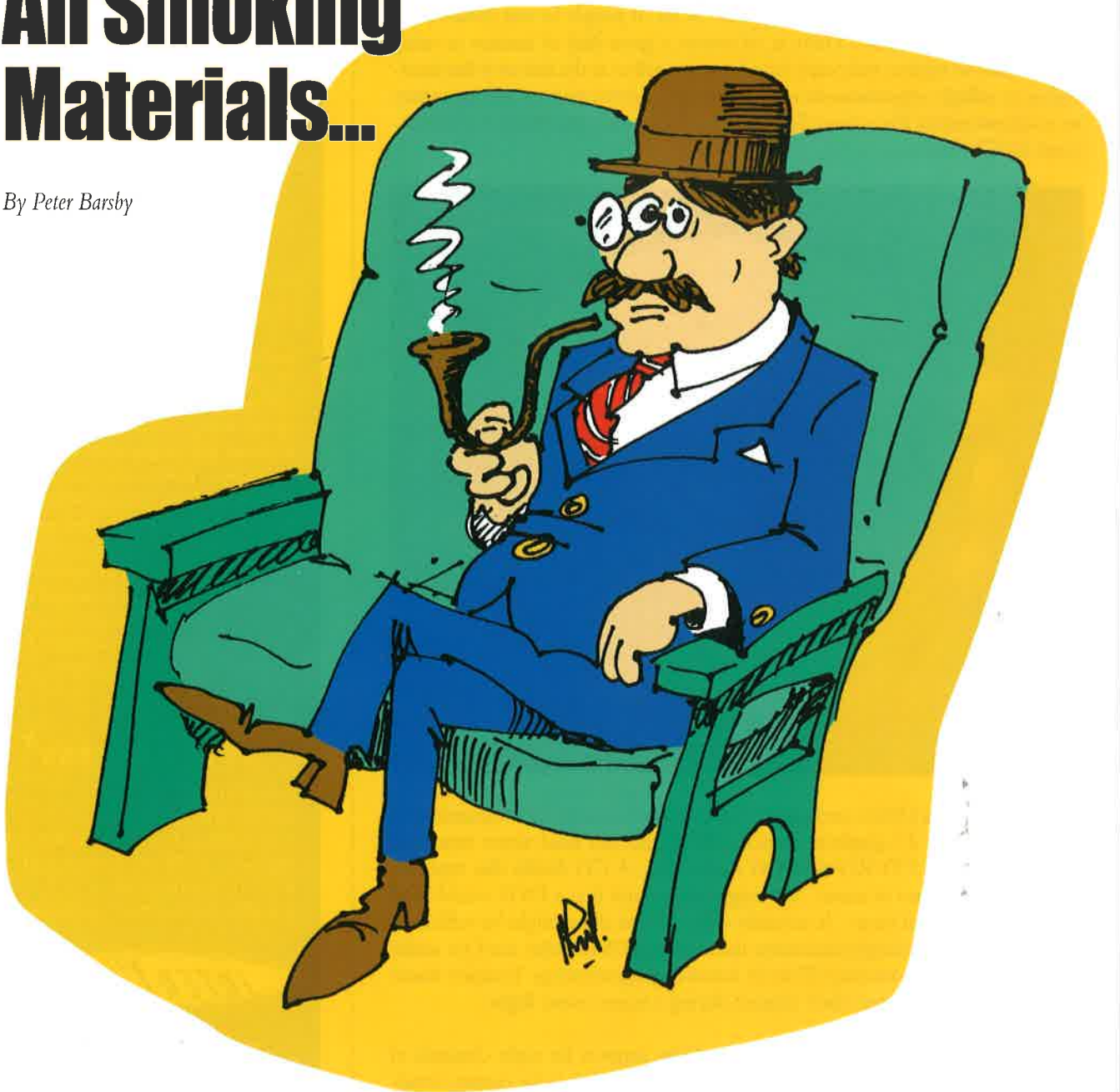


# Please Extinguish All Smoking Materials...

*By Peter Barsby*



This is a plea for ordinary English. Not the English of Oxford or the BBC, or the loopy speech of the English upper classes, but a plea for plain ordinary everyday English-English, American-English, Indian-English and even Australian-English. I suspect that many of the points I make apply equally well to other languages, but I have enough trouble with my own language, so I'll leave the rest to others.

Why is it that the moment an airline starts playing back the safety video or prerecorded announcements (PRA's) or the crew switch on the microphone and start reading from the card, ordinary comprehensible English vanishes out of the cabin window and is replaced by tortured, unclear, and confusing verbiage?

Take my headline case from the (previous) safety video of a major British airline:

*In an emergency, extinguish all smoking materials.*

I have a vision of an Asian businessman who speaks perfectly good second-language English doing exactly what he is told—taking a fire extinguisher and spraying it on the cloth seats, the clothing of fellow passengers and any other ‘materials’ within reach. That’s what the announcement says to do.

We provide these messages in order to inform passengers. They are important. They need to be understood quickly, clearly, and easily, and a great many passengers will have English as a second language. So why do we make them so complicated? Why say *extinguish all smoking materials* when we mean *put out your cigarettes*?

There are a couple of reasons why airlines have confusing announcements. Most people do not realise that there is a great difference between the spoken and written version of languages, and this is especially so in English. Usually, it is only broadcasters, playwrights, or fiction writers who have to learn to put the spoken language onto paper so that announcers, actors, or characters can sound as if they are speaking naturally. The rest never write anything except ‘written’ English.

Unlike many other languages, English today relies mainly on word order (in written language) and emphasis (in spoken language) to distinguish meaning and eliminate ambiguity.

Try this – the title of a famous Cole Porter song—and see how the meaning changes when you emphasise the bold words in turn. (I’ve cheated by providing some commas to help you. For non-English readers, you can call someone *love*, but it is very, very familiar and slightly vulgar.)

What **is** this thing called love?

What is **this** thing called, love?

What is this **thing** called, love?

What is this thing **called**, love?

The same words but slightly different meanings.

Take a look at the last line directly above. There is no verb, so it is grammatically incorrect in written English, but it is perfectly acceptable in spoken English.

So spoken English is different from written English. When you write scripts for someone to say out loud or to record, you need to write in the way you would speak. You can use underlines or bold to show where you want the emphasis to avoid ambiguities. Use all the usual spoken contractions—*there’s, don’t, can’t, won’t, we’ll, we’d*—just as you would in everyday speech.

Environment is also used in the spoken language to simplify things.

*The lavatories are situated at the rear of the aircraft cabin.*

Firstly, everything in the world is *situated* somewhere, so that can be cut for a start. (Another unnecessary favourite is *located*.) Next, if you’re sitting in an office writing a script for an indeterminate audience somewhere, then you may well need to specify what sort of cabin, but to the passenger sitting on the aircraft, it’s unnecessary and pedantic. Did you think he might be on a ship ... “*at the rear of the cabin*” or even “*at the rear*” is enough.

Misunderstanding the differences between spoken and written English is not the only reason that so many safety soundtracks, PRA’s, and live cabin announcements sound as if they have been written by lexicographers rather than real people. “Officialese” is the other. Relaxed, everyday spoken English looks more casual when written down. It includes contractions (*we’ll* for *we will*), imprecise words (*put, get*) and perhaps even words which were slang until recently. This is anathema to those who are used to dealing only with official documents (“officialese”) with their need to be exact and formal—for example, the FAA, CAA, the airline Safety Officer, perhaps even your line manager. A simple and easily understood script goes up the line and comes back down with blue-pencil marks and *heretofor’s* and *notwithstanding’s* inserted. Well, that might be a lit-

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tle over the top, but you know what I mean. In this case, it's up to you IFE managers to fight your corner for a more easily understood script.

The other pitfall of "officialese" is long words. For some strange reason people have the impression that using a long word makes the announcement sound more important, official, or authoritative. Personally, I blame lawyers. They use long words because they need every word to mean precisely and exactly what it means in their law books—and no one has ever dared explain that the rest of us don't know what they're talking about. In safety announcements we have to be sure that everyone understands what we mean, so ignore *embarkation* and talk about *boarding*, forget *deplaning*, and we can *get off* instead.

Which reminds me. Why do people get *on* an aircraft? I prefer to get *in* an aircraft; it is much more comfortable.

Here are a few more of my most unfavourite announcements heard on airlines.

Firstly, another British carrier: *Should you need any assistance during the flight.....*

I don't know, *should* I need assistance? Is it compulsory? Why are we confusing second-language English speakers with the various different uses of *should*? What's wrong with *if*? *If you need any assistance....* What's more, why use *assistance* when *help* is so much easier for everyone to understand? So what this announcement really means is *If you need any help during the flight.....* Ah, plain English.

Here's one from a German airline who at least has the excuse that they're working in someone else's language.

*The whistle can be utilised for summoning attention.*

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I don't know about you, but I do not *utilise* anything. I *use* it. Why use a longer, less familiar synonym when there's a short everyday word? That goes even more so for *utilisation*. You can save whole trees with the noun *use*. American airlines are excepted here. For some reason *utilize* (and *utilization*) is gradually replacing the verb *use* (and the noun *use*) in American-English. For the life of me, I cannot understand why, but I suppose they can't be right about everything, and they have lots of trees—so far. They also spell them with a “z” where modern English-English uses an “s.”

Next, I want to know why is this announcement in the passive mood? Remember the trouble you had at school trying to get the hang of the passive or reflexive in Latin, French, or German? So please don't take revenge on second-language English speakers. *Use the whistle* is shorter, quicker, and easier to understand than *the whis-*

*tle can be used*. And why, oh, why *summon attention* when you can *attract attention* or even *call for help*. Translate this announcement into plain English and we get:

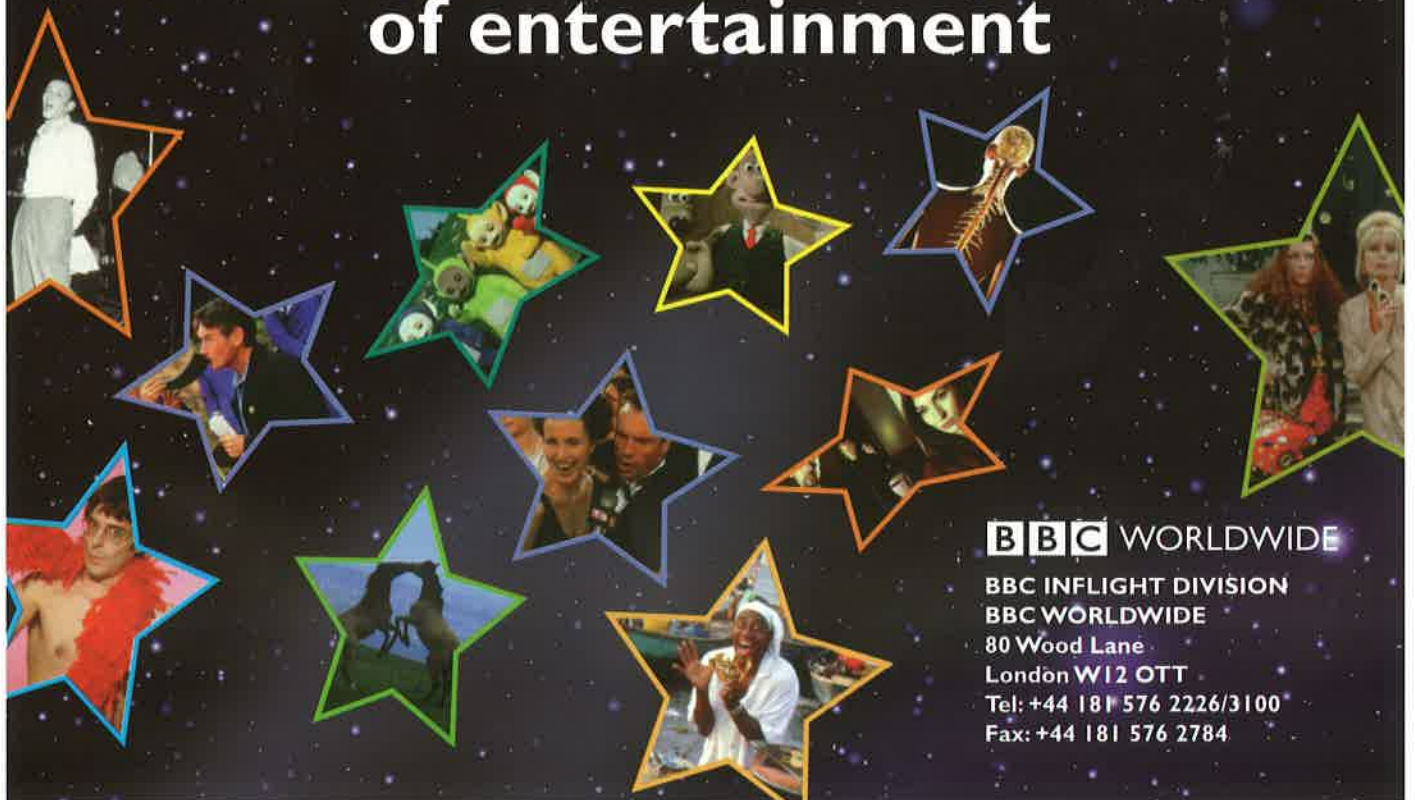
*Use the whistle to call for help.*

Now everyone knows what you mean.

If you are writing safety scripts and English is your second language, beware. It would be a very good idea to get an Englishman (or at least someone whose mother language is English) to check over your script and, most preferably, one who is familiar with script-writing and has read this article. Any of the usual major inflight entertainment companies will be glad to check over your script.

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## A star-studded choice of entertainment



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Here's yet another awkwardness which can be misinterpreted:

*Should your life jacket fail to inflate,  
then you should utilise the oral tube.*

This has got them all, including conditional verb and *utilise*—but the real disaster is the *oral tube*. In case you haven't realised, bringing the words *oral* and *tube* together in English has certain connotations which may have an undesirable connotation.

It is all too easy to slip up when using someone else's mother tongue. I suspect that the offices at a certain French airline still ring with laughter over the English supplier negotiating a contract who announced "OK, *il faut que nous baissons les prix.*" The lady airline representatives all collapsed sniggering while a French associate urgently whispered that though *baissons* (two *s*'s) means reduce, *baisons* (one *s*) is rude. The supplier had said "OK, *we will have to /?@#\*! the prices.*" That may have been true, but it would have been better if *I* had not said it.

Here's another:

*Please refrain from throwing foreign  
articles into the toilet.*

*Refrain* can mean the chorus of a song, and for this Englishman, anyway, *foreign articles* are found in newspapers like *Pravda*, *Le Monde*, or *Al-Ahram*. Why would I throw them in the toilet? Especially while singing.

On a less serious note, it's good to know that our airline announcements and messages are not the worst offenders. The hotel and retail trade beats us hands down. This list is in English, but I have no doubt that your own language has just as many pitfalls for the unwary.

*The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time you will be unbearable.*

*You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.*

*Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.*

*Ladies may have a fit upstairs.*

*Because there is a big rush, we will execute customers in rotation.*

*Fur coates made for ladies with their own skin.*

*For your convenience, we recommend courteous, efficient self-service.*

**Finally, here are some rules for plain, sensible easy-to-understand English scripts.**

- Write "as you speak" not "as you write for a book."
- Use everyday spoken contractions—*we'll, don't, can't.*
- Use short sentences.
- Never use a long word where a short word will do.
- Avoid the passive mood.
- Remember that many of your listeners know the language less well than you do.
- If the language is not your own mother tongue, get someone to check your script.
- Never *extinguish your smoking materials.*

If you are not now entirely paranoid about what your announcements are saying to passengers, then I recommend that you listen to "Airline Announcements" by the American master of the angry comedians, George Carlin ("Jammin' in New York," Atlantic 792221-2). It could be worse.

*Peter Barsby spent ten years struggling with his own language as a TV and radio journalist before setting up Skyline where he is now Managing Director.*

