

There's a lot of it about

Official writing is full of verbiage — dead material clogging up the thoughts of its reluctant readers. The Civil Service is probably no worse in this respect than businesses and local authorities. Consider this example from an Automobile Association letter to a member:

The relevant comments which you have made in respect of the case under review, have been carefully considered. Immediately we would concur that from a point of conjecture, or in a hypothetical sense, it may indeed be of benefit, or meritorious to your position, if details could be extracted from the book within the repairer's premises, to which you have referred, and which may contain details of your instructions or other corroborative matter.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, practically, we would require to address ourselves as to how such information may be obtained, or extracted. Basically, even if such record in the case of such a book, should still exist within the premises of the motor traders, it may, quite frankly, be found that they would be extremely reticent to make such information, or data immediately available to you, or at worst, admit that it exists at all.

Therefore, whilst as aforesaid, there may be hypothetical merit in what you have stated, to all practical purposes it may be difficult, if not impossible to procure such data or evidence again pre-supposing that it actually exists.

Now maybe you've never written anything quite like that. But how often have you looked at an incoming minute and thought, 'What exactly does this mean?' or 'Why doesn't he get to the point?' Are you sure that someone, somewhere, isn't saying the same about something you've written? Writers sometimes think they know how to say what they mean and can't understand why other people don't see what they mean.

If you see what we mean . . .

Clarity begins at home

The *Civil Service Pay and Conditions of Service Code* begins:

Under Article 5 of the Civil Service Order in Council 1969, the Minister for the Civil Service is empowered to make regulations for controlling the conduct of Her Majesty's Home Civil Service. Instructions given in the exercise of this power are communicated to departments by the Civil Service Department as part of a consolidated Code. Such instructions stem mainly from two sources, legislation which binds the Crown or which, although not binding the Crown, Ministers have undertaken to apply as though it were so binding; and agreements reached in negotiation with the National Staff Side or with Staff Associations in accordance with custom and practice extending back over more than 50 years. Rules and guidance so issued are mandatory on employing departments. In some instances, the method of application of the rules is precisely defined, in others, the principles to be observed are defined and the method of application is left to departments.

It's not quite in the same league as the AA, but it's difficult to understand without a second or third reading.

Even though a lot of MPO's work isn't seen by the public, our reports, circulars, minutes of meetings and many of our letters are read by staff in other departments. We should practise, as well as preach, plain English. Just because we are writing to other civil servants doesn't mean we should use officialese.

Won't plain words destroy the beauty of English?

No. The examples given already could scarcely be called beautiful. If anything, they're tiring. You have to unravel the language in search of the ideas. One of the strengths of English is its capacity to express complex ideas simply and attractively. You show your mastery of those ideas, and of the language, by doing so.

But I can't say exactly what I mean in plain English

Are you sure? What is more to the point, will your reader understand exactly what you mean if you don't use plain English? The reason for most of your writing is to transmit information or ideas from your mind clearly, convincingly and politely into your reader's mind. Of course, you may have to use technical terms. But when you do, it is even more important to use plain English techniques to explain your ideas clearly. There's no need to sacrifice accuracy in the search for clarity. Follow Einstein — 'I like to make things as simple as possible, but not simpler'.

Won't my letters and reports become longer?

Does it matter if they are longer if they are easier to read and therefore quicker to understand? But you will generally find that plain English is shorter. Bradford Council put its Standing Orders for Contracts into plain English. The old Orders had 3,679 words. The new Orders say the same in plain English in 1,850 words. Moreover, loopholes obscured by jargon in the old Orders were exposed — and closed.

What can be learnt from forms?

Forms and questionnaires can be a test-bed for plain English. Form designers learn a great deal about the way people understand language by examining forms which have been returned and talking to the people who filled them in.

Forty people were asked what they thought was meant by the phrase *disposable income* in a form. They took some time to think about it and among the answers were:

'It means you throw it away'

'It's what you spend on your grocery and rent'

'It means getting rid of . . . you've got to sell your furniture and everything before you can get the grant'

'Is that your earnings coming in?'

Time spent on careful skilful drafting means time saved by the people who have to read and fill in forms. And it means time saved by the staff who have to check and process the information.

Application for Civil Service College Training **1**

Please write clearly and use a separate form for each application. After completing this page, pass this form to your Line Manager who will need to send it to your Departmental Training Officer for approval. Please allow time for this. **2**

CABINET OFFICE
Management & Personnel Office
CIVIL SERVICE COLLEGE
COL 25

For one day seminars complete this column ONLY. **3**

Course code _____
Course title _____

Location *Please tick:*
Belgrave Rd Sunningdale Other **4**

Dates _____
Price _____

Please tick: Repayment Non-repayment

Surname (Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms) _____
Forenames _____

Grade _____ **5**

Department or organisation _____
Division _____

Phone number (including GTN if civil servant) _____
Address to which we should send joining instructions _____
Postcode _____

Date of application _____

For training lasting MORE than one day go on to complete the rest of this page. **6**

Year of joining Civil Service _____
Date of entry into present grade _____
Professional qualifications _____
Academic degrees _____
Time in your present job _____

Please describe briefly your present job including the number and grades of staff reporting to you

Please give details of any experience or qualifications that you consider relevant to the course

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On the left is a reduced-size version of a redesigned Civil Service College form. Here's a commentary on its language and design.

1 A clear title. In the old-style forms the titles were often missing altogether or subordinate to the departmental name and coat of arms.

2 Clear and polite instructions in large, bold type (even at this reduced size). They replace the impersonal, confusing and even offensive notes which used to say:

It should be noted that *before* completing page 2 of the form it is necessary to detach page 1 otherwise details entered on page 2 will be duplicated by carbon on to page 1(a). Both sheets must be sent to the College.

The new instructions herald a change in procedure; the expensive and unnecessary carbon system has disappeared.

3 A clear position for this instruction. But could it be misleading? Could you improve it? Is it needed at all?

4 Easy-to-use 'tick-boxes'. They are often simpler than demanding, 'Delete whichever is inapplicable.'

5 Two columns to the page. This layout is often quicker to read and more pleasing to the eye. It gives a more organised structure than one wide column right across the page.

6 A clear instruction. This saves many form-fillers from giving unnecessary details.

7 Adequate space for answers (about 7mm between lines in the full-size form).

Are there any techniques for writing plain English?

Clarity doesn't come naturally to most people — it has to be learnt. Ernest Gowers's classic *The Complete Plain Words* is the bible of techniques for clear writing. Here are some of the important ideas he and others put forward. Bear in mind they are suggestions, not rules.

- The first isn't really a technique at all, more a state of mind. It's attitude. Your writing will become much more conversational and personal if you treat your readers as people and imagine them opposite you in the room. The official who wrote:

In consequence of the non-payment of the above-noted account, an officer of the Board will attend your premises to disconnect your electricity supply facilities

had got his attitude wrong. He wasn't treating his reader as a human being.

- Use short sentences. For writing to civil servants, aim to average 15-25 words. For the public, average 15-20 words. Within these limits you can still be polite and, if you need to be, formal or forceful.

- Use sentences with active verbs. Write:

This report answers your questions

instead of:

Your questions are answered by this report.

The first phrase follows the normal English word order:

subject of the sentence . . . verb . . . object.

This gives your readers much less trouble than:

object . . . verb . . . subject.

- Use verbs instead of nouns created from verbs. For example, use *use* as a verb instead of *the utilisation of*. Reports in particular are full of these grand-sounding noun phrases.

Instead of:

The decision of the department was that employees should work between 9 and 5

write:

The department decided that employees should work between 9 and 5.

- Generally use shorter words instead of their longer equivalents. Try *try* for *attempt*, *work out* for *calculate*, and *more* for *additional*. There's nothing wrong with long words, though some may be outside your readers' vocabulary. But they are often ingredients of a stodgy style that sends readers to sleep.

- It's often a good idea to address your readers as *you* and refer to yourself or the department as *I* or *we*.

- Use jargon only when it's essential shorthand to people who know what it means. Otherwise explain your technical terms.

- Use a simple style, not a high-sounding, over-educated one. You may know just the right word. Use it by all means — provided you are certain that your readers will understand it.

- Organise your writing in a way that will be helpful to your readers. This may mean, for example, putting the recommendation or decision at the beginning to save your readers skipping to the end to find out what you are leading up to. Remember, readers are invariably in a hurry to get to the point. They want to ride down a motorway, not thrash about in the Hampton Court maze.

Practise the techniques

A straightforward style takes time to develop. At first you may have to spend longer thinking about *how* to say something as well as *what* you are going to say. But eventually it becomes easier to write . . . and easier to read.

Here's part of a water board's letter to a customer. We've left space on the opposite page for you to make it crisper and more vigorous using the techniques of plain English.

Water Resources Act, 1963. Proposed abstraction of water from underground strata at 104, Bridge Road, Woodley.

I refer to your letter dated 31 May 1983 and note that it is proposed to abstract water by means of a well at your property for the purpose of watering your garden.

No licence is required under the above Act where water is abstracted from underground strata for the domestic purposes of the abstractor's own household. It is considered that an abstraction of water from underground strata for the purpose of watering a private garden attached to a dwellinghouse is excepted from the licensing requirements of the above Act as a domestic purpose.

As regards the second paragraph of your letter, the Authority have not imposed restrictions upon pumping water by means of wells for garden watering by sprinklers. However, should there be exceptional drought conditions it would, of course, be essential for the greatest economies in the use of water to be exercised, particularly for such a purpose, so as to avoid wastage.

There's more

Most departmental libraries have some books on plain English. Amongst those in the Cabinet Office library are:

- *The Complete Plain Words*, E Gowers
- *Guidelines for Document Designers*, D B Felker & others
- *Guidelines for Forms Design*, Cabinet Office (MPO)
- *Usage and Abuse*, E Partridge
- *Modern English Usage*, H W Fowler
- *Writing Plain English*, M Cutts & C Maher
- *Daily Mirror Style*, K Waterhouse



The last word

From Lord Gowrie

Most Ministers have too much to read and I am no exception. But I admit that I have enjoyed this booklet. It is clear and to the point. I look to all who work in the Cabinet Office (MPO) to read, digest, and apply its lessons.

The message is simple. Using plain English is the best way to write. The audience will pay more attention to what you have to say if you can capture their interest and if they don't have to waste time unravelling the language.

The first step is also simple. Put yourself in the position of your readers. Then you will see why your letters, minutes or reports will be more acceptable and more convincing if they are written in plain English.

As a lecturer in English literature I used to set my new students an early exercise to describe a bicycle to a visitor from Mars. They soon found that writing plain English wasn't so easy.

Of course this booklet isn't comprehensive. But if you keep it close to hand and use the tips on pages 8 and 9, they will help. The library has more advanced material when you want it.

Make plain English the MPO style.