

Languages and translation



Directorate-General
for Translation

Clear writing



European
Commission

September 2010



1

CONTENTS

ABOUT Clear writing

Why does the Commission need a Clear Writing campaign?	4
Tailor-made in 23 languages	6
Teach yourself clear writing online!	11
Clear writing – what Commission staff think	12
Des formations pour rédiger clairement en français	14
Improving professional writing in the Commission	16

VOICES FROM OUTSIDE

Why should the law be plain?	18
Campaigning for plain language in public information	20
Plain language work in the Swedish government	22

INTERVIEW

Interview with EU Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou	24
--	----

USEFUL INFORMATION	27
--------------------	----



EDITORIAL

par Anabela Pereira¹

Vous avez entre vos mains le premier numéro du magazine de la Direction générale de la traduction (DGT) «nouvelle version». Il a fait peau neuve visuellement et substantiellement. Son nouveau graphisme le rend plus attractif et agréable à feuilleter. Quant au contenu, le magazine a ouvert ses pages à des auteurs externes aux institutions européennes. Leurs témoignages seront sans nul doute des éléments intéressants et novateurs qui permettront un enrichissement des débats grâce à une ouverture de ceux-ci vers l'extérieur et une mise en perspective de ce qui se fait dans le microcosme de la fonction publique européenne.

Le présent magazine est consacré au sujet *Rédiger clairement*, question de grande actualité à la Commission européenne. Il retrace les aspects les plus marquants de la campagne qui vise à améliorer la qualité des textes de la Commission, que ce soit des textes internes administratifs ou des textes adressés aux citoyens.

Chaque citoyen a le droit inaliénable de comprendre les dispositions et mesures adoptées par l'Union européenne le concernant directement. Au fil du temps, les textes communautaires ont eu tendance à devenir de plus en plus complexes et hermétiques. Les raisons de cette évolution sont multiples et liées essentiellement à la nature particulière des institutions européennes. En effet, les institutions sont uniques en leur genre: elles ont une culture administrative propre résultant d'un compromis entre différentes traditions et cultures et elles produisent des documents en 23 langues officielles.

Les combinaisons linguistiques entre les 23 langues officielles sont extrêmement nombreuses. Ainsi, la Commission s'est vue obligée de fixer des règles de travail pragmatiques, réduisant le nombre de langues utilisées au quotidien. Tout au long de la chaîne de production d'un texte, différents acteurs interviennent et, le plus souvent, ils doivent rédiger dans une langue qui n'est pas leur langue maternelle. Il faut aussi ajouter que, au fil des années, les institutions ont développé un style rédactionnel propre et emploient un jargon particulier qui n'est pas toujours aisément compréhensible par les destinataires de sa production législative.

Le service de traduction de la Commission européenne constitue souvent le dernier rempart avant la diffusion d'un document. En effet, il représente un chaînon de communication au travers duquel passe 95 % de l'interaction de l'institution avec les autorités nationales,

les citoyens et autres parties. Il est donc normal que les traducteurs soient très concernés par la qualité des textes qu'ils sont appelés à traduire.

Il y a environ douze ans, ce service lança une campagne appelée *Fight the Fog*. Elle s'adressait à tous les rédacteurs et traducteurs de textes institutionnels en langue anglaise. L'objectif était de combattre le «brouillard linguistique» qui bloquait souvent une réelle communication et compréhension entre les institutions européennes et les citoyens. La campagne a été favorablement accueillie et a produit des résultats concrets. Elle a permis d'accroître la qualité des textes en anglais et a conduit à des développements qui ont amélioré la communication avec les citoyens.

Les vagues successives d'élargissements des dernières années et l'afflux d'un nombre important de nouveaux fonctionnaires semblent avoir eu un impact sur la qualité des textes produits. Ainsi, le moment actuel se révèle propice au lancement d'une nouvelle campagne, cette fois-ci plus ambitieuse que la précédente. Elle est menée par un groupe issu de différents services, s'adresse à tout le personnel de la Commission européenne et donne des conseils dans toutes les langues officielles. L'objectif visé par cette campagne est de changer durablement les habitudes de rédaction au sein de l'institution.

Les avis sont unanimes: l'Europe ne peut pas se construire sans l'adhésion des citoyens à ses projets. Afin de se rapprocher des citoyens, la plus grande attention doit être accordée à la communication et, par conséquent, à la forme et au fond des textes qui leur sont adressés.

Cette campagne est en symbiose parfaite avec les développements qui ont lieu dans de nombreux pays européens, où des démarches similaires ont déjà été entreprises, avec succès, dans des organismes officiels ou privés. Il s'agit de garantir aux citoyens européens le plein exercice de leurs droits. Pour que les citoyens puissent faire des choix éclairés, il faut qu'ils soient en mesure de bien comprendre la législation qui leur est adressée. ■



¹ Rédactrice en chef

Why does the Commission need a Clear Writing campaign?

by Emma Wagner¹

For most readers, the answer to the question in the title will be clear. It is obvious, to anyone whose job requires them to understand European Commission documents, that they ought to be easier to read. And that includes the Commission's translators. Their job means that they are the first (and sometimes, they fear, the only) readers who have to decipher entire documents in order to reproduce them in another language.

Although efforts have been made to improve the clarity and impact of Commission writing, much still remains to be done. Action taken since the Fight the Fog campaign drew attention to the problems, 12 years ago, includes the following new initiatives:

- major efforts by DG Communication, including an overhaul of the Europa website;
- the introduction of citizens' summaries for Commission policy documents;
- the creation of the Web Translation Unit, a dedicated DGT service where websites and

citizens' summaries are edited and translated into all official languages;

- the creation and promotion of in-house editing, with a DGT Editing Unit to help improve important English and French texts written in the Commission.

Despite these new developments, the situation is still problematic. When the idea of a new campaign was mooted, one reason was the recent recruitment of new officials (from the 12 new Member States that joined the EU from 2004 onwards). This major EU enlargement was a fantastic achievement for democracy and for Europe, but it brought two problems for drafting in the Com-

mission: the continued rise of bad English as the Commission's *lingua franca*, and the massive influx of new staff who naturally adopted the prevailing in-house style, rather than trying to reform it.

Our suspicions were substantiated by the in-house survey held in November 2009 to prepare the ground for



the new Clear Writing campaign. It showed that 95 % of Commission drafters wrote mainly in English, although only 13 % of them were of English mother tongue. It also revealed that 54 % of them, that is more than half of the entire Commission population drafting documents, rarely or never have their documents checked by a native speaker.

So the new campaign would, we realised, have to raise awareness and provide practical 'quick-fix' aids to clear writing, offering more access to more kinds of training, and generally promoting the idea that important texts should be revised by a native speaker (preferably a trained editor) before they go public.

The new Clear Writing campaign was successfully launched in March 2010 and will run for most of the year,

'The major EU enlargement was a fantastic achievement for democracy and for Europe, but it brought two problems for drafting in the Commission: the continued rise of bad English as the Commission's lingua franca, and the massive influx of new staff who naturally adopted the prevailing in-house style, rather than trying to reform it.'

The booklet offers and illustrates 10 top tips for clear writing:

Tip 1: Think before you write

Clear writing starts with clear thinking. Ask yourself: Who will be reading the document? What are you trying to achieve? What points must the document cover?

Tip 2: Focus on the reader — be direct and interesting

Try to see things from the point of view of your readers. Involve them. Imagine which questions they might ask. Interest them.

Tip 3: Get your document into shape

Give your document the right structure and avoid mistakes commonly made at the Commission.

Tip 4: KISS: Keep It Short and Simple

Don't be afraid to go for the shorter option. Avoid over-long sentences.

Tip 5: Make sense — structure your sentences

Arrange ideas in logical (often chronological) order. Don't bury important information in the middle of the sentence.

Tip 6: Cut out excess nouns — verb forms are livelier

Avoid noun disease by using verbs and verbal forms instead.

Tip 7: Be concrete, not abstract

Concrete messages are clear — abstract language can be vague and off-putting.

Tip 8: Prefer active verbs to passive — and name the agent

If you change passive verb forms to active ones, your writing will become clearer because you will be forced to say who is responsible for the action.

Tip 9: Beware of false friends, jargon and abbreviations

We all know how and why it happens... but many say this is the cardinal sin of Eurocratic writing.

Tip 10: Revise and check

Don't just rely on your spelling chequer!

(Note on the explanation of Tip 10: Yes, 'chequer' is a deliberate mistake.)

culminating in a report with recommendations on sustainable action. Unlike the Fight the Fog campaign masterminded by English translators, the new Clear Writing campaign is wider-based, with a steering group drawn from several Commission departments: the all-important Secretariat General, the Legal Service, DG Communication, DG Human Resources (Training) and of course DG Translation.

Another difference is that the new campaign is not English-only. It is about clear writing in any language.

Most of the practical advice is presented in our booklet 'How To Write Clearly', which draws on guidance from several different European countries and is available in all 23 official languages. The booklet can be accessed by the public on Europa (go to <http://ec.europa.eu/translation> and scroll down to 'How To Write Clearly' — click on the square with 3 dots to get the other languages).

Alongside the booklet, which is public, the campaign includes many activities directed at in-house staff: an intranet website, a special online

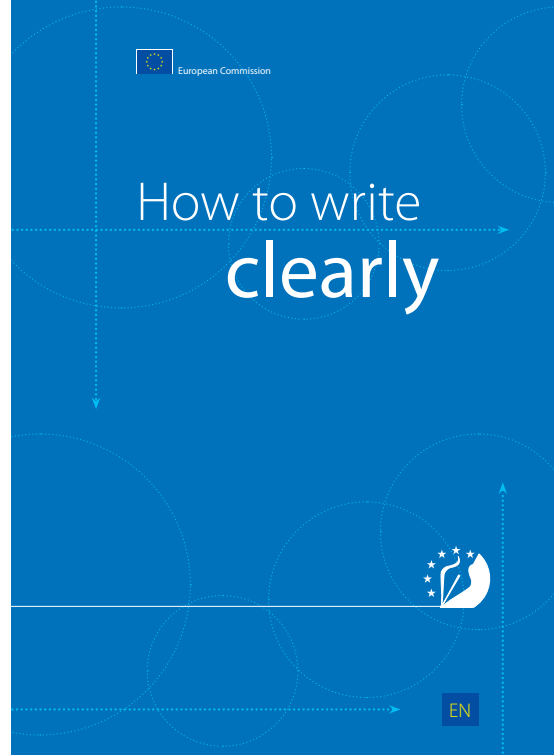
tutorial, a 'Tip of the Week', lunchtime lectures and taster courses. There is even a helpline providing instant advice for drafters in distress.

Later this year the campaign will host national clear writing specialists at a major conference entitled 'Clear Writing throughout Europe'. The public will be able to watch via webstreaming on the internet. Our conference will showcase successful campaigns in the EU Member States and will — we hope — spread the (clear) word! ■

¹ Editor in the DGT Editing Unit

Tailor-made in 23 languages

The English original of the Campaign for Clear Writing guide, 'How to write clearly', was adapted into other languages. We asked DGT translators involved in the project about the challenges they faced.



> Bringing the clear writing message closer to home in Irish

by Tomás Ó Máille,
Irish language unit

What good will this do? Isn't unclear English the problem? These were the questions I asked myself while embarking on this project. And I was not alone... However, it became clear as time passed that a small publication of this kind could also benefit those writing in a lesser-used language such as Irish.



Ideally, a booklet of this kind should be written from scratch in each language. Although the English version of the booklet had been prepared using multilingual sources, it became clear very early on that we would have to question and adapt some of the recommendations for the Irish edition. Ideas on clear writing in English cannot simply be superimposed onto other languages.

For instance, on sentence structure, one recommendation was to put the most important thing at the end of a sentence. In Irish, the most important thing comes at

the beginning. So most recommendations in this section were very different to those for other languages. Another section that had to be adapted for the Irish edition was that on preferring active versus passive verbs, as the passive is seldom used in Irish anyway.

In Ireland, we have a large number of people writing in both English and Irish. The influence of one language on the other can certainly produce instances of unclear writing, a constant concern when discussing this issue from an Irish point of view.

I showed the booklet to a number of external experts in the field. Though they, like me, were initially concerned about localising a booklet from the English, they contributed to the project because they felt the guide would indeed be a useful tool to have available for raising awareness of the issues.

One of the main benefits of the booklet, in my opinion, is that when you see the ideas in your own language, it can bring the message about clear writing closer to home, and this can sharpen the perceptions of those having to write in a foreign language too.

By coincidence, the first publication focused solely on editing texts in Irish, *In Ord is in Eagar* [The right word in the right place] by Antain Mac Lochlainn, went on sale in bookshops just in time for Clear Writing Week. Timing is everything... ■

> Lively guidelines for natural, vivid Bulgarian

by Iva Vatoa-Ivanova,
Bulgarian language department

At the core of the Clear Writing campaign is the booklet 'How to write clearly'. To turn it into all the EU languages was a tricky task, because it was written in English and supposedly reflected English language rules — both in terms of grammar, and vocabulary. The authors encouraged translators to be creative and to 'domesticate' the text, to make it appealing to the target audience. Now the task became an even greater challenge.



In the Bulgarian language version, we decided to stick to the structure of the original, because the principles of clear writing are basically universal. However, the examples had to be carefully selected to reflect the idea, but also to be real-life examples, something we come across every day. The hint 'Be concrete, not abstract' is legitimate, but when it comes to the crunch in Bulgarian, the natural, vivid, clear-writing choice of word in a report or a news article in Bulgarian might seem rather abstract if translated into English. For instance, 'Many people decided' might literally be rendered as 'Not a few decided'.

We also had a challenge with the hint about avoiding false friends. Since the examples and the idea are not really very pertinent to the Bulgarian language, we decided to rewrite the chapter and to focus on the unnecessary or misleading use of foreign words instead of Bulgarian counterparts (e.g. 'badge', for which we have a nice word that has been in circulation for a long time, or 'tax' which sounds similar to the word *taksa*, which means 'fee').

There were other details that had to be localised, rather than translated: the examples for acronyms, for instance.

The next step for the translator and the reviser was to send the text to the Language Coordination Group in our department for comments, ideas and suggestions. These we incorporated in the final version. The text got re-shaped, reformulated, reread numerous times, so that we came up with a final product that offers guidelines that are lively and perfectly in tune with our language. ■

> Judicious fine-tuning needed in Finnish

by Samuli Mäkelä,
Finnish language department

The main principles of clear writing defined in 'How to write clearly' by and large apply to Finnish, too. However, some of the more detailed pieces of advice needed adapting. For example, addressing the reader directly is not something that you can recommend unreservedly for Finnish.



The language tends to favour more impersonal expressions, and readers could find extensive use of direct address officious, even patronising. Another example: the recommended sentence length was adjusted to correspond to that in Finnish. Moreover, we fine-tuned this by giving average lengths for different types of text.

Particularly troublesome were 'false friends'. As there are hardly any typically EU-related false friends (or even distant acquaintances) causing confusion between Finnish and English/French, we decided to keep the original examples with short explanatory translations. These might serve to caution Finnish drafters of EU texts and to help others understand why some expressions sound unfamiliar.

As for the other examples, we decided not to translate all of the originals as such, but rather to look for cases of typical EU Finnish.

The Finnish version of the guide was the result of intensive cooperation both in-house and with experts outside. The latter included the publishers of a guide for drafters of texts which are translated or interpreted, the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland, which contributed very useful suggestions. At first, it was difficult to picture the target audience for the product. Having finished the job, we think it may well hit the spot as a concise aid to writing Finnish clearly. ■

> Creative localisation into Lithuanian

by Inga Lukoševičiūtė,
Lithuanian language department

When I was assigned to translate the booklet

'How to write clearly', it didn't take long to figure out that the task could not be called translation. 'Localising' in fact meant adapting the whole text, finding suitable examples for Lithuanian and rewriting a

couple of chapters. Most of the clear writing hints apply to most languages in principle, but we had to reconsider a few of them.

For example, hint 8 ('Prefer active verbs to passive') could well be valid for conversational Lithuanian, but not for legal texts. In fact, the passive often takes precedence over the active here, especially when there is an inanimate subject. So after lengthy discussions and brainstorming sessions with the reviser and language experts, we decided to change this particular hint to 'Do not overuse impersonal constructions' and to write a completely new chapter.

Part of hint 9 ('Beware of false friends') also had to be adapted, as the French and English examples would not necessarily be useful for a Lithuanian writer. We talked here about semantic borrowings, where words are used with the wrong meaning, and gave relevant examples.

Part of Hint 5 ('Don't bury information in the middle of the sentence/Use a strong ending') is another example of what doesn't work in our language and required particular creativity. In Lithuanian, which is an inflected language, the word order is free, but it is very important to keep in mind the theme-rheme structure of sentences. We explained this and gave illustrative examples.

Naturally, all this meant a lot of hard work, creative agonising, brainstorming with colleagues and even linguists from Lithuanian institutions, attending meetings with the author and other translators, numerous proof-readings and some headaches. But it is easy to forget the hardship when you get positive feedback for your work. This was certainly a 'translation' I will not forget. ■



> A la recherche d'un titre clair

par Klaus Buring,
Département linguistique de langue allemande

Le véritable casse-tête pour l'équipe germanophone a été le titre anglais: *Clear writing*. En anglais, c'est court, cela ne fait que deux mots et trois syllabes. En plus, le terme est assez neutre, contrairement à l'ancien slogan *Fight the Fog*. Il faut penser que les auteurs de la campagne ont voulu cette sobriété.

Qu'en faire en allemand? La traduction littérale *Klar schreiben* est ambiguë car le lecteur pourrait comprendre «écrire de manière lisible». Nous avons donc commencé à regarder à gauche et à droite pour trouver des campagnes pareilles dans des pays germanophones. En effet, il y a de multiples initiatives - tant au niveau national qu'aux niveaux régional et local. Certaines ont de beaux titres, comme par exemple celle d'une ville allemande: *Klartext schreiben*. Pas mal, à première vue. Mais... aurions-nous le droit de copier ce titre? En plus, *Klartext reden* signifie quelque chose comme «dire ses quatre vérités» et il fallait sans doute éviter cette connotation-là.

Après de longues discussions, nous optons pour *Klar und verständlich schreiben* en reprenant une partie du titre d'une campagne comparable. Certes, c'est plus encombrant que la version anglaise mais en même temps très explicite = *clear*. La recherche du compromis à l'intérieur de notre équipe a été dure, mais nous sommes finalement contents.

Quelques jours plus tard, nous recevons un message d'une unité proche du directeur général: «C'est trop long. Trouvez un autre titre dans les prochaines heures».

La composition de notre équipe - trois traducteurs de différents groupes d'âge et de différentes unités - avait été le résultat d'un choix consciencieux fait au plus haut niveau du département linguistique; le consensus devait gouverner nos travaux, à tout moment. Mais en l'occurrence, le choix du titre définitif *Klar und deutlich schreiben* a été fait par un seul membre de l'équipe, sans aucune consultation des deux autres qui étaient absents ce jour-là. Piètre consolation: les grandes décisions sont souvent des décisions solitaires. ■



> Consensual localisation into Latvian

by Māriete Stikāne,
Latvian language department

While translating the booklet on Clear Writing into Latvian, the translators tried to involve as many people as possible in the discussion of the draft Latvian version of the brochure. In addition to discussing the text of the brochure among DGT's staff, including the Internal Linguistic Committee, the Latvian translators working in other EU institutions and several specialists from Latvia were consulted.



The consultations dealt with practical examples in order to localise the brochure as appropriately as possible. Thus, a chapter on the use of the passive voice was modified as the use of the passive voice in Latvian is not always a bad choice. The chapter dealing with abbreviations was elaborated to highlight certain peculiarities of the use of abbreviations in Latvian. A list of examples for the chapter on false friends was prepared with the contribution of a well-known University professor from Latvia. ■

> Tailor-made guide makes perfect sense in Portuguese

by Cristina Camarão,
Portuguese language department

When I first read the Clear Writing booklet, I wondered if it made any sense at all to translate a short guide that praises the virtues of a clear and simple style into Portuguese, a language which, unlike English,



tends to favour circumlocution over conciseness and straightforwardness. My colleagues were equally doubtful, as they felt the problems posed and the solutions proposed had to do with English and English alone. Our initial reaction was that any adaptation into Portuguese would just be dismissed as a translation of something which had no bearing on our own language whatsoever.

However, the more we read the guide, the more we felt it could indeed be useful for those drafting in Portuguese. It was all about being logical, clear and concise and communicating effectively. We agreed that, in general, Portuguese formal drafting has been plagued for too long with tedious and roundabout sentences that are only successful in baffling readers. So this little booklet and its suggestions on how to make communication intelligible could prove invaluable, we decided.

Since the principles of clear writing could in general be transposed into Portuguese, we only had to adapt one or two rules and create examples from scratch to give it a local feel. The most difficult bit to get around had to do with addressing the reader directly. The English guide suggested using the personal pronoun 'you' more often in documents — something which is certainly to be avoided in formal Portuguese. Direct address is acceptable in advertising or in direct information to the public, but in other areas it may be wiser to use impersonal constructions.

As for false friends, we had to find specific examples, not only from English, but also from languages such as French and Spanish, which are structurally and lexically much closer to Portuguese and can therefore lead to misunderstandings.

Likewise, the over-use of the passive voice may be more of a problem in English than in Portuguese, as the latter favours the impersonal active. But since the passive voice is used in a fairly similar way, we applied the principles in the guide, and only had to adapt the examples.

Other suggestions, for example, on the length of sentences, were left virtually unchanged. The number of words in a sentence is on average significantly lower in English than in Portuguese. However, an unnecessarily long sentence will always be complicated, regardless of the language it is written in, so it made perfect sense to remind people to be simple and to the point. ■

> Des conseils judicieux pour améliorer la communication dans un contexte multiculturel

par Geneviève Desvals-Faget,
réviseur à l'unité «Qualité linguistique»

Traduire la brochure *How to write clearly* a été pour Gwenaëlle

Diquélou et moi-même un vrai plaisir. Travaillant dans la même unité (DGT-D-4 «Qualité linguistique») qu'Emma Wagner¹, nous avons été les témoins (muets) de l'élaboration de cette brochure, si bien que lorsqu'il s'est agi d'en faire une traduction en français, nous savions déjà dans quel esprit travailler, quelle dose d'humour insuffler et quel style privilégier.

Le titre «*Rédiger clairement*» ne nous a pas posé de vraies difficultés, les mots *rédiger* et *clairement* étant en tous points les équivalents sémantiques de *write* et *clearly*. De même, *clear writing* supportait bien d'être traduit par *rédaction claire* en cas de nécessité.

Le principal défi a été de trouver les bons exemples pour des situations identiques ou parallèles à celles de l'anglais, tout en recouvrant des situations propres à la langue française. Cela nous a pris du temps et de la réflexion mais a été l'occasion aussi de quelques moments de bonne humeur et de satisfaction quand nous trouvions la bonne formule ou l'exemple qui cadrerait au mieux avec le défaut à stigmatiser ou l'erreur à ne pas commettre.

Comme nous avons commencé à traduire la brochure alors qu'elle était encore à l'état de projet pour l'anglais, nous avons dû par la suite revenir plusieurs fois sur notre traduction initiale, notamment pour respecter les exigences du service juridique, qui devait donner son aval sur le contenu et la forme finals. Mais pour un traducteur, cent fois sur le métier remettre son ouvrage, n'est-ce pas l'essence du travail...

Notre plus grande satisfaction a été de voir la brochure à sa parution, avec une mise en page très aérée, ses illustrations humoristiques et le visage de *Claire*, et de plus, parfaitement alignée dans toutes les langues de l'Union. Une très belle réussite, cette brochure! ■



> Advice distilled from experience in Slovene

by Maksimiljan Gulic,
Slovene language department

As I have always been particularly interested in issues about the Slovene language, style and of course translation, I was delighted when I was asked to adapt the Clear Writing campaign booklet. Slovenians are very sensitive to language issues, and it is very likely that the booklet will reach out to a significant number of those who care. This, of course, made the job all the more enjoyable – quite a thrill, in fact ...

In the Slovene department, we understood from the start what a great opportunity this was for us. So I translated, and, where needed, re-wrote the booklet. Everything was discussed and revised in our linguistic forum. And I think we did a great job!

The booklet does more than sum up the basics of clear writing. These are excellent in themselves, and too often, we are afraid of using them to the full as we try to render as precisely as possible the intricate legal lingo of EU documents without stiffening already dense texts. But here I am preaching to the choir ...

I think we managed to offer advice that has emerged from years of day-to-day work and reflection about writing in or translating into Slovene. Some of our tips have probably never been laid down so clearly before. Take, for instance, the way in which we can use short prepositions instead of long formulations to clarify a text, and the way in which we can be more concise if we use the possibilities that Slovene pronouns offer. We distilled an enormous amount of good practice into the project.

I hope the result will encourage us all to think differently about our work, stimulating us to be more aware of the nature and purpose of our texts, and more active in achieving results that are clear and effective... ■



¹ Emma Wagner est réviseur à l'unité «Qualité linguistique». Elle a rédigé la première mouture de la brochure *How to write clearly*, soumise par la suite à plusieurs instances pour coordination et harmonisation sur le fonds et la forme.

Teach yourself clear writing online!

by David Monkcom¹

Just about everyone in the Commission agrees that clear writing is important and that many officials need to improve their drafting skills. That's why DG Human Resources provides clear writing courses in both French and English. They are excellent, but for that very reason they get booked up months in advance. Moreover, many people find they can't attend these classroom courses because of their working hours or because they don't live in Brussels or Luxembourg.

The solution? Learn online! If you are a Commission official, regardless of where in the world you are, you can sign up for the Clear Writing Multimedia Tutorial. You can sign up for it via SYSLOG. The course code is CTO_ELCLWRI.

Each 'chapter' of the tutorial deals with one of the drafting techniques described in the booklet 'How to write clearly'. The chapter begins with a short video in which I give examples of unclear sentences and show how they can be improved using this particular technique. Then I invite you to do some interactive exercises, and/or to re-write a text using the technique under discussion.

'The advantage of the online tutorial over a classroom session is that you can tackle whichever chapter you choose, whenever you have the time and inclination, and you can work through the exercises at your own pace.'

You can do your re-writing on paper, or you can click on a link which opens the text as a Word document, so that you can edit it on screen. When you've finished, you can click on 'next' to see my suggested re-written version and compare it with yours. There is also a short video or audio clip commenting on the suggested new version.

For example, if you go to the chapter entitled 'Make the abstract concrete' you will find the following rather abstract text:



It is a matter of necessity that the citizens of Europe be aware of the division of competences among European institutions and Member States. It is also vital that citizens be informed of the tangible contribution of the European Union to improving their daily lives. Only when this becomes a reality will citizens perceive the relevance of the Union and engage in an active participation in the European political process.

So, how would you re-write that in more concrete terms? There is, of course, no single correct answer, but here is my suggestion – which also happens to be shorter:



People need to know who does what in Europe. They also need to see what the European Union is actually doing to improve their daily lives. Only then will they see the EU as relevant and turn out to vote in European elections.

The advantage of the online tutorial over a classroom session is that you can tackle whichever chapter you choose, whenever you have the time and inclination, and you can work through the exercises at your own pace.

To give you a flavour of how the tutorial works, there are extracts on the Clear Writing website (which is an internal Commission site). Go to My IntraComm, click on the Clear Writing logo at the bottom right, then follow the appropriate link. If you like what you see and hear, I hope you will sign up for the full tutorial on Syslog. ■

¹ Editor in the DGT Editing Unit

Clear writing – what Commission staff think

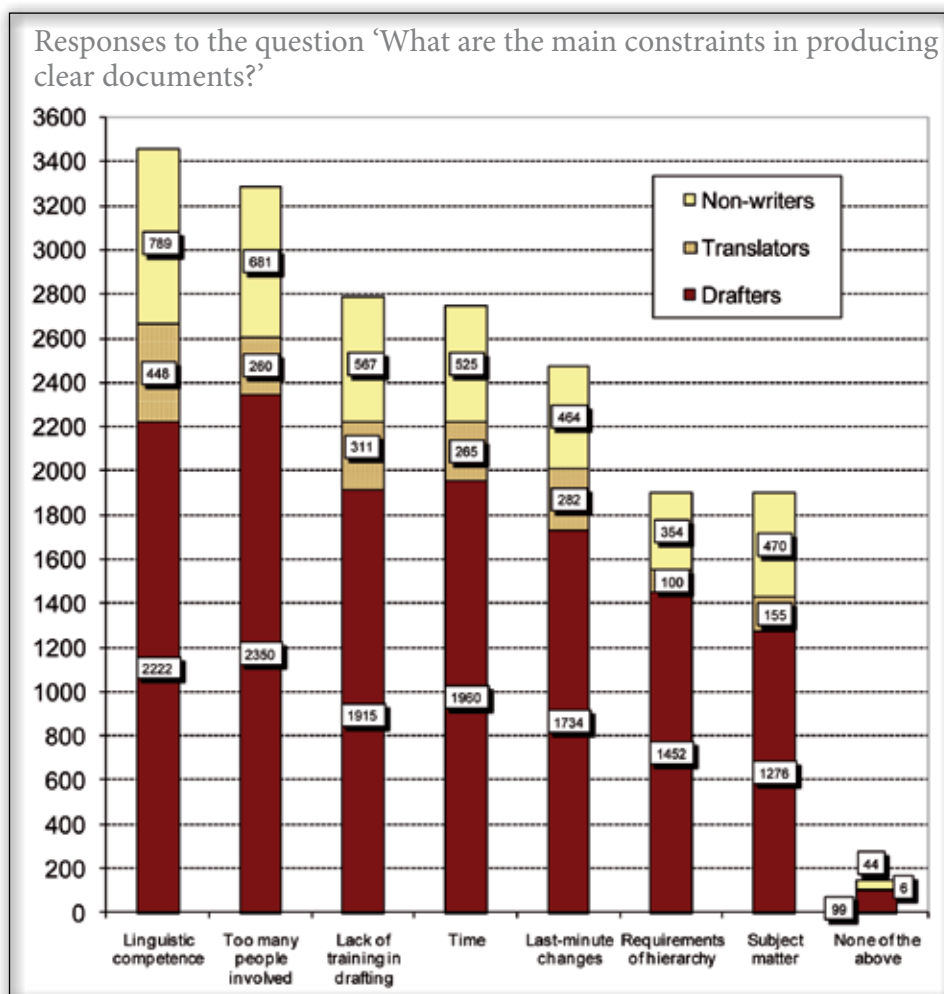
by Eva Kaluzynska¹

What do staff think about the standard of drafting at the Commission? How important do they think clear writing is? What can or should be done to improve quality? Those were the questions to which nearly 6 000 people responded in a Commission-wide survey last November. As well as completing a structured survey, about 1 600 staff felt strongly enough to add comments and suggestions.

On balance, the verdict was: 'Not bad, but could do better'. About 85% agreed there was too much Eurojargon in documents, and 90% thought EU legislation should be easier to understand. Over 90% agreed the Commission's image

would be better if its publications were more readable.

What influences the quality of documents? Linguistic competence scored highest. Most people draft in a language other than their own. This finding was followed by a perception

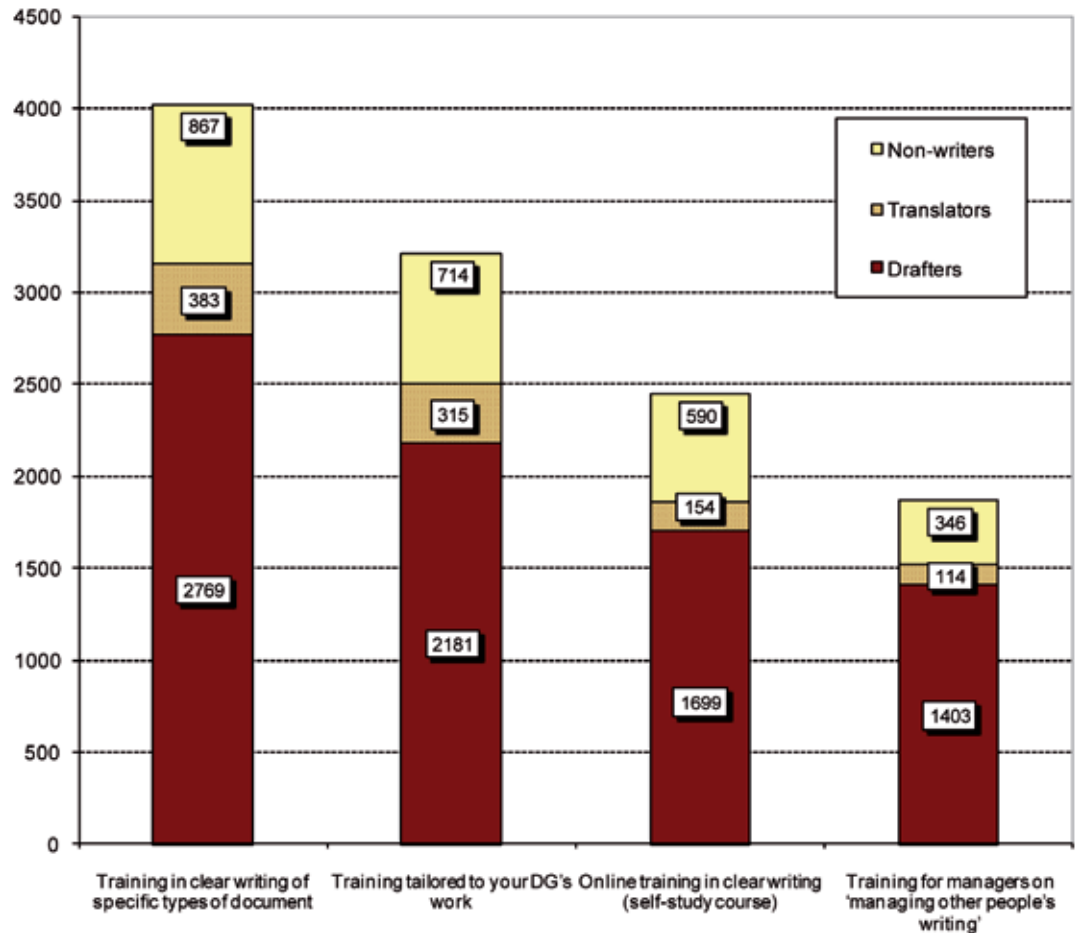


that too many people were involved in producing documents. Lack of training in drafting, time pressure, last-minute changes, and complying with management's requirements were also cited as factors affecting the end-result.

What can we do to promote clear writing? There was very strong support for proper revision of important documents: a massive 92% agreed with this. Staff also called for more training for all, including managers, to highlight the importance of clear writing, the better to encourage it.

An opportunity to volunteer input inspired a surprising number of staff to voice their views. Constructive and often witty, these contributions helped to illuminate the core findings. Broadly speaking, comments

Responses to the question 'Do you think the Commission should provide any of the following types of training in clear writing?'



were very much in favour of improving quality, as long as this did not make life more difficult..no more crazy rules, please'.

'Think before you write' was a recurrent theme, along with 'Keep it Short and Simple -- KISS', echoing the theme of a previous campaign, 'Fight the Fog'. Many called for quality, not quantity in texts. Length was not a good measure of productivity, they said. One pleaded for an end to the belief that 'a good' document is a 'big' document'. Another said it was time 'to convince authors that it is not rude to be brief and to the point'.

Many thought drafters should focus on their readers' needs. Legal accuracy often took priority over intelligibility: 'People usually write to impress their hierarchy and peers...'; 'Identify your target audience and

put yourself in their shoes. Too many documents are driven by what the AUTHOR wants to say, rather than what the reader needs to read.' And so-called 'corrections' that diluted quality, and even introduced errors, gave much grief.

Eurojargon was a favourite target. Comments called for 'sanity checks'

'Above all, there was a loud and clear call for a change of mindset to make people write simply concisely and clearly.'

to reduce jargon possibly familiar in-house, but often absurd outside. 'Limit the number of new acronyms to less than 18 billion a year' was one heartfelt plea.

There were many calls for more understanding of the skills that go into good writing, and to have these recognised, rewarded and encouraged. Many valued the training they had undergone to acquire or improve skills: 'absolutely excellent', in the opinion of one. Many recommended training for all staff, at all levels, to raise awareness and build up skills. Above all, there was a loud and clear call for 'a change of mindset to make people write simply, concisely and clearly'. ■

¹ Editor in the DGT Editing Unit

Des formations pour rédiger clairement en français

by Anne Vervier¹

«Don't waste my time» (Ne me faites pas perdre mon temps) disait Madame Diana Wallis, vice-présidente du Parlement européen, en citant le lecteur lors de la conférence inaugurale de la semaine «Rédiger clairement», le 15 mars 2010. Et vous? Êtes-vous parfois irrité de perdre le vôtre en étant obligé de relire deux ou trois fois une même phrase pour enfin la comprendre? Mais qu'en est-il de **vos** textes: êtes-vous certain que **vos** lecteurs n'ont pas cette réaction en les lisant?

Si c'est le cas, vous devriez augmenter la lisibilité de vos textes. Plusieurs types de formations pourront vous y aider. Mais avant tout, vous devriez peut-être vous débarrasser de quelques préjugés relatifs à la rédaction en français. Vous pourrez ensuite mesurer les bénéfices d'une rédaction claire. Cela vous permettra enfin de choisir la formule d'apprentissage la mieux adaptée à vos besoins.

Des barrières à faire sauter

Les raisons pour lesquelles certains textes de la Commission manquent de clarté sont diverses et connues : auteurs multiples, rédacteurs souvent non-francophones et habitudes difficiles à changer.

Il reste toutefois deux obstacles que l'on rencontre fréquemment auprès des participants aux formations en rédaction. Le premier est de penser que l'auteur se doit de montrer dans son texte l'étendue et la richesse de ses compétences linguistiques en français. Le second, conséquence naturelle du premier, est de croire qu'un texte professionnel en français doit forcément contenir un vocabulaire recherché, des phrases longues et des tournures sophistiquées.

Les apprentis rédacteurs oublient ainsi deux choses importantes : l'écrit professionnel n'est pas un texte littéraire que l'on déguste, entre autres, pour la beauté de la langue; l'écrit professionnel est avant tout un outil de travail. Son objectif majeur est de faire passer un message clair, qui

puisse être lu rapidement, compris correctement et mémorisé aisément.

Rédiger clairement n'est donc nullement un appauvrissement de la langue. Bien au contraire: écrire un texte clair (donc efficace) demande une grande maîtrise du vocabulaire et de la syntaxe.



Des bénéfices à en retirer

Les avantages de textes clairs ont été largement exposés lors des diverses manifestations de la campagne de la Rédaction claire. Notamment, le souci de transparence et de facilité d'accès pour tous. Soulignons d'ailleurs que les administrations nationales francophones partagent avec les institutions européennes ce même souci démocratique. Ainsi, en novembre



«Vos textes de travail doivent eux aussi être particulièrement clairs, puisque la plupart de leurs destinataires — vos collègues de l'administration multilingue et multiculturelle qu'est la Commission européenne — ne sont pas francophones.» c'est le conseil de Anne.

dernier, se tenait à Liège un colloque intitulé : «La communication avec le citoyen: efficace et accessible² ?» auquel participaient des organismes linguistiques de Belgique francophone, France, Québec et Suisse romande.

Vos textes de travail doivent eux aussi être particulièrement clairs, puisque la plupart de leurs destinataires -vos collègues de l'administration multilingue et multiculturelle qu'est la Commission européenne- ne sont pas francophones.

Comme lecteur, des textes clairs vous permettront de travailler plus rapidement. Comme rédacteur, ils augmenteront vos chances d'obtenir une réponse rapide, correcte et complète à vos messages. Enfin, rédiger clairement, c'est plus facile et surtout, c'est plus gai³ !

Une formation qui vous convienne

Vous trouverez à la Commission un éventail de formations⁴ qui vous aideront à rédiger plus clairement: une formation de 2 jours (*Rédaction claire*) qui passe en revue tout le processus de la rédaction d'un texte clair ; des ateliers d'un demi-jour qui se concentrent sur une compétence (*Rendre son texte lisible pour tout public, Structurer son texte, Trouver la bonne formule*); un module de 90 minutes pour les *managers* qui souhaitent encourager leurs collaborateurs à rédiger clairement.

Le contenu de ces formations reprend et développe les bonnes pratiques présentées dans la brochure «Rédiger clairement». Je voudrais toutefois



Un intérêt indéniable pour les formations *Rédiger clairement* qui affichent toujours complet!

insister sur la pratique qui me paraît la plus importante, après plus de 15 ans d'observation des textes communautaires: rédigez des phrases courtes! Les non-francophones diminueront les risques d'écrire des phrases grammaticalement incorrectes. Tous augmenteront leurs chances de faire comprendre leur message.

La méthodologie adoptée lors des formations est dynamique et interactive: évaluation de textes authentiques, déduction de bonnes pratiques, application lors d'exercices de rédaction, évaluation et correction collectives de ces exercices. L'objectif pédagogique des formations est de vous rendre autonome, c'est-à-dire capable d'évaluer l'efficacité communicative de vos propres textes, de les corriger et ainsi d'améliorer vos compétences en rédaction claire.

Rédiger clairement : un état d'esprit

Avoir le souci de rédiger des textes clairs, c'est une attitude que l'on peut partager. Je termine souvent mes

formations par ce conseil aux participants: encouragez-vous entre collègues, n'hésitez pas à vous soumettre mutuellement vos textes, à vous proposer des tournures de phrases

«L'écrit professionnel n'est pas un texte littéraire que l'on déguste, entre autres, pour la beauté de la langue ; l'écrit professionnel est avant tout un outil de travail.»

plus lisibles et à vous féliciter pour vos formulations claires.

Finalement, n'êtes-vous pas les premiers lecteurs et donc les premiers bénéficiaires de textes clairs? Bonne rédaction! ■

¹ Formatrice DEMOS. Anime depuis plus de 15 ans des formations en rédaction pour les institutions européennes.

² Les actes de ce colloque seront bientôt disponibles sur le site du Service de la langue française de la Communauté française de Belgique : <http://www.languefrancaise.cfwb.be>

³ Expression fréquemment utilisée en Belgique pour dire qu'une activité est agréable, réjouissante et encourageante.

⁴ Les descriptifs de ces formations proposées sont consultables sur Syslog ou auprès de votre coordinateur de formation. Vous y trouverez également l'accès à des modules d'E-Learning en rédaction (en français et en anglais) : ils sont d'excellents compléments aux formations traditionnelles.

Improving professional writing in the Commission

by Alex McCafferty¹

The launching of the Clear Writing campaign is an excellent chance to present some impressions based on several years experience delivering the 2-day Clear Writing course. From the comments of participants from different DGs, the over-riding impression is that the Commission has excellent resources to assist writers to convey their message clearly and simply - but many people don't know where to find them. The 'How to Write Clearly' booklet is, therefore, an easily-found guide to start improving professional writing in the Commission. The comments that follow link to, and hopefully deepen appreciation of, some of the booklet's hints.

Translators are also readers

The first impression is that very few writers seem to have translatability in mind when they draft their documents, and I think that, in a multi-lingual context, translatability is an extremely important issue.

The guidelines for clear writing contained in the 'How to Write Clearly' booklet are useful because paying attention to them would make most documents much easier to under-

stand for all readers, and of course translators are also readers.

For example, hint 8 of the 'How to Write Clearly' booklet: *'prefer active verbs to passive ...'*, is good advice for several reasons, including that the active voice is generally easier for readers to process mentally. Preferring active verbs to passive can be important to translators because, apart from being easier to understand, some languages apparently have more than one way of translating passive verbs, which forces the translator to make an avoidable choice and to remember that choice for a document.

Readers are also translating

The second impression is that most writers within the Commission don't *focus on their readers* enough, which is hint 2 of the 'How to Write Clearly' booklet.

Any Commission document stands a good chance of being translated, even if only informally inside a



reader's head! While a reader may be looking at English words on paper, in their head the reader may very well be translating into another language before they construct the meaning. This can apply to a scientific expert reading a dense paper just as much as to a member of the public reading a web page.

The Clear Writing guide helps to understand what it means to write simply but not simplistically - there is a difference, but one that is not always easy to realise because of the way we've been taught to write.

We're not at school anymore

The third impression is that many writers need to update their usually school-acquired writing skills for the workplace.

'Very few writers seem to have translatability in mind when they draft their documents, and I think that, in a multi-lingual context, translatability is an extremely important issue.'

The guidelines contained in hints 4 and 5 of the 'How to Write Clearly' booklet about *short, simple, well-structured sentences* are especially useful to help develop an appropriate written style for contemporary contexts.

Many people have been taught to write using long, grammatically complex sentences almost for the sake of it, or to ape a so-called academic style. But they forget that they are no longer at school, writing to impress their teachers and professors. Instead, they are writing for busy readers who may not have much time and are definitely not impressed by having to decipher the meaning of a longer-than-necessary sentence.

A different example of the need to update writing skills is the claim of many people that long sentences are part of their culture. That may well be, but I would suggest that such long sentences are part of their **literary** cultural heritage, and that writing a novel is a very different ex-

ercise to writing a web page, briefing or report.

The point is that many writers, including mother-tongue English writers, need to update their learning so that they are using an appropriate contemporary style, instead of the often-outdated language learned at school.

The 'How to Write Clearly' booklet is one tool which helps because it gives guidelines as to what-to-do, but not how-to-do it. The how-to-do it is what we teach in the Clear Writing course.

Interestingly, and perhaps controversially, the How to Write Clearly' booklet is available in all the official languages. I take this as an indication that the guidelines are also intended to apply to documents written in those languages.

During my courses I point this out as an added benefit — even though the course may be in English or French.

the principles can apply to whatever language a writer is working in to help them write better professionally.

'A different example of the need to update writing skills is the claim of many people that long sentences are part of their culture.'

None of us are mind-readers

The fourth impression is that many people think that learning more English is the most important thing they can do to write clearly in English, whereas I think that really the most important thing is to apply hint 1 of the 'How to Write Clearly' booklet and *think before you write*.

It is important, without doubt, for writers in the Commission to continually improve their English, indeed, any of the languages they are working in — but beyond a certain functional fluency, the greatest gains in clear writing are to be found in thinking clearly and then expressing those thoughts in as simple language as possible. After all, none of us are mind-readers, and overly-elaborate expressions or florid, fruity phrases simply leave readers, and translators, wondering what on earth was in the writer's mind as they were writing.

To achieve this clarity and grace of expression is not easy work and presupposes that one has something good to write and a good reason to write it — which I suppose translators are occasionally left scratching their heads about. ■



¹ DEMOS trainer

Why should the law be plain?

by Mark Adler¹

The answer to the question in the title seems so obvious that you'd think the question was rhetorical. At least, so it seems to me after 25 years during which legalese was barred from the documents I prepared as a solicitor in general practice.

But most lawyers still write the old way, through habit, fear of innovation, ignorance of the law ('I don't know what I'd be changing'), and poor literacy ('What's a verb?'). So they write



I hereby give devise and bequeath all my real and personal property whatsoever and where-soever situate unto my said wife Janis Andrea Mitchell for her use and benefit absolutely

instead of the sane equivalent



I give all my property to my wife.

Here are some of the arguments I use to lure them across:

Legalese is inherently imprecise

It is a myth that legalese is necessary because it is more precise than plain language.

Terms of art comprise a very small part of legalese, and even those are constantly reinterpreted by the courts. Most legalese is merely bad

style. It consists largely of disorganised document structure; inadequate formatting; poor paragraphing; overlong sentences (sometimes with multi-layered embedded sentences); inadequate punctuation inconsistently used; unusual word order; poor word choice; and repetition. Unsurprisingly, these faults create more ambiguity than they cure, and the ambiguities may not be noticed until it's too late to correct them.

Legalese breeds mistakes

If your text is 5 times as long as it needs to be you'd expect 5 times as many mistakes. But it's worse than that. Writers become lost in their own verbal maze, especially when the text is too difficult — and dull — for them or anyone else to check it carefully. So the document doesn't do what it should. I don't think I have ever 'translated' a document from legalese to plain language without uncovering errors overlooked, often for years, by both lawyers and clients. And the clients' comprehension is

'Most legalese is merely bad style. It consists largely of disorganised document structure; inadequate formatting; poor paragraphing; overlong sentences.'



important: they know their case better than anyone, and it is essential that they check drafts for mistakes, misunderstandings, and oversights before they approve the document.

Legalese shuts the public out of its own business

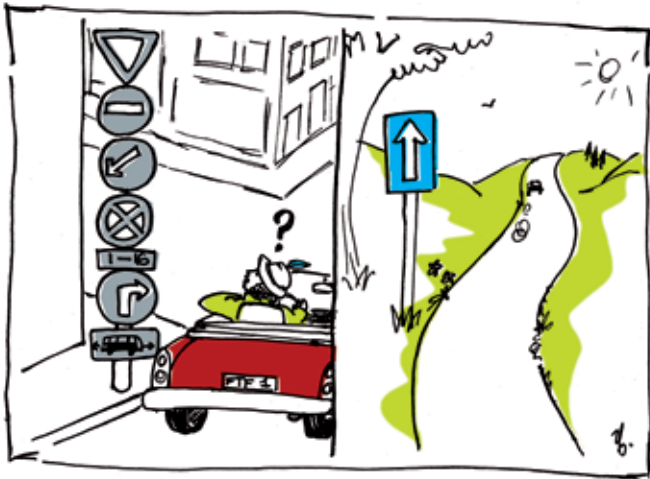
If people cannot understand their rights they cannot enforce them. If they do not understand their obligations, they cannot comply with them. This defeats everyone's purpose. In any case, in a democracy they have a right to understand.

Legalese wastes time and money and delays clients' business

Naturally it takes longer to write, and then to read, the 149 characters in my example above than the 27

characters of the revised version (and that is an uncharacteristically short example). Not only is there more text, but more time is needed to parse and decode it. Sometimes it must be read several times. And as it's tempting to put this tedious chore off till another day the law-

It also reduces lawyers' earnings, by forcing them to spend more time than they can reasonably charge for. I used to lose rather than earn money vetting leases for clients who couldn't afford either to buy their homes outright or to pay a realistic fee for the leasehold work.



yer's file may attract more dust than enthusiasm. All this costs money, and the delay inconveniences the clients.

letter described it as verbose, uninformative, arrogant, misleading, and dishonest².

Legalese is unpersuasive

Few members of the public, and even fewer judges, are likely to confuse pomposity with professionalism, or to find it persuasive. Members of the public asked in a survey to comment on a typical lawyer's

Legalese is sometimes unlawful

Judges have long been reluctant to enforce contractual clauses imposed on people who could not be expect-

'It is a myth that legalese is necessary because it is more precise than plain language.'

ed to understand them. Now legislation in the EU and elsewhere *requires* plain language in some consumer documents.

Legalese is boring

I can't tell you how good it is being retired. Never again need I advise a client about the unnecessary problems created by the 50 pages of legalese sent by a 'take-it-or-leave-it' opponent. ■

An example of legalese



Before

In consideration of the grant of this Lease to the Tenant the Guarantor irrevocably and unconditionally guarantees to the Landlord that until such time as the Tenant is released pursuant to the Landlord and Tenant (Covenants) Act 1995 the Rent and other sums due under this Lease will be duly and punctually paid and that all the other obligations of the Tenant under this Lease will be duly complied with and the Tenant will comply with the obligations it enters into in any authorised guarantee agreement entered into by it pursuant to the Lease in any case whether during or after the end of the Term.



After

The guarantor will indemnify the landlord against any breach by the original tenant of its obligations under this lease and under any authorised guarantee agreement.

¹ Mark Adler <adler@adler.demon.co.uk> retired from legal practice in 2007 but remains a plain language consultant, trainer, and campaigner. He was for many years chairman of Clarity (the plain-legal-language movement) and editor of its journal. Much more information than we have room for here, including many examples and analyses of legalese, can be found through <www.clarity-international.net> and <www.adler.demon.co.uk>.

² Research quoted in my 1993 article Bamboozling the Public.

Campaigning for plain language in public information

Plain language developments in Portugal

by Sandra Fisher-Martins¹

Plain language is a new topic in Portugal. In the 1990s, the *National Institute for Public Administration* tried to incorporate it in the training of public servants, with very limited impact. As the political priorities changed, plain language slipped to the bottom of the pile and everyone forgot about it. But things are starting to change.

Private initiative revives plain language

Despite recent efforts to cut red tape, Portugal is a bureaucratic country where people and businesses are weighed down by paperwork, forms and permits, for the most part written in a language that nobody understands. That's bad in itself, but in a country where 80% of the population has low literacy skills (below level 3, considered the minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work), it leads to serious exclusion problems.

So, in 2007, moved by frustration with institutional gobbledygook and its effects on people's lives, *Português Claro* started campaigning for plain language in public information.

Our first large project was creating scripts for the *Social Security Contact Centre*, describing more than 100 products and services in a language that both call centre operators and service users could understand. This included information about contributions, benefits, pensions, social services, adoption procedures, legal aid, etc.

This project was a major shift in the way the Social Security service communicated with its clients. Its experts, who were used to considering

only precision and accuracy, were 'forced' to think about comprehensibility. There was a lot of resistance at first, but the idea of plain language as something valuable and necessary started to spread through the organisation (mostly at the top) and soon reached other government agencies.

Becoming part of the political agenda

As more agencies showed interest in simplifying their communication, it became clear that the next step should be getting the government to commit itself to plain language.

In fact, since 1999, Portuguese law requires public administration documents, such as forms, letters, templates for applications, notices and certificates, to use 'simple, clear, concise and meaningful language' and avoid 'acronyms, jargon and obsequious or intimidating expressions' (decree-law 135 of 1999). This is the kind of legal backing plain-language advocates around the world dream of. This is what our colleagues in the US have been trying to achieve with the Braley Plain Language Act, for the last three or four years.

However, unlike what will happen in the US when the Act finally gets



approved by the Senate, in Portugal, this law has been studiously ignored.

But things are about to change. Until now, *Simplex*, the government modernisation program, has been extremely successful in simplifying access to public services, but has rarely included plain language in its initiatives. This year's *Simplex* includes a plain-language programme for public administration, developed by *Português Claro* and the National Institute for Public Administration. This will be implemented with the support of the Agency for Administrative Modernisation. This agency, which executes most *Simplex* initiatives, will make plain language one of its main goals for 2010.

Progress in the legal world

President Cavaco, in 2008, speaking about the reform of the justice system, said that laws and judicial decisions should be clear and understandable to all citizens. But, despite the rules of legislative drafting stipulating the use of clear language, most legislation continues to be opaque and incomprehensible.

Simplegis, a new government initiative launched in May, aims to solve some of these problems and to make laws more accessible. Soon, plain language guides will accompany complex laws, and citizens' summaries in Portuguese and English will be included in all new legislation produced by the government. It is a compromise, but is nevertheless a huge improvement on the current situation.

The next logical step will be to draft clearer laws and, to prepare for this, the *National Institute for Public Administration* now offers a 250-hour Diploma on Simplification of Legal Texts.

Another interesting development is the recent partnership between The Portuguese Bar Association and Clarity, the international association of lawyers who advocate using plain language in place of legalese. The Bar is sponsoring Clarity's fourth international conference, *Clarity2010*², which will take place in Lisbon in October. The conference will give Portuguese (and European) professionals from the legal and public sectors the chance to meet the world's top experts in clear legal language.

One of the projects that will be presented at *Clarity2010* is the plain Portuguese version of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European



Union. Recently published by the European Commission Representation in Portugal, this booklet is the result of a collaboration between *Português Claro* and the two DGT translators working in Lisbon.

Plain language in the corporate world

Always quick to spot a trend, businesses were the first to see the potential of plain language. Over the last couple of years, several banks, insurance and utility companies redesigned their communication to make it more accessible, and trained their staff to write more clearly.

Even industry regulators, normally shy of change, embraced plain language as a way of increasing their effectiveness. For instance, *ANACOM*, the telecom regulators, are in the process of rewriting their standard letters, which they feared were too complex and legalistic for most readers.

Although Portugal never had a grassroots movement for plain language, consumers are gradually becoming aware that there is an alternative to incomprehensible documents and they are starting to demand clarity.

Preparing for the future

Over the next couple of years, plain language might become a standard

for public communications in Portugal, as has happened in other European countries.

To respond to the expected increase in demand for plain language professionals, *Português Claro* and the *National Institute for Public Administration* teamed up with two higher education institutions in Belgium and Sweden, and are currently preparing an application for funding to develop a European Diploma in Plain Language.

In the short term, the biggest challenge is to generate support for plain language, particularly among public servants and the legal professions. *Clarity2010* will play a large part this. Along with the world's top experts in plain legal language, participants will have the chance to see information designers demonstrate how images can be used to clarify legal and administrative texts, and to hear usability experts discuss ways of testing documents with real users. Hopefully, this will help overcome some resistance and win support for the idea that clearer legal and administrative language is not only possible, but long overdue.

'Laws and judicial decisions should be clear and understandable to all citizens.'

So, come to Lisbon in October and share your experiences and ideas. Help us change attitudes and establish a culture of clarity. ■

¹ Sandra Fisher-Martins runs *Português Claro*, a plain-Portuguese training and consultancy firm co-founded with Martin Cutts in 2007. A former psychologist, Sandra is particularly interested in the use of plain language and information design in public documents as a way of helping citizens make informed choices about their health, education, welfare, civil rights, and other important matters.

² Visit the conference website at www.clarity2010.com for the latest news. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook.

Plain language work in the Swedish government

by Anne-Marie Hasselrot¹



What do we mean by plain language?

In Sweden we think of plain language as clear and user-friendly language. Many groups and organisations around the world are working hard to improve and simplify administrative and legal texts. In the Swedish government, this work has been carried out since 1976, when the first plain language expert was appointed to the Cabinet Office to organise systematic modernisation and clarification of the language in Acts and other regulations. It was thought that a democracy must ensure openness and clarity within public administration and see to it that official documents are written in a way that meets the readers' needs. The idea was also that legislation written in plain language would have

a positive impact on all administrative documents at different levels of government.

How is the work carried out?

The Division for Legal and Linguistic Draft Revision at the Ministry of Justice in Stockholm has a key role in the legislative drafting of all ministries. Here every Government Bill and Government Ordinance, as well as Committee Terms of Reference, are revised from a legal and constitutional point of view, as well as linguistically, by the division's five lawyers and five plain language experts.

Through our work, we hope to ensure that every modern Swedish Act has:

- a functional and logical structure,
- normal and natural sentences,
- no archaic and misleading words and phrases.

'Laws must be clear and user-friendly, because they have an impact on decision-making at all levels of society.'

But revision alone does not guarantee lucid laws. Therefore, other methods are also used, such as training sessions, handbooks and guidelines.

'Reforms take time, and that you need to have a strategy and be patient, persuasive, diplomatic and persistent.'

Starting at the top

It is very important to start at the top: to make the language and structure used in legislation as clear as possible. Laws must be clear and user-friendly, because they have an impact on decision-making at all levels of society. They also influence the wording of more detailed provisions issued by public authorities, as well as other texts down the line, such as brochures or information on web sites.

Drafting style is a question of attitudes

Strangely enough, the really old Swedish provincial laws from the Middle Ages (obviously no longer in force!) were in a language far simpler, clearer and easier to understand than the texts in force some six hundred years later, in the 19th century, when there was already a fully-established bureaucratic and administrative culture in Europe. Obviously, a lot had happened to society in the meantime. Let's face it, the society of today is so compli-

cated that it is probably impossible for us to write legislation that is really easy to understand. We will always need legal and technical terms that are both difficult and impossible to do without. The aim of our work is to do away with barriers to understanding that are unnecessary and simply stem from legal and bureaucratic tradition and habit.

As writing is governed by tradition, it is not at all easy to alter inefficient writing habits. You have to convince the drafters that it is worthwhile to draft in a new way and they are allowed to do so - and then make them do it. Reforms take time, and you need to have a strategy and be patient, persuasive, diplomatic and persistent. As soon as drafters get accustomed to new ways of drafting, though, they stop arguing against them. Projects to revise important standard documents are therefore necessary in all plain language work.



The EU Language Service

Obviously, the way in which European Union Directives are drafted influences the texts through which they are implemented in Member States. Usually, one can take a quick look at the draft of a new Swedish Act and see if it is based on a Directive. If so, the terminology and structure may have a certain untypical feel, and the Swedish may be slightly unidiomatic.

Before I started working at the Ministry of Justice, I spent five years revising translations into Swedish of the European Community legislation needed ahead of Sweden's accession. So, I am obviously aware of the great job the translators do. I am also aware of how much clearer European Union legislation has become over the years. There have been great strides towards making it more accessible and easier to understand. Having said this, much remains to be done to create more readable texts. In 2001, a special EU Language Service was set up with a network to help EU translators get in contact with Swedish officials to establish correct terminology. This is very helpful in our work.

Patience, persistence, patience, persistence...

In conclusion, one of the most important factors in plain language work is persistence and patience. It takes time for a public administration to move from a bureaucratic style to a citizen-friendly and plain language

'As writing is governed by tradition, it is not at all easy to alter inefficient writing habits.'

style. The Swedish Government has been working towards this for more than 30 years. So, can it be done? Yes, if you agree on the goals and have an effective organisation in place. It has been done successfully for many years, and this will go on in future.

There is much to be gained if language experts and lawyers, as well as experts from other disciplines, cooperate. And political support, as well as support from central administration, is crucial. Plain language makes administration more efficient and saves both time and money. And last but not least, it inspires all of us to do a good job. ■

¹ A Deputy Director and Language Expert from the Swedish Ministry of Justice. Since 1997, she has been working at the Division for Legal and Linguistic Draft Revision. Her work there involves taking an active part in the process of revising and modernising the language of all kinds of government documents, primarily legislative acts. Other tasks at the Government Offices include writing guidelines, holding training sessions for Government officials and taking part as an expert in law commissions. She is also involved in the EU Language Service, which provides support to Swedish translators and terminologists in the EU institutions and to Swedish ministries and public agencies in EU-related language matters.

Before taking up work at the Government Offices, Anne-Marie spent five years on the Committee on Translation of EC Law, revising Swedish translations of European Union legislation. Her missions abroad have included training sessions for Swedish translators at the European Commission and the Council of the European Union.

She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and is a graduate of the academic programme for Swedish language consultants at the University of Stockholm.

Interview with EU Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou

by David Monkcom¹



Androulla Vassiliou, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth

Shortly after your appointment as Commissioner, you gave your full support to the launching of the Clear Writing Campaign. Can you explain why you are personally committed to it?

Certainly. First, clear communication is a golden thread that runs through all my areas of responsibility. It is vital in education and in a multilingual Europe. It is a skill that young people need and it is also a key element in many cultural activities. So naturally I have

a strong interest in clear communication — whether written or spoken.

More specifically, written communication between the Commission and the outside world has to be clear and effective. The Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) handles some 95% of this communication, and translation is one of the activities for which I am responsible. So I have a personal interest in this area. I am very glad the Commission has launched a clear writing campaign and that DGT is playing a leading role in it.

The texts produced by the European institutions are often said to be too obscure. Do you think this reputation is deserved? Why do you think the EU institutions have a particular difficulty in drafting documents clearly?

I think most people outside the institutions find the EU difficult to understand, given its sheer complexity, so it needs very clear explanation. On the other hand, people inside the institutions are so familiar with the EU's policies and its machinery that when they write about it they just don't notice they are using lots of bureaucratic language and in-house jargon. This can be completely obscure to outsiders. We need to put ourselves in the position of the reader!

Another factor, of course, is that most of us have to write in languages that are not our native tongue. Then what we write often goes through a whole chain of consultations and revisions, becoming longer and more complex. Sometimes, for political reasons, the wording is also made vague and ambiguous. The end result, unfortunately, can often be a typically unclear document.

How do you think the Clear Writing Campaign can benefit the Commission?

It is designed to raise awareness of the problem within the Commission and to help officials learn basic techniques for drafting more clearly. The practical benefits could be enormous. Externally, clearer writing will improve the Commission's communication with the public and with stakeholders. It will get our messages

across more effectively and improve the Commission's public image. Internally, it will save a great deal of time and cut down waste: a short, clear document takes less time to read and is more easily understood.

What about staff in the DGT? How might they benefit?

Translators at the Commission are often called on to produce clear translations of documents that have been poorly drafted. I admire their ability to do so, but I see what a lot of time and effort it takes. Translators can work much more quickly and efficiently — and with greater pleasure — if the document they are translating is clear and short. Besides, a translation should convey the exact meaning of the original, so the original needs to be clear.

Do you think that applies to all Commission documents, or would you make an exception for legislative proposals, for example?

Of course, laws have to be drafted carefully and precisely, and people tend to assume that this requires a lot of legal jargon. But it does not. I practised law in Cyprus for 20 years and, believe me, I know from experience that a lot of 'legalese' is unnecessary and unhelpful. A law that is drafted in clear and simple language will be much more easily understood and also be transposed by national legislators in a way that can therefore be applied without confusion and without the need for time-consuming court cases.

'Clear communication is a golden thread that runs through all my areas of responsibility.'

A similar campaign, called 'Fight the Fog', was conducted in 1998. Why launch another campaign 12 years later?

There are three main reasons. First, the situation has changed since 1998. The European Union has grown from 15 to 27 Member States, from 11 to 23 official languages, and as a result there is now much more non-native drafting. A fresh campaign was therefore needed.

Second, the 'Fight the Fog' campaign was run only by a small team in DGT: this new campaign is being organised by a task force from five DGs: the Secretariat-General, the Legal Service, DG Human Resources, DG Communication and DGT. In addition, most DGs now have a Clear Writing contact person who can give advice and coordinate local activities.

Third, the 'Fight the Fog' campaign was aimed only at people drafting in English. The new campaign is multilingual: it is aimed at all officials. Clear writing is **everyone's** business!

What else is new about this campaign?

Lots of things! For a start, the excellent campaign booklet, giving practical advice on how to write clearly, has been produced in all 23 official EU languages. Second, the new campaign is making much more use of the internet. There is a Clear Writing website where officials can find various resources: tips and advice, a discussion forum, a helpline, a quiz and, of course, the booklet. There is even a link to YouTube where you can hear the campaign song!

DG Human Resources has set up an online tutorial in clear writing techniques, and the campaign task force is looking at software which Commission officials could use to help edit their documents and improve their writing skills week by week.

The Clear Writing Campaign seems to be very welcome in the Commission. But can it succeed? In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges it faces?

Yes, there is a lot of in-house support for this campaign and I certainly hope it will succeed. In a survey in 2009, nearly half the staff who responded felt there was a problem with lack of clarity in Commission documents. Around 90 % felt that important documents



Commissioner Vassiliou makes the case for Clear Writing at the launch conference of the Commission wide campaign.

¹ Editor in the DGT Editing Unit

should always be revised or edited before publication. Of course, one challenge here is human resources: at present we don't have enough native speakers available to take on this important job — whether in DGT or in the originating DGs. Moreover, drafting can take up virtually all the time available for producing a document. There may be very little time left for revision, editing and translation. So evidently better time allocation is needed.

'Our new campaign is multilingual: it is aimed at all officials. Clear writing is everyone's business!'

Another challenge is the need for training. Nearly half the respondents to the survey felt that there should be more training in clear drafting. DG Human Resources (HR) offers excellent courses, but places are limited and they get booked up months in advance. Also, staff outside Brussels and Luxembourg can't easily get to these courses.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is to get top and middle management 'on board'. DG HR will soon be launching a new Clear Writing course specifically aimed at managers and I hope there will be plenty of applicants. The Commission needs to **make clarity a priority** and support the efforts of its staff. Those efforts are all too easily undermined by a manager who insists on receiving long reports written in long sentences using lots of jargon and acronyms!

The campaign is targeted at writers within the European Commission. Are there any plans to extend it to other institutions? And what about publicising it more widely?

As I said at the campaign launch conference, 'Clarity begins at home'. But it doesn't have to **end** there. Other EU institutions have similar problems to ours, and the rules of clear writing apply to everyone. The Commission will gladly share its experience and its expertise with the other institutions: they already have access to our Clear Writing website. However, there are organisational differences between the institutions, and solutions that work in the Commission may not necessarily work elsewhere.

Although the Clear Writing campaign is internal, it has naturally aroused some outside interest, and experts from inside and outside the Commission can benefit by learning from each other. That's why, on 26

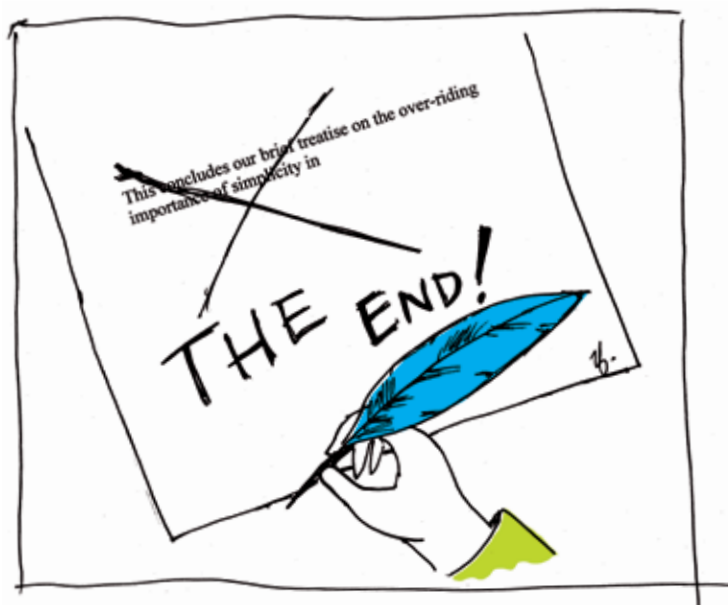
November, the Commission will be hosting a conference on 'Clear Writing throughout Europe'. Experts from various Member States will tell us how clear writing is promoted at national level, and I hope they will confirm that the Commission's campaign is on the right track.

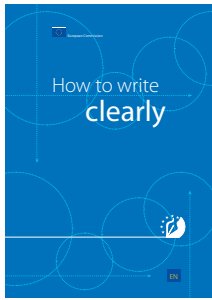
I'm certainly glad to see that there are national organisations campaigning for clear public information in simple language. I also believe it's very important to educate young people in how to express themselves clearly and correctly — especially in this age of online chatting and text messaging. A young person who can communicate well is in a far better position when it comes to finding work. Teachers, of course, are fully aware of this — and if the Commission can help them through its various educational programmes, so much the better.

What do you see as the outcome of the campaign? Can it really have a lasting effect, or will the Commission simply revert to 'business as usual' next year?

The campaign has been running for only six months or so, and it's too early to predict what its lasting impact will be. But the task force is evaluating it, and will soon issue a report, including a number of recommendations for future action. It's important to consolidate and build on the awareness that this campaign has already created, and we must find ways of 'hard wiring' clarity objectives into our day-to-day drafting. This may well require action at Commission level.

In short, there can be no question of going back to the status quo ante. As the campaign song says: 'Clarity's a-coming!' — and I want to make sure that it stays. ■





ON THE WEB

The booklet 'How to write clearly' was drafted for all authors at the European Commission and it gives useful hints on clear writing in any of the EU's official languages.

You can access it on EUROPA: go to <http://ec.europa.eu/translation> and scroll down to 'Clear writing guide'.

To get the other language versions, click on the square with 3 dots.

COMING SOON

CLARITY2010

From 12 to 14 October 2010, Clarity¹ is organising in Lisbon its fourth international conference, preceded by a seminar. Clarity2010 will focus on multidisciplinary ways of achieving clarity in legal, administrative and corporate communications.

With more than 90 speakers from 22 countries, the conference programme (http://www.clarity2010.com/program_en.html) offers a range of case studies and master classes presented by specialists from different areas. Its purpose is to bring together plain language specialists, information designers and legal experts from around the world to exchange experience and discuss new ideas for promoting clear communication in the public and private sectors. All sessions will be presented in English or Portuguese, with simultaneous interpreting.

For more details, visit the website www.clarity2010.com.



CONFERENCE 'CLEAR WRITING THROUGHOUT EUROPE'

The European Commission multi-DG Task Force² on Clear Writing is organising on 26 November 2010 a major conference entitled 'Clear writing throughout Europe'. The conference will take place in Brussels, in the Gasperi room at the Charlemagne building.

The keynote speakers, clear writing specialists from national bodies, will showcase successful campaigns in the EU Member States. All sessions will offer interpretation into English and French.

The public will be able to watch the conference via webstreaming on the internet.

¹ Clarity is an association of lawyers, judges and lay people dedicated to researching and promoting the use of plain legal language.

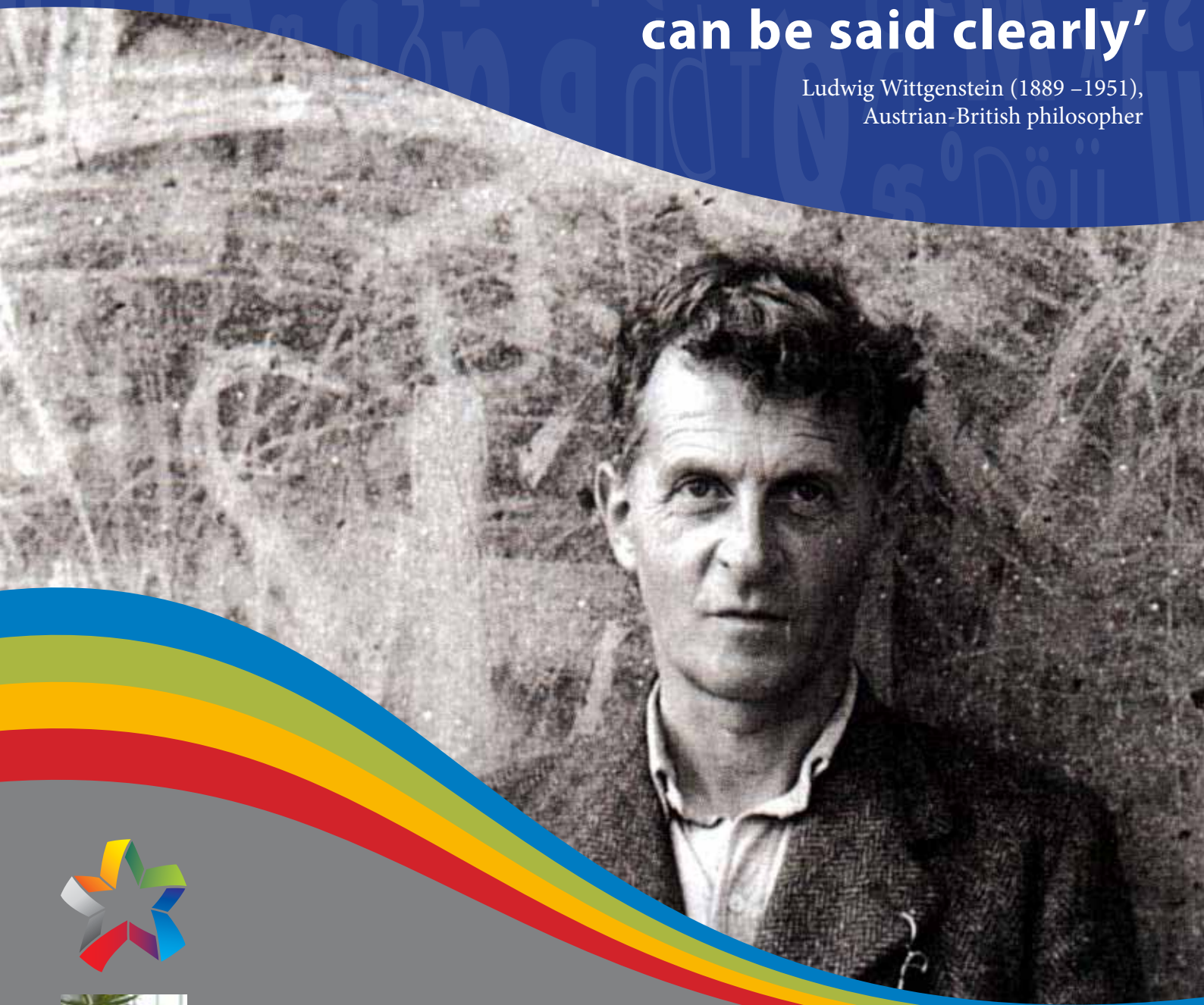
² The five Directorates-General involved are: Secretariat-General, Legal Service, DG Human Resources (Training), DG Communication and DG Translation.

You will find an electronic version of the magazine on EUROPA website:
<http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/magazines/>

Commission staff can subscribe to the paper version of the magazine by sending their name and address to the DGT-COMMUNICATION functional mailbox and asking to be included on the subscriber list.

'What can be said at all can be said clearly'

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 –1951),
Austrian-British philosopher



COORDINATION
AND DRAFTING:

Anabela Pereira
(+32) 229 65728
DGT.02



GRAPHICS DESIGNER
AND LAYOUT:

Philippe Marchetto
(+352) 4301 36337
DGT.02

Neither the European Commission
nor any person acting on its behalf
is responsible for any use which
might be made of the information
contained in Languages and
translation. This is not an official
publication and neither
the Commission nor any of
its services are bound in
any way by its contents.

