

Keynote address by European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly to the Clear Writing for Europe conference

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Thank you for inviting me to open your conference on a subject that is very close to my heart.

As many of you will know, I was a journalist for twenty years, so clear writing is very much in my DNA. However, I have always been convinced that communicating clearly should also be a top priority for public servants, and this has very much guided my approach in almost twenty years as an ombudsman, first in Ireland and then at EU level.

To paraphrase William Penn, the entire purpose of writing or communicating is to be understood. For those of us in public administrations, I am also convinced that it is our duty to reach out to the public we serve in a language and medium they can understand. Put another way, clear writing and communicating is part of our mission as public servants.

The flipside of this is that communicating in complex or technical language not only makes it difficult for the public to understand our work, it is also often perceived as elitist or exclusionary. As a result, the failure to prioritise clear writing and language can further exacerbate the much-discussed divide between the EU and people across Europe.

Clear communication creates trust, and the pandemic provided a perfect case study of this.

Governments and administrations were forced to take seismic decisions at breath-taking speed. Where they provided clear and comprehensible explanations for these far-reaching decisions to shutter our economies and societies, governments and administrations were able to guarantee the buy-in of their citizens. Where they failed to do so, or where the messages were mixed and changing, the seeds of public doubt were sown. Fast forward a year and we saw, and are still seeing, the same scenario play out with regards to vaccines.

It is almost exactly eight years since DG Translation first invited me to speak at a conference on clear writing. That was at the very outset of my first term as European Ombudsman. At the time, I told you that clear writing would be a priority for my Office.

As an ombudsman institution, we act as a bridge between the public and the EU administration.



We deal with over 2 000 complaints each year, most from ordinary members of the public. These are people who have often had an initially frustrating experience with the EU administration. As such, I believe we have an additional duty to speak to them in a manner that is relatable.

I am very happy to inform you that clear writing and plain language remain a top priority for me and my Office. It guides all our interactions with the public, from basic correspondence with complainants to the closing decisions in high-profile inquiries.

We offer in-house training on clear writing, which every staff member is encouraged to follow after taking up their duties. The course material is tailored to our work, but the training was prepared in cooperation with the clear writing team at DG Translation, with whom we have ongoing cooperation.

We also have an editorial team in-house that is specifically dedicated to clear writing and ensuring all documents in our main inquiries are drafted in a manner that is as easy-to-read as possible.

Beyond my Office, I am encouraged to see that clear writing is now being mainstreamed across the EU administration, and is no longer perceived as the irritating preoccupation of a few eccentrics in the bigger institutions.

As part of the Award for Good Administration, which I organise every second year, we have a category on excellence in communications. This enables me to see first-hand the impressive efforts being made by dedicated teams in the EU administration to communicate clearly on key issues.

Clear writing can be a challenge for any expert, whether a lawyer or a scientist, whether in the public or private sectors. The very nature of jargon is that it does not sound like jargon to those that use it.

It is arguably even more of a challenge for multicultural organisations in which people are drafting texts in languages that may not even be their second language.

I continue to be overwhelmed by the quality of English-language drafting in my Office, and this is something that is no doubt replicated across the EU administration. It is also an undeniable badge of shame that native English language speakers are often not as competent in their second language, if they even have one.

However, in the Brussels and EU bubble, this particular situation has led to the emergence of a very specific type of jargon: Europeak, where technical policy jargon meets Euro-English.

As with other forms of jargon, even those of us who are native English speakers and non-policy



experts quickly begin to absorb and adopt the language that surrounds us. It is a normal, and even positive, dynamic, which is at the root of how language evolves.

However, we need to avoid the trap of speaking to the outside world in our familiar dialect of Euro-English, as this may be perceived as elitist. We should regularly check ourselves and ask if what we are drafting and how we are communicating can be easily understood by the public. This is not just about an English-language public, since documents that are drafted in English are then translated, often into all 23 other official languages.

This brings me on to another cornerstone of our clear writing and communicating mission: multilingualism.

The EU is committed to respecting and safeguarding linguistic diversity. Applying the principle of multilingualism is not only about ensuring equal treatment of Member States, it is of paramount importance for relations between the EU and its citizens.

To return to William Penn, the purpose of writing and communicating is to be understood. For the majority of people in Europe, this means - as a minimum - reaching out to them in the official language of their Member State and enabling them to participate in the democratic life of the EU in that language.

To this end, in 2018, I launched a 'strategic initiative' on the use of official EU languages in the EU administration. As part of the initiative, we carried out a public consultation, and then consulted 64 EU institutions, bodies, offices and agencies on the findings.

The initiative culminated in a set of 'practical recommendations', issued in July last year, which serve to guide the EU administration on the use of official EU languages when communicating with the public.

These recommendations set out when and where EU institutions and bodies should make information available in all official languages. The guiding principle is to enable the public to follow and contribute to our core work.

Clearly, the nature and size of an institution or agency will have some bearing on how far you can go. So far, we have had around 30 responses on the recommendations from EU agencies, almost all of which were positive.

I know that the Commission and other institutions and agencies have already updated, or are in the process of updating, their language policies to take these practical recommendations into account. This is very welcome.

Of course, in the spirit of clear writing, this should ideally go beyond mechanical translation. It implies that the translated texts are also checked to ensure that the content is clear and understandable to their audiences.



I am encouraged to know that there is such keen interest in this year's Clear Writing for Europe conference. As I mentioned at the outset, I believe clear communication is a core part of the mission of public administrations, and I am convinced it is essential for enabling the public to participate in the democratic life of the EU. This ultimately ensures public trust in the Union. So, I hope you take many valuable lessons from the conference and apply these in your institutions and agencies over the coming year.