What follows is a brief report on three excerpts, one from the Department of Work and Pension, one from the Department of Education and one from the Department of Health accounts, as part of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee inquiry into government accounts.

Here’s the first excerpt:

“10. The 2004-05 Disability Living Allowance (DLA) National Benefit Review identified cases where the change in claimant’s needs had been so gradual that it would be unreasonable to expect them to know when their entitlement to DLA might have changed. These cases don’t result in a recoverable overpayment as we cannot identify when the change occurred. Because legislation requires the Secretary of State to prove that entitlement to DLA is incorrect, rather than requiring the claimant to inform us that their needs have changed, cases in this sub-category are legally correct. The difference between what claimants in these cases are receiving in DLA and related premiums in other benefits and what they would receive if their benefit was reassessed was estimated to be around £0.6 billion (+/-£0.2 billion) in 2005-06. Based on 2014-15 DLA expenditure this figure is now estimated to be around £1.0 billion (+/-£0.3 billion). This component is not included in the total above.”

This is awful for numerous reasons. It’s badly overwritten, confusing, contains needlessly complex terms and is difficult to decipher. It’s likely to be misread or misunderstood by most reading it.

Specifically:

- The sentences tend to be overlong. The opening sentence, for example, is 39 words long. We recommend a sentence length of between 15 and 20 words. Anything longer than this, particularly in a report dealing with complex information, can become a meaningless dirge.
Here’s that opening rewritten:

The 2004-05 Disability Living Allowance (DLA) National Benefit Review found cases where a claimant’s needs changed very gradually. In such cases it would be unfair to expect the claimant to know when their DLA entitlement changes.

The changes – including splitting that paragraph in two (one point now made per sentence) – may seem minor but such changes made throughout would make the report far more readable.

Here’s the second excerpt:

“247. The evaluation process identified seven overarching objectives set in 2013 were still relevant to the Board, to help enhance its effectiveness and help deliver against its goals: • More clearly articulate the vision and strategic purpose of the Board; • Maintain focus on long term issues and priorities (at least the next ten years and longer where relevant), whilst recognizing short term pressures; • Lead the shift in emphasis from “curing illness” to “sustaining good health”; • Focus more time on how the health and care system can achieve continuous and structural improvements in productivity; • Continue to reinforce the Board and Department’s oversight of risk identification and management; • Continue to develop the Department’s approach as ‘steward’ of the overall health and care system; and Department of Health Annual Report and Accounts 2014-15 66 • Build on the good work already done around composition, succession and logistics to ensure the Board continues to support the work of the Department in the most effective way.”

This is hollow nonsense. What is an ‘overarching objective’? Is it any different to an ‘objective’? Is ‘enhance’ clearer than ‘improve’? Is the line ‘More clearly articulate the vision and strategic purpose of the Board’ a fancy way of saying ‘Show clearly what the board intends to do’?

- Lots of unattributed quotes.
- Overlong sentences full of bad word choices.
- Important-sounding, long-winded, easily-disposable padding (‘Maintain focus on long term issues and priorities (at least the next ten years and longer where relevant), whilst recognizing short term pressures’).
• A final sentence that’s not only pointless but confusingly so.

And finally, the third, and possibly best (worst) excerpt:

“Valuation D50. ATs valued their land and buildings using a range of methods, and as above, most reported on those values at 31 August, not the Group year end of 31 March. Few of the methods adopted by ATs complied with HMT’s reporting requirements for such valuations. The Department therefore continued its approach of commissioning valuations of newly opening academies’ land and buildings. We paid an average of £116 per valuation for academies opening in 2014-15 and commissioned independent quality assurance of the valuations. Together with valuations we procured for earlier years and have indexed, we obtained a materially complete set of valuations for all academies that have opened since the inception of the programme, using a method that complies with HMT reporting requirements. Valuations the Group received in 2015 were at depreciated replacement cost (DRC) based upon the school or academy footprint set out in Buildings Bulletin 103 and 102, whereas previous valuations were at DRC with reference to Buildings Bulletins 98 and 99.”

Truly terrible.

• Pompous and pointlessly complex language use: procured (how do you ‘procure a valuation’, anyway?), obtained (and for that matter what does ‘obtained a materially complete set of valuations’ mean?), inception, complies, footprint.
• A snooze-inducing 40-word sentence which contains within it most of the above.
• Too many acronyms.
• Very little substance and plenty of waffle.

In conclusion, the full documents are not always as bad as these excerpts suggest, but are consistently badly-written and in serious need of a rewrite.

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