

Blue Pencil

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(NSW)

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Unplain English is just plain rude

This article is reprinted from Offpress, the newsletter of the Society of Editors (Queensland). The author, Paul Bennett, has recently been appointed editor of the yet-to-be-named national journal for editors.

Editing unplain English can be fun if you are in a good mood and have a strange sense of humour but, otherwise, it is tiresome to have to fight your way through a mess of bureaucratically correct words and phrases used by many 'public' authors.

Despite their occasional posturing on issues of equity, many authors have still not grasped the really basic fact that unplain English is plainly inconsiderate to people whose first language is not English. It is also inconsiderate to people born and bred here who want to understand the message without having to jump language hurdles.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' *1996 Year Book Australia* tells us that about 95,000 settlers (their word) arrived in Australia in 1992 and that more than 40% came from countries whose first language is not English. As many of these people have taken the trouble to learn basic English, is it asking too much to expect 'public' authors to learn it too?

Most immigrants have not had the opportunity to keep up to date with the new slants that are often applied to standard words and phrases. They will not have had much opportunity to have heard about things like organisational re-engineering either. It must be really difficult for them to understand vogue phrases that arrive one month and leave the next. This has nothing to do with politics, but a lot to do with good manners, and it is amazing that so many public authors cannot 'hear themselves'.

Although the authors do not intend it to be, unplain English is quite rude because, in a cosmopolitan society like ours, many listeners will not grasp the meaning of the message. This means that the author does not care enough about the listeners to think the message out before speaking. Here is a good and typical example of unplain English from a recent government draft: 'It is now almost impossible to reflect critically on the educational past or gaze with precience into the future unless students are included in an emerging and often illuminating dialogue of diversity'. This statement does not make much sense to most reasonable

people whose first language is English, so what would it sound like to a recently arrived teacher from overseas?

How about this as a selection criterion in a job application: 'Manage the operation of the change control functions as it impacts on the migration of the applications and enhancements between testing and production environments, and
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Next meeting: Tuesday 1 April, 1997

A niche publisher and her priceless treasures

Since 1992 Judith Kelly has been publishing manager of the State Library of New South Wales Press. Judith is responsible for publishing books, research guides, greeting cards and other publications based on the library's collections and exhibitions, as well as publishing works from other sources. In addition to supervising 20 production staff, in-house and freelance, Judith spends a lot of time supporting authors developing new manuscripts.

This promises to be a fascinating evening, as Judith speaks of the special character of the State Library of New South Wales Press as a niche publisher, whose list is filled from a treasure trove of history and culture: the library's priceless collection. Come along and discover the published treasures, and hear about those others still undiscovered and waiting to be published.

6.30 for 7.00 pm in the Rooftop Function Centre, 4th floor, Australian Museum (enter from William Street). Drinks and light refreshments provided. RSVP by Friday 28th March to (02) 9552 0039 (Voicemail). Members, \$10; non-members and those who don't RSVP, \$12.

Coming meetings:

6 May: Peter Frankis, Publications Manager, NSW Department of Urban Affairs and Planning: 'Whither Public Sector Publishing', on working with government clients

3 June: Alison Pressley, Belladonna Books, on the editor and publishing success

1 July: Lyn Collingwood, on picture research

Style matters: the good, the bad, and the useful

Michael Giffin takes a look at two new reference works

The Australian Writers' Dictionary, edited by Shirley Purchase, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997
ISBN 0-19-554080-8, rrp \$29.95.

This book is a retitled and updated second edition of *The Australian Writers' and Editors' Guide*, first published in 1991. According to the press-release, this second edition uses the 'full resources' of the Australian National Dictionary Centre in Canberra, which makes it a different kind of authority than, say, a reference book that uses the 'full resources' of the Dictionary Research Centre at Macquarie University. In the postcolonial and postmodern age there is a plurality of discourse, so competing authorities are similar-but-different. Authors and editors must consult widely before choosing whom or what to believe.

No explanation is given as to why editors have been dropped from the title. Inevitably some will take this as a sign of our increasing marginalisation in the publishing world. Nor is any reason given for the elevation from guidebook to dictionary. This is curious because, arguably, the title of dictionary confers (or at least implies) a greater degree of authority upon the text, and so the contents of a dictionary will attract a higher level of scrutiny than the contents of a guidebook.

Again, according to the press-release, the book 'provides straightforward and authoritative advice on numerous issues of style and usage, such as: spelling dilemmas; names of people and places; foreign words and phrases; to italicise or not to italicise; abbreviations and acronyms; capitalisation and punctuation'. No reference work of this kind can be all things to all people. That is one reason why, perhaps, the claim to dictionary status is unwise. Clearly the book sets itself some lofty goals and will inevitably be more comprehensive in some areas and less in others.

My general impression is that this is a handy and useful reference book for authors and editors, provided it is not deferred to as a sole authority, and as long as it is used in conjunction with those other necessary reference tools of our vocation as authors and our craft as editors: general and specialist dictionaries, style and usage manuals, and a thesaurus or two. The *AWD* does not replace a reference library, and we cannot criticise it for failing to be something other than what it is.

The *AWD* recognizes that language evolves and changes. This is something we need to be reminded of constantly because some authors and editors remain phobic about protecting Australian spelling, especially from what are perceived to be American influences, as if our national identity is at stake. As the introduction says:

Notable changes from old practice are *acknowledgment*, etc. preferred over *acknowledgement* and acceptance of *-e-* as well as *-ae-* and *-oe-* in such words as *p(a)ediatric* and *(o)estrogen*. In the few words included here that might end in *-our* or *-or*, the *-our* has been retained, chiefly to show the difference between, for example, honour and honorary — although it is recognised that the style of many newspapers is *-or*.

Obviously our spelling and usage is evolving along with our national identity, and this is not a bad thing. However, this

spirit of change makes the *AWD*'s treatment of *-ise* and *-ize* endings all the more disappointing. Some Australian authors and editors still dogmatically insist upon *-ise* endings as a matter of principle over reasoning. For *-ise* endings the *AWD* suggests: 'use in preference to *-ize* as verbal ending where both spellings are in use', and this is followed by a list where *-ise* is always used (but no reason is given why). This is quite arbitrary and without rationale.

Likewise with *-ize* endings, which we are told are: 'preferred by some publishers to the more widely used *-ise* as a verbal ending'. Again, this is arbitrary and without reasoning. As statements that want to explain or justify usage, they explain nothing and are too simplistic for a reference book that aspires to dictionary status.

Every author and editor needs to know the reasoning behind *-ise* and *-ize* endings, which has to do with Greek and Latin roots, and with (archaic) English imitation of French. The issue is not to use *-ise* simply to protect us from American spelling (although that is precisely why many of us still use it), or to use *-ize* purely because some publishers feel they ought to. The issue is far more complex, and editors should know about the reasoning involved in order to make informed judgements. (For the record, Australians tend to think the *-ise* ending represents British tradition over American tradition, which is simply not the case. Just compare a variety of canonical texts published over the past 200 years and see for yourself.)

As if to contradict the claim to recognizing change, the *AWD* makes a stand on foreign accents opposite to that suggested by the *Macquarie Dictionary*. We are told that *résumé* has two acutes and must be roman while *émigré* has two acutes and must be italic. As if to compound the mystery of this style, it is then insisted that *crème fraîche* has a grave and a circumflex and must be roman. I could argue against this curious logic for hours. The cedilla is inscribed in *façade*, *cliché* must have its acute, and a circumflex is insisted upon in *débâcle*, *crêpe* and *tête-a-tête*.

The *Macquarie Dictionary* allows us to omit these accents in words that, quite obviously, have been received into the English language. The use of accents and italics in foreign words that are no longer foreign is obviously a debatable subject upon which the authorities disagree.

Dictionaries cannot serve too many masters with distinction, and biography is one master that the *AWD* serves with little discrimination. Although published in March 1997, Boutros Boutros-Ghali is still Secretary-General of the United Nations. Elsewhere Robert Dessaix is noted as an Australian writer, but there is no mention of Helen Garner, Helen Demidenko-Darville, or David Marr. We may ask why one and not the others.

Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale, and Sidney Nolan are noted as Australian artists, but there is no mention of William Dobell, Donald Friend, James Gleeson, Fred Williams, or Jeffrey Smart. Again, why some and not others?

In the other arts we are told, perhaps curiously for an Australian dictionary, that Harley Granville-Barker (1877–1946) was an English playwright, producer, and actor, but there is no mention of Mel Gibson or Ruth Cracknell. In philosophy there is mention of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but

no mention of Foucault or Derrida, and in literary criticism there is no mention of Kermode or Leavis. (Or A.C. Bradley; I am certain that any dictionary that feels it necessary to include Granville-Barker ought to include Bradley as well. But then again I am a pedant.)

One could go on and on listing exclusions that arguably should not be included in the first place. But my point remains: why Robert Dessaix and Harley Granville-Barker but not Helen Garner and Mel Gibson? Or Slim Dusty and Skippy, who are not entered but who, to my mind, vie with Robert Dessaix for the right of inclusion. Perhaps if the *AWD* cannot be a reasonably comprehensive biographical reference, it should not try to serve this particular master.

The book is also incomplete as a definer of words and concepts: *bête noire* is surely more than 'one's pet aversion'; *chernozem* is defined as 'Russian black soil' but, dimly recalling my high school geography, I suspect there are *chernozems* outside of Russia; *doppelgänger* connotes something more than 'a wraith'; *hail-fellow-well-met* means much more than 'friendly'; *mardi gras* is surely not '(in Aust.) a fair of any kind'; and a *Pooh-Bah* definitely implies someone who is more than a 'holder of many offices at once'.

Johnny Cake, we are told, is 'a small thin damper', but when I consulted three recipes from American, British and Australian cookbooks all of them contained polenta, leavening, shortening, milk, sugar and eggs. This makes a [johnnycake] a type of combread. Traditionally a damper is made from flour, leavening, salt and water. Sadly there is no entry for a Sally Lunn, which I find quite perverse under the circumstances. Why a Johnny Cake and not a Sally Lunn? This is discrimination! But then again Johnny Cake is American and Sally Lunn is British; that might explain the unconscious bias.

We are told that *religieuse* is French for a nun, and *religieux* is French for a monk, but this is not a French dictionary and we are not told that in English, with an article, the term 'religious' is used as a noun to describe someone who belongs to a religious order. ('Are you a religious?' 'She/he is a religious.') Curious that the *AWD* enlightens us as to the French usage but keeps us in the dark as to the English. But here I am being esoteric, and merely demonstrating how easy it is to criticize. (Or should it be criticize? Consult Fowler's and decide for yourself.)

The acknowledged inspiration for the *AWD*, and its predecessor the *AWEG*, is the *Authors' and Printers' Dictionary*, written by F. Howard Collins and published in 1905. That little book, we are told, 'was essentially a style guide for the proofreaders and typesetters at Oxford University Press'. I suspect that at the time it served its purpose admirably, and what we need now is an updated version that understands, within narrow limits, what it reasonably can be without trying to serve too many masters.

Clearly the *Australian Writers' Dictionary* is a useful book especially, I think, for finding out which compound words or phrases ought to be hyphenated, or expressed as a series of single separate words. But don't expect this book to answer those questions that only a comprehensive reference library can answer. And don't expect it to solve those dilemmas of usage being perpetuated by different Australian authorities. Perhaps the best thing to do is check the book carefully before you buy it, see if it meets your particular

needs, and decide whether it will fill a gap in your reference library. Judge for yourself whether it will simply duplicate a variety of similar-but-different authorities that disagree.

Welcome to the postcolonial and postmodern age! Welcome to the plurality of discourse!

***The Australian Guide to Getting Published*, by Samantha Schwarz, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995. ISBN 0-86806-579-X, rrp \$16.95. Includes glossary of terms, index, bibliography and list of useful contacts.**

This book was written by a senior editor and trade publisher. It is an indispensable reference guide for editors, especially those without extensive in-house experience, who need to know about the rationale of publishing and the processes involved in order to counsel authors. Of course, every author should have his or her own copy of the guide, but not all of them will. And authors, especially unpublished authors, are notoriously naive about publishing. You could encourage them to buy the book or, at the very least, you should be able to acquaint them with the advice it imparts.

The guide is practical, concise, well written, and clearly presented. This author-editor-publisher knows what she is talking about and has performed a great service in making this necessary information available to the writing and editing public.

The guide contains chapters on: What is Publishing?; Publishing in Australia; Writing for an Audience; Magazines and Journals; Writing and Content; Options (Self-Publishing and Specialist Publishing); Presentation (must do's and troubleshooting with disks); Literary Agents (what do they do, and do you need one?); Approaching Publishers (including what to put in proposals and how to deal with rejections); Negotiating with Publishers (contracts and expectations); and Who's Who in Publishing (including sales, marketing, publicity, distribution and finance).

Every word is important and nothing is out of place. Like Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, Schwarz's the *Australian Guide to Getting Published* is one of those rare gems that belongs on every reference shelf. Highly recommended.

Member survey

Enclosed with this issue is a survey designed to help the committee make sure the society is meeting your needs as members. A lively discussion at our March meeting produced some ideas about roles and functions for the society and possible topics for meetings and training seminars, but we felt it was important to seek the views of all members.

Please take the time to respond. It's anonymous, so you can be as outspoken as you like. A similar survey by the Canberra Society of Editors at the end of last year achieved a 35% response rate—let's see if we can do better than that! The more responses we have, the more accurate and useful the survey will be.

Send to Member Survey, PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007, by Friday 18 April.

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Noticeboard

Practical editing workshop in Taree

A practical editing workshop for HSC candidates, TAFE students, teachers, business people, and writers will be held in Taree on 19 and 20 April. For details and registration, please ring Keith Duncan, Taree Writers' Group, on (065) 54 1317.

The Futureproof Indexer

The NSW Branch of the Australian Society of Indexers has organised a weekend conference titled The Futureproof Indexer to be held 28 and 29 September 1997 at the Mountain Heritage Country House Retreat in Katoomba. The program will provide a range of activities aiming to arm indexers with knowledge and skills to operate in the rapidly changing environment of the information industry. While designed for professional indexers, the program will also be useful for information professionals in fields related to indexing, such as publishers, editors, librarians and technical writers. The 1997 AusSI Medal will be presented at the conference dinner on Saturday night. For details, contact Michael Wyatt; ph (02) 9331 7764, fax (02) 9331 7785, e-mail keyword@ozemail.com.au. Or visit the society's home page at <http://www.zeta.org.au/~aussi>.

Design competition

Paul Bennett, editor of the new national journal for editors, invites members of the seven societies of editors in Australia to submit designs for the journal into a competition. Creator of the winning design will receive \$750. Deadline for entries is the end of April. The brief: **General:** The journal must be easy to read. There is no name yet but, for the sake of this competition, you may call it *Word Watch: a journal for editors*. **Extent:** 16 to 24 pp + cover; size: A4; cover: 4pp, 4-colour on 150 gsm A2 art; paper: 100 gsm Offset, folded and stitched; illustrations: line drawings and halftones; printing: offset. **Layout:** The journal will be divided into sections such as 'book review', 'interviews with members', 'overseas trends', and there will be space for camera-ready ads and ads prepared in-house.

Send your design, marked 'confidential' to: Paul Bennett, Society of Editors (Queensland), PO Box 1524 Toowong Qld 4066. Inquiries to Paul on (07) 3255 0559.

Unplain English

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the implementation of change in the applications, database, systems, communications and desktop services areas'? Most recently arrived and highly qualified residents from, say, Africa should be able to do that, shouldn't they?

Regardless of how you feel about *what* he says, Paul Keating's *language* has always been easy to understand; when describing funding for a ferry service in Tasmania, he called it 'a lot of money', not 'a generous funding option'. Justice Michael Kirby and Cheryl Kernot also speak well. If these senior people can do it, why do so many other public figures try so valiantly to be misunderstood?

The problem is that some authors believe they sound more dignified when they say 'prior to' instead of 'before', 'procure' instead of 'get', 'prioritise' instead of 'rank'. These authors are not convinced that a clear understanding of their message is more important than how dignified they or their organisations may appear. It may be too much to hope that these authors will ever see that unplain English is not only a mystery to most, but an insult to many and, effectively, an infringement of the rules of equity.