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English as it is broken

Not sure what is good English and what is not? Write to The Sunday Times and we will get master teachers to answer your queries. This is a weekly series in support of the Speak Good English Movement.

WHEN safety advice is not expressed clearly, it defeats its objective of warning people. Here's one such sign with many mistakes and ambiguities. Let's scrutinise some of the instructions above.

As a non-edible item, it is evident that clay cannot be consumed. Perhaps the people who put up this sign are playing it safe. However, to state that eating clay could result in the 'strangling' of a person is an incorrect usage of the word.

To strangle means to kill someone by squeezing his throat tightly so that he cannot breathe. It would certainly be most frightening if the clay could take a life of its own to strangle someone! For clarity and accuracy, we suggest: 'Avoid putting clay into your mouth, or you may choke on it.'

Guessing at the meaning of the second instruction, we think it would read better written this way: 'Keep your hands clean and dry when handling the clay.'

In the third line, 'it' in the sentence seems to refer to the clay. It is baffling that the clay should assume more importance than the nose, eye or mouth that comes into contact with the clay. Surely the safety of the child warrants more attention than the cleanliness of the clay. So coming back to the instruction, we would go with: 'Clean your nose, eye or mouth immediately with water if it comes into contact with the clay.'

'Tickle' is also inappropriately used in the fourth instruction. Usually, a person 'tickles' another or something 'tickles' you. Hence, the clause '...as soon as you tickle in playing clay' is ungrammatical and inaccurate in usage. We would go with: 'Stop using the clay if you itch or come out in a rash.'

Try your hand at correcting the rest of the instructions.

When to sound the horn

'HORN to warn others of danger and not to express your frustration. Horning unnecessarily may alarm or anger other road users into making unpredictable moves which may lead to accidents.'

Singapore Police Force

This road safety advice will certainly be familiar to all drivers or those learning to drive. While Singaporeans will not question the meaning of the advice, an Australian friend of ours was amused by it and the way Singaporeans have mangled the English language. Here's why:

The 'horn' in a vehicle is a device that is used to make a loud noise as a warning or signal to other people. A 'horn' may also refer to a musical instrument, or a hard bony outgrowth found on the heads of cattle, sheep and other animals.

'Horn' is usually not used to describe an action, much less convey the meaning of sounding the horn.

Although the Oxford Dictionary does record the use of 'horn' as a verb, it means to butt or gore with the horns, as in 'the rhino horned the explorer'.

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