

WORST WORDS

Media release

Embargoed until
3.30 pm, 3 December 2024

“Dynamic pricing” named Worst Words of 2024

Plain English Foundation has named “**dynamic pricing**” as its worst words of 2024. This dubious practice became prominent when English band Oasis released concert tickets. The term usually refers to prices that fluctuate with demand. But Oasis fans found that prices soared instantly and did not come back down, which impacted the tickets already in their shopping carts.

For a fifteenth year, the Foundation has gathered dozens of examples of corporate and government waffle to highlight the importance of clear and ethical public language. And spin, doublespeak and gobbledegook all made the list.

A strong contender was “**underground coal gas ignition incident**”. It is how mining company Anglo American described an explosion at one of its mines. Thankfully, nobody was hurt, but simple language sure took a bashing.

This year also saw Telstra downplay thousands of redundancies by announcing them as part of a corporate “**reset**”. A fresh take on mass job losses, the vague label helped divert attention from the everyday impact of dramatic operational changes.

The Foundation would forgive you for thinking you too had won if you received promotional material reading “**YOU HAVE DEFINITELY WON!**”. But this misleading phrase got Magnamail into hot water with Australia’s consumer regulator.

“In a year of spending cuts, data breaches and industrial accidents, companies and governments lean on vague or camouflaging words,” said Foundation spokesperson Greg Moriarty. “Organisations and politicians are skilled at distorting language to avoid responsibility. The public sees through this and has had enough.”

A murkier entry from international politics comes out of Russia. In February, the world learned that Putin’s political rival Alexei Navalny died in prison of “**sudden death syndrome**”, a symptom of which included the unknown location of the body.

Spin continues with “**sunset**” meaning to retire a brand. And “**Bregret**” is a portmanteau the British may live to regret, just like Brexit. Even a GIF made the list.

The list rounds out with a worst sentence, non-apology and mixed metaphor. The full shortlist of the Worst Words of 2024 follows.

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

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Worst Words of 2024

Winner

Dynamic pricing

Dynamic pricing one day, dynamic definition the next.

This term usually refers to prices that fluctuate with demand. But Oasis fans found that prices soared instantly and did not come back down, which even impacted the tickets already in their shopping carts.

Consumer watchdog Choice said that it is yet to see dynamic pricing resulting in cheaper-than-advertised tickets.

This ambiguous label and unfair practice need clarifying.



Spin and doublespeak

Underground coal gas ignition incident

‘Underground coal gas ignition incident’ was how mining company Anglo American downplayed what unfolded at its Queensland mine in June. Thankfully, no one was injured.

Anglo American went on to minimise the severity of the event, describing it as an ‘underground fire’ and a ‘combustion event’.

But the word they were digging for all along was ‘explosion’.

Reset

Corporate spin dominates this year’s list. In May, Telstra announced a massive business **reset**, which involved dismissing up to 2,800 employees.

The telecommunications giant buried the mass redundancies within a list of operational changes. Appearing 6 times throughout the release, ‘reset’ seemingly softens the blow and serves as a creative way to announce a 9% cut in staff numbers.

If a company sheds close to a tenth of its workforce, does ‘decimation’ better describe it?

Sunset

Need to announce the end of a brand? Don’t ‘stop it’ or ‘close it down’. Instead, have your product head off into the sunset for some well-earned rest.

US publisher Wiley announced it would **sunset** Hindawi, its troubled open-access journal publisher.

By all means, get creative with the language and turn nouns into verbs when that makes the meaning clearer. But this unclear example of corporate doublespeak is quite a stretch. Let’s hope ‘sunset’ vanishes over the horizon.

YOU HAVE DEFINITELY WON!

Some organisations forgo spin and doublespeak in favour of misleading statements. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is taking one such organisation, Magnamail, to court.

Magnamail sent promotional material reading, '**YOU HAVE DEFINITELY WON!**'.

The ACCC states hundreds of thousands of people, including elderly and vulnerable people, made purchases under the impression they had already won a prize. But Magnamail's winners were pre-drawn.

We don't recommend using all caps, and we certainly don't recommend misleading your readers!

Sudden death syndrome

Governments also like to use language to obscure the truth. The death in prison of Russia's outspoken opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, in February this year led to an outpouring of sorrow around the world. This grief was only exacerbated when the world learned the official cause of his death: **sudden death syndrome**.

Our concern over this sinister euphemism, which covers various cardiac conditions, was compounded at the time by the unknown whereabouts of Navalny's body.

Frankenword

Bregret

If you think that the UK leaving the European Union – Brexit – was a mistake, you could be experiencing **Bregret**.

This confusing monster of a word is the result of joining regret with Brexit (also a portmanteau).

Data platform Statista.com claims 55% of British people now consider leaving the EU was a mistake. And media reports suggest this rethink is on the rise.

Hopefully, commentators can discuss the change of heart without resorting to such unclear language.

Gobbledegook

Contained within data stolen by a malicious third-party actor

Even organisations with the best intentions fall prey to the lures of gobbledegook.

When Melbourne-based prescription messaging system MediSecure suffered a cyber attack, its press statement delivered this 51-word sentence:

Nonetheless, MediSecure wishes to inform the public that the personal and sensitive information, including contact and health information, of approximately 12.9 million Australians who used the MediSecure prescription delivery service during the approximate period of March 2019 to November 2023 **was contained within MediSecure data stolen by a malicious third-party actor.**

MediSecure buried what the public most needed to know under 40 words of ambiguous, complex and passive language.

If it's too long for you, let us do the heavy lifting: thieves stole the data of about 13 million Australians. This might affect your account if you used the service between March 2019 and November 2023.

Non-apology

As far as my comments may have been misunderstood

Whether you apologise in public or private, the key is to mean it. But Victorian Liberal leader John Pesutto offered a qualified apology to Kellie-Jay Keen and Angie Jones for his comments that wrongly suggested these women's rights campaigners had links to far-right extremists.

He wrote:

As far as my comments may have been misunderstood as conveying that I believed this to be the case, I apologise for any hurt, distress or harm that has occurred.

Admittedly, the statement worked. It included the words 'I apologise', and Kellie-Jay Keen dropped her defamation case.

But prefacing the apology with 19 words of passive, cloudy language weakens any genuine remorse – a key ingredient for an apology.

Mixed metaphor

Elbows, orthodoxies and levers

Equally cloudy is our understanding of Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's statement about the government's key role in renewable energy. He said:

Government needs to be more strategic, more sophisticated and a more constructive contributor; we need **sharper elbows** when it comes to marking out our national interest; and we need to be willing to break with **old orthodoxies** and pull **new levers** to advance the national interest.

Figures of speech only work well if they clarify meaning or illuminate a topic for an audience. Albanese's take on 'think outside the box' certainly goes out on a limb.

AI stuff-up

Excellent educational institutions

The rise of generative artificial intelligence means more opportunities for language to be misused.

When a real estate agency left the promotional task of selling a home in Farley, New South Wales to ChatGPT, the chatbot did some creative writing.

Not only did ChatGPT invent two **excellent educational institutions**, which most people call 'schools', it gave them stellar reputations too.

The ad claimed Farley Primary School was 'known for its nurturing environment and dedicated staff'. There are no schools in Farley.

While the AI world refers to these lies as hallucinations, let this stuff-up stand as a cautionary tale on our over-reliance on AI.

Embarrassing misprint

Wicked.com

Toy manufacturer Mattel might have wished it was hallucinating when it incorrectly printed a link for the Wicked movie on merchandising packaging.

The link on the doll box should have read 'WickedMovie.com'. But 'movie' was missing, and the link directed fans to an adult site instead.

Mattel apologised and dealt with the typo quickly, withdrawing the doll from sale. A missing word proved a costly proofing error.

Errant image

Hourglass GIF Words aren't the only things that can get you into hot water. With the likes of emojis and GIFs at our fingertips, we have to think even more carefully about how our messages might be interpreted, especially if you're a world leader.

After Australia's ambassador to the US Kevin Rudd congratulated Donald Trump on the election result, Dan Scavino Jr, a senior Trump adviser, replied with an **hourglass GIF** and no accompanying text.

Whatever could this cryptic image mean?

Is the errant GIF a warning of Rudd's time running out? Or perhaps Scavino is counting down the hours to working more closely with Australia's former prime minister.