

WORST WORDS

Media release

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“Bundle of rights” named Worst Words of 2023 “Rapid unscheduled disassembly” wins the people’s choice

Plain English Foundation has chosen **“a bundle of contractual rights”** as its worst words of 2023. This is the phrase Qantas came up with to avoid responsibility for selling cancelled flights. The airline argued it does not actually sell flights, just the right to fly ... eventually.

Every year, the Foundation gathers dozens of examples of weasel words and phrases like this one. Contenders for the worst words of the year include political spin, corporate gobbledegook and everything in between.

This year, the people’s choice award went to **“rapid unscheduled disassembly”**. Not sure what that means? It is the phrase SpaceX used to describe the midair explosion of their spacecraft, and to reduce a dangerous, damage-causing event to a technicality.

This year also saw OceanGate (the makers of the Titan submarine) call their passengers **“mission specialists”**. This phrase identifies passengers as crew, which helped the company to avoid safety requirements and limit their liability for the submarine implosion.

“Whether they are taking you up, down, or all around the world, these companies have 1 thing in common”, said plain language expert, Greg Moriarty. “They’re all using technical or legal language to try to bamboozle the public and avoid responsibility.”

And corporations aren’t the only ones that like a bit of spin. This year the UK Home Secretary got in hot water for pretending that homelessness was a **“lifestyle choice”**. Closer to home, a Victorian government agency announced that it was merely going to **“retire”** public housing buildings, a pretty euphemism for demolish.

Aside from spin, the Foundation is always on the lookout for new buzzwords, jargon and Frankenwords. This year **“feedforward”** (a sensitive replacement for ‘feedback’) and **“solutioning”** (what we used to call ‘problem-solving’) took the cake for most unnecessary new words. While **“autobesity”** and **“resenteeism”** just left us confused.

The Foundation’s 2023 list is rounded out with real estate gobbledegook and yet another celebrity non-apology. The full shortlist of the Worst Words of 2023 is attached.

Plain language expert Greg Moriarty is available for interviews.

Greg is clear, engaging and funny on air. He regularly speaks to the media about the importance of clear language, and he is also a published crime novelist.

From 19–22 December, contact Prudence Illingworth to book an interview:
02 8357 4310 or prudence.illingworth@plainenglishfoundation.com.

From 23 December onwards, contact Greg Moriarty directly:
0430 333 062 or greg.moriarty@plainenglishfoundation.com



Worst Words of 2023

Plain English Foundation's winner

Bundle of rights – Qantas

Earlier this year, the ACCC alleged that Qantas had been deceptive by selling flights that they knew were already cancelled. To avoid this charge, Qantas told the court that it doesn't sell particular flights at all.

Instead, they sell passengers 'a bundle of contractual rights'.

Legal nitpicking like this just doesn't make sense to consumers.



People's choice award

Rapid unscheduled disassembly – SpaceX

When testing their new Starship spacecraft in April this year, SpaceX commentators were dismayed to see the craft explode soon after launch. They quickly recovered and started calling the explosion a 'rapid unscheduled disassembly' – a line repeated on SpaceX's social media.

This innocuous phrase minimises the severity of the event. Fallout from the explosion landed on spectators, homes, cars and a wildlife refuge.





More corporate spin

Mission specialist

Earlier this year OceanGate's submarine imploded, killing all aboard. However, some tricky legal wording limited the company's responsibility for this terrible event.

OceanGate classed passengers as crew and called them 'mission specialists' (despite one 'specialist' being just 19 years old and studying an unrelated field). This means that the company could take their 'crew' on the dive, which would otherwise have been illegal in this experimental and uncertified submarine. And the penalties for killing a crew member are far less than those for killing a passenger.



Political spin

Lifestyle choice

In November, UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman decided to take a hard line on people experiencing homelessness. In a series of social media posts, she argued that many of these people were 'living on the streets as a lifestyle choice'.

Journalists, politicians, and people experiencing homelessness immediately pointed out the lack of compassion in pretending that homelessness is a choice.

Retiring buildings

And while we're on housing, we must note a Victorian housing agency that announced that 'Homes Victoria has commenced taking steps towards retiring our older public housing towers.' We assume this means demolishing and rebuilding or refurbishing the housing towers.

Given this can be a very stressful time for residents, it is critical to use clear language so residents know what is happening.



Buzzwords and jargon

Feedforward

Corporations enjoy reinventing the wheel when it comes to language. The latest word subjected to this treatment is feedback, which in some companies is now called 'feedforward'.

This potentially confusing term has grown in popularity in an attempt to reduce employees' anxiety around feedback. We just don't know if 'feedforward' is any less stressful.

Solutioning

When is problem solving not problem solving? When it's solutioning.

This ugly alternative has been used in IT teams and organisations for a while, but this year it gained more traction in normal business-speak.

We're not averse to technical terms when needed. But there's no need to create a new verb when a perfectly good one already exists.

 **Frankenwords**

Autobesity Cars are getting bigger and heavier, and many commentators want to talk about this. The problem is that they're all talking about 'autobesity' – a new word coined to describe the trend.

We polled our colleagues to see what people thought 'autobesity' meant, and most thought it meant to make yourself fat. Let's skip the confusing new word and keep our language trim.

Resenteeism Feeling unhappy and unfulfilled is not a new phenomenon in the workplace, but there's a new word for it: resenteeism. This is 2023's twist on presenteeism (where you still turn up to work, but you're either not very productive or actually rather ill).'

'Presenteeism' makes some sense when compared to 'absenteeism'. But 'resenteeism' takes it 1 step further (away from any clear meaning).

 **Gobbledegook of the year**

Rapid nature of home value uplift Property prices are a perennial topic, but that doesn't mean we always understand what people are talking about. Explaining a new report, CoreLogic spokesperson Eliza Owen said:

It varies a little bit because there's been different schemes and things introduced in the periods of upswing, but last cycle shows a pretty quick drop off of first home buyer activity after the expiry of HomeBuilder and the rapid nature of home value uplift has contributed to that as well.

From schemes to swings, cycles to drop-offs – there's a lot going on in this 51-word sentence. But the bit of gobbledegook we found most egregious is a phrase at the end: 'the rapid nature of home value uplift'. What's wrong with simply saying 'house prices are going up fast'?

 **Non-apology of the year**

We are aware of the pain that has been caused Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis released a video apologising for the character letters they wrote for convicted rapist, Danny Masterson. In the video, they avoided true apologies, saying, 'We are aware of the pain that has been caused by the character letters that we wrote on behalf of Danny Masterson.' They continued, 'They [the letters] were intended for the judge to read. Um, and not to undermine the testimony of any of the victims or retraumatise them in any way.'