



BACK TO LIFE: RESUSCITATING PUBLIC LANGUAGE

Keynote address by Dr Neil James

Thank you Pam for your welcome. I'm both honoured and delighted to deliver the keynote speech for this conference.

But since we are here this weekend to discuss public and professional discourse, perhaps I should start again, and rephrase my opening remarks in the language of officialese:

In relation to the welcoming statement made by Associate Professor Peters, in terms of the commencement of the proceedings, it is incumbent upon the speaker to note the not inconsiderable significance of the honour bestowed, and moreover the acceptance of its desirability with regard to the opening interlocution.

Those of you that are still awake may well recognise this style. It permeates the speech of our politicians and the policies of public servants; it lives in the language of lawyers and large corporations; and it infects in the jargons of accountants and academics alike. It is part of the official language of public exchange. We use not in the privacy of the home, but when we communicate with, or through, an institution.

And this language has been in the news of late. Public language is dead and decaying, according to Don Watson, and the tens of thousands who have bought his book *Death Sentence* clearly show that they care. Nor is his success a one-off event. Who would have predicted a year ago that Watson's rant about public language would be joined *simultaneously* in the top ten non-fiction bestsellers by a guide to punctuation, the history of a dictionary, and a biography of English? Yet the sales of Lyn Truss' *Eats Shoots and Leaves*, Simon Winchester's *The Meaning of Everything*, and Melvyn Bragg's *The Adventure of English* continue apace.

The undercurrent of this interest seems to be that we have let our language slip, that the standard of public speech and writing has deteriorated while we have been concentrating on other things—like the economy perhaps. But is this really the case, and what, if anything, can we actually do about it?

1. Understanding the disease

The English language as a whole is far from dead. It continues to grow and adapt in dynamic ways. But some modes of public discourse are certainly not well. They use an outdated, inefficient officialese that is imprecise even to the point of being impenetrable.

Of course it is dangerous to lump all public discourse into one category, but I've just spent four years helping professionals to dismantle officialese in their writing, and I believe it is possible to isolate some common elements.

Firstly, there is the diction. English has one of the most diverse vocabularies of any language in the world. For any given concept we can choose from as many as a dozen or more words, some directly synonymous, others with more subtle shades of meaning. Yet the first rule of officialese seems to be to choose the longest, most Latinate word. We never 'start' or 'finish' things, or even 'begin' and 'end' them. We write of their 'commencement' and 'termination'. We 'endeavour' instead of 'try', 'utilise' instead of 'use', 'facilitate assistance' instead of 'help'.

Of course, individual words make little difference until you build them into full phrases and sentences. We don't 'think', but 'are of the view that'; we speak of replying 'in the immediate future' instead of 'soon'; about 'transferring payment in the amount of \$150' instead of 'paying \$150'. By the time you get to whole paragraphs they sound something like this letter I received from my local council:

In terms of reaching its decision Council took into consideration the matters in your submission and as the proposal complied with the objectives of Council's policies and conformed to the relevant statutory requirements, Council was of the opinion that the application should be approved. (44 words)

By simplifying the vocabulary, you can express the same text as:

Council considered your submission, but decided to approve the application because it complies with Council policy and meets legal requirements. (20 words)

The first version demands greater skills of comprehensive, higher concentration and patience, not to mention more paper and ink. It seems most intent on sounding authoritative, of conveying 'gravitas'.

The universities are also particularly prone to Latinate, jargonistic prose. Here's my current favourite from the field of cultural studies:

Whether you discuss this open/closed in terms of the semiotic coding of the self and other, some kind of introjected and extrojected cultural imago, or the cross-projection of Lacanian veils on a cultural plane—each of which generates different kinds of problematics and solutions—it nevertheless remains a cross-cultural rule of thumb that “out” is not “in” because “in” is the inverse of “out”.

The content behind this passage is reasonably simple: when you migrate from one country to another, you will never feel entirely at home in the new culture—‘out’ rather than ‘in’. Getting this message from the words on the page is another matter altogether. Even a reader familiar with ‘cultural imagos’ and ‘Lacanian veils’ would have to work at it. Its unstated purpose seems to be to project authority and complexity, whatever the cost to actual communication.

Thirdly, there is the underlying grammar. Officialese must use as many abstract nouns as possible, and where a verb is unavoidable, the chances are it will be in the passive voice. This de-humanises the prose, but also makes it harder to call anyone to account. Why write clearly that ‘I think you can fund this project from your existing budget’, when you could take everyone out of the picture by saying ‘It is suggested that consideration be given to the implementation of the project out of existing budgetary resources’. Here's a sample from the world of finance. Anyone who has read a ‘management letter’ from an auditor may have read something like this:

It is important that bank reconciliations are performed regularly so that errors or misstatements are detected and can be addressed as soon as possible. Where bank reconciliations have not been performed in a timely manner significant organisational time is used investigating reconciling items. (43 words)

I'm sure it makes the auditors feel important, but why could they not write:

The accounts officer should reconcile bank statements regularly to detect errors and avoid wasting time investigating mistakes. (17 words)

Not only is this significantly clearer, but it specifies with certainty who should be responsible for the reconciling—the accounts officer. When you efface the real subject, then nominalise the verb as an abstract noun, how can we then call them to account? This is why Commissioner Neville Owen, who investigated the collapse of HIH, called for plain English audit reports to be mandatory.

The next common element of officialese is sentence length. Here, the prize certainly goes to the lawyers. Here is a sentence from the standard contract issued to all NSW government agencies for them to use when they engage a consultant.

The Consultant will ensure that the Specified Personnel undertake work in respect of the Services in accordance with the terms of this Agreement and will not be hindered

or prevented in any way in the performance of their duties in carrying out the Services including but not limited to being removed from the performance of the Services or being requested to perform services which in any way interfere with the due performance of the Services by the Specified Personnel. (79 words)

Before committing myself to a final edit of this one, I ran it past Peter Butt, Professor of Law at the University of Sydney. Here's what he suggested the thing means:

The Consultant will ensure that the Specified Personnel deliver the Services without hindrance. (13 words)

But if formal diction, redundancy, jargon, verb use and sentence length are not enough, the way officialese documents are structured is almost guaranteed make them unclear. The dominant form is narrative, ordering all information by chronology. A document might start by defining the topic, but will then cast back through its entire history before coming to any kind of point. In government agencies, for example, the standard briefing note format for Ministers follows a series of set headings: Issue, defining the problem; Background, going into its history at length; Current Position, bringing the story into the present; Advice, outlining anyone the author has consulted; Comment, where we might finally get some analysis, and Recommendation, where the Minister is asked to approve a particular course of action.

The effect is to concentrate most of the key information towards the end , but spread enough of it throughout the narrative so that Ministers spend their time turning back and forth trying to sift out what they need. Suggesting that agencies replace this structure with a top heavy triangle, which concentrates all the core information at the start, before then moving to the details, is at first like suggesting they walk to the moon during lunch hour. Yet once they make the change, they are increasingly amazed at how it improves both the efficiency and the quality of the writing.

Government organisations are not alone in using narrative structures. Take a good look at the last letter you received from your bank. My favourite example was one I received a couple of years ago. Great news, it trumpeted, we've simplified your accounts! I wasn't aware that my accounts were overly complex, particularly as I only had one of them at the time, but the letter went into great detail about what the bank was doing to make my finances simpler. Then came the sting, and the actual point of the letter. Buried half way down the second page of a two page letter was the 'regrettable' detail about increasing my fees so that they could bring about these massive improvements in efficiency that I didn't need and hadn't asked for. The structure was carefully calculated to downplay the real content. The bank met its legal obligations while avoiding honest communication.

Sometimes narrative structures bury the core message even when there is not this kind of agenda. Here is an example that I couldn't help but note while standing at a urinal:

Flick Washroom Services

This system is maintained by using the latest in sanitising treatment methods. This affirms that you, the user, can at all times have the peace of mind that a high standard of hygiene is being met. To help us better maintain this facility for your use and that of others.

Please flush after use.

I wish I could say that these are extreme examples, that I had to search far and wide for them. But this kind of overdressed, inefficient writing is so rife throughout the public language of our institutions that individuals feel they have to use it to play the game. It's time we all realised that the Emperor, far from having no clothes, is heavily dressed in highly ornate gowns. We should care about this because we are all paying for the wardrobe.

In fact there is increasing evidence about just how expensive this public language is. The Royal Mail in Britain found that by rewriting a standard form into plain English, it saved not thousands, but millions of pounds in staff time. More recently, it surveyed customers about the writing they receive from businesses, and found that nearly a third had stopped buying products because they received poor writing. The study estimated the total cost to the economy at over \$10 billion. Unfortunately, there are no comparable figures available for Australia, but if we adjust the Royal Mail results to the size of our economy, Australian businesses would be losing more than \$2 billion yearly. That's enough for another 40,000 full-time jobs.

What is it about corporate writing that makes us so mad? Imagine that you email an online music supplier and ask them if they stock blank CDs, only to receive this reply:

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 again?

Companies believe that an overly elaborate style softens the blow when they have to say no. Instead, they only infuriate their customers further. The most interesting result from the Royal Mail research is that consumers ranked good communication as the most important factor in building a long term relationship with a business, even ahead of value for money and competitive pricing.

But perhaps of equal importance is the inefficiency of corporate-speak. We can render all the examples I have quoted so far down by at least a third, and often by more than one half. Think about the documents in your own organisation. Imagine reading one third fewer words every time. Then add up the number of people who read your documents. The cost savings in time and the benefits to productivity can be enormous. When we add the government and university sectors to the corporate world, the British survey figures start to look conservative indeed. After introducing plain English, organisations I have worked with record that it now takes them half the time to prepare a standard report, and managers note that they now spend less time as highly paid editors, and more time doing the work they are actually paid for.

But the costs of poor writing don't stop there. Errors damage reputations and balance sheets alike. An Australian charity found out the hard way recently after a call centre it employed sent an offensive letter to a member of the public. Its apology only made matters worse. Not only was the tone wrong, but a simple mistake destroyed any hope of recapturing good will: 'Though we cannot go back in time and rectify it happening we can certainly take action that enables it to recur to other individuals'. The publicity this sort of error attracts could destroy a charity.

I've dwelt here on the economic costs because that's been the focus of some most recent research. The costs of officialese to democracy, in restricting debate and reducing public access to services, have been well catalogued since George Orwell's 1946 essay 'Politics and the English Language'. When a politician wants to avoid scrutiny, to paper over the unpleasant, out comes the officialese. They stack on the Latinate grammar, fill it full of clutter, drop into the passive, and lengthen their sentences. John Howard is very good at it, such as when explaining how he misled parliament over the abuse of Iraqi prisoners. To say sorry is not an option for a politician, so instead he intoned:

It is regretted that the incorrect information was provided to me by [the Department of] Defence.

2. Diagnosing the causes

Yet understanding these symptoms of officialese is barely the first step. To choose the best treatment, we must next diagnose what causes the disease. This is where Don Watson's lively rant fails us. All he can offer is that we 'mock them', 'never stop mocking them'. When was the last time you heard of a government department, or a bank or a lawyer or an academic, change their writing style because of some carefully crafted wit?

Watson has little in the end to offer because he does not understand the causes of the problem. At one point he hopes vaguely that 'maybe one day someone will trace where this journey into fog all began.' Was it the management texts of the thirties? The corporate speak of the eighties? The political speak of the American century?

In fact, diseased English goes back to the 60s—the 1060s that is. We can trace its origins to the centuries following the Norman conquest in 1066, when key institutions adopted the Norman French of their conqueror. As Melvyn Bragg notes in *The Adventure of English*, the survival of the language was no sure thing after William supplanted Harold as the King of England. The conflict itself had greatly reduced the English nobility, and William ruthlessly finished the job. He replaced everyone in positions of power in the aristocracy, the church, the military, the government, the law and the academy with French speaking supporters. According to Baugh and Cable, by 1072 only one of the 12 English Earls was an Englishman, and he only lasted another four years. The Domesday book records that over half the country was put into the hands of just 190 men, and half of that was given to just eleven, none of whom spoke a word of English. By the end of William's reign, only one English bishop retained office. By 1087 only three abbots spoke the people's tongue.

The result was that French swiftly joined Latin to supplant English as the language of record, the language of the law, the language of the academy, the language of local administration, and the language of high culture. The last of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the Peterborough Chronicle, completed its final entry in English in 1154. If you wanted to appear before a Magistrate to resolve a legal dispute, your pleading had to be written in French. The literature of chivalry, which flowered during the reign of Henry and Eleanor of Aquitaine, did so in French. Yet over 90 per cent of the population continued to speak English, setting a sharp divide between the language of power and the common tongue.

For my purposes, the story becomes more interesting after King John lost Normandy to King Philip of France in 1204. The hundred years war with France gave English the opportunity it needed to restore its social status. Over the next two centuries, those in positions of power increasingly came to see themselves as English, and restoration of the language naturally followed. Some institutions resisted of course, most notably the academy and the church. Late

in the thirteenth century, monasteries at Canterbury and Westminster adopted regulations forbidding novices to converse in French. At Oxford university, statutes were drawn up to cement French and Latin as the languages of learning. In 1284, Archbishop Peckham was appalled to discover that the Fellows at Merton not only ‘wore dishonest shoes’, but worse, ‘talked English at table.’

Fortunately for English, these measures were part of a losing battle. In 1362, the chancellor for the first time opened the Parliament in English. The proceedings of the Sheriff’s court in London used English from about 1356, and the *Statute of Pleading* of 1362 made English the official language of all pleadings, debates and judgements throughout the realm. By 1388, reports from towns and guilds to Parliament started to appear in English. When Henry IV deposed Richard II in 1399, the proceedings were in English. When Henry V wrote to his subjects of his success at Agincourt, he did so in English.

It was however, a very different English to that of the Anglo Saxon Chronicles. The language of Chaucer was suffused with about 25 per cent French vocabulary. Three centuries of official French had flowed into all walks of life, and remain with us today. A recent study by communications company Optimum analysed the origins of millions of words of English speech and writing, and set the proportion of French at around 22 per cent. It is hardly surprising that many of these words come from the institutions of power, but what is surprising is that their descendants should retain so much of it so many centuries later. The Optimum study found that officialese uses over 50 per cent Latinate French. I’ve turned in the same results by analysing the diction of organisations we have worked with. This is the nub of officialese, the root cause of our dead public language. The French diction of our public institutions is well out of proportion to the living tongue. That’s why we find it so inefficient and unreadable. This may itself not be such a problem except that the content of public writing does not demand such an elevated language.

In short, we have democratised many of our institutions since the eleventh century, but we have not yet democratised the language they use.

3. Working the cure

Understanding this history is crucial because it points us in the direction of an effective cure. We must work at the institutional level, work with the organisations that privilege status over content. We must illustrate the costs of officialese and convince them of the need for a plainer style.

The word ‘plain’ here is crucial. The first method we can draw on is that developed, particularly over the last half century, by the plain English movement. It kicked off in the 1940s, when the British Treasury commissioned Ernest Gowers to write *Plain Words*, a guide on clear writing for the civil service. The principles he set tackle the same problems that I have outlined today: an elaborate diction, jargon, redundancy, passive voice, long sentences, and poor document structures. It is not rocket science.

Neither is the underlying concept of a plain style remarkably new. Chaucer refers to plain speaking in one of his tales. Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* makes a convincing case against the ornate diction of Augustan poetry. Jeremy Bentham railed against ‘the pestilential effects... of literary garbage’ in the law. But the term plain English is often wilfully misunderstood, even by Don Watson, who equates it with a boring, utilitarian prose. I prefer Coleridge’s notion, which is simply to match the complexity of the language to the complexity of the content. He criticises Pope not for using Latinate words per se, but using them to overdress rather feeble content. Pope can’t just write that the sun rose, but that ‘reddening Phoebus lifts his glowing orb’.

While we may be able to defend Pope as a poet writing for mere fancy, it’s harder to excuse elevated diction in the work-a-day world. So instead lawyers, for example, defend their archaic prose because, they argue, it brings precision and certainty. If that were really the case, they would face far less litigation than they actually do. The CEO of the NRMA, which converted its insurance policies into plain English two decades ago, has stated publicly that far from the predicted deluge of legal action, plain English made little appreciable difference to the number of disputes, but it measurably improved efficiency and customer relations.

The second method we need to draw from is the foundational discipline of language learning: grammar. If the standards of our public writing have fallen in recent decades, it may bear some relationship to the downgrading of grammar in our school system. It amazes me that the usefulness of grammar was ever, could ever, be in doubt. We wouldn't send people out to be practicing chemists without teaching them to distinguish between compounds and elements; yet we have been educating professionals, whose main products are often pieces of writing, without teaching them to distinguish, for example, between nouns and verbs. As a result, they simply do not have the skills to analyse and adapt their writing to ensure it conveys its content as efficiently as possible.

Restoring the status of grammar is an essential part of the cure for officialese, but I want to distinguish between two approaches. On the one hand there is traditional grammar, the grammar of the Greeks, of Dionysius Thrax, of Donatus and Priscian. This gives us the basic parts of speech, and how they combine in clauses and sentences. As Professor James Mulroy notes in *The War Against Grammar*, this is a method of 'practical guidance, not theoretical exactitude'. It is a far from perfect, and unfortunately we have taught it with an overly proscriptive purpose in a dry and dreary classroom.

Against this there is the grammar of linguistics, of Fries and Chomsky and Halliday; of transformational and functional grammar. This attempts to describe the grammar in its full complexity, to avoid the holes and inconsistencies of the traditional system. The eight parts of speech multiply into 20 or more. The new *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* proudly announced a couple of years ago that it had found yet another. Charles Fries in the 1950s compared this 'scientific' grammar to Harvey's work on the circulation of the blood, and traditional grammar to the practice of bleeding.

I realise I am conflating a spectrum of methods into two broad, and possibly arbitrary divisions. I do so because, in my own experience teaching more than 2000 professionals how to undo their officialese, I have found that basic grammar is essential. Yet for all its shortcomings and inconsistencies, by far the most practical end of the spectrum is traditional grammar. By all means acknowledge its limits. Remove some of its proscriptive and simplistic rules. But let's restore a basic understanding of nouns and verbs, subjects and objects, the passive and the active voice. This is not to reject more complex grammars altogether, but they are simply not necessary to tackle the challenges of officialese.

Ironically, scientific grammar was partially responsible for tossing all grammar out of many English-speaking schools. The National Council of Teachers of English in America was heavily influenced by Fries, for example, and still holds the belief that ‘the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or ... even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing’. The theory the Council offered in the sixties argued that ‘For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar’. Today, teachers are asked only to teach grammatical terms with ‘receptive competence’, so students understand the concept of a noun, but avoid learning what it is called.

Australia is fortunately better off than the Americans, and we have begun to restore grammar, particularly in the K-6 syllabus. But we have over two generations of professionals who write daily without the basic knowledge of the tools that they wield. When they have no alternative authority, they swallow officialese whole. When I teach basic grammar to tertiary graduates newly in the workforce, they are at first reluctant, but are quickly amazed that it is so useful, delighted that it is in fact interesting, then angry that they were not taught it systematically in the school system.

The third method we can draw from as part of the cure is classical or civic rhetoric, which has fallen even further out of favour with educationalists, but is making a comeback, particularly in the United States. The first handbooks of rhetoric were written to help noble Athenians compete on the floor of the new democracy. At its shallow end, rhetoric became a box of tricks for debating. But in the hands of Aristotle, and later Cicero and Quintillian, it became a powerful and systematic method for marshalling a persuasive argument.

The key aspects of rhetoric that we can apply to today’s public communication are, firstly, how to adapt to your audience. Instead of a one-size-fits-all officialese, concerned with the needs of the writer, rhetoric places the reader at the forefront. It sounds so obvious, but this approach is rarely in the minds of the professional writer. Lawyers may realise that their clients can hardly read their writing, but that is usually less important than invoking the sacred style.

Secondly, rhetoric offers an extensive toolbox for structuring a document, marshalling evidence, making a case. Instead of the default narrative structure of officialese, it would resuscitate the structures of our public documents, bringing much more subtlety, cogency and power.

Finally, the study of rhetoric can’t help but restore the connection between the sound of the spoken words and the tone of the words on the page. Officialese writers become tone deaf, they no longer hear the impact of their words. They risk becoming either too distant, or too familiar, with their writing. The Royal Mail study I referred to earlier found that of the one third of respondents who had boycotted products, half had done so because the writing

sounded pompous, and the other half because it overstepped personal bounds. The most powerful thing I do when workshoping writing with professionals is get them to read their writing aloud. Many are shocked, indeed stunned, by the tone they have generated, mostly because it was the last thing they had intended.

Finally, if we are to succeed in treating officialese, we must draw on the skills and experience of our professional editors. Editors themselves also need to take a more aggressive stance with some of their clients' work. Much of the profession is influenced by the romance of the book editor, of legendary icons such as Max Perkins or Beatrice Davis. Davis, arguably Australia's first professional book editor, trained over two generations of Australian editors while head of the fiction and general department at Angus and Robertson. She spoke and practiced editing 'in the author's voice', and this concept has infused Australian editing practice. Tidy it up, correct glaring errors, but don't meddle with the voice. Yet when it comes to officialese we need to do more than meddle, we need to change the voice. Plain English provides a strong economic opportunity for freelance editors, particularly in the shrinking economy of book publishing. You can offer a more extensive service and charge a much more respectable rate. The process is more difficult to manage, but the rewards are there for both editor and client.

4. Resuscitating public language

With a firm understanding of what *officialese* is, where it comes from, and the methods we have available to cure it, the remaining question is how to proceed from here. I will illustrate the strategy I have in mind by drawing on Plain English Foundation's experience with government organisations.

To resuscitate our public language, we must apply the cure to the source of the disease, and that means focussing on our institutions *as* institutions. Replacing *officialese* with a more effective language needs more than new skills, it means cultural change, and any manager will tell you that cultural change is a most difficult thing to achieve. We must begin at the executive level in each organisation, and secure commitment for a new style. Without this support, middle and line managers, let alone the day-to-day troops, simply will not risk lightening their language.

To win this support at the top, we need to gather more evidence about the costs and benefits of different styles. I've referred to some of the current research, but there is still so much more to look into. For those looking for topics to research, this is an emerging field that presents a wealth of opportunity.

I find I can talk an organisation's executive into attending some kind of presentation. They are often aware that their writing needs to improve, but don't know how to go about it. I usually start with efficiency. Demonstrate how they can convey the same content in half the words and they start to take you seriously. Link this at the same time to a better quality document and more satisfied readers, and they admit themselves for treatment.

But the most compelling evidence involves tangible measures of the organisation's actual writing. I wonder how many language practitioners would currently take performance indicators of writing very seriously. How can you measure something as subjective as writing in an objective and precise way? Even then, how do you decide what is the right level, the right benchmark, for each indicator.

Many of you will be familiar with readability measures such as the Fry Graph, which take factors such as average sentence length and syllables per hundred words, then correlate these against the number of years of education a reader would need to understand a passage comfortably. A newspaper such as the Telegraph scores about 10. The Herald rates around 12. Most of our public writing comes in at over 17. The linguists might argue that this tells you little, that it is possible to score well on such a scale and still write poorly. This is certainly true, but it is a whole lot less likely.

On its own a Fry Graph is not completely reliable. But if you add to it a raft of other measures of elements such as sentence length, passive voice, nominalisation, keywords, tone, layout and structure, together you have a useful picture, not only of where an organisation's writing is at, but how it is improving as you work with it. These may not be accurate within a few per cent, but when the performance shifts by one half, or even one third, it gives you solid evidence. When back it up with qualitative surveys of staff, managers and readers, their feedback invariably supports the numbers.

This kind of evidence is compelling, and it helps organisations invest what is often tens of thousands of dollars in changing its writing culture. Most feel the improvements in efficiency and productivity make this investment well worthwhile. This approach is new in Australia, but has been working successfully in Britain, where both the Plain English Campaign and the Plain Language Commission offer plain English auditing as part of their services.

But to bring about measurable change means re-training each writer, and workplace training must always be at the heart of the treatment. This involves at least two, and often as many as four days training for each employee, drawing on the methods of plain English, traditional grammar, and classical rhetoric. A critical mass of staff in each organisation must attend if the culture is to shift. We usually start with 4-6 two-day workshops with ten people in each, but find ourselves eventually training several hundred. The process of change gathers pace over the first 12-18 months, but takes up to 2-3 years for the organisation as a whole. Several centuries of officialese culture does not go away overnight.

Training of itself is not enough either. There are too many roadblocks built into the organisation's processes and structures. We always back up training with editing, authoring and engineering. Sometimes this involves one-on-one coaching, sometimes outright editing and re-writing of key documents. Most significantly, it involves re-engineering standard templates and documents. These are the symbolic heart of a writing culture, the standard forms, letters and report structures. Many date back, not only decades, but often centuries. Updating them about half way through the training is usually the point where life begins to spring back into the patient.

But while we are working with institutions, we can also prepare the next generation of professional writers. Our teaching of English is already restoring basic grammar in primary schools and placing some grammar in context at the secondary level. The university system is lagging behind the most. As an example, I've retrained hundreds of accountants and auditors, most of whom have poor writing skills. The worst of it is that they are completely unaware of the fact. Their degree program was not concerned with these skills, and let some of the most basic errors pass through in their essays and exams. When they graduate into the workforce the shock is enormous, for they often then write reports without the skills to do so effectively. It's no wonder they retreat into an unreadable officialese.

Finally, those of us outside of institutions, the poor suffering public, must also play our part. Firstly by being aware of the costs and the causes of poor public language. Secondly, by exercising more of the freedoms that one third of the Royal Mail respondents did, and boycott officialese. There are limits to what we can do, but every gesture helps. Don't employ a financial advisor or an accountant unless they are committed to plain English. Check out the plain English credentials of any lawyer before you engage them. If they spin you a line about having to write in a way you can't understand for technical reasons, go find yourself another lawyer. You will probably save yourself time and money by doing so, particularly if they are charging you by the hour. When you receive some shoddy writing from a business, stop buying the product, and let them know that you are doing so. The bureaucracy will be harder to apply this pressure to except through the ballot box. Ask your local member about plain English the next time you hear that door knock.