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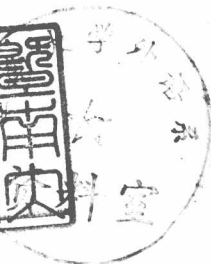
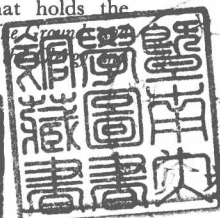
The Complete
PLAIN WORDS

BY

SIR ERNEST GOWERS

*Author of Plain Words and
An ABC of Plain Words*

"As if plain words, useful and intelligible instructions, were not as good for an esquire, or one that is in commission from the King, as for him that holds the plough." JOHN EACHARD *The Crown Occasions of the Contempt of Religion enquired into.* 1670.



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Preface

THIS book is in the main a reconstruction of my two previous books, *Plain Words* and *ABC of Plain Words*. Both these, as I explained in the prefaces to them, were written at the invitation of the Treasury as a contribution to what they were doing to improve official English. The first was by way of an introduction to the subject; the second was designed as a work of reference. When my publishers told me last year that the time was ripe for a new edition of *Plain Words*, I thought it would be well to round off the venture by weaving into the new edition material from the *ABC*. I could then say all I had to say in one volume, and, by giving it the index which the original edition lacked, could make it serve as a book of reference, and so do away with the need for a separate book with the layout, inevitably unattractive, of a series of unrelated topics arranged alphabetically.

I am not a grammarian, and *The Complete Plain Words*, like its predecessors, makes no claim to be a grammar of the English Language, though for reasons I have explained in the text I felt bound reluctantly and diffidently, to give one chapter (IX) to some points of grammar and one (X) to punctuation. Apart from these two chapters, this book is wholly concerned with what is described in one of the quotations that head the first chapter as the choice and arrangement of words in such a way as to get an idea as exactly as possible out of one mind into another. Even so I must not be credited with too high an ambition: the scope of the book is circumscribed by its being intended primarily for those who use words as tools of their trade, in administration or business.

I have made full use of this opportunity to revise what I wrote before by alteration, by omission, and especially by the addition of new matter. In doing so I have profited from reading books on kindred subjects since published, and I tender my grateful acknowledgment to their authors. They are among the books listed in the bibliography on page 200. But above all I am indebted to the many correspondents from all parts of the English-speaking world who have been good enough to respond to my invitation to send me suggestions, criticisms and specimens. I have thanked them all individually by letter, and I should have liked to print a list of their names here as a perpetual token of my gratitude for their kindness. But they are too numerous. Many of them, if they read this book,

will recognise passages in it as their own contributions, and I would ask them to treat this discovery as conveying a message of special thanks from me to them.

But I must make one or two exceptions to the anonymity of my gratitude. Kind letters from fellow-workers in the same field gave me particular pleasure: among these were Mr. Ivor Brown, Mr. V. H. Collins, Dr. Rudolph Flesch, Mr. Frank Jones and Mr. Henry Strauss, M.P. (now Lord Conesford). And I must record my deep obligation to that master-craftsman of the English language, my friend Mr. G. M. Young: the frequency with which references to him occur in the following pages imperfectly reflects the debt I owe him for his encouragement and advice. I must also repeat the thanks I expressed in my previous prefaces to Dr. Wyn Griffith for continuing to allow me to draw on his wise council, and to him and to my brother, Sir William Gowers, for being good enough to read the proofs and making many valuable suggestions. Finally I am most grateful to Sir Gordon Welch, lately Controller of the Stationery Office, and to Mr. H. G. Carter, late of that Office, for the keen interest they have shown in this book and the great trouble they have taken over its preparation.

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I

Prologue

Do but take care to express yourself in a plain, easy Manner, in well-chosen, significant and decent Terms, and to give a harmonious and pleasing Turn to your Periods; study to explain your Thoughts, and set them in the truest Light, labouring as much as possible, not to leave them dark nor intricate, but clear and intelligible.

CERVANTES. *Preface to Don Quixote*

The final cause of speech is to get an idea as exactly as possible out of one mind into another. Its formal cause therefore is such choice and disposition of words as will achieve this end most economically.

G. M. YOUNG

THE purpose of this book is to help officials in their use of written English as a tool of their trade. I suspect that this project may be received by many of them without any marked enthusiasm or gratitude. "Even now", they may say, "it is all we can do to keep our heads above water by turning out at top speed letters in which we say what we mean after our own fashion. Not one in a thousand of the people we write to knows the difference between good English and bad. What is the use of all this highbrow stuff? It will only prevent us from getting on with the job."

But what is this job that must be got on with? Writing is an instrument for conveying ideas from one mind to another; the writer's job is to make his reader apprehend his meaning readily and precisely. Do these letters always say just what the writer means? Nay, does the writer himself always know just what he means? Even when he knows what he means, and says it in a way that is clear to him, is it always equally clear to his reader? If not, he has not been getting on with the job. "The difficulty", said Robert Louis Stevenson, "is not to write, but to write what you mean, not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish." Let us take one or two examples given later in this book to illustrate particular faults, and, applying this test to them, ask ourselves whether the reader is likely to grasp at once the meaning of

Prices are basis prices per ton for the representative-basis-pricing specification and size and quantity.

or of

Where particulars of a partnership are disclosed to the Executive Council the remuneration of the individual partner for superannuation

purposes will be deemed to be such proportion of the total remuneration of such practitioners as the proportion of his share in partnership profits bears to the total proportion of the shares of such practitioner in those profits.

or of

The treatment of this loan interest from the date of the first payment has been correct—i.e. tax charged at full standard rate on Mr. X and treated in your hands as liability fully satisfied before receipt.

or of

The programme must be on the basis of the present head of labour ceiling allocation overall.

or, to take an example from America, so as to show that this is not the only country in which writers sometimes forget that what has a meaning for them may have none for their readers, of

The non-compensable evaluation heretofore assigned to you for your service-connected disability is confirmed and continued.*

All these were written for plain men, not for experts. What will the plain man make of them? The recipients of the last three may painfully and dubiously reach the right conclusions—the taxpayer that no more money is wanted from him, the builder that he is unlikely to get more labour than has been allocated to him, and the veteran that there is still no disability pension for him. But the recipient of the first example will be unable to unlock the secret of the jargon without a key, and what the second will make of the explanation given to him is anyone's guess. Yet the writers may be presumed to have known exactly what they meant; the obscurity was not in their thoughts but in their way of expressing themselves. The fault of writing like this is not that it is unscholarly but that it is inefficient. It wastes time: the reader's time because he has to puzzle over what should be plain, and the writer's time because he may have to write again to explain his meaning. A job that needed to be done only once has had to be done twice because it was bungled the first time.

Professional writers realise that they cannot hope to affect their readers precisely as they wish without care and practice in the proper use of words. The need for the official to take pains is even greater, for if what the professional writer has written is wearisome and obscure the reader can toss the book aside and read no more, but only at his peril can he so treat what the official has tried to tell him. By proper use I do not mean grammatically proper. It is true that

*Quoted in *Time*, 7th May, 1947.

there are rules of grammar and syntax, just as in music there are rules of harmony and counterpoint. But one can no more write good English than one can compose good music merely by keeping the rules. On the whole they are aids to writing intelligibly, for they are in the main no more than the distillation of successful experiments made by writers of English through the centuries in how best to handle words so as to make a writer's meaning plain. Some, it is true, are arbitrary. One or two actually increase the difficulty of clear expression, but these too should nevertheless be respected, because lapses from what for the time being is regarded as correct irritate the educated reader, and distract his attention, and so make him the less likely to be affected precisely as you wish. But I shall not have much to say about text-book rules because they are mostly well known and well observed in official writing.

The golden rule is not a rule of grammar or syntax. It concerns less the arrangement of words than the choice of them. "After all," said Lord Macaulay, "the first law of writing, that law to which all other laws are subordinate, is this: that the words employed should be such as to convey to the reader the meaning of the writer." The golden rule is to pick those words and to use them and them only. Arrangement is of course important, but if the right words are used they generally have a happy knack of arranging themselves. Matthew Arnold once said: "People think that I can teach them style. What stuff it all is. Have something to say and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style." That was no doubt said partly for effect, but there is much truth in it, especially in relation to the sort of writing we are now concerned with, in which emotional appeal plays no part.

This golden rule applies to all prose, whatever its purpose, and indeed to poetry too. Illustrations could be found throughout the gamut of purposes for which the written word is used. At the one end of it we can turn to Shakespeare, and from the innumerable examples that offer themselves choose the lines

Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchymy

which, as a description of what the rising sun does to meadows and rivers on a "glorious morning", must be as effective a use of thirteen words as could be found in all English literature. At the other end we can turn (for the golden rule can be illustrated from official writing in its observance as well as in its breach) to the unknown member of the staff of the General Post Office who by composing the notice that used to be displayed in every post office

Postmasters are neither bound to give change nor authorised to demand it

used twelve words hardly less efficiently to warn customers of what must have been a singularly intractable dilemma. At first sight there seems little in common between the two. Their purposes are different; one is descriptive and emotional, the other instructional and objective. But each serves its purpose perfectly, and it is the same quality in both that makes them do so. Every word is exactly right; no other word would do as well; each is pulling its weight; none could be dispensed with. As was said of Milton's prose in the quotation that heads Chapter VI, "Fewer would not have served the turn, and more would have been superfluous".

It is sometimes said that the principle of plain words can be overdone. That depends on a writer's purpose. If what he wants is to use words to conceal his thoughts and to leave a blurred impression on the minds of his readers, of course it can; and there may be occasions when prudence prompts him to do so. Even those who want to express their thoughts sometimes prefer to do so not too plainly. That rare artist in words, C. E. Montague, once amused himself by tilting against exaggerated lucidity. He said:

Even in his most explicit moments a courteous writer will stop short of rubbing into our minds the last item of all that he means. He will, in a moderate sense of the term, have his non-lucid intervals. At times he will make us wrestle a little with him in the dark before he yields his full meaning.

That again depends on what the writer's purpose is, and on who his reader will be. As Samuel Butler said, "It takes two to say a thing—a sayee as well as a sayer, and the one is as essential to any true saying as the other". I recall an old story of an Indian official who, on finding his British superior laboriously correcting a letter he had drafted to a brother Indian official, remarked "Your honour puts yourself to much trouble correcting my English and doubtless the final letter will be much better literature; but it will go from me Mukherji to him Bannerji, and he Bannerji will understand it a great deal better as I Mukherji write it than as your honour corrects it". But the writers for whom this book is intended are not addressing a small group whose idiosyncracies must be studied. They have the whole adult population as their readers. In other words the sayees are mostly plain, simple, not highly educated people. And the things the sayers have to say are in the main concerned with telling the sayees what they may or may not do and what they are or are not entitled to. There is no room here for experiments with hints and nuances. No doubt these writers do in fact sometimes make us

wrestle with them in the dark before yielding their full meaning—sometimes indeed no amount of wrestling will make them yield it. But it is charitable to suppose that this is by accident, and not, as when Montague's writer does it, by design. Just as those servants of the Crown whose weapon is the sword have had to abandon the gay trappings of regimental uniformis and assume the dull monotony of battledress, so those who wield the pen must submit to a similar change; the serviceable is now more needed than the ornamental. "That the hurry of modern life has put both the florid and the polished styles out of fashion, except for very special audiences, is not to be deplored if this leads to a more general appreciation of the capacity of the plain style. By 'plain' we do not mean bald but simple and neat."*

Moreover you need to choose the right words in order that you may make your meaning clear not only to your reader but also to yourself. The first requisite for any writer is to know just what meaning he wants to convey, and it is only by clothing his thoughts in words that he can think at all. "What a man cannot state he does not perfectly know, and conversely the inability to put his thoughts into words sets a boundary to his thought. . . . English is not merely the medium of our thought; it is the very stuff and process of it."* And the less one makes a habit of thinking, the less one is able to think: the power of thinking atrophies unless it is used. The following was written about politicians, but it is true of all of us:

A scrupulous writer in every sentence that he writes will ask himself . . . What am I trying to say? What words will express it? . . . And he probably asks himself . . . Could I put it more shortly? But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shirk it by simply throwing open your mind and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.†

"Go to all this trouble" is not an overstatement. Few common things are more difficult than to find the right word, and many people are too lazy to try. This form of indolence sometimes betrays itself by a copious use of inverted commas. "I know this is not quite the right word", the inverted commas seem to say, "but I can't be bothered to think of a better"; or, "please note that I am using this word facetiously"; or, "don't think I don't know that this is a

**Report of the Departmental Committee on the Teaching of English in England.* H.M. Stationery Office, 1921.

†George Orwell in *Horizon*, April, 1947.

cliché". If the word is the right one, do not be ashamed of it: if it is the wrong one, do not use it. The same implied apology is often made in conversation by interposing "you know" or by ending every sentence with phrases such as "or something" or "sort of thing". Officials cannot do that, but in them the same phenomenon is reflected in an unwillingness to venture outside a small vocabulary of shapeless bundles of uncertain content—words like *position*, *arise*, *involve*, *in connexion with*, *issue*, *consideration* and *factor*—a disposition, for instance, to "admit with regret the position which has arisen in connexion with" rather than to make the effort to tell the reader specifically what is admitted with regret. Clear thinking is hard work, but loose thinking is bound to produce loose writing. And clear thinking takes time, but time that has to be given to a job to avoid making a mess of it cannot be time wasted and may in the end be time saved.

It is wise therefore not to begin to write until you are quite certain what you want to say. That sounds elementary, but the elementary things are often the most likely to be neglected. Some, it is true, can never be sure of clarifying their thoughts except by trying to put them on paper. If you are one of these, never be content with your first draft; always revise it. Within the Service, authoritative advice has varied in its emphasis on the need for revision. In the Foreign Office a memorandum on draft-writing, after recommending simplicity, continued:

It is a commonplace that this simplicity does not always come in a first draft even to the greatest stylists. Redrafting takes time, and I know that members of departments have little enough time to spend on it in these days. But it is up to them, for heads of departments and under-secretaries have still less time to spare. . . .

The Ministry of Health ended a similar memorandum:

I do not expect our letters to be models of the best English prose, and I do not want the time taken in answering letters (which is already too long) to be increased still further by unnecessary labour in the preparing, and, still less, the polishing of drafts. . . . But it is clear that there are ways of saying what is meant in shorter, plainer and better English [than the examples given].

These pieces of advice are not irreconcilable. They relate to rather different types of communication. Both are no doubt wise. But I am sure that you should fear more the danger of putting out slipshod work by omitting to revise it than that of delaying public business by excessive polishing. Very few can write what they mean and affect their readers precisely as they wish without revising their first attempt. There is a happy mean between being content with the

first thing that comes into your head and the craving for perfection that makes a Flaubert spend hours or even days on getting a single sentence to his satisfaction. The article you are paid to produce need not be polished but it must be workmanlike.

The official must use the written word for many different purposes—for Parliamentary Bills, Statutory Orders and other legal documents, for despatches to Her Majesty's representatives abroad, for reports of commissions and committees, for circulars to Local Authorities and similar bodies, for departmental instructions, for minute-writing, for correspondence with other departments and with the public, and for explaining the law to the millions for whom it now creates complicated personal rights and obligations and whose daily lives it orders in countless ways. Whatever the purpose, the object of the writer will be the same—to make the reader take his meaning readily and precisely. But a choice has sometimes to be made between the simplicity that conveys some meaning readily and the elaboration necessary to convey a precise one. In the first of the categories mentioned—Parliamentary Bills, Statutory Orders and other legal documents—precision is so important that these form a class apart, with which this book is not concerned. But there is so much confused thinking on this subject, even among people who ought to know better, that it will be as well to begin with a digression explaining why it is outside my present scope.

II

A Digression on Legal English

Even where the Counsel in chambers is merely "advising on a case" or drawing up a conveyance of property, he is really thinking of what view the court and the judges will take of his advice or his draftsmanship if any dispute arises on them. . . . The supreme test in every case is: "Will this stand the scrutiny of the Court?"

STEPHEN. *Commentaries on the Laws of England*

THE peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official with. They are cited (to quote a typical comment) to show that "it would be a herculean task to teach the Civil Service to write its own language creditably". The style in which Acts of Parliament are written is contemptuously called "official jargon". That the style has peculiarities cannot be denied, but if it is jargon*—an arguable question—its species is the legal not the official. It is written by lawyers, not by civil servants (in the sense in which the critics use the term), and its peculiarities arise from causes exactly opposite to those of the peculiarities alleged against officials. Those of the one come from a desire to convey a precise meaning; those of the other—so it is said—come too often from a reluctance to convey any meaning at all. The only difference between the language of Acts of Parliament and that of private legal documents is that in the skilled and experienced hands of Parliamentary Counsel its inevitable peculiarities are less obtrusive and ungraceful than they are in the hands of the ordinary private practitioner. Such as they are, they are caused by the necessity of being unambiguous. That is by no means the same as being readily intelligible; on the contrary, the nearer you get to the one the further you are likely to get from the other.

The reason why certainty of meaning must be the paramount aim is clear enough. These documents impose obligations and confer rights, and neither the parties to them nor the draftsmen of them have the last word in deciding exactly what those rights and obligations are. That can only be settled in a Court of Law on the words

*The proper meaning of *jargon* is writing that employs technical words not commonly intelligible. *Catachresis*, for instance, is grammarians' jargon for using a word in a wrong sense. When grammarians call writing jargon merely because it is verbose, circumlocutory and flabby, they themselves commit the sin of catachresis that they denounce in others.

of the document. If anyone is to be held irrevocably to meaning what he says, he must be very careful to say what he means. And words are an imperfect instrument for expressing complicated concepts with certainty; only mathematics can be sure of doing that. As Dr. Glanville Williams has pointed out in this connexion, "words have a penumbra of uncertainty". He writes:

The ordinary man is not usually troubled with these perplexities. It does not matter to the seaman whether an anchor is or is not called part of a vessel. A chemist does not need to answer the question, yes or no, does a rolled-gold watch come within the description gold. Biologists may find difficulty with their classification, but nothing turns on the question whether they classify a creature under one head or another: it is simply a question of verbal expediency. With the lawyer it is different. The lawyer, like the theologian, is faced with a number of texts that he regards as authoritative and that are supposed to settle any question that can conceivably arise. Each text was once drawn up by someone who presumably meant something by it; but once the document has left its author's hands it is the document that matters, not any unexpressed meaning that still remains in the author's mind. For the lawyer the words of the document are authoritative as words and there is no possibility of obtaining further information from the author, either because the author is dead or because of the rules of evidence precluding reference to him.*

It is accordingly the duty of a draftsman of these authoritative texts to try to imagine every possible combination of circumstances to which his words might apply and every conceivable misinterpretation that might be put on them and to take precautions accordingly. He must avoid all graces, not be afraid of repetitions, or even of identifying them by *aforesaids*; he must limit by definition words with a penumbra dangerously large, and amplify with a string of near-synonyms words with a penumbra dangerously small; he must eschew all pronouns when their antecedents might possibly be open to dispute, and generally avoid every potential grammatical ambiguity. (An application for quashing a New Towns Order turned on the true antecedent of a *thereto*.) All the time he must keep his eye on the rules of legal interpretation and the case-law on the meaning of particular words, and choose his phraseology to fit them. (Previous judicial interpretations of the word *money* compelled the beneficiaries under a will to take a case to the House of Lords in order to establish that *money* meant what everyone knew the testatrix had intended it to mean.) No one can expect pretty writing from anyone thus burdened. A well-meant attempt was made by the Minister in charge of the Bill that became the Workmen's Compensation Act 1906 to make perfectly clear to ordinary

*"Language and the Law", *Law Quarterly Review*, April, 1945.

people what sort of accidents gave rise to a right to compensation; he insisted on using the simple words "arising out of and in the course of" the employment. Simplicity proved to have been bought at such cost in precision that those words must have caused more litigation than any other eight words on the Statute Book. Halsbury's *Laws of England* takes more than 38 pages to explain the phrase and cite the cases on it.

To illustrate the difference between ordinary phraseology that makes its meaning plain and legal phraseology that makes its meaning certain, let us take an example at random. I open the volume of Statutory Rules and Orders for 1945, and, turning over the pages until I find a short one, alight on the "Rags (Wiping Rags) (Maximum Charges) (Amendment) Order". In the summer of 1945, it appears, the President of the Board of Trade, moved perhaps by compassion for those who follow what must be a spiritually unsatisfying occupation, decided to increase the profit allowed for washing wiping rags. The Order effecting this (if we omit the common-form provisions about the Interpretation Act and the Short Title) runs as follows:

The Rags (Wiping Rags) (Maximum Charges) Order 1943 (as amended) shall have effect as if in Article 1 thereof for the figure "8" where it occurs in the last line there were substituted the figure "11½".

This by itself conveys no meaning at all to anybody. Because the same is true of so many Orders, instructions have been given to all Departments that every Order submitted to Parliament must be accompanied by an explanatory memorandum. In this case the explanatory memorandum was as follows:

This Order permits launderers of wiping rags to add 11½ per cent to the charges they were making during the week beginning the 31st August, 1942, for such work.

That is a statement immediately intelligible. Why could not the Order itself be equally lucid? Because, although the explanatory memorandum is probably enough to tell most people all that they want to know, it is not precise enough to give unmistakable guidance in doubtful cases or to support a prosecution for its breach. What is a "wiping rag", and what are "charges"? Both need definition, and both are elaborately defined in the original Order. Why then, it may be asked, did not the amending Order repeat these definitions, and so make all clear? Because the definitions are so complicated that re-enactment of the Order as amended would have been far from making the meaning of the Order immediately clear. Research would have been necessary to find out what was old and what was