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CREATIVE TENSIONS

Plain misguided

The pedantic obsession with linguistic accuracy and plain English discourages creative and original business writing

IF THE LATEST CROP of linguistic Cassandras is to be believed, a virulent form of plague is sweeping through the English language. Buboes of jargon, pustules of misplaced colons and even (gasp) mis-appropriated apostrophes bubble up and burst everywhere.

We've had weeks of haranguing from Lynne Truss perched atop the bestseller lists with *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. And apparently the redoubtable John Humphrys is also refining an Eyeore-like tome on the parlous state of our writing. Oh woe is us.

Much as I applaud their commitment to writing and language, I'm getting a bit miffed with these nanny-ish proclamations. It's not that the use of jargon is good (obviously it isn't). Nor that the apostrophe should not be wielded accurately (it should). It's the nagging that rankles.

I blame the idea that "plain" English is something to be aspired to in business.



Who wants to be plain in life? No professional writer I know. So why do we insist that business people aspire to be plain?

I find it telling that when we ask clients to bring

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along a piece of business writing they like to a writing workshop, even the most starched "suits" squirrel out writing with character and attitude. No one brings along examples of writing that is "plain". Ever.

Business people are already hampered by the perception that their writing is a "formal" activity. Banging on about the rules just makes them more constrained and stilted. And that's precisely the opposite of what we business writers should be doing for them.

Whether we write in agencies, consultancies or in-house, we need to be out there swashbuckling verbally for our clients, exploring new, original and authentic ways of articulating their shared goals.

Why? Because writing is hugely motivating for teams as they seek to identify, share and attain business goals. Some of the UK's most exciting companies prove this truth. Lush and Innocent Drinks don't just win customer loyalty with their writing, they actually make work look fun.

Larger companies also see the value in looking beyond the syntax. Unilever, Orange and Boots have invested heavily in verbal identity and in helping their people to write more creatively.

Unfortunately, the Trussian-Hurumphing view keeps the writing debate bogged down in punctuation, syntax and plainness.

Frankly, it's time to move on. The sooner professional writers redirect their articulacy away from other people's colons the better it will be for business writing as a whole.

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