

At Simplified, we know that clear communication  
is more than words and sentences.

## Jargon and the curse of knowledge

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# What we'll discuss

1. What is jargon and why can't we get it right
2. A collaborative yet formal approach
  - Make stakeholders put themselves in the user's shoes
  - Identify 'circle words'
  - Decide 'replace' or 'define'
  - Use the drafting table
  - Be relentless in precision of definitions

What is  
jargon?

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**Jargon** is a type of language that is used in a particular context and may not be well understood outside that context.

Most jargon is **technical terminology**, involving **terms of art** or **industry terms**, with particular meaning within a specific industry.

(Wikipedia)



A shortcut

# Jargon is a surprisingly emotive topic. We need to look at the research:

For example, research into use of specialist language found:

- **80% of people preferred sentences written in clear English** - and the more complex the issue, the greater that preference (eg, 97% preferred 'among other things' over the Latin 'inter alia')
- the more educated the person and the more specialist their knowledge, the greater their preference for plain English

People understand complex specialist language, but don't want to read it if there's an alternative.

(As quoted in Gov.uk)

Thomas Cooley Law School, From the Selected Works of Christopher R Trudeau

Why can't we  
get it right?

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# Steven Pinker: A sense of style

“I think **the curse of knowledge** is the chief contributor to opaque writing.”



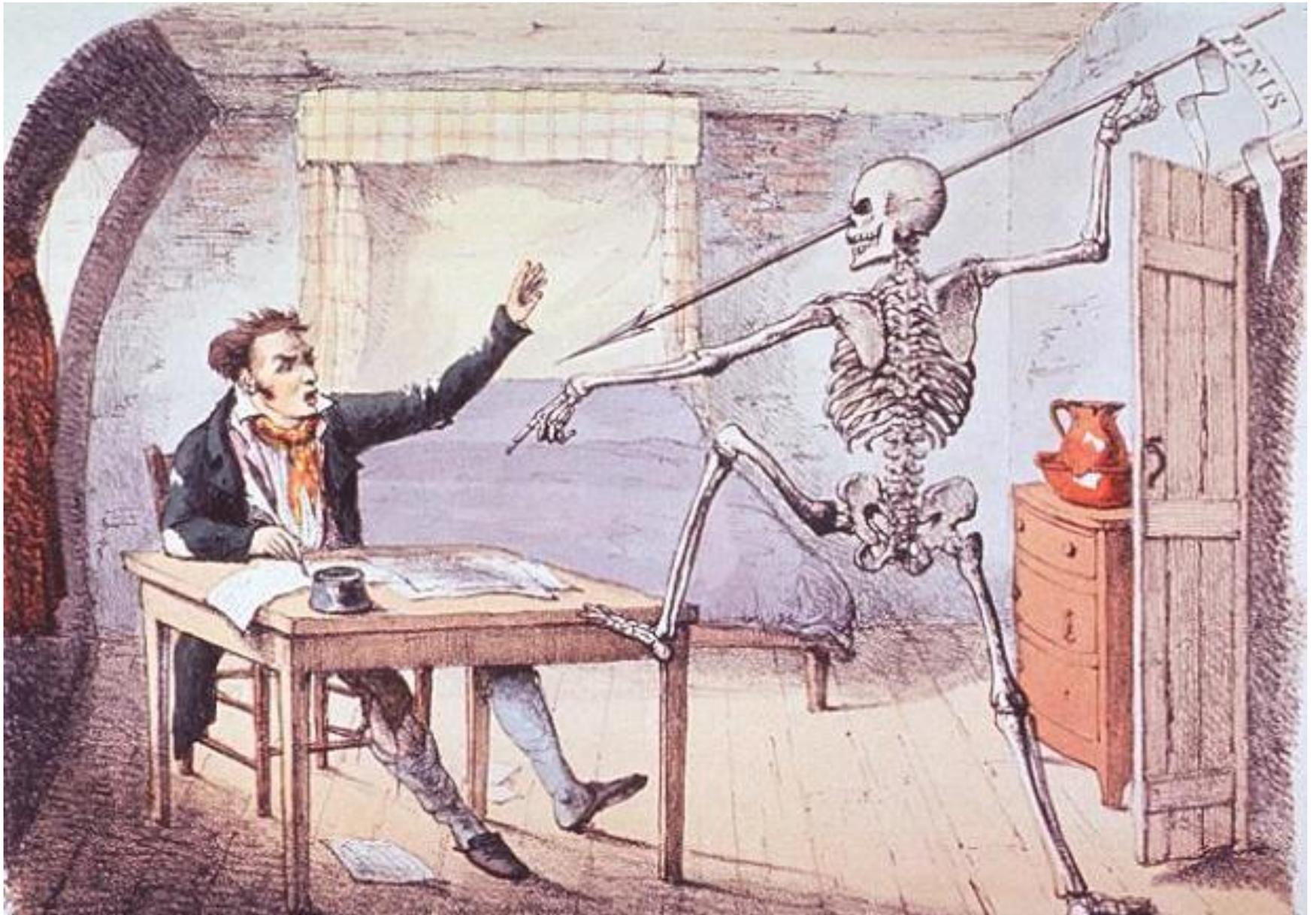
But that's not all.

Putting stakeholders into the user's shoes

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1. A perissodactyl ungulate may be propelled towards a body of aqueous fluid, but such ungulate cannot be forcibly induced to imbibe such fluid.
2. In such circumstances, the stylus is more important than the claymore.
3. I was reminded that lithodial fragments ought not to be forcibly projected by inhabitants of vitreous abodes.
4. But then, as with the progenitor of the scion, in such similar manner it may occur with the scion.
5. In short, eleemosynary deeds have their incipience intramurally.
6. It should be noted that pulchritude does not penetrate below the dermal plane.

1. a person may be directed towards a body, but such a direction cannot be forcibly induced.
2. in such cases, the mind is more important than the body.
3. I was reminded that the mind should not be forcibly projected by the body.
4. But then, as with the mind, in such similar manner, the scion
5. In short, all deeds have the
6. It should be noted that does not penetrate below the dermal plane.



With the loss of control of the writer, comes real cost.

# Identifying our 'circle words'

## Three methods:

Do I think my audience understands it?

Do my audience understand it? (user test or comprehension test)

Corpus studies

Is the word in common usage? Corpus studies

“To give a very rough guide, I judge that words scoring more than about 1,200 in the British National Corpus are fairly common. If the word does not occur in the corpus or if its frequency is less than 1200, then the word is considered unfamiliar.”

-- Martin Cutts in the ‘Plain English Lexicon’.

# Plain English Lexicon, Martin Cutts

LWV: Living Word Vocabulary (lowest US grade level at which the word was understood by at least 67% of those tested)

BNC: British National Corpus

abandon – absorb

Word	LWV	UK	%	BNC	LWV meaning or (maybe) plainer term	Commentary
A abandon	6	11	74	4254	give up	An easy word, as the scores show. No need to be wary of all 3-syllable words.
abandoned	6	11	89	298	deserted	
abate	12	17	69	219	decrease, lessen, reduce	'Abate' and 'abatement' are neither well known nor, as the BNC score shows, much seen. Even the Noise Abatement Society has changed its name, to Pipe Down. Local-council letters, though, still advise people to 'abate the nuisance' – strange language to many.
abattoir	16	21	4	93	slaughterhouse	
abbreviate	4	9	74	79	shorten	
abbreviation	4	9	67	229	shortened word form	
abdomen	6	11	77	296	where stomach is	
abdominal	6	11	67	513	about the stomach	
abet	13	18	68	151	assist, help	Rare and old fashioned. 'Aid and abet' is a legal doublet. 'Assist' or 'help' will do.



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Decide whether to replace or define by using a drafting list.

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# Drafting checklist

- Is the word in common use? If yes, use. If no:
- Is there a specific technical meaning? If no, replace. If yes:
- Can you replace it with a short easier alternative? If yes, replace. If no:
- Keep the jargon and define it

# Replacing legalese

I, the undersigned, do hereby revoke, cancel and annul all and any wills, testamentary instruments and codicils heretofore made by me.

# Replacing legalese

I cancel all earlier wills.

# Replacing legalese

I cancel all earlier wills and codicils.

A codicil is [definition].

# How to write definitions (when you need to)

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# How to write a definition

## What you must do:

- ✓ Aim to use only one sentence or phrase for each definition.
  - ✓ Nouns should be described as nouns, verbs as verbs.
  - ✓ State distinguishing characteristics precisely.
  - ✓ Use words appropriate to the target audience.
  - ✓ If the reader base varies in its level of knowledge, use words appropriate to the lowest level of readers.
  - ✓ Be consistent – decide whether to begin with a definite or indefinite article, and whether to use 'is' or 'means' or just a colon?
-

# How to write a definition

## What you must not do:

- ✘ Don't include substantive information (explanatory content) in the definition.
  - ✘ Don't write negative definitions.
  - ✘ Don't define a term with the same term.
  - ✘ Don't introduce the definition with the words 'is when' or 'is where'.
  - ✘ Don't include examples and formulas
-

A definition consists of four parts:

- The term being defined (a robin)
- The verb (is)
- The general group to which the term belongs (a type of bird)
- The unique characteristics that distinguish the term from all others in its group

<b>Term</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Unique characteristic</b>
A robin	is	a type of bird	that flies south for the winter and eats seeds and fruit
A robin	is	a small Old World thrush related to the chats	that has a scarlet breast and brown rear plumage
A robin	is	a small red-breasted bird	that has brown feathers on its back and eats seeds and fruit

Term	Verb	Group	Unique characteristic
A policyholder	is	a person or organisation	who owns a company death benefit

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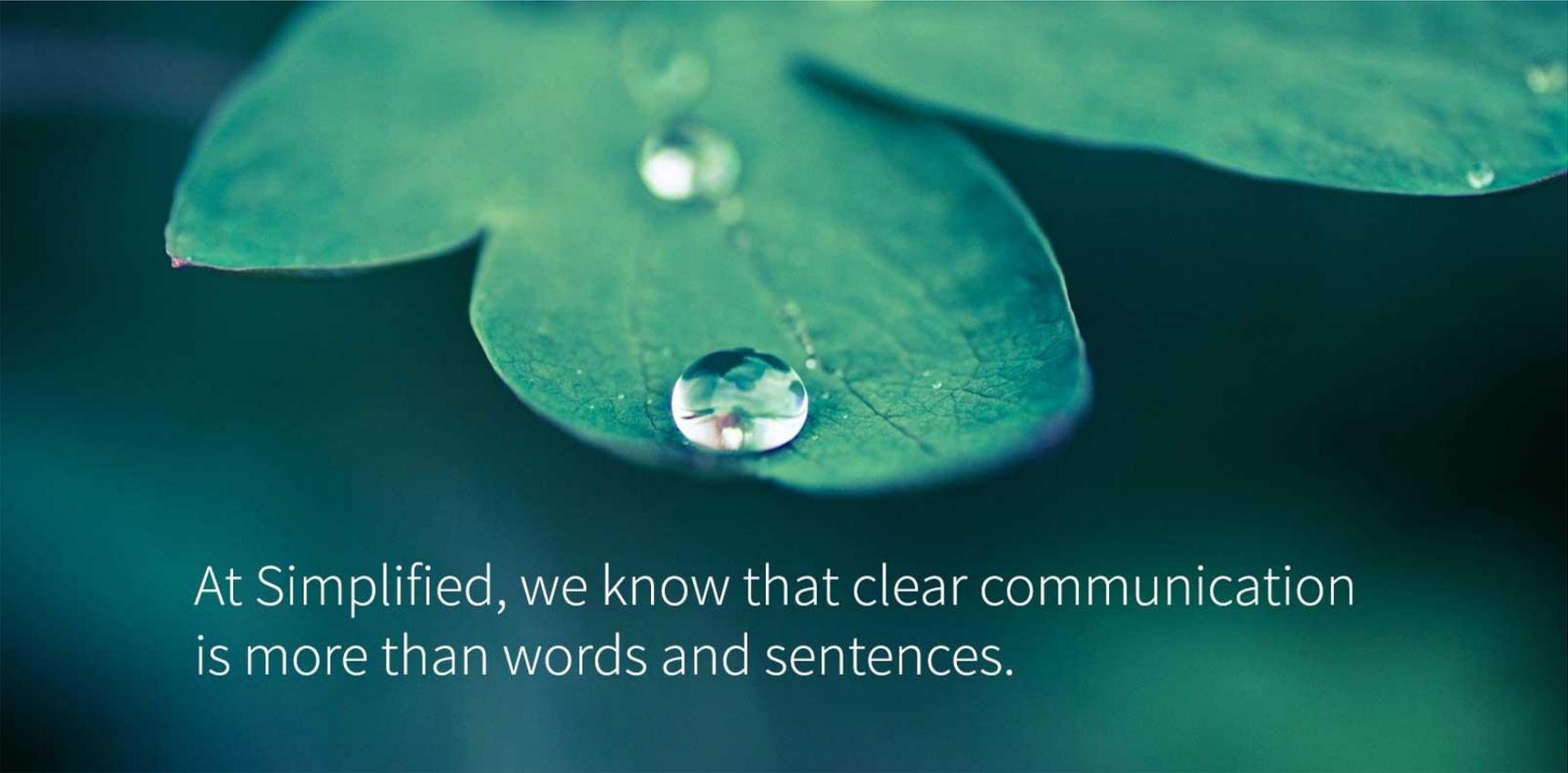
Test:

We pay the death benefit to each policyholder after a death of a life insured.

We pay the death benefit to each person or organisation who owns a company death benefit after the death of a life insured.

# Recap

1. Because issues around jargon are psychological we need processes and techniques to deal with it
2. Make stakeholders put themselves in the user's shoes
3. Have a formal yet highly collaborative process for identifying 'circle words'
4. Have a rational process for 'replace' or 'define'
5. Use the drafting table
6. Be relentless in precision of definitions



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