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Plain or just plain dull?

Collateral damage from the Plain English movement

Since the mid 1980s the Plain English movement has sought to cut a swathe through jargon-filled and obtuse language. Its mantra of eliminating 'gobbledygook' in legal and other documents was soon taken up by a broad range of organisations which produced informational texts for public audiences. Short, crisp sentences, everyday vocabulary and above all the active voice were hailed as our linguistic saviours. More recently Don Watson and his best-selling books *Death Sentence: the Decay of Public Language* have continued the crusade.

But in our enthusiasm to improve readability and accessibility have we lost some of the things that make texts interesting, engaging and memorable? Have we lost sight of other, more appropriate models and solutions? Has accessible become bland? Has plain become just plain dull?

This paper looks briefly at how the Plain English movement broke away from its original 'mission', and then at three of its hallmark principles: sentence length, voice and vocabulary - and in doing so considers some of its unintended casualties.

Beginnings

Back to the 1980s - even to the 70s. What was going on? Where did the idea of 'Plain English' come from and why then?

The movement had its genesis in the world of legal and official documents. Its wonderfully democratic ideal demanded that citizens are entitled to know their rights as consumers.

To quote one of its main advocates, Prof Rob Eagleson:

'Too often they are expected to enter into agreements and to sign contracts and leases without being able to comprehend the documents placed before them. Equally important, many in the community do not take advantage of the benefits to which they are entitled because they cannot understand the written announcements setting out the details'.ⁱ

Plain English was also very much about cost efficiency - an argument that was fundamental in helping the movement gain its 'organisational' backing. The time and effort spent in reworking texts, it was argued, was more than repaid in lower production costs (plain texts often shorter) but with the real savings seen in reducing the costs that resulted from errors, ambiguities, misunderstandings, complaints, litigation. Plain English was good for business, and it was good PR.

These imperatives also dovetailed with emerging research into the process of reading and writing. The 1980s was the decade when, for the first time, we could get *inside* the human brain to observe that most complex and unique of our behaviours: language. How do we produce it, as speakers or writers, and how do we comprehend it? With the development of technologies that could map and analyse the brain at work - that allowed us to actually see what the brain was doing while we composed our ideas into language, spoke, listened, read and wrote - the emerging fields of neurolinguistics and neuropsychology radically changed

the way we thought about language - and in particular about the features and structures that can form obstacles for readers as they seek to comprehend written texts.

For editors, the basic principles of Plain English weren't new, but the movement took them out into the world in a way that was.

Plain English focused on the **audience**:

'In essence the Plain English movement is a reminder of the purposeful and social nature of language. It enables human beings to communicate with one another. Over the years we have come to lose sight of the real audience of many of our documents ... The Plain English movement is calling us back to a proper balance and is reminding us of the true purpose of language.'ⁱⁱ

It focused on the **process** of writing: Good writing, it championed, takes time: thinking, planning, drafting and reworking.

It focused the **product** of writing, on things such as clarity of concept, organisation, layout and language (word choices, grammatical structures, sentences etc).

And it focused on the **purpose**: where, how and by whom would a document be used.

And these were big achievements - in Australia when the NRMA released the first Plain English document in 1976, followed the next year by the Real Estate Institute of NSW and its residential tenancy agreement these were, appropriately, hailed as major breakthroughs.

Breakout

What happened next is that the Plain English movement spread beyond its original contexts; its principles applied not just to forms, leases, documents and contracts but to other kinds of informational texts intended for public audiences.

And clearly, there was a need ... for example, this 'sentence' from an art catalogue:

'Note should be taken of the fact that Gerhard Richter's capitalist realist paintings were executed in the early '60s as the spread of American culture through western Europe intensified; and of his response to the more recent engagement with history, in the guise of historical and socio-political themes, and with alchemy as a redemptive force, which permeates the work of certain newly celebrated figures not the least of whom is Anselm Kiefer.'ⁱⁱⁱ

At the time I was working at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, a major redevelopment of the Museum of Applied Art and Sciences. With a collection covering science, technology, decorative arts and social history, we were developing some 20 permanent, theme-based exhibitions, all developed by experts but aiming to communicate to a very broad, mixed public audience. I signed up with enthusiasm for the chance to attend a Plain English seminar. The Plain English message seemed spot on, and a crusader in the form of a distinguished Sydney University professor (aka Rob Eagleson) backed by, in his words, 'highly regarded bodies such as the Australian Law Reform Commission and the Task Force on Departmental Information' gave these basic principles of effective writing a credibility, an imprimatur, an *enforceability* that was a godsend to a small editorial department of twenty-somethings in an organisation full of experts - scientists, engineers, historians, archaeologists, philatelists, art historians - all of whom were trying to communicate with an audience of largely non-experts.^{iv} And Plain English had the cachet of first having been

accepted in the United States, Britain and Canada before arriving in Australia. It had 'clout'.

And it did provide a framework for dealing with many of the issues we faced, both in editing and writing texts, and as a way of improving the skills of our authors, whose writing skills varied enormously. Another particular feature of the museum context is the constant pressure on space for text in the exhibition environment - how can we present the information and stories without overwhelming the objects on display and the visitor. For us, the key principles of Plain English seemed really no different from those we were following; for our many of our authors, the 'banner of Plain English' brought an outside, independent backing and an institutional one (ie, it was something tangible that senior management could support) that really helped change some very entrenched attitudes and approaches to writing.

So what is the problem? The problem I think is two fold: it's partly that over the years the original principles seem themselves to have become simplified and more definitive - often applied, I think, without enough sensitivity to the present contexts. And it's partly that the contexts are just different.

If you compare those original Plain English guidelines written in the 1980s with those you see today in various style guides or on the web, you see that what they say about *language* has become reduced. Where originally we were told to avoid *archaic* words, avoid specialist terminology or properly explain it, and avoid 'nominalising' (turning other words into nouns), we are now told to 'avoid jargon and unnecessary words'. Where originally we were told to pay particular attention to grammatical structures, ordering of clauses, and long syntactically convoluted sentences, we are now told to keep sentences short' and 'use the active voice'

They have become The Three Golden Rules:

- * avoid jargon and unnecessary words
- * keep sentences short
- * use the active voice

There also, I think, has been a shift in the sense that originally these 'principles' were a means of focusing on the audience and purpose and over time they seem to have become an end in themselves.

So I want to look at these each in some detail.

Words: avoid jargon and unnecessary ones

Jargon words are one of the key features of specialist writing - they're extremely efficient when communicating with a peer audience but among other audiences are deeply powerful in withholding meaning and excluding readers. Unlike archaic words which are a particular feature of legal writing but not especially elsewhere, jargon words are found all over the place. In museums, where that pressure on space is always especially critical, the message 'avoid jargon words or properly explain them' tended to just give way to 'avoid' them. 'Avoiding unnecessary words' was embraced as a way of squashing ideas and information into very small spaces.

But exhibitions (and indeed other kinds of informational writing) are not forms or documents, and sometimes those extra few words are what bring a text to life, what make it interesting, memorable, personal.

Consider these few examples:

'I was given a book written by a fellow with the odd name of Watkin Tench, a marine officer who came out to Australia with the First Fleet. I fell in love with Tench, as most of his readers do. He is a Boswell on the page: curious, ardent, gleefully self mocking. He didn't fit my image of a stiff-lipped British imperialist at all ...^v

'Hunter's ... [descriptions] are unfailingly marvellous and his written account is alive with images no one else thought to mention ...^{vi}

These few sentences are from Inga Clendinnen's book *Dancing with strangers*, an account of the first years of the British colony of NSW, told largely through the journals of some of the first fleeters and other early arrivals. I was interested because so many people had said how fabulous it was. What stands out in this book is how just a few extra words - unnecessary words - bring these names that we've all heard many, many times before to life. Tench, Collins, Hunter become people rather than names on a page or in a byline. In Glendennin's words, 'they remind us that the past was real'; we can almost imagine that we know them, that we were there.^{vii} This is surely one of the key qualities that an effective text arouses, an informational text as much as drama or novel, a text about art or science as much as history: empathy.

In these examples, pulled from draft exhibition labels, just one extra word makes a huge difference:

... Frederick McCoy published his first scientific paper at the age of 18

... the peppery Frederick McCoy published his first scientific paper at the age of 18

... clubs were established across Australia

... clubs were enthusiastically established across Australia

For most people, even a glimmer of the person, or the mood, behind a 'fact' or 'action' helps make it interesting and relevant. Personalising the 'players' as real people rather than one-dimensional agents helps create empathy, meaning and understanding. And it makes the information memorable.

Another trend which I think in part has become more common as a result of the Plain English principle of 'avoiding the unnecessary' is use of footnotes. In our enthusiasm for getting rid of what are seen as the 'trappings' of writing intended for specialist or peer audiences - jargon, archaic words, 'the unnecessary' - footnotes got caught up in the net. They were seen as something unnecessary for a general audience. Yet in many ways they are doubly important. Not only should they fulfil their basic function of citing the source of information or argument, but they also provide a means of 'layering' information by allowing authors to add detail that may only be of interest to certain parts of the audience. And they leave a trail of discreet, subliminal messages through a text that say, even to readers who never look them up, that 'this point has come from somewhere', 'there is something more to be said about this' etc. Footnotes should be present, of course, in books and education kits but equally on websites, in ephemeral publications such as exhibition brochures and labels, and even in many children's books where they can be used with

tremendous imagination and fun but still help introduce or model to kids 'the script' of scholarship.

Sentences: keep them short

Embedded in this principle is the idea that short sentences are easier to understand than longer ones, but this is not always the case.

Sometimes very long sentences are quite easy to understand:

After Sally came home from school she put her bag by the stairs and went into the kitchen so she could make herself some afternoon tea of a glass of chocolate milk with extra drinking chocolate sprinkled on top (a bit like a cappuccino) and a toasted sandwich with ham, tomato and cheese and a little bit of fresh basil too.

Some short sentences are very hard to understand:

The girl the teacher the headmaster sacked failed cried.^{viii}

Reformulation and transcoding are complex operations inherent in the formal specificity of the exhibition.

But also when we look beyond the sentence as an isolated unit and see it as part of a text, we see that a whole lot of the one kind of sentence is very, very boring - lots of long ones but equally lots of short ones too.

In this example, it's the very length of the first sentence that gives the second sentence its power, its drama. It makes the point. In a text, this kind of variation creates rhythm, interest, suspense, drama - qualities that *keep* you reading and, again, are also fundamental in helping readers understand a text.

At the International and Australian Championship Carnival at Torquay Beach in 1956, local boardmaker Vic Tantau watched the visiting US and Hawaiian teams surf on short balsawood 'Okanui' surfboards, also known as malibus. Vic was 'blown away'.^{ix}

Another important quality that is lost when a lot of sentences are kept short, and / or grammatically relatively simple, is the ability to prioritise information.

Look at these two versions of a label text about *The little red school book*:

This small red book was published in English in 1971. The book ruptured the quiet conservatism of Australian schoolyards and caused a furore that went all the way to Cabinet. It was written by two Danish school teachers as a practical handbook for teenagers and gave frank advice about drugs and sex. It resembled two other small red books (*Selected Quotations of Chairman Mao* and *The Constitution of the Australian Communist Party*). This made it a target for those who were determined to contain what they saw as the growing trend of rebellion and permissiveness.^x

Published in English in 1971, **this small red book ruptured the quiet conservatism of Australian schoolyards, causing a furore that went all the way to Cabinet.** Written by two Danish school teachers as a practical handbook for teenagers, **the book gave frank advice about drugs and sex.** With more than a passing resemblance to those other small red books (*Selected quotations of Chairman Mao* and *The constitution of the Australian Communist Party*), **it became a target for**

those who were determined to contain what they saw as the growing trend of rebellion and permissiveness.

In this first version, the editor has decided that the sentences are too long and should be simplified by breaking up the sentences or converting the subordinate clauses to 'more simple' co-ordinate ones. But this, of course, gives equal weight to all the ideas. In this second version, the subordinate clauses serve to background some of the information so there's a sense of 'building' to a more important idea. They also allow a sense of pace and rhythm to develop that carries the reader along.

In some ways, I think the Plain English movement has put such focus on the 'the sentence' as a unit of meaning that the dynamic between sentences and larger structures meaning such as paragraphs, and indeed the message itself, have been overlooked. Many writers and editors too seem to have lost the confidence to use or 'permit' longer and seemingly complex sentences.

Voice: keep it active

If there is one message from the Plain English movement that has become its clarion call, its defining feature it is: 'Keep your sentences active'. It's a belief that has such currency that many writers are now afraid to use the passive voice. Yet the concept, even among editors I think, is often misunderstood.

Why do we think active sentence are easier to understand?

Active sentences (The dog bit Michael / Katie ate the apple / Boulton and Watt built the steam engine) are shorter. They are massively more familiar (generally 90% of sentences are active) and morphologically more simple (ie, they contain fewer units of meaning). They also follow the action more congruently, maintaining, what linguists would call, the iconic organisation of the experiential (subject → verb → object / agent → process → goal).

In contrast, passives sentences (Michael was bitten by the dog / The apple was eaten by Katie / The steam engine was built by Boulton and Watt) are longer, less familiar (only 10 % frequency), morphologically more complex and don't maintain the iconic organisation of the experiential. But this does not necessarily mean that they are more difficult to understand. Context plays a critical role.

When you look at language as a message, different kinds of meanings (realised in structures) are mapped onto one another to produce a single wording. So while at the grammatical level active sentences are simpler, at the semantic level, this becomes secondary to the thematic structure. The thematic structure is what gives a sentence its meaning as a message; it acts to organise the message as a communicative event - it tells you what the sentence is about. Beyond that it becomes critical in linking sentences and ideas together as paragraphs and texts.

In English, the theme is indicated by its position at the *beginning* of the sentence (or principal clause) - no other signal is necessary. While the information contained in the active and passive form of a sentence is in many ways the same, as messages, they can be different. There is a very real difference between: 'The steam engines made by James Watt and Matthew Boulton brought a new kind of power to the world' and 'James Watt and Matthew Boulton made steam engines that brought a new kind of power to the world' - the first is a message about steam engines, the second is a message about Boulton and Watt.

As an editor working mostly with exhibition texts, for me this has been an issue of particular interest because our texts are often about *things* – objects in the collection or in a display. At times, the pursuit of the active voice has created some very confused texts, and at times completely distorted the message:

Consider:

The 'two-cornered' basket is unique to the rainforest region inland from Cairns in Queensland. Both men and women made these distinctively shaped baskets for carrying food and personal belongings. They also traded them northwards in exchange for bark blankets. The shape of the base made these ideal traps or sieves when secured in streams.

The distinctive form of the 'two-cornered' basket is unique to the rainforest region inland from Cairns in Queensland. Used by both men and women for carrying food and personal belongings, these baskets were traded northwards and exchanged for bark blankets. The shape of their base also made them ideal fish traps or sieves when secured in streams.

In the first example, the author has tried desperately to use the active voice, but in doing the sentence themes flip from the basket to the people who made and used them. In the second version, the basket remains the theme of each sentence and gives the paragraph a clear thematic focus.

Conclusion

To return again to Prof Eagleson and his original ideals for the Plain English movement:

'What we need to do then is to break away from false attitudes to language. In particular we must not let current inept practices and ancient custom be our yardsticks. Nor must we let the love of inflated style among others tempt us away from that clarity of expression which will help our real audience.'^{xi}

Clarity is an absolutely important and fundamental goal. And on a form or a lease it might be enough. But in many other kinds of informational texts we need more. In the words of that fabulous new breed of professional, the stylist, our writing needs colour, texture, movement, rhythm. If we want our readers to engage, not just to comprehend, we need texts that have all these elements: colour, movement *and* texture; texts that encourage empathy; texts that have a sense of narrative.

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- ⁱ Eagleson 1983, p1
 - ⁱⁱ Eagleson 1983, p1
 - ⁱⁱⁱ *Art is easy*, 8th Biennale of Sydney, 1990
 - ^{iv} Eagleson 1983, p1
 - ^v Clendinnen 2003, p2
 - ^{vi} Clendinnen 2003, p 40
 - ^{vii} Clendinnen 2003, p 287
 - ^{viii} Eagleson 1983, p 9
 - ^{ix} From *Watermarks* exhibition, National Maritime Museum, Sydney, 2001
 - ^x From *Memory of a nation* exhibition, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 2007
 - ^{xi} Eagleson 1983, p 23