How one UK bank is using software to improve the way it writes to customers.

Making Words Work

MIKE CROWTHER — Manager Service Excellence, HBOS

At HBOS we’re changing the way we write. We’re encouraging everyone to write in clear, plain English. We want colleagues to write to customers in a natural style that reflects our open and approachable philosophy. The success of our Make Words Work campaign depends crucially on using Editor Software’s customised editing and training programs.

Every few months managers complained at the standard of customer correspondence and internal documents. We were no different from any other company or government agency—we did not write well. All organisations, especially large ones, suffer from a business style that gets in the way of clear communication.

We tried solving this problem in the traditional way—we ran internal courses teaching colleagues how to write clearly. Unfortunately, although colleagues enthusiastically embraced the ideas, they soon fell back into their old writing habits when they returned to their desks.

The Software Solution

When discussing our needs with Editor Software, the company’s director, Nick Wright, helped us by offering software solutions. He suggested designing an Electronic Writing Course based on our customer-service letters to teach colleagues everything they needed to know to write in a clear and effective style. Our site licence to the Course lets us train all colleagues quickly and efficiently at their desks.

Once trained, we issue staff with StyleWriter. Each time a colleague drafts a letter, StyleWriter checks, analyses and rates the document. The program highlights the poor business style—long sentences, wordy phrases, clichés, passive verbs and so on. With a few simple mouse clicks and keystrokes, the writer produces a better letter. StyleWriter is as simple as running a spell-check but the results are far more impressive.

Editor Software also helped us to design an Electronic House Style. This gave us control over what StyleWriter checked. We added editing advice to check the correct capitalisation of product names, dates, time, telephone numbers and so on. As a financial company, we also had to tackle proscribed wording set by the industry’s regulator, the Financial Services Authority. As part of our

Software for Better Writing Skills

StyleWriter — Editing Software
StyleWriter will change the writing style in your organization. Recommended by the Plain Language Commission, StyleWriter checks each document for thousands of writing faults. Simple editing using StyleWriter cuts 25 per cent of the wordy style, resulting in a clear, concise and readable document.

The Electronic Writing Course
Conventional training in effective writing skills has always been time-consuming and costly. The Electronic Writing Course gives an affordable solution to training staff, quickly and thoroughly.

The Electronic House Style
Does your house style recommend 23 June, June 23, 23rd June or June 23rd? Do you want to discourage people from using industry jargon? Do you spend time proofreading for product names? StyleWriter can check thousands of your house-style rules to help everyone write consistently and accurately.

The Tutor
The Tutor is a customised, interactive guide to these software tools. Viewing the demonstrations and tutorials on the Tutor explains your communications project and how to use StyleWriter, the Course and the House Style software tools.

Software for Clearer Communication from EDITOR SOFTWARE
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StyleWriter—The Plain English Editor

We turned to Editor Software to find a practical solution to our problem. We had previously asked Editor Software to edit over 800 of our standard letters. Once edited, the new letters met with universal approval from our customers. We had also introduced Editor Software’s StyleWriter software into a few areas of the business. This software, popular with colleagues, checked letters for thousands of plain English style and usage problems, gave valuable editing advice and encouraged a clear and natural style. Could StyleWriter be the answer we were looking for?

All organisations suffer from a business style that gets in the way of clear communication.

The HBOS Tutor
house style rules, Editor Software adapted StyleWriter so the program highlighted FSA banned wording and stopped employees editing required, regulatory paragraphs.

To make sure colleagues understood our Make Words Work project, we ran internal promotions, newsletter articles and specialist training workshops. Nick Wright trained our 70 plain English champions who would go back to their departments as experts in plain English and the StyleWriter software. To make sure the whole project ran smoothly, Editor Software also designed an electronic Tutor to teach colleagues how to use the software.

Checking Every Letter with StyleWriter
Each time we opened Microsoft Word to draft a letter, there are three new icons available.

- The Tutor icon explained the project and shows colleagues how to use the new software tools.
- The Electronic Writing Course icon to learn how to write in plain English.
- The StyleWriter icon sits there ready to check for thousands of writing problems, including our customised house-style rules.

The software solution we use to improve our writing standards is always there—in the user’s word-processing program.

Measuring the Success of our Project
StyleWriter lets us measure the standard of our writing. The program automatically collects a before (the original draft) and after (the redraft) scores for every letter checked. For the first time, management will have quantitative data to see how our writing standards improve. We have already seen a marked improvement in every letter that StyleWriter checks. We expect the program to continue to help raise our standards.

Conclusion
This year, 1,500 HBOS employees will use these software tools. If the project meets our expectations, we’ll issue the software solution to around 10,000 employees. Eventually, we expect to use StyleWriter to check, monitor and improve the seven million non-standard letters we send to customers every year.

Working with Editor Software has been a pleasure. The company designed software and workshops to meet our specific needs. They offered a workable and effective solution that saved us money and delivered better results than our traditional training courses. If more organisations followed our example and used Editor Software’s StyleWriter program, clear writing, rather than business-speak, could become industry-standard — surely a worthwhile goal.

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StyleWriter — Auditing Corporate Writing Standards

StyleWriter sets high corporate standards for documents

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<th>Original/Redraft</th>
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<th>Passive Index</th>
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