

Bad writing and how to avoid it

Highlighting possible mistakes and misinformation

Patrick Forsyth



PATRICK FORSYTH

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HOW TO AVOID IT**
HIGHLIGHTING POSSIBLE
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MISINFORMATION

Bad writing and how to avoid it: Highlighting possible mistakes and misinformation

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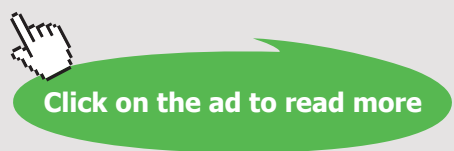
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CONTENTS

	The author	5
	Acknowledgements	6
	Introduction: writing is a dangerous business	7
1	Don't state the obvious	9
2	Don't be ambiguous or confusing	13
3	Numbers and impossibilities	17
4	Value for money	21
5	Instructions that don't instruct	26
6	Misleading timing	32
7	Measures that confuse	37
	Afterword	41

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THE AUTHOR

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!*, about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue*, was published recently.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is a great deal of nonsense quoted in these pages; some of it wrong, mistaken, erroneous, inaccurate, misinformed or just plain careless. So, despite their writers' ignorance of either the facts or of the written word (and in many cases I suspect both), or indeed their slapdash checking or sheer duplicity – for there is a good deal here that one fears was *intended* to deceive – I suppose I should thank them. Without their mistakes this book would not exist. Whilst the book revels in the humorous nature of such errors, the prevalence of such weapons of mass disinformation should be challenged and its originators castigated, but the purpose of this book is to stop others falling into similar traps.

What is quoted here represents some time progressively collecting items from sources as varied as magazines and posters. By now at least some of the originators of the material quoted have probably spotted their errors and amended their material. I hope so. Maybe the originator of the ad below hopes of change matters before the mistake was made.

A job advertisement in the *Shropshire Star* asks for a "Past Prevention Technician".

INTRODUCTION: WRITING IS A DANGEROUS BUSINESS

*In order to discover the truth of an advertisement it
is necessary to read between the lines.*

– Irving Fletcher

Communication seems easy, but that's deceptive. Mistakes abound and even a few moments spent in many an office will have you overhearing the results: *But that's not what I meant – What? – There's no need to be like that!*

Many a verbal error is got over in a moment, though some cause real problems, but when you put things in writing they have a permanence that can be doubly dangerous if they are wrong or ambiguous; they can literally come back to haunt you long after they were written. Meantime poor writing can fail to inform, can confuse or cause problems of all sorts, including casting doubts on the expertise and professionalism of the writer or the organisation that they represent. Something, an advertisement perhaps, can aim to persuade and end up being a laughing stock.

It is the fact that a perhaps surprising number of errors are *amusing* that gives rise to this book. The emphasis here is unashamedly on those messages that are inadvertently humorous, but there is still a moral to be taken from looking at this sort of stuff. It just shows how careful you have to be. Even the most ambiguous phrase can somehow still often seem impressive, be missed in proofing and then cause real damage. Yet despite the imperative of communicating effectively, despite the millions spent on doing it and despite the professionalism of those who work at making it so, sometimes customer communications fall a tad short of what is intended. I am understating it – some communication is wrong, inaccurate, confusing or devious and much of it so ill-thought about that it just ends up nonsensical and humorous.

Consider a simple example: a sign inside a hotel bedroom door states: *In the interests of security please close door securely before entering or leaving your room.* It would be a good trick if you could do it. Now think about it: someone wrote these words, others probably checked them, they were printed and then fastened to all 252 individual bedroom doors in the hotel – yet *still* no one noticed that it appeared amusing, confusing and annoyingly incorrect.

Does it matter? Well, yes I think it does. That notice might have provided innocent amusement for guests (who doubtless sort of understood what was meant), but there is a real danger that their image of the organisation was diluted as a result – more so if they are at pains to be thought of as expert, experienced, trustworthy or whatever, can this be so if their communication is seemingly cobbled together without a thought or a check? Should such people, services and products be trusted? Specifically:

- Do you want to buy a hot chocolate sachet that says it contains a “source of milk”? If they put a whole cow in there what else do they do?
- Maybe it’s safer to buy an ice-cube tray described as “Freezer safe”; certainly it suggests it is worth avoiding ones that are not.

Incidentally, considering the process of checking (or rather not checking) reminds me of the computer manual with the following boxed paragraph prominent on its title page:

This manual has been carefully to remove any errors.

One feels for whomever proof read this, they could not have missed out a worse word (“checked”, of course) – but I digress. Let’s move on and review more about the kind of mistakes that are made, in different ways – all of them damaging.

Note: all the examples in this text are real, none are invented, though most have been anonymised to spare their blushes, and believe me there were plenty of examples from which to choose!

1 DON'T STATE THE OBVIOUS

I wish people who have trouble communicating would just shut up.

– Tom Lehrer

You would think that anyone with a product to sell would respect their customers.

A host of premises have notices saying: **Only guide dogs are permitted to enter.** Luckily for their continued business most people seem to ignore them.

Throughout this text we focus on how customers are communicated with and the inadequacies of much of that communication. Inadequacies run from sheer sloppiness – like the hi-fi shop that sells “revolving turntables” – to downright deviousness designed to prompt us to ignore any shortcomings and buy, buy, buy. But first, we start with examples of the simple things. These mostly do no great harm, and assuredly many make us smile, but equally they do not paint a picture of wondrous organisations ready to care for people in every way. This may not matter in routine matters – for instance a brand of mosquito destroyer mats claim “Kills mosquitoes for up to 10 hours” but dead is dead so to speak, so we sort of know what they mean. But consider Frudix (a medicine for cats and dogs) the directions for which state “One tablet per 10 kilograms once or twice a day at 8 hour intervals”. I think I want a company in that kind of business to be a little bit more careful and use a little more precision with regard to dosages so that those with sick animals are sure when to give the next pill. They should definitely go on the naughty step.

Our main theme here highlights those who spell out information people simply *don't* need. Product producers should not take everyone for idiots. Most are unnecessary; though someone phoned a radio show discussing eclipses and the danger of looking at them directly to ask “If eclipses are so dangerous, why do we keep having them?” Perhaps some people *do* need a mental upgrade.

Back to unnecessary statements. For example, “Herbal Care Aloe Vera, Honeysuckle and Vitamin E Shampoo maintains the health and shine of normal hair – for less than more expensive brands”. Well I guess they wouldn't be less expensive otherwise. What a name too – I would almost prefer to have hair that was abnormal so that I don't have to use it. Imagine bathing with a friend: by the time you had said “Can you pass the Herbal Care Aloe Vera, Honeysuckle and Vitamin E Shampoo please” the water would be cold and any romantic moment would have long passed. While mentioning shampoos I discover that

there are special ones made for animals, though when I had a dog I remember using one called Fairy Liquid. A tea Tre Concentrated Shampoo is for rabbits and small animals. It sounds irresistible “Blended with the finest pure plant oils. pH balanced, low lather and non-toxic. Suitable for all coats. Gentle on the skin. Acting as a non irritant for those rabbits and small animals with skin problems”. Oh joy, I almost wish I was a bunny rabbit and could enjoy it. I do hope it is as good as is suggested and does no harm as it also says “Not tested on animals”. Now animal testing of many things is rightly frowned on, but wait a minute, here they are selling this stuff on the open market and yet they can't give even one of their own pets a quick rinse to make sure it's okay; that seems irresponsible.

Even more blindingly obvious is a mobile phone leaflet telling its users “You will need to remove the existing battery if you want to install a new battery”. How long would people fiddle about trying put a new one in without that advice, I wonder.

Any kind of technological gizmo needs care, even evidently the humble telephone. One landline phone comes with this amongst the instructions “Situating your product close enough to the telephone and mains supply sockets so that the cable will reach them”. If there really are people who need to be told that then perhaps they should spell it out fully: “the product is a telephone; the ‘mains’ refers to electricity”. It would be so sad if a customer connected their shiny new phone to the kitchen tap.

Cameras are complicated gizmos these days – some of them make telephone calls and toast too for all I know – and the digital ones certainly need detailed instructions. One such document starts by aiming to risk no misunderstanding and says “The various types of memory card that can be used in this camera are collectively referred to as memory cards in this guide”. This just makes you long to read the rest of the manual and I confidently predict it will tell you that it refers to buttons as buttons and batteries as batteries.

- A door in a school has a sign saying: **This door can only be used when it is unlocked.** Well obviously, but is this an instruction or part of the pupils' education?

The label on a box containing a coffee mug warns: “May get hot in microwave”, which is not quite as stupid as a particular lemon pudding's label telling you: “Warning – contents may get hot after heating”. Both warnings are surely unnecessary, though is there a question posed by their use of the word “may”? Surely these things *will* get hot if you heat them up and if they don't then...you haven't heated them.

These set the tone and there are so many ways people are taken for idiots. Amongst many other examples of pointing out the obvious I would mention the following:

- The web site of the charity Optimum Population Trust states helpfully that “Sex is the main cause of population growth”. It does not mention any other causes
- A major brand of electric tools produces masonry drills which are evidently designed to “drill on contact”
- Five Spice Powder lists only one ingredient and that’s “Five Spice Powder”, which is both obvious yet leaves us wondering what on earth it is made of
- Limbitin is a natural remedy of some sort recommended for treating restless leg syndrome. It is described as easy to take and says it should be “consumed orally through the mouth”; presumably any other form of oral consumption is frowned on and may even do damage – perhaps it would make your leg twitch
- The warnings on Ambien, a prescription sleeping pill, says “May cause drowsiness”. Well, so it should, in fact if it’s any good it should surely go way beyond drowsiness
- Reflecting safety bands designed for runners training after dark helpfully point out that “The retro-reflective material and LED light must be on the outside”
- A shelving unit needs assembling after purchase and tells you helpfully “*Note:* people are required to safely assemble this product”; the robot age is still a little way off then
- A watch strap is labelled “To be worn on the wrist” as if being a watch strap wasn’t information enough
- Puma socks tell you to “Wash when dirty” which is maybe only sensible if it is directed exclusively at teenage boys.

All these and more have me tearing my hair and despairing of their very existence. Do the writers of such things think the public all have the brains of retarded dormice or is it simply that they think hardly at all? What about this? A supermarket chain has shops with in-store opticians in them; in one such there is a sign saying: “Contact lens patients should remember to bring their lenses with them or we will be unable to see them”. Nobody evidently saw the odd way that is put, and anyway surely if you are the patient without lenses it is more likely that you will be unable to see the optician.

Boxes of a popular brand of chocolates have some printing on the bottom of the box, one part of this says: “Do not read this whilst box is open”. Sensible enough, but surely by the time you complete a reading of the sentence your chocolates will be on the floor.

Even a prestigious business magazine, which is surely read by intelligent people has an online subscription form that reminds people that a credit card number is: “The large numbers

across the middle of the card”. Whoever wrote this seems to take a dim view of the level of intelligence of their potential subscribers.

Occasionally you see something that makes you wonder if it is not intentional, written not by an idiot but by someone with a sense of humour well aware of what they are doing: like the hospital door marked: “Delivery Room – Push”. Otherwise such messages cast doubt on the efficiency and professionalism of the organisation they represent.

So much for things falling into the “obvious trap”: already I hope you are experiencing an urge to check things more carefully.

2 DON'T BE AMBIGUOUS OR CONFUSING

I know that you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant.

– The late US president Richard Nixon

Sometimes things are not as they seem and there are so many ways in which words can confuse.

Let's continue with more simple examples. An own brand redcurrant jelly is labelled: "NO FLAVOURS – We've done the hard work by removing each and every flavour from this product". Gosh it must taste wonderful. This probably means something, though I'm not sure what – certainly it fails to make a positive point. The Gardener's Corner rain gauge measures rain in inches and millimetres and is evidently designed "for indoor or outdoor use". Not only do they think it rains indoors, they put that first! Again perhaps I'm missing something and it's actually a real selling point; there is, after all, a need to make products stand out.

As an occasional asthma sufferer I am interested in anything that will help prevent or reduce it. One treatment is featured on the BioPortfolio web site where it says that asthma attacks can be "fatal and recurrent". I know you can get repeated attacks. I know an attack can be dangerous or, at worst fatal, but surely if you got a fatal one at least you wouldn't get another; even if that's small comfort.

Haemorrhoids are a nasty affliction and best treated to get rid of them. One website offers a range of medical products and also says "If you do not have an account and wish to purchase haemorrhoids click here". So if you have never had them and want to give them a try you can evidently buy some.

Warnings of unwelcome ingredients abound and such is the state of worry about being sued that even the most inedible product's producer often feels it necessary to warn that it "may contain nuts". But what is one to make of a computer printer box warning that its contents "may contain products from Switzerland". Okay Switzerland has its oddities and I have seen it described as the second most boring country in the world (there cannot, incidentally, be a *most* boring country as that would automatically make it interesting). But I have never seen it suggested before that things coming from Switzerland are dangerous, as this seems to imply. You never know though – better ditch that cuckoo clock quick.

Bottled water is mystifyingly to me, a multi-million pound industry and many people really believe it is better for them than what comes out of the tap, never stopping to wonder why something billed as having taken four million years to trickle out of a glacier into its bottle has a sell-by date on the label. Some view it as a necessity and want it to be exclusive, expensive, posh bottled water. A brand of demineralised water says on the label: “We start with pure water. We filter it for impurities so nothing gets in the way of its clean crisp taste”. Right, but if it was so pure to start with I wonder what it is that they filter out and what is left in it to give it its “clean, crisp taste”. The cost of shipping water across the world is a liquid version of food miles, and it’s surely a huge waste. But fashion dictates: Fiji Water is served in London; justifying this a statement from the company said (to the *Guardian* newspaper) that soon “...the production and sale of each bottle of water will actually result in a 120 per cent reduction of carbon in the atmosphere”. No it won’t, or is a major environmental disaster about to hit us?

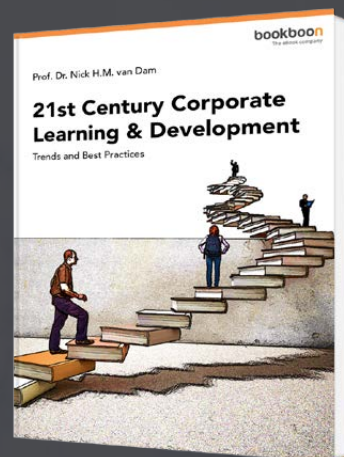
Sign in health food shop window: Closed due to illness

The science teacher at an English secondary school received laboratory supplies which arrived well-packed in a box labelled “Do not open”. Ignoring this instruction he found a further

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series of boxes inside all labelled the same way – a ploy to get you to order more, perhaps. This reminds me of supplies sent out by an IT company. On top of the box was printed in large letters “I’m upside down. Please turn me over”. On turning the box over the same notice was revealed on the bottom. Maybe this is where the phrase about “never getting to the bottom of something” comes from.

Flat-pack furniture is popular these days. One supplier sells other things too. Maybe its main business philosophy has gone to its head: it sells light bulbs, some of which are in boxes adorned with an Allen key symbol and the words “This product requires assembly”. What else is required to assemble a light bulb beyond the Allen key – glass blowing equipment and a blast furnace? Perhaps they should have another label saying “Don’t try this at home”.

A brochure inviting people to an event at a university states: **We have gone paperless. Well, apart from the brochure presumably.**

Something sure to make people pause, take note and beware before buying is signalled by the word “new”. Even the most basic claim can give pause for thought: on Jordan’s cereal packet it says: “The Original. New recipe with 10% more fruit”. Sounds really different, doesn’t it? Another word that should be used with care is “improved”. Nothing seems to stay the same for five minutes, though changes may prove imperceptible.

A popular brand of crisps have a variant in Worcester sauce flavour, the pack says: **NEW, IT’S BACK**

On the packaging for a smoke detector it says: “Approximately 31 per cent of households have less than one working alarm. According to fire experts, this is not nearly enough”. I think there is an important safety message in there somewhere or maybe if more and more households have “less than one” fire alarm there will be more work for the fire service. Anyway, it seems to me that it would be more powerful to say not “less than one” but none.

Albert Einstein is reputed to have said: “If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research.” That apart I am greatly in favour of companies finding out what customers think of their products and service. One easy way to do this is to put a questionnaire in with the product for customers to complete and return once the product is in use. One manufacturer of electric appliances does this with their steam iron and, along with questions about its performance, ask people “Which factor most influenced your decision to buy a new appliance?” Amongst the options to tick, such as “Setting up home” is: “Wanting to eat more healthily”. Irons are pretty sophisticated these days, but

I didn't think they had much to do with food preparation. There is a great tendency to indiscriminately throw "good sounding" words into product descriptions in an attempt to make them sound more attractive; even if what is being said is, well, somewhat contrived or inappropriate. I am sure that cider is a great drink, but one producer describing it as "Made from biologically grown apples" rather misses the mark, though if they used any apples that were *not* biologically grown that might indeed be news. Worse is this example where the word infinite is dropped in: a double-glazing leaflet promises to "...make your home infinitely warmer and safer". Infinitely warmer would surely be hell and thus more than hot enough to be anything but safe.

Label: Blackcurrant juice comes in two flavours – orange and strawberry

Consider adjustable beds: the idea is that they deliver an exceptional level of comfort, something that is especially important if you have a bad back. For anyone so afflicted thinking of buying a new bed, what should be made of this description saying that a particular bed provides "a lifetime of temporary relief" for chronic back pain. I would want that word temporary defining somewhat more and certainly for it to be describing something that lasts for more than a few seconds.

An office sign warns "No smoking alarms in use". Maybe they prosecute if you do smoke and sound an alarm if you don't. In a similar vein, a hotel notice says "No smoking prohibited by law" so maybe clamping down on people who don't smoke is spreading.

Clearly your choice and arrangement of words matter. Anything you want to check yet?

3 NUMBERS AND IMPOSSIBILITIES

If you can't convince them, confuse them.

– Harry Truman

Words are problem enough, but this is compounded when some of the words describe numbers.

In the brave new world of consumerism there are many promises made. There are products that we are told will change almost any aspect of life for the better. However, it seems such claims should be viewed with caution; sometimes with extreme caution.

Ladders must be used at all times says a notice in a garage; what even when sweeping the floor? How do you do that?

Do you ask people to believe impossible things, do impossible things and regard impossible things as good reasons to give them your business?

First, and there are dozens of versions of this, there is something that seems to be a stock in trade of the software industry. Obsessive about their gubbins being used correctly their packs say things like “Do not open until you have read and understood the enclosed end user license agreement”. I can't do that, I won't do that and it puts me off the whole idea of even looking at the wretched agreement, much less abiding by it. How many people ever actually read this sort of thing, I wonder; I suspect it's vanishingly few. The same is true of terms and conditions. If I had a pound for every person who has clicked the “I have read and accept the terms and conditions” box on line without a glance at the detail I would be a millionaire. Next, and this is impossible either way, there is “slow setting, instant glue” – one or the other seems more likely.

A computer message appearing while using a popular software says: The software must update itself before it can check for updates. Would you like to update now? By the sound of this even if you do want to, it's impossible.

Computers again: the web site at a London university asks students logging in to “make sure that your new password is between 7 and 8 characters”. That's impossible I think, unless they have students there studying mathematics and versed in something like imaginary numbers who know better. Let's hope it was not someone from the Department of Mathematics who

set that up. Also to do with computers: at Sydney airport security tells passengers “Laptop computers are to be removed from cases and presented in two separate pieces at the X-ray machine”. Well I hope that’s impossible, it would certainly break mine, though with some models one bit now clicks off the keyboard to make a tablet.

Cooking can be difficult and even barbecuing can present problems. The “Fall-off-the-bone” frozen ribs packet tells purchasers to: “Place thawed ribs on grill and heat for 10 minutes. Turn halfway through and continue grilling until thoroughly heated. To avoid burning, keep bone side of ribs facing down for two-thirds of the heating time”. Either that is impossible or I don’t understand it; or both. But it’s more likely than the lamb joints sold by one major supermarket whose packaging tells you to cook them at 1900 degrees C. No normal oven would do that and getting that kind of detail wrong could conceivably lead to downright dangerous situations, as someone sets up a blast furnace to try and comply. The population on the naughty step is growing.

Remember that all the text quoted here is designed to help a product stand out from competition and prompt people to buy it rather than a competitive product. Sometimes perhaps the urge to do this goes too far. A bottle of bleach says it “Kills bacteria as well as the leading competition”. Surely it can’t do that and, in any case, create a monopoly like that and someone might just notice. Another cleaning product, a toilet cleaning block, claims: “Stops Limescale FOREVER”, now that’s an awfully long time and would I suggest this is impossible. Actually it does add “with continuous use”, which removes the impossibility but rather makes the claim seem a bit pedestrian.

A card handed to me as I left Sydney airport read: **Has anyone put anything in your luggage without your knowledge?** An impossible question to which one can only respond with a “Don’t know”.

Maybe translation makes absurdities more likely. One wonders about this one offered for U.K. buyers of a continental made car. The manual describes a “Park Assist feature that enables the...car...to park itself – just like magic”. Wow, sounds impressive but in fact it’s not like magic at all as it goes on to say “Requires driver control”. Harry Potter can relax. They have added that in after an asterisk, so I suspect it is not translation causing the problem it’s just that in their excitement they can’t resist talking up each and every feature to make it sound great even if ultimately the magic palls. So for the moment the phrase “park itself” needs to be translated to say that actually the driver must park the car but this model does offer a little electronic assistance.

There are no translation problems as far as I know with this next one. A chain own brand of Multivitamins for Men has a warning: “During pregnancy and lactation or if you are trying to get pregnant we suggest you consult your doctor or pharmacist before taking this product”. First off Mr Retailer you should know that it’s impossible for men to get pregnant, they just don’t – not even a little bit. Secondly, anything like this needs instructions that are as clear as crystal. One is left wondering if whoever wrote this is brain dead or if actually they are trying to say that it could affect a man’s ability to *make* someone pregnant, in which case some real explanation is surely necessary. Another vitamin pack states: “people with a vitamin D deficiency are as much as twice as likely to die compared to people whose blood contains higher amounts...” Literally this means that you are half as likely to die if you do the business with vitamin D, although most of us accept, however reluctantly, that the likelihood of death is actually 100%.

Computer pop up: Cannot delete file. There is not enough free disc space. Delete one or more files to free disk space, and then try again. Don’t you just love computers!?

Also appertaining to transportation was the notice on London Underground that “There are no trains travelling in both directions between Victoria and Brixton”. Right – not now, not ever there aren’t; at least without some radical alteration of the laws of physics.

Sign in hospital lift: The fourth floor has moved to the ninth floor. If that’s not impossible then I hope they did it carefully or the whole building might now be unstable.

Maybe we need to consult a modern day Einstein about this next example. Some items sold by an up-market clothes seller are made in a fabric described as “4-way stretch”. Not in this universe they aren’t. But wait a moment maybe they are not in this universe: another label describes something made of 2.5 layers, which seems a pretty outlandish kind of cloth – other worldly, perhaps.

In a hospital corridor a hamper for used bed sheets is labelled: Empty when half full. No, that’s impossible; it’s empty when there is nothing at all in it.

This next case relates to the way a product works. A compass is on sale saying “This ingeniously designed compass is far easier to read, as it always points in the direction you are heading”. No, that’s impossible – it points north or it would not be a compass, and anyway we usually know which way we are heading – but we may want to know where north is. It’s all rather confusing. Maybe if it is so special you could use it indoors, where

in one office building there is a sign in the lift saying “Only use the buttons provided”. I know some people who are frightened of using lifts, but they do not to the best of my knowledge take their own, more trustworthy, buttons with them.

If all this relentless impossibility is getting you down, cheer up and have some chocolate. Many people try to ration their consumption of this fattening substance, if you want a little treat then you should avoid one brand’s “Mint for two” aiming to have just half each. You cannot do so – the contents are “13 mini-mints”. The mints are small by the sound of it but the odd number will likely to lead to major arguments.

Many gadgets need batteries, and some, like watches, stop working with little or no warning of the batteries’ demise. A portable DVD player is different, the instructions say “When the battery pack is fully charged, the battery pack charge indicator will turn green”. That seems clear enough until you read on: “*Note:* Because of the characteristics of lithium-ion batteries, when the battery pack charge indicator turns green it does not mean the battery pack is fully charged”. Ever so helpful.

Sometimes wording is so convoluted that the truth of the matter is just not clear and you are not sure what is impossible and what is not. If in doubt you need an Anti-Bacterial Cleanser the label on which proclaims it “wipes away doubt”.

More to think about here then, now we can move on to the next chapter and think, amongst other things, about price.

4 VALUE FOR MONEY

People want economy and they will pay any price to get it.

– Lee Iacocca

There is the one clear overriding reason for companies to communicate with people: they want their money. They will go to quite some lengths to get it too; those with something to sell can be, well on occasion the word pushy doesn't really cover it. An apocryphal tale makes this clear – there was once a salesman who managed to sell a farmer with one cow two milking machines – and who then financed the deal by taking the cow as a down payment!

With money in mind there is one big, overall, inherent clash between consumers and suppliers. Consumers want a bargain, or at the very least they want value for money, and suppliers want to make as much money from their customers as possible. There is one seeming contradiction with this: sometimes we actually *want* to spend more. No, you say I don't, well I beg to differ – sometimes you do. No one buys a Rolls Royce because it's cheap – it's very much not – and the same could be said for a wide range of luxury goods. Sometimes products are actually promoted as costing a lot: Stella Artois beer is sold with the slogan “Reassuringly expensive” and it sells very well. Many people like posh products, they like exclusivity and they like to spoil themselves. But we also like a bargain and Stella no doubt sells even better when it's on special offer.

So here we look at all aspects of price, discounting and value for money. Let's start with this: every second advertisement on television seems to aim to sell you insurance and many of these are put out by the price comparison websites. One of these seems a bit confused about value for money. It mentions savings and specifically a sum of £137.43, then says: “The money you can claw back on household insurance is invaluable”. Wait a minute, isn't it actually worth just £137.43. Perhaps the company believing otherwise is themselves just a bit confused.

Back to value for money; however carefully people think they buy, I am afraid that getting the best deal, or even a good deal, may be difficult if not well-nigh impossible. Even trying can be a complex process.

Consider mobile phones. Most people check around, balancing the way they use their phone in terms of calls, texts, email and data these days to get a good deal. Top of the list on a search I made on the Internet was a site offering to help me compare “more than 800,000” tariffs. There are, almost unbelievably, some 800,000 different ways of signing up to be able to say “I'm on the train”. It's nice to have a choice, but isn't this just the tiniest bit

over the top? It's surely choice gone mad and is in any case utterly unmanageable. Actually it's an example of what marketers call *confusion pricing*. The providers *want* choosing to be complicated. If it is difficult to make real comparisons then their superficial blandishments are more likely to get frustrated consumers rejecting the whole comparison business as impossible – or at least impossibly time consuming – and opting for what they hope is a good deal by taking a superficial glance at the details or just picking what they hope is the best of a confusing bunch. Many suppliers use confusion pricing as you will know if you have gone anywhere recently by train, tried to work out which company to buy gas from or asked about travel insurance. Incidentally most insurance comparison sites bring a whole new meaning to the old idea of comparing apples with apples as they are more like comparing apples with old boots. Just check their descriptions.

A sign at a multi-story car park says there will be a charge of £15.00 for "releasing cars outside opening hours", alongside it says: **Open 24 hours**

At least people know that "two for the price of one" is saving money. Or is it? One major supermarket once had a shelf label stating that cartons of soup were £1.00 or "Any two for £3.00". And how about the bookshop that was seen offering "Fantasy fiction – 2 for the price of 3"? It may be fantasy but it's also fantastically expensive. Before we go into special offers, remember that confusion pricing is just one of many dubious tactics used to get consumers to cough up hard earned cash. Such tactics include:

- *Drip pricing*: consisting of a low headline price that expands as you investigate it. This is something certain budget airlines excel in; perhaps they invented it. Sometimes the actual cost of a full fare is twenty times that shown up front. How long will it be before they charge extra if you wear a coat?
- *Bait pricing*: this is when one enormous reduction on a single item is used to attract people to a sale where other reductions are not in the same league.
- *Reference pricing*: here a special price is compared with the apparent norm: "Usually £220, now only £99" screams the banner. It usually means that a branch of the shop located in the Hebrides had it on show, though it was visible only in the basement. At the back. Hidden behind a filing cabinet. For twenty minutes...after the branch had closed. Okay, yes, maybe I do exaggerate – but only a bit.
- *Time-limited offers*: only available today, this week, during February they say hoping this will prompt a quick and perhaps irrational decision to buy right now – but the offer is often still there in six months.
- *Free offers*: that just are not. I got awarded a free holiday recently and when the details arrived it was £140 odd pounds – provided I took it within the next two weeks! Any later and the cost went up. And to think I spent a moment being excited about it; I should know better.

Maybe greater clarity would work better. Even a phrase like “free delivery” can be misused. A specialist clothes retailer’s catalogue tells customers “You can pick up your order from any one of our...shops and delivery will be free”. But that’s not free delivery at all, it’s called collection and so I should jolly well think it would be free. People should be careful at sales: making a saving or getting a bargain is always satisfying but...another *bait pricing* trap involves the words “up to”. “Savings of up to 60%” on a sign outside a furniture shop for instance, may be good news, but equally it could mean that the only item at a 60% discount is a single shop soiled sofa with a cushion missing.

There are regulations about the sorts of thing listed and manifestly care and checking are necessary. Research by Mysupermarket.co.uk recently listed: supermarkets charging £2.00 more for a pack of 12 Pepsis than the total cost of two packs of six, eight Gillette razor blades for £14.91, when a packet of four was £5.00, and another pricing a 800g jar of mayonnaise at £2.99, with a 400g jar of the same stuff at £1.00. Can these people just not work with numbers or might such things be because so many people grab unthinkingly at special offers. A profusion of surveys over many years have shown that we all buy more when prices just miss a round figure. Prices set at 99p, £9.99 and even £9,999 all get more people saying yes than the same thing at £10.00 and so on. Why? Because psychologically we love a bargain and in a sense we allow ourselves to be fooled; it is the same thinking that has people emerging from the summer sales saying “I saved over £100!” No, not so – you *spent* £200.

Everyone wants to pay the minimum possible. A major international airline promotes round the world trips “from £698 return”. Ignoring the “from” ploy for a moment (which with airlines tends to mean that to get the fare advertised you have book 18 months in advance and fly on a Thursday when there is a R in the month), does this mean that a one-way round trip only costs £349? Sadly I am sure the answer was no, though usually going “round the world” does bring you back to where you started.

Buying something can certainly be pleasurable. But, however carefully people buy, bills seem to have a habit of catching them up. One customer of a telecom giant, which should know better, received an email telling him he owed his business broadband account £87.5100000000000005. Despite this nonsense figure they added that failure to pay promptly “could lead to a late payment charge of £10.00”. In isolation £10.00 may not be so much, unless it’s £10.00 more than you expect. A mobile network advertises “Free internet and texts for life” but curiously only if you pay £10.00 each month. Similarly an article about a television system explained, all in one breath as it were, that “There’s no subscription and no monthly bills to pay. Prices start from as little as £2.99 per month”. They should really understand the word “free”; it’s in their name after all. Meanwhile over in Canada, an energy company offers: “Special free offer! Free maintenance – only \$13.99 a month”.

Sign in a Dublin shop: Everything under 5 euro – or less

Sometimes helpful comparisons are offered: again in a major supermarket frozen spinach is priced at 89p for a one kilogram pack, a notice alongside says that this is “£89.00 per 100 kilograms”. So a calculator is unnecessary; and that’s so helpful to anyone who can even imagine what 100 kilograms of spinach looks like. It would keep Popeye up to strength for months. Even more mystifying, a pharmacy chain sell a toothbrush for £1.44 – sounds like a fair price until they add that is equivalent to “£7.58 per metre”. Oops.

Every parent knows the agony of buying some gadget or toy for Christmas and then finding that their child can’t play with it without batteries and spends the rest of the festive day fractious and in tears. So it is encouraging to see a popular toy catalogue offering items “With batteries free of charge”. No tears at Christmas there then, but, wait a minute, if they are free of charge then surely they won’t power the toy. Back to square one. A Google search produced another freebie: “Free CDs. Huge selection of free CDs in stock at discount prices”.

Other things may be free too and you would expect a bank to be able to present this clearly. But one of the U.K.’s big banks gave one customer a quotation for a mortgage that said “No early repayment charges are applied to this mortgage. However, a final repayment charge which is currently £275.00 is payable if you repay your mortgage in full before the end of the mortgage term”. So it seems that the charge you don’t pay for repaying early amounts to £275.00. That’s a good bit more than the nothing they firmly state it will be in the first



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sentence. With that level of precision calculation no wonder the banks failed and had to be bailed out by the government. Actually banks have trouble with other matters too

Sign at car dealership: Up to £3000 minimum trade in

An international chain is obviously the best place to shop for everything as they offer “Lower prices every day”. The only question is how much they will reduce by each day and how soon everything will be free. If it is not going to be too long we should long form a queue now.

Mostly suppliers are communicating with numbers of people, often large numbers of people for mass market products and services. Sometimes though something is offered just for a single person. A budget airline is an example: “Be first to board your flight for just £7.50 per person”. Sounds very exclusive, unless they sell this deal to more than one person; if you buy this and do not board alone demand your money back. For some suppliers just making the offer of savings, discounts or special deals is not enough. They can’t just say “30% off”, they throw in other words: like the store that promised “unique home wear always up to 60% less” though what makes a bog-standard product unique is unexplained and so is what it is always less than. Or the notice of a kitchen sale that said “up to a genuine 35% off”. This seems to presuppose that lots of sales are not genuine. Or do they mean that all 35 percentages are not the same. Some deals are assuredly not what they seem, so I guess it’s nice if some suppliers warn us of this.

Even if someone spends nothing there is money to be saved. One utility company sensibly suggest “Common sense ways to save energy”, offering as one idea that customers should “Switch your TV, hi-fi or video off at the mains and you’ll save 60 per cent of the energy it uses on standby mode”. 60 per cent is it? Actually it’s better than that: if you switch it off at the mains you actually save 100 per cent of the power it would otherwise use. Yes, really Mr Power Company, all of it. Because then it costs nothing. But wait a minute: in that case your TV will develop two small faults: no sound and no picture.

As an example of spanning the total range of possibilities without even the tiniest degree of clarity an online clothing retailer’s clearance sale offered savings of “up to 50 per cent or more”. That range of price is literally unimaginable, but it could still include items with only a few pence off and have such a saving match the headline. That sort of thing is just plain wrong and too often one suspects that it is just piling on words, however illogical, to try to make an offer sound good.

Okay, grudgingly I accept that in the computer age bizarre calculations may be made inadvertently and missed; just one mistaken click is all it takes. But many confusions start with confused writing. Take care.

5 INSTRUCTIONS THAT DON'T INSTRUCT

The customer is not always right and we let them know it from time to time.

– Alan Sugar

Warning: if you need to issue instruction don't let your wording lead in an odd direction. Although an instruction tells people to do something and a warning essentially suggests *not* doing something there is a kind of overlap. For example a crazy piece of text in the manual for a television set starts with the word “warning”, but is also in the nature of an instruction in the way that it is phrased: “WARNING – do not watch television programmes or turn your TV set on for your own and others safety”. Why it should make this either a warning or an instruction is another matter. Maybe if it listed specific programmes not to watch that would be different – some programmes I can live without.

Consider warnings: practically everything you might put even near your mouth these days warns that it could contain “traces of nuts”, not in many instances because there is a real chance it will but “just in case”.

Worcestershire road sign forewarns of: Accident improvement roadworks

Sometimes medicines must be injected, and some people are wary of a syringe, but why do the makers of one particular syringe feel the need warn “Do not swallow”? Is there anyone needing heparin or any other drug who has ever in the history of the world looked at a syringe and said to themselves *Looks like a tasty snack?* I am sure I'm not alone in thinking that the answer to that is no.

Sometimes instructions simply defy all logic. They are clearly wrong and yet make it difficult to think of how they came to be written, they contain no typos, appear not to have used a wrong word, they are just weird. Such is one of many instructions with a power drill: “The machine must be used with the attractive woman of security”. What? The only explanation I can think of is that some feminine vision of loveliness walk by just as someone wrote this.

One instructions for operating a keel lifting mechanism on a yacht says: “Unscrew the bolt THM8 located at the end of the endless screw”. That sounds like it may take some time and this seems to cast doubt on just how straightforward the rest of the instructions will be.

Yet instructions are important. Getting them wrong can waste time (assembling something takes hours), inconvenience you (something you have assembled falls apart) or seriously damage your health (if, say you took the wrong medicine). If there is obvious evidence that instructions were written with half an eye on a magazine during the writer's tea break and not checked at all then they will prompt little confidence in them. Furthermore: such errors can seriously dilute the image of an organisation – an image, no doubt, that they have worked hard to establish.

Label: To remove scissors from pack, carefully cut cable tie using scissors

Modern technology is truly wonderful, but there can be snags and it certainly presents many of us with a continuing learning curve. A friend in the computer industry asked to define the phrase “user friendly” told me “I suppose it means something is very, very complicated, but not as complicated as next year's model will be”. Some gadgets certainly take a bit of getting used to, and they can also take some time to set up and get going. Working through the instructions on an mp3 player one user found the screen displaying “Player disabled. Try again in 21,668,172 minutes”. Anything that takes more than 41 years to set up surely inspires no confidence.

But technology apart, other things can confuse. Putty is pretty important – without it all your windows would fall out. It needs some care in use and might possibly involve considerable personal discomfort: one tin says “Remove skin before use”.

It is clearly important that children are protected and a classic warning is one about the danger of young children swallowing things. But isn't the following just absurd? “Not suitable for children under 3 years because of small parts”. What product did this appear on? It was a foot wide, solid, one-piece, surely utterly unswallowable Frisbee. But perhaps you can't be too careful. I think I've discovered the cause of the decline of one traditional toy: a skipping rope labelled “Keep out of the reach of children”.

I have a friend whose garden has become a squat for foxes, indeed urban foxes are a widespread problem these days. One suggested antidote is a device that emits an ultrasonic tone that only animals like foxes can hear and which it is claimed they dislike and move away from. So far for such devices and various other cures my friend has only one comment – “Doesn't work”. Well, maybe I have discovered why that is. On one such sound device is a helpful label “This product will not work with deaf foxes”. No, really! But if the wretched creatures in my friend's garden are deaf why do they bark at each other all night and keep the whole neighbourhood awake?

A display of mirrors in one supermarket is labelled “All-purpose mirrors”. That will be reflecting an image and, and ... whatever else? That said there is surely no great inherent danger in mirrors, other than the guarantee of seven years of rubbish luck if you break one. Maybe there is more danger when they are electrical. The Elegance Touch-control illuminated beauty mirror includes amongst very many instructions this one: “Never use while sleeping”. What, not even if you are dreaming of combing your hair? Almost as mystifying is the instruction on a refrigerator explaining that “The temperature control is located inside the fridge and as a safety feature can only be adjusted with door closed”. Very tricky; indeed there seems to be no way round it.

Other oddities refer to use. For example one may wonder why a set of screwdrivers should be marked “Not for pacemaker users or for use during pregnancy”. I have no clue as to what link might exist between screwdrivers and pacemakers, but perhaps the manufacturers feel that once you are pregnant then the screwing should stop for a while.

Label on a baby's teething ring: Do not iron

The concept of food miles is a valid environmental issue. Some customers want to avoid this and like to see the source of food labelled – accurately. In a major supermarket water melons were clearly marked “Produce of more than one country”; maybe they grow the fruit in one place and add the water in another.

A brand of shampoo has various “flavours”: one is for “sensitive scalps only”, another “for everyone”. No point in buying the special one then, I wonder if it costs more than the other. Anyway this seems to me to be one area of many where choice has gone mad; just how many kinds of shampoo need to exist? Other odd instructions and warnings include:

- A riding hat labelled “Keep out of direct sunlight”
- On a restaurant window: “Prior notice is required for all reservations”
- “Harmful if swallowed” (on a brass three-pronged fishing lure)
- “This product is not intended for use as a dental drill” (on a large carpenter's drill)
- “...cannot protect any part of the body they do not cover” (on cyclists' shin guards).

Sign on gates near Exeter: Warning – these gates may close without warning. Actually, the notice suggests, no they won't.

In Melbourne there are train carriages displaying notices saying “Power operated doors. When tone sounds open doors by hand”. Also in Melbourne a notice was seen instructing

students at the university to “Please put one-sided paper in box below for recycling”. You surely don't need a university education to know that paper is two-sided.

A packet of herb seeds states: “Warning: use stem and leaves only. Do not eat roots or potting mixture”. I think if you want to eat potting mixture then you should select the box marked “Muesli”. Cleaning instructions seem particularly prone to nonsense and ambiguity. For instance a scarf labelled “Dry clean only in cold water” is hardly helping to clean it without damage, but at least it is not as bad as the instruction: “Hand wash in warm water with mild detergent. Do not spin dry” – which bizarrely appeared on a dog kennel!

In-store theft is sadly rife these days. Many stores fit many of their more expensive products with security tags. Usually these are removed at the checkout, but evidently not always: an electric toothbrush is labelled “Warning! This product is fitted with a security device which is NOT MICROWAVABLE”. Are there people who take such security devices home and must be warned not to microwave them? Why would they want to? But as the devices usually remain in the shop it all seems somewhat unnecessary. And before we leave the subject here's another thing about microwaves: one leading model tells you “Do not use the microwave oven for drying pets”. Surely unnecessary, but given some newspaper stories of animal cruelty, perhaps it's not.

Notice on Paddington station: Passengers must stay with their luggage at all times or they will be taken away and destroyed. Fear not: I don't think this means an execution chamber under Platform 8, it is just badly worded.

A solar battery charger tells users it will “keep the whole solar system in proper working condition”. That's a relief – it seems that we are safe from spiralling into the Sun for a while longer.

Digression: following all these instructions has given me a thirst. Getting a drink I discover that a sparkling apple drink tells you to “Refrigerate after opening and consume immediately” – deciding which to do first just makes me even thirstier.

All websites need regular updating and maintenance and sometimes this demands that they are closed for a while. It is polite to advise customers of this, just as one particular car manufacturer do saying: “This page is temporarily closed due to system maintenance. We hope to reopen this page at the soonest time. Thank you for kind understanding.” That may show signs of less than perfect translation but it is still clear, though it is rather spoilt by the unthinking and inappropriate addition of the stock slogan – “...always there for you”.

This is another example of writing on automatic pilot and not thinking about context, clarity...or anything else really.

Websites seem particularly prone to spouting nonsense, and so too does email promotion. More than once I have seen a line on one such saying “Click here if you cannot see this email”. If I couldn't see it how can I...enough. I think it means that if you cannot see certain pictures and graphics then you should click. In which case why not be specific – what is it about communication on computers that means it is so often abbreviated to the point of being unintelligible?

How many instructions does a refrigerator need? One model explains: “...the coldest area is directly above the PerfectFresh zone”, going on at once to add “however the PerfectFresh zone is even colder”. Well of course it is otherwise it wouldn't warrant the name PerfectFresh.

An “all-in-one” cold cure tells users to take two pills at a time.

Possibly the ultimate ambiguity was the instruction given by an online science magazine as a caption below an image of the planet Jupiter. It said simply “Click for full size image”; I hope the day someone does that is not the day the world ends.

As well as immediate instructions such as push this, turn that or shake vigorously some manufacturers take the trouble to give you background information as well. Mortain produce insecticide and their website tells you that “Flies start to breed within 48 hours of completing their life cycle”. Wait a moment that seems to imply no more flies and no need for the insecticide designed to kill them. Or does necrophilia actually work for dead flies?

Food often seems to have slightly odd instructions, so much so that following them to the letter would cook up more than a few problems...and some odd meals, witness the fruit pudding labelled: “Defrost thoroughly before cooking in a refrigerator”.

Roundup weed killer label: Avoid contact with the environment

Let's applaud anyone who keeps things simple. An advertisement for an oven in *Good Housekeeping* magazine begins by saying that the model advertised: “...doesn't have complicated function – just simple one-touch controls, including 52 cooking programmes...” So immediately you need one-touch multiplied by 52 and already it sounds not so simple. No applause there then.

Some things we buy are out and out dangerous, like a chain saw. One such offers the warning instruction: "Always stand on one side while cutting, allowing plenty of space for a severed limb to fall without causing injury". Take heed: as if a severed limb isn't injury enough, you would not want to stand wrongly and risk still more injury.

Sign seen on a toll road in Oklahoma: "Failure to Pay Toll Strictly Enforced". That's a form of wording that I'd like to see in car parks that I use.

Washing instruction are important, you do not want things to shrink or suffer in some other way, but what is one to make of a bed sheet from a department store chain the packet of which advises purchasers to wash it inside out? In the case of the sheet some literally minded soul may be standing by their washing machine as I write this endlessly turning it one way and the other and wondering what to do next. Impossible it may be to turn a sheet inside out, but some instructions simply defy any kind of explanation: a packet of condoms states: "Please remove prior to putting in the microwave". As opposed to climbing in while wearing one, perhaps? One wonders what the logic is for any mention of microwaves at all, unless the condoms are designed specially to use on a hot date.

Sign at farm gate: Bag your own manure. Are they collecting or selling?

As a final comment on instructions maybe sometimes people have the right idea. A packet of cod fillets simply advises "Cook any way you choose". That at least I understand...even if I don't know how to decide what to do.

Clearly there is a need for care regarding instructions. Some errors quoted here are just silly and unlikely to lead people astray or into danger (though a few could do so and extra care is needed).

Overall it is certainly easier for a company to double check what their printed instructions say rather than have endless phone calls to deal with – all complaining and all wanting an answer to the same question. Serve them right perhaps, but better all round to get it right in the first place. Again you might ask yourself if there is anything you want to check. You have been warned

6 MISLEADING TIMING

Eternity's a terrible thought, I mean where's it going to end?

– Tom Stoppard

Albert Einstein made us realise that time is relative, but sometimes a degree of accuracy and conventional adherence to the everyday way we work in hours, days, months and the like would be a help to achieving understanding. Sadly all too often that adherence is not in evidence.

This is an area where there seem to be many misprints, yet some are so obviously wrong that it reinforces the point about communicating with customers needing a bit of care and checking. How can an organisation providing a sophisticated online payment system, tell a customer “Your credit card that ends in 2235 will expire soon” then go on to suggest that they go online and sort it out to “avoid any interruption to your service”. Well, if they are to be believed the card is good for well over two centuries yet, so they can make a cup of tea first as there’s apparently no hurry.

This sort of thing is doubtless in part down to computers. But computers only do what you tell them – even the one that famously translated “Out of sight, out of mind” as “Invisible idiot” – so when some idiot put in the year 2235 then failed to check, the computer knew no different and continued to churn out the error.

Airport sign: Shuttles leave every half hour on the hour

The far future crops up a good deal in messages. A pack of bread yeast states “Best before Mar 10 9075”. Personally I have no idea how long yeast lasts – maybe the date is correct, though the more pessimistic bread makers may doubt that the human race will still be around by then to eat bread or anything else. Actually it has already been around rather longer than you might think if you believe an advertisement for a science CD-ROM (long gone now I suspect) but it claimed to cover “human history from 500 million BC to the present day”. We have certainly been around long enough to invent best consumed by dates: a pack of traditional English muffins is evidently “best before 30 February”; so will presumably stay fresh until after some sort of major international calendar revision.

If you use an smart phone, though they change as you watch, some certainly allow you to enter dates of birth for contacts from the birth of Christ right on to thousands of years

beyond the present. Smart phones are certainly wonderful gadgets, yet such things hardly have long lives and the chances of someone still using one by the time it is appropriate to enter a birth date in, say, the year 3087 must be remote. This sort of thing occurs elsewhere. One organisation tells those who register for its email service: “You cannot use birthdates more than 150 years ago”. Even for dates a bit short of that they seem to be targeting silver surfers. Some things go even further back: one website allows an advanced search through the last 6142 years of internet posting, allowing you access to an early prehistoric version of the web, I guess.

A sign reported in a Chinese takeaway asks you to note that: “Every dish is instantly cooked to order, therefore short delays may occur”, but any kind of delay, even a short one, makes it less than instant – so time is definitely relative, something that is always shown by time seeming to go more slowly when you are in a queue.

Sign on Richmond Park gates: These gates will close ½ an hour before closing time.

Another claim that involves 24 hours comes from a supermarket own brand mouthwash, which is a boon if your breath smells because it provides “24 hour action”. So one quick rinse and you are right for the day. Wrong. It also says on the packet “when used twice daily”. Not so good then and the inattentive could well feel short changed.

I am writing this on a computer and, so far, it has worked well. I like to think this is because of the care and attention that was lavished on its production. A major computer manufacturer appears to be exceptional in regard to testing. One advertisement describes how they “provide the latest and most reliable technology for small businesses today”. It goes on to say that every one of their notebooks is “subjected to 95,000 hours of rigorous testing”. Forgive me but computers become out dated quickly enough already, so I don’t really want one that is 11 years old as it comes out of the box thank you very much, however reliable that may make it. I do rather wonder about another firm too as their online ordering process, which tells you the company is subject to US export compliance procedures, then asks you various questions. Fair enough you may say, but one is: “Will the product(s) be used in conjunction with weapons of mass destruction i.e. nuclear applications, missile technology, or chemical or biological weapons purposes?” which demands a Yes/No answer. In my case the answer is “no”, but I can’t help wondering what is going on here. Do they want to identify terrorists as a niche market or if someone answers “yes” do they just want to have early warning to get themselves to the bomb shelter in the basement? Sorry, I digress – let’s go back to time related examples.

On computer screen: Time remaining for print job about 2033406812 hours – that’s a whole forest gone (though it is only an estimate).

Some things last longer than others, and claims are made about just a few products that defy imagination. The Meta Thatcham MC1 motorbike alarm sounds like a good product, and a good idea too given current crime rates; now it is even better as the manufacturer has “extended our free ‘lifetime guarantee’ on this product”. Faced with contaminated supplies, a safety conscious Anglian Water asked customers to “boil tap water for up to 10 days”. If you once noticed a lot of cloud over East Anglia it was probably the steam.

Supermarket Christmas turkey cooking instructions: approximate cooking time...2 hours and sixty minutes

We all know what a pain in the neck it can be to get some piece of household equipment repaired or serviced. Many suppliers will not fix a visit day with any accuracy, much less a specific time. Some do aim to do better: one promises “Should you request a...engineer to visit, we are able to provide you with the time slot and name of engineer that will visit

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after 4.30 the day before”. This is truly confusing. After all a week on Wednesday is after 4.30 yesterday, but perhaps they mean that if you are sitting there waiting patiently today no one will come and you should have been at home the day before.

Here’s something festive, or is it? Special Christmas packs of mince pies carry the tag line “Great for Christmas”; certainly this is a traditional Christmas item – so why does the small print say “Best before 17 November”? This was probably organised by whoever it is who arranges for me to receive my first catalogue of Christmas cards through the post in July. In similar vein a child’s sweater featuring the slogan “My first Christmas” is labelled as suitable for children “from 18–24 months old”.

If you are ever caught short don’t head for the public toilet in Kips Bay Library New York where a sign says “Restroom closes 15 minutes before closing”. Best just assume it is never open and go elsewhere. This error occurs despite the fact that the library doubtless contains a book or two on writing English and the hushed environment surely being conducive to taking a moment to check things.

Online message: for contacting us. We will respond within the next 24 hours, if not sooner

Some instructions are time based: for instance if you are replacing a broken window pane and need some putty, one brand tells you that “Painting must be carried out within 28 days of application” but it also says “Allow 28 days for surface of putty to sufficiently harden before overpainting”. Both instructions can’t be right. Surely you need some sort of gap when it is actually right – and possible – to do the painting; or is this a reluctant DIYers charter to leave the job half done? Oh, and by the way what is this “overpainting” business? Perhaps there is somewhere in the multiverse where paint is put on *under* the surface of things.

Packaging for popular nasal spray: Do not sue (company) for longer than 7 days without medical advice” – what, not even if it seriously misinforms you?

Sensibly we all need to be on our guard for computer viruses with appropriate software. You need to keep your software up to date too as new viruses are being created daily. One security provider advised one user: “To continue using..., please activate within 4915287 days”. Surely updates need incorporating rapidly, suggesting that you wait upwards of 13,000 years hardly seems prudent. Will there be computers then or will people all *be* computers? Even odder is one provider of such software saying on their website: “Users who have no internet or email access at all and cannot uninstall or shutdown ****, please click here”. If you do manage to click you are given a phone number, one presumably unlikely to be

overburdened with calls. Wait a minute, perhaps it means that there are some helplines you actually *can* contact easily.

If you feel like a break and go to one hotel on Lake Como in Italy then you will find the many facilities include a “Complimentary minibus to nearby Spa (approx. 3 metres)”. Sounds like you will be there in no time at all.

The driving test is in two parts these days, and you need to take the theory one first: the UK Driving Standards Agency says “You can normally book a theory test 24 hours a day, every day”. But it adds “Outside these hours you can make a ‘pending’ booking”, which I guess means there is no such thing as a pending booking.

Major brand toothpaste pack: Clinically proven everyday protection against time.

Also confusing is the notice in the Mary Rose Museum in Portsmouth which says “This film lasts for four minutes and is repeated every 15 seconds”. That is a statement that brings a whole new meaning to the words “fast forward”.

Let’s end our focus on time with another ill-worded notice:

Notice at U.K. railway station: To speed up time, please use all available train doors to enter the train

Time is potentially something that customers will feel needs to be accurate. So for product claims you should aim at just that. Always take time (sic) to be sure that what you say is clear, unambiguous and actually helps people. Poor communications in this area should not just send guilty companies to the naughty step, it should, at worst, send customers in search of an alternative supplier.

7 MEASURES THAT CONFUSE

*He uses statistics like a drunken man uses lamp posts,
for support rather than illumination.*

– Andrew Lang

Mine's a pint. And if I say that in a pub, I expect a pint delivered with some degree of accuracy every time. Measurements matter: people want a pint to be a pint, they want their medicine dosage to cure them and not kill you and the Beagle 2 mission controller wanted his capsule to land on Mars, but some metric and imperial measurements were switched and instead it crashed and relayed only an endless silence. Some £65 million wasted on an avoidable measurement screw-up. I bet any life they might have found there is still laughing.

Many people find numbers a touch confusing and frankly common practice makes it unsurprising. Depending on your age you may consider your weight in pounds or stones, but never in kilograms despite the pressure to go metric. We resist this pressure in many ways, for instance buying jam in one pound jars and calling them 454 grams. Do some DIY and you will measure the girth of your plank in inches – *some two by four please* – but not its length in metres. It's all a bit of a muddle. Thus everyday comparisons are sometimes used. "Which?" magazine favours whales, telling its readers that 50 million packets of bacon are eaten in the U.K. every year and that's "the equivalent of 50 blue whales". Surely pigs would have been a more appropriate benchmark.

Elephants are often favoured with *The Guardian* telling us that the ice dropping off Greenland every year is equivalent to "a billion elephants". And if elephants don't quite fit then other bizarre comparisons seem to come to mind: the British Potato Council tells us that we eat 38,000 tons of chips (in the U.K.) every week and then pick something truly indigestible saying that's "equivalent of almost 5500 double-decker buses". I just love the fact of that word "almost" being in there, perish the thought that we might think it was *exactly* like 55000 buses. I also love another comparison I saw somewhere describing the amount of money Bill Gates is worth by saying that if he put it all under his mattress and fell out of bed it would take him 10 minutes to hit the floor!

Even if such descriptions are straightforward, a glitch in expressing it can confuse and misinform. A desktop computer is advertised saying "...it occupies less than ten times the space of modern tower PCs"; that could still make it about the size of a couple of filing cabinets, yet somehow I suspect they were trying to point out how compact it was. A similar feel is given by a computer game company, their web site states that: "...launched in November and sold over two million units in as many months". A period seems to be

involved here of many thousands of years. Back to size: a brand of firelighters is promoted as being a “New improved cube shape”. But can you change a cube without changing the rules of geometry?

So numbers may present difficulties, but people expect that they will be rendered in an understandable and accurate way. Doesn't always happen. A CD player evidently weighs 320486 lbs. That's more than 16 tons and will have even a qualified removal firm ordering a crane. Don't order one of these on the basis that you collect it yourself, no matter how much cheaper that is. That may be wrong, simply an error, but at least it's so wrong it's pretty damn clear that it *is* wrong. Perhaps we can all guess at the range of sizes in which a typical kitchen bin liner comes, but most likely we want one to fit *our* particular bin, so what do we make of one labelled as “120 × 190 × T-shirt”; whoever wrote this has the oddest sense of both language and measurements. It's nonsense and probably a cut and paste error. The simplest measurement can be expressed in the oddest way. A computer printer is described as being “about a 12-inch ruler long by half a 12-inch ruler wide”; most of us can imagine 12 inches by six without involving rulers and then halving them.

Even the number one can be misused. A food company whose products are billed as easy to prepare, presumably leading to names like “One-Step Pancakes”, but on the back of the pack for that the cooking instructions suggest you follow “these basic steps”. There are four or five of them – naughty, naughty. Stephen Hawking is not the only person to work in imaginary numbers. A search on the website of a company producing bicycles brought up the message: “The search returned 3 results of which the top 10 are listed below”. Imagine.

“**** Tyres – guaranteed to last up to 80,000 kilometres.” Sounds good? Perhaps for a split second until you realise that it can clearly mean that any number up to the 80,000 means the guarantee has been fulfilled however shiny your tyres get: *Sorry, guv, I know you've only been to the end of the road and back, but it does say 'up to 80,000 kilometres' so we can't change them.* This kind of language may sometimes be a mistake, but one fancies that it is used all too cynically by those aiming to confuse and make something sound better than it is. It is a ploy also regularly used in regard to discounts. A store offered a sale on Sat Navs: “Up to half price”. Two pence off? If I had a quid for every time I have seen something like that I could pay full price. The “up to” ploy is a bad one and all too often used. It has a close relative, that is the “less than” ploy, a way of words that grammatically surely demands that there is a “less than *something*” in there somewhere.

Some manage to combine less and more together to produce something still more confusing. One brand of sat nav has instructions rightly reminding users that road layouts do not stay the same for ever, but they say “Don't forget, roads change no less than and up to 15 per cent a year”. It is good to know the level of change to expect and where would we be here without the precision added by using percentages?

Weights can be important for all sorts of reasons. On-line retailers sell a huge range of products. Some items are of a nature which means the weight is quoted on the product description, and sometimes this is interesting. For instance, a vehicle reversing aid, is available and noted as weighing 2 kilograms. Fair enough, but evidently when it is packed and shipped it weighs only 599 grams. Somehow that is inexplicably a lot less than the product *without* its packing. Maybe this is linked in some mysterious way to their ability to offer free delivery.

So sometimes numbers and measurements can be wrong, badly phrased or confusing. One retailer has the answer: just ignore the numbers and write the same thing after them all. Their flaxseed oil supplement comes in two strengths – 1000 or 500 milligrams – both tell you to “Take one capsule twice a day” adding that “you should not exceed the stated dose”. Flaxseed has been cultivated for thousands of years and even a cursory trawl of the Internet shows that it helps lower cholesterol, prevent heart disease, angina, and high blood pressure as well as reducing inflammation, correcting hormone related disorders and reversing infertility. Actually I think the word “may” preceded “help”. Even so it sounds like a must-have addition to any medicine cabinet and presumably in the larger dose a couple of capsules a day is twice as likely to be a help as is its little brother. Perhaps if it is infertility you seek to correct – you get twins. The lack of precision simply astounds, and maybe there is still a danger that desperate would-be parents will exceed the stated dose.

Seriously, you cannot be too careful with medicines (or supplements too for that matter) as almost anything has at least the possibility of side effects. These are what is known in medical circles as ADRs or Adverse Drug Reactions. Responsible pharmaceutical companies warn you of these and even in many cases tell you what to do if they occur: for example if you take methotrexate (for your rheumatoid arthritis) it could evidently result, amongst other things, in a loss of consciousness, but, no worries, the literature with it counsels you to “...tell your doctor immediately if you notice any side effects.” Or at least when you come round. Doesn't anyone read this sort of thing *before* it's printed and distributed?

Just as I was writing the paragraph above I spotted a letter written to the *Daily Telegraph* in which someone told of spotting this line on what he described as his heart medicine: “If your heartbeat becomes very slow or stops, go to hospital immediately”. Hospital he added was more than thirty minutes away. The two things together justify some ranting: the pharmaceutical industry is one of most heavily regulated around and is also one of the most profitable. Surely they can afford someone to write and check such vital information who can avoid this sort of thing. After all it is pretty difficult to tell your doctor that you have lost consciousness, much less get yourself to hospital if your heart has stopped.

A popular brand of fruit drink's label tells you it is "Best served 100% chilled". What does that mean...as ice cubes? Numbers can give problems even when no specific number is involved: the hi-fi outfit Richer Sounds once advertised that "some of our deals are finite in supply". I guess that will stop you being disappointed if something you want is no longer available at a bargain price, but it says "some" – what I wonder do they have an *infinite* quantity of for goodness sake?

Precision is out there too. An IT firm advise their customers of their Internet download usage so that they can avoid going over their limit. One customer with a limit of 5120 megabytes was told he had so far used 24. – and then, after the decimal point, the figure was followed by no less than 45 further numbers! Surely no one needs that level of precision. Let's not worry though as this gigantic number was followed by the explanatory phrase "This usage summary is only an estimate". Some estimate! Similarly Seafair Milford Haven measure the boats they book into moorings, or at least they did for one yacht owner who it told that his boat was 5.791199999999999 metres long (and the beam was measured with a similar accuracy). Quite how they did that is a mystery. Let's go back to weight for a moment. This causes problems all over the world. The New Zealand post office sells special boxes to make sending gifts easier. The different sizes each come with a maximum weight limit: a small one (140 × 130 × 25mm) specifies packing no more than 20 kilograms in it, yet if you filled it with a solid lump of the heaviest element known to man (something like iridium) it would weigh less than 10 kilograms. Perhaps they are just playing safe.

Recruitment advertisement: 7 ton delivery drivers wanted

There are certainly some numbers provided that seem accurate, but still give pause for thought. A pack of 10 cartons of fruit juice proclaims "2 more boxes than other leading juice box 8-packs". Wow! Back to elephants, on a bag of a chocolate product it states that "1.25 billion are produced every year. This is equivalent in weight to 625 African elephants". I can't help feeling that this fact is stated with some pride, but does it make you want to buy more?

Label on a Pale Ale bottle: Where progress is measured in pints – Volume 500ml

If there is a moral here given the nonsense numbers quoted, it is that you should do the maths; otherwise there is every likelihood that you will misinform, confuse or con – especially if decimals or percentages are involved. Still more care is needed.

AFTERWORD

*One should not aim at being possible to understand,
but at being impossible to misunderstand.*

– Quintilian

The quotation above goes back to Roman times and is my favourite comment on communications. Everyone concerned with telling the world about their organisation and their product should bear it in mind.

The supplier of a shower cap advises users to: **Place shower cap over head to prevent it from getting wet.**

Be warned

I hope these pages have made you smile. But their message has serious purpose. If you cannot even describe your product (or anything else) in plain English, are terminally number blind, don't check what you have written or think so little of people that you believe that they will immediately purchase anything described as new, improved and exceptional, especially if it is unique or, better still *very* unique (the latter phrase being especially favoured though, for the record, nothing can be very unique), even to a small extent, then you need to pause and take stock.

Think carefully, think long and hard, write carefully and check carefully – check, check and check again.

You may feel I have taken a long route to a simple action point, but it's important. Be especially careful when figures are involved and even more so if they involve decimals, percentages and, above all, money. I'll address the last word to those writing the sort of nonsense featured here, and do so in the form of a sign seen in one customer orientated store some years back:

WARNING: CUSTOMERS ARE PERISHABLE

So they are. People rarely *have* to buy from someone; there are nearly always alternatives. Be warned out there, if people do not like the way you address them they can and will vote with their feet and walk away. The ultimate penalty for wielding weapons of mass disinformation is that you are ignored.

I have been pretty scathing about many of the errors recorded here, though rightly so especially regarding those that may engender real confusion, inconvenience or even danger.

That said let me admit that realistically some errors are perhaps inevitable. Some have no mischievous intent and have simply slipped through. The authors of such are no doubt contrite if their errors are pointed out and, as was said early on, many of the words quoted here have doubtless now been corrected or dropped.

I am sure I am not immune to all this. I wrote this carefully. I checked it carefully, as did my editor at the publisher, the proofs were read (again carefully) by at least three people and for all I know the publisher may have shown it to many more; maybe the office cat had a look too.

Nevertheless it's still possible there is an error, or tow (sic). So I'll end with an apology. If you find an error, even if it is simply a slip of the typing finger, then I apologise – of course, the deliberate mistake is included just to make a point! Take care.

Website: "Proof-Reading-Service.net provides professional proofreading services exclusively for professors, lecturers, post-doc's and research students and businesses". *No one is immune – and here it's those tricky apostrophes again.*