

# Sydney Writers' Festival panel paper

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Already today we've heard some excellent examples of diseased English and of how to write in a healthier style. I want to talk about whether we can cure the disease on a larger scale.

Many of you will have read Don Watson's *Death Sentence*, which skewers the worst of our public writing. Watson laments that all we can do to this illness is "mock them, never stop mocking them". I believe we can do more; but to improve the health of our public writing we need to diagnose the causes of the disease.

Diseased writing goes back to the 60s—the 1060s that is. When William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, it changed the future of English forever. He didn't just replace an English sovereign with a French speaker, but replaced the language of an entire ruling class. French became the official language of government, of the church, the military, of the law, society, and the academy. Using English marked you as part of the inferior, uneducated majority.

Numbers eventually told, of course, and English restored its social status. But after nearly three centuries of official French, our institutions did not relinquish the language of privilege lightly. They began to suffuse English with thousands of French words. This greatly extended our vocabulary so that today not quite a quarter of English words come from the French. Yet—and here's the rub—our public language retains about double this proportion, well out of balance with the common tongue.

That's why when you receive a letter from a government department, it sounds like this:

In accordance with your request, and in consideration of the fact that significant time has elapsed, it is incumbent upon you to facilitate the identification of the certificate. It would be appreciated if you would ascertain this information in a timely manner. (42 words)

This uses so many French-derived words we could easily pronounce it in a pythonesque mock-French accent. In English, the words mean:

To meet your request, we need you to find and send us a copy of your certificate as soon as possible. (21 words)

Government organisations think the first version has ‘gravitas’ and ‘authority’. They cling to it even though their mission and vision statements pontificate about providing a public service.

In short, we have democratised our institutions, but we have not yet democratised their language.

Economic self-interest also perpetuates the problem. We’ve all had to put up with long-winded legal writing. Here’s my favourite example:

The provision of section 43 and 48 shall with such modifications as are necessary extend and apply to and in relation to this Division and, without affecting the generality of the foregoing, in particular with the modification that – [a] a reference to eggs or eggs products shall be construed as a reference to citrus fruit. (55 words)

This obviously works for the lawyers that wrote it, and they would defend the language on technical grounds. It’s precise they say. But how much more precise is it to write:

What sections 43 and 48 say about eggs and egg products shall also apply to citrus fruit. (17 words)

Again, the diction of the original dates back to when, if you wanted to appear before a magistrate to resolve a dispute, you had to find a lawyer to write your petition in French. Lawyers quickly understood that this is good for business. Even when forced into English, they forged a dialect no one else could understand—a code for those in the know. That way, not only do we have to pay them for a legal document, but the second party has to employ another lawyer to interpret what the first one wrote.

But probably the most insidious reason people write in diseased English is to avoid scrutiny. Here the prize goes to the politicians. American troops in Iraq apparently did not kill any Iraqis, they “degraded by 70 per cent a body of soldiers”; they “attrited” with smart bombs; they “deconflicted”. These are dead words that deliberately obscure reality to diminish our capacity to judge a thing for ourselves. And the current master of the disease is Donald Rumsfeld. When asked about the weapons of mass destruction, he famously replied:

As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say there are

some things we know we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.

This is logically watertight, but the words are insincere, deliberately diseased. I don't need to dwell on the dangers this poses for a democracy.

The corporate world is also prone to a diseased prose. Royal Commissioner Neville Owen, who ran the inquiry into HIH, observed that vague language played a major role in that corporate collapse. He called for plain English audit reports to be mandatory.

And recent research ought to frighten companies into taking up plain English. It reveals that Australian business may be losing as much as \$2 billion yearly through unclear communication. That's enough for an extra 40,000 jobs. This figure is based on a British survey of 1,000 customers about the letters and promotional material they received from corporations. Almost a third boycott products because of poor writing. The total cost to the English economy is about \$10 billion every year.

Imagine that you email an online music supplier to ask if they stock blank CDs, only to receive this:

We are currently in the process of consolidating our product range to ensure that the products that we stock are indicative of our brand aspirations... As a result of the above certain product lines are now unavailable whilst potentially remaining available from more mainstream suppliers.

In other words: no. Would you bother to shop there ever again?

But of equal importance is the sheer inefficiency of corporate-speak. The examples I've been quoting reduce by at least a third when you re-write them into plain English. This is about the average that many companies can reduce their writing by. Imagine reading one third fewer words at work every day. Multiply this by the millions of readers in Australian workplaces. The time saved can't help but boost the nation's productivity. This might be the only area where the writers and the economic rationalists can agree!

Diagnosing the history, the causes, and the costs of diseased English is vital because it points us in the right direction for the cure. You wouldn't try to mend a broken leg by putting your arm in a sling. There's no point tackling this disease without giving all our institutions a dose of linguistic chemotherapy. Here are five ways we can start the drip.

Firstly, we need to set some basic standards so our professionals understand what an effective writing style means. Here are my all-time top ten guidelines:

1. Be aware of your readers and always put their needs first
2. Focus on your core message and be ruthless on unnecessary detail
3. Use top-heavy document structures that give all your key information up front
4. Use layout and design for impact
5. Hear the tone of your words and make them speakable
6. Use the simplest word for each concept and do not overdress your language
7. Be ruthless on clutter
8. Write in the active voice
9. Place each idea into a sentence of its own
10. Get your punctuation right.

Of course, you can write well and not follow every one of these guidelines, but most effective writers—creative or professional—tend to do so. Only diseased English fails at every one.

With some basic principles under our belt, we then need to take them into our institutions. Writer by writer, division by division, we need to give them the tools to reduce the costs. Each organisation should back this up with changes to standard document templates and style guides. Re-introducing grammar and rhetoric back into our secondary schools wouldn't hurt either.

As we work our way through enough organisations individually, it's then time to tackle each profession as a whole. Get the Institutes of Architects, the Associations of Accountants and even, god forbid, the Societies of Lawyers to take it on systematically.

But if this is to succeed, the public needs to play its part. We must pressure our institutions, firstly by boycotting the worst writers, and letting them know we are doing so. Then, perhaps, we can also start to mock them. The Plain English Foundation will hold Australia's first-ever plain English Awards next year, and we are looking for entries. Send that diseased writing in, and we will give it the attention it deserves.

Lastly, we need to do far more research about the dangers of diseased English. Instead of perpetuating poor writing practice, our universities in particular ought to support research and reform.

I've been working in this area now for over three years, and I've seen plain English work in more than a dozen organisations with over 1300 people. I believe it's time we spread the cure further, for the health of us all.