



Some police 'barely literate', lawyers allege

Some lawyers speak in 'contemptuous terms' of the quality of police evidence, says Tom Winsor, a lawyer commissioned by the home secretary to review police recruitment. He told the Police Superintendents Conference that some officers are 'barely literate' because the educational standards required to join the service are so low:

We looked at the basic questions, one of which is, 'You find a purse in the street, it contains a £5 note, four 20p pieces and five two pence pieces, how much is in the purse?' That's the standard. [The test is multiple choice, we should add. And did you clock that triple run-on sentence?] We've looked at the educational standards for the police from 1930 and 1946 and I can tell you they are very very significantly harder.

Winsor suggested that the public could be at risk if poor academic skills detracted from the effectiveness of evidence. He claimed that checking and rewriting poor-quality paperwork is increasing the cost and bureaucracy of policing, asserting it is unfair to expect overworked prosecutors to correct documents.

Pikestaff has been digging to find out more. The Police Initial Recruitment Test (PIRT) comprises 4 separately timed sub-tests, each designed to measure a different ability:

1. To spell words and construct sentences correctly.
2. To check information quickly and correctly.
3. To solve numerical problems accurately.
4. To reason logically when given facts about events.

Here are examples of questions from the non-numerical sub-tests (tests 1, 2 and 4 above):

Test 1

One hundred officers _____ allocated for _____ control.

- A – was/croud
- B – was/crowd
- C – were/croud
- D – were/crowd
- E – none of these

Test 2

Look at the two lists below and check to see whether the information in List 1 has been correctly transferred to List 2. If there is a mistake in column A, mark circle A on your answer sheet. If there is a mistake in column B, mark circle B on your answer sheet. If there is a mistake in column C, mark circle C on your answer sheet. If there is a mistake in column D, mark circle D on your answer sheet. If there are no errors in that line, mark circle E on your answer sheet. Note that there may be more than one error in a line.

A Date	B Name	C Time	D Reference number
12.1	Williams	13.30	2613
3.8	Chan	07.29	5971

A Date	B Name	C Time	D Reference number
Jan 12	WILLIAMS	15.30	3612
March 8	CHAN	09.27	579

Test 4

Some time on the night of October 1, 1999, the Copacabana Club was burnt to the ground. The police are treating the fire as suspicious. The only facts known at this stage are:

- The club was insured for more than its real value
- The club belonged to John Hodges
- Between October 1, 1999 and October 2, 1999, Les Braithwaite was away from home on a business trip
- There were no fatalities
- A plan of the club was found in Les Braithwaite's flat

1. A member of John Hodges family died in the blaze

A – true

B – false

C – impossible to say

2. If the insurance company pays out in full, John Hodges stands to profit from the fire

A – true

B – false

C – impossible to say

We like to keep an open mind (innocent until proven guilty, and all that), but if these questions are representative of the test as a whole, it's not terribly encouraging, is it?

[Sources: BBC News, 13 September 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14898745>; *Daily Mail*, 14 September 2011: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2037027/Some-police-officers-barely-literate-educational-standards-low.html#ixzz1YUMijW8M>; *The Independent*, 14 September 2011: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/new-police-recruits-are-barely-literate-2354413.html>; and <http://www.policemales.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=16737>]

Linguistic link: Pikestaff on Facebook

Pikestaff now has its own page on Facebook, thanks to our colleague James Fisher of Português Claro, who has kindly set this up for us and is posting regular features there. So visit <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pikestaff/147154458699746?sk=wall> and have a look for yourself. What's not to 'like'?

A reader writes

A *Pikestaff* reader has asked us to explain the origin and meaning of the phrases 'spoke in the wheel' and 'silver lining'. Here's what we found:

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'put a spoke in someone's wheel' as 'prevent someone from carrying out a plan'. This expression has apparently been around for many years. Although it doesn't sound logical (since bike wheels, for example, are full of spokes), the wheel referred to is apparently the ancient wheel (made of solid wood), which didn't have any spokes. These wheels contained a hole, and if

someone wanted to stop the wheel from moving, they inserted a spoke into the hole. The spoke or pin acted as a brake.

Phrases.org.uk reports the following on the saying 'every cloud has a silver lining':

Meaning

Every bad situation has some good aspect to it. This proverb is usually said as an encouragement to a person who is overcome by some difficulty and is unable to see any positive way forward.

Origin

John Milton coined the phrase 'silver lining' in *Comus: A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, 1634. 'Clouds' and 'silver linings' were referred to often in literature from then onward, usually citing Milton and frequently referring to them as Milton's clouds. It isn't until the days of the uplifting language of Victoria's England that we begin to hear the proverbial form that we are now familiar with – 'every cloud has a silver lining'.

Clear Writing throughout Europe

Conference proceedings

We reported in *Pikestaff 44* that Martin Cutts had spoken at this conference in Brussels. Organized by the European Commission in Brussels in November 2010, the event gave the floor to experts from member states, all 'pioneers of plain language'. The idea was to enable participants to share experience in tackling the issues from different angles.

The conference proceedings have now been published, and are available free of charge (in hard copy only) from <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/clear-writing-throughout-europe-pbHC3111150/>.

Parliamentary question

The following question was recently put to the European Parliament, for written answer:

Members of the European Parliament have noted the Commission's efforts to hold a Clear Writing campaign for its officials.

Last year on 15 March 2010, Vice-President Diana Wallis, MEP, spoke alongside Commissioner [for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth] Androulla Vassiliou at a conference to launch the campaign.

One year later, at a conference to celebrate the first year of the campaign, Commissioner Vassiliou reiterated her support and called for a sustainable effort to promote clear writing in the Commission.

What specific action is the Commission planning to this end?

Vassiliou gave the following answer on behalf of the EC:

The Commission would like to reiterate its full commitment to the cause of clear writing in all the Commission's external and internal written communication.

In fact, the Clear Writing campaign has been in progress in the Commission since March 2010. Since then an important amount of campaigning work has gone on, ranging from a dedicated website and the 'How to write clearly' booklet (in 23 languages), through numerous talks and an online tutorial, to a helpline for drafters in distress and the Clear Writing Awards.

An inter-service Clear Writing Task Force was set up to run the campaign. In November 2010, the Task Force submitted its report 'Clarity in the Commission', containing 10 recommendations along with 30 actions for improving the quality of drafting in the Commission and making clear writing an integral and lasting part of the Commission's practices.

At present, the report is subject to internal consultation, and the proposed action points are open for discussion on an internal Commission website. The Clear Writing Task Force will be meeting again in September 2011 to assess and discuss the results of this consultation process and to prioritise actions on the basis of their feasibility and ease of implementation. Details of the planned action will be made available as soon as it is finalised.

While all this reflection is going on, the Clear Writing team in the Directorate-General (DG) for Translation will be keeping up the campaign by making drafting advice and tools available Commission-wide, by publishing a regular newsletter on clear writing activities and by completing a pilot project on the quality of Commission press releases and by organising the 2011 Clear Writing Awards. Besides all this the Clear Writing team offers editing services to all Commission DGs.

Au revoir to European star

On the topic of clear writing throughout Europe, we wish Emma Wagner, who leaves the European Commission at the end of September, a long and happy retirement. Emma has laboured long at the Commission in Luxembourg as translator, reviser and manager. She helped manage the integration of new Finnish and Swedish translators in 1995, and coordinated the 'Fight the Fog' campaign launched in 1998 to encourage Commission staff to write more clearly.



Emma also worked for the Institute of Translation and Interpreting, and is co-author of 3 books. They include *Clarifying EC Regulations*, which shows how a typical regulation could be written in plainer language. It's available on free download at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=18>.

Emma, a true star on the flag of Europe, won't just be lazing about in the continental sunshine during retirement. She and husband Hans are renovating a house overlooking the Aegean.

International Plain Language Day

International Plain Language Day (IPLD) takes place on 13 October. There's a Facebook page for this at <https://www.facebook.com/internationalplainlanguageday>, where you can read about the various grass-roots activities planned. Cheryl Stephens, a Canada-based expert in plain legal language, said:

The movement for plain language is really growing. For example, LinkedIn's Plain Language Advocates Group I host is nearing 800 international members. From October 13, U.S. government materials written for the public must be in plain language. We've chosen this date to celebrate hard-won achievements in many countries who are making materials understandable and usable.

Kate Harrison Whiteside, a social media and plain language consultant, added:

Cheryl Stephens and I started the international plain language network and conferencing in the early 90s using only email and web pages. For IPLD we are

using all the social technology available to get world-wide support for this important day.

On 13 October, people and organizations will be hosting events online, in offices and on the streets to mark their support for putting readers first in communication by using plain language.

Victory for better legibility

Text should not only be easy to understand but easy to see; presenting important information illegibly is blatantly unethical.

Martin Cutts has just won an 18-month battle against Excel Parking Services, a Sheffield-based company that slapped a £60 charge notice on his car windscreen after he parked in Stockport without displaying a ticket in March 2010. (The fee rose to £100 if unpaid after 7 days.) Excel sued him for breach of contract when he refused to pay; the company claimed that motorists who use the Peel Centre car park automatically accept its terms and conditions.



Martin argued that Excel had failed to make reasonable efforts to alert him to the supposed contract and its terms. He said the text on the entrance-board notice was illegible to the typical motorist:

The relevant parts of the notice [see picture] were the words 'Pay and display', which was in lettering only 13mm high and surrounded by lots of visual clutter. There was also a mish-mash of terms and conditions and other text, most of which was only 5mm high. From 7 metres away, driving at 10mph, people just don't see or read this stuff. What they see is large text saying 'Welcome to the Peel Centre' and a big 'P' for parking. This gives them the mindset that the car park is free, like so many car parks near big stores. There's no barrier or ticket machine at the entrance.

The judge visited the site twice to see the set-up for herself, and Martin showed photographic evidence of local car parks where the signs are large and clear. The words 'Pay and display' are typically 65mm high at council-run car parks: 5 times bigger than at the Peel Centre. Martin added:

The entrance I used was, I believe, cunningly got up to look like the entrance to a free car park. The fact that 11,498 people had fallen into the same trap in the previous 3 years, according to Excel's own figures, shows how easy it was to make this mistake. So why didn't Excel do something about it, say by painting 'Pay and display' in large lettering on the entrance roadway? Do the maths: $11,498 \times £60 = £689,880$. And if people don't pay up within 7 days: $11,498 \times £100 = £1.15$ million. So there's big money in unclear signs: big money that's being ripped out of the local economy from the pockets of hapless motorists.

Guidance from the Office of Fair Trading about regulation 7 of the Unfair Contract Terms Act (which relates to standard-form consumer contracts like this one) says terms and conditions have to be legible as well as in jargon-free language. Martin argued that this

must mean legible to the typical user, in this case a moving motorist several metres away. Judge Lateef dismissed Excel's claim and refused the company leave to appeal.

Martin plans to write a detailed article on the case soon; we'll let you know when this appears on our website. There will also be work to persuade Excel to refund the tens of thousands of other motorists who've fallen foul of their signs across the country.

[Source: *Manchester Evening News*, 15 September 2011:
http://menmedia.co.uk/manchestereveningnews/news/s/1458879_motorist-wins-18-month-ticket-battle-after-judge-agrees-stockport-parking-signs-were-too-small]

Heroin goes dirty dancing

The Guardian reports that romantic novelist Susan Andersen's hero became altogether filthier after an unfortunate editing error:

I apologise to anyone who bought my on-sale ebook of *Baby, I'm Yours* and read on page 293: 'He stiffened for a moment but then she felt his muscles loosen as he shitted on the ground.' Shifted – he SHIFTED! I just cringe when I think of the readers who have read this.

Had this been an opening sentence, it might have won the Bulwer-Lytton award, a 'whimsical literary competition that challenges entrants to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels'. Run since 1982 by the English Department at San Jose State University, the contest includes categories for different literary genres. Here's the overall winner for 2011:

Cheryl's mind turned like the vanes of a wind-powered turbine, chopping her sparrow-like thoughts into bloody pieces that fell onto a growing pile of forgotten memories. (Sue Fondrie)

As the website (<http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>) notes, at 26 words, this 'is the shortest grand prize winner in Contest history, proving that bad writing need not be prolix, or even very wordy' – and of course that short sentences are not necessarily good sentences. Not that short sentences is something the runner-up – with this 77-word wonder – has to worry about:

As I stood among the ransacked ruin that had been my home, surveying the aftermath of the senseless horrors and atrocities that had been perpetrated on my family and everything I hold dear, I swore to myself that no matter where I had to go, no matter what I had to do or endure, I would find the man who did this ... and when I did, when I did, oh, there would be words. (Rodney Reed)

Here at *Pikestaff*, we're into words, but there's a time and a place for everything...

[Source: *The Guardian*, 12 September 2011:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2011/sep/12/shift-typo-romantic-novel-susan-andersen>]

Back issues

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Rolling the credits

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