

BOOK WORM

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

August 2004

From the Chair

It is well known that Sir Ernest Gowers, a senior British civil servant and author of those influential works on English usage, *Plain Words* (1948) and *The ABC of Plain Words* (1951), attempted to maintain standards of clear English, especially in official prose.

In a subsequent work, *The Complete Plain Words* (1954), a British-government-issued book that is still the Bible of the Civil Service, Gowers explains that its purpose:

... is to help officials in their use of written English as a tool of their trade.

However, Sir Ernest is quick to add his lament that:

I suspect that this project may be received by many of them [officials] without any marked enthusiasm or gratitude ... they may say ... 'Not one in a thousand of the people we write to knows the difference between good English and bad. What is the use of all this highbrow stuff? It will only prevent us from getting on with the job.'

Nevertheless, his crusade for plain writing is not lost altogether. A contemporary handbook for PhD/MPhil research from the Department of Chemistry at the University of Hull, England gives this advice to students:

... unless particularly gifted in writing good English, the student should study one of the many books that are now available on the subject. Sir Ernest Gowers' 'Plain words' is an excellent example. There is more in this than making the thesis a pleasure for examiners to read. Woolly writing is frequently a reflection of woolly thinking and a student who has been trained to write clearly will soon discover that a problem of expression often arises from a lack of understanding, whereas a student who writes poor English can write rubbish without even realising it.

The debate continues. The theme of the Style Council, held in Sydney in July and reported elsewhere in this issue of Book Worm, was based on Don Watson's book, *Death Sentence: The decay of public language*, which presents a timely reminder to writers and editors that public language is the language of public life—the language of political and business leaders and civil servants.

Watson asserts that the public realm has been in decline since governments retreated from the economy and private companies moved in to take their place. As the private sector has replaced the public, it has found itself obliged to pick up functions and responsibilities that had belonged to governments; and although it picks them up in

different ways and uses different terms, there is still an alignment with the old bureaucratic structures.

Watson refers to Gowers' *Plain Words* and Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926) as having been necessary, along with centuries of satire, to decode pompous bureaucratic forms. Generally there was a meaning to be reached, something to be saved. There was still room in this official language for the occasional elegant exception. In today's corporate world that would not happen, as all knowledge is work-related. Countless meetings, seminars and conferences are now conducted and reported in the mind-maiming language of managerialism, a language which is now finding its way into schools, banks and even into reports from areas of sport such as football and cricket.

Plain English, the sane alternative, need not be colourless. Consider this passage drawn from the first chapter of Gowers' *The Complete Plain Words* (1954) in which he turns to Shakespeare to illustrate the importance of the choice of words to describe what the rising sun does to meadows and rivers on a 'glorious morning':

Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchymy

Now that does not sound like bureaucrat-speak, does it?

Betty Durston

SOEWA President

Editorial

We have a much smaller version of the newsletter this month—mainly due to there being no members' meeting in July. I am looking forward to learning about the ubiquitous 'pdf' technology and why it sometimes doesn't do what I want it to do (see meeting details below)! I hope to see many of you there.

Tanya Marwood

Forthcoming Meetings

AUGUST MEETING

SOEWA's August meeting will provide a chance to learn about 'pdf' technology—a versatile proofing and viewing tool, which is used widely in electronic communication.

When: Tuesday 3 August, 6.30pm for drinks, nibbles and a 'chat with the expert(s)', then a seminar with questions and answers begins at 7pm.

Where: Desktop Applications, 268 Lord St, East Perth.

Cost: \$2 SOEWA members, \$5 guests.

September's meeting will be the annual joint function with Women in Publishing, on the topic of 'professional mentoring' in the publishing industry. Details of format, time and venue will be explained in the next edition of Book Worm.

Technical Editing

Ian Nowak

I was very interested in Betty's musings 'From the Chair' in July's Book Worm. As some of you know, I have earned my pittance for many years as a technical editor—mainly in geology and associated sciences. I have just finished the biggest job (in terms of number of words) that I have ever been given. It consisted of editing 50 conference papers in geomechanical engineering for a research group associated with UWA. About 100 hours of work, and could I please finish the job in three weeks? OK—what were their ground rules? They wanted to ensure consistency of units, case, spacings, tables, headings, all citations to be referenced (vice versa not important) and, above all, absolute clarity of meaning to be conveyed to the reader. And what was I to do about grammar? Oh, you know, fix the feral stuff but let's not get carried away—could be here all year! I'm perfectly happy with that—it's entirely different from the 'quick edit', the dangers of which I wrote about in Book Worm last year. The rules were clear, and my only demand has been that my name shall not appear as 'editor' in the final product! When I received those 50 papers, some 10 were written very well, 25 fell within the meaning of the act, and the rest were execrable—but I've bodgied those up into the second category. Of course, I shan't be able to tell my hyper-exacting, bread-and-butter employer, the Geological Survey of WA, that I took on this job. ("Engineers? What do you mean, 'been editing for engineers'? You must be insane!")

But the engineers will have ended up with a book that's very readable, clear of meaning (I nearly exhausted my life-stock of commas achieving this), and which will rapidly disseminate accurate details of an exciting new field to a large audience. There will be a few dangling participles, a mongrel mix of 'due to' v. 'owing to' v. 'because of', perhaps even (gasp!) one or two sentences starting with 'Hopefully,'—but there will never, ever, for me, be a moment's compromise on the punctuation of 'however'. I do have my principles.

This last notwithstanding, I would sum up my attitude as one of flexibility—whether to a fault (do I hear the word ‘prostitution’ murmured?), is for others to decide.

SOEWA members ‘consult’ online

Jan Knight

Editor’s note: Member Jan Knight posted an interesting question on-line recently and elicited the following very useful responses from members.

She writes, in addition: “Hey guys, why not reply to ALL members at once? This kind of coaching/mentoring/informal training is one of the solid benefits of being a Society member.”

Jan’s initial question:

From: jan_edit@omen.com.au

Date: Tues, 12 Jul 2004

Dear SoE members

I am editing a procedures manual that uses the phrase "Department Manager or 2IC" several times. I don't feel comfortable with "2IC" although it must be the common term used within the organisation. Nor does "Second-in-command" read any better to me. Perhaps the actual position title should be used ... I'll have to find out if it is "Acting Department Manager" or ??

Any comments?

JAN

From: "scribewyse" <scribewyse@ozemail.com.au>

Date: Tue, 13 Jul 2004 17:03:28 +1000

Hi Jan, how are you?

My instinct would be that the next in the chain of command would usually be the Assistant Manager, such-and-such Department - and if so I'd be using the actual title in first formal reference, perhaps followed by "and his/her deputy" in subsequent references?

Or, do you mean the Department Manager is the 2IC?

Ciao Adrienne Jones

From: Vida Corbett <vcorbett@bigpond.com>

Date: Tue, 13 Jul 2004 15:11:11 +0800

Hi Jan

My preference would be to use the actual, 'official' title of the position. That is what I generally encourage management to use in corporate documentation. However, if it is an internal document and the term '2IC' is frequently used (and understood) within the department then I don't have any real problems with using it.

Cheers, Vida

From: "Barbara Thomas" <barbara@clarityedit.com.au>

Date: Tue, 13 Jul 2004 16:44:39 +0800

Hi Jan,

I've used the term 'delegate' in this context in a procedures manual. I wasn't thrilled with it but it seemed to do the job without adding a lot of extra words and ugly initial caps.

Just a thought. Cheers, Barb

Barbara Thomas

Clarity edit

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From: "Roger and Alison Angel" <angel@tnet.com.au>

Date: Tue, 13 Jul 2004 18:30:50 +0800

Hi Jan,

I'm a new member of SoE. I would suggest Deputy Department Manager, rather than Acting Deputy Manager because that person would be deputising for the Department Manager, i.e. temporarily taking on their responsibilities. To me, an Acting Manager is someone who is filling in a little more permanently than temporarily, e.g. to cover if the Manager's position is vacant temporarily because the Manager has left and a new one has not yet been appointed, or away for a month on leave. I hope this makes sense. I agree that Second-in-Command seems clumsy.

Hope this helps. Regards, Alison Angel

angel@tnet.com.au

From: James Hansen <jehansen@starwon.com.au>

Date: Tue, 13 Jul 2004 21:02:05 +0800

Dear Jan,

2IC is a colloquialism. I'd find out the proper title and call the position that. After all, this is a procedures manual that should emphasise accuracy and correctness. It could have some legal status in a future "negligence" case - it would not look too good for this kind of easygoing expression to be official. Perhaps they're easygoing on safety, too?

Regards, James

From: Alex George <ageorge@central.murdoch.edu.au>

Date: Tue, 13 Jul 2004 21:27:23 +0800

Dear Jan

When I worked in the Dept of Agriculture many years ago, 2IC was a very common term but I hear it much less these days. Maybe it's because I don't mix much with public servants or managers now.

It didn't necessarily refer to a position with a formal title, just the person immediately below the head of the organisation or unit (division, branch etc.).

Cheers, Alex

Deadline for September 2004 *Book Worm* issue: Tuesday 24 Aug 2004.

All submissions gratefully accepted.

Further 2004 *Book Worm* deadlines

Issue	Deadline
October 2004	Tue 21 September
November 2004	Tue 19 October
December 2004–January 2005	Tue 23 November

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