

How to be a Civil Servant

MANDARIN ENGLISH Part 1

A Short Course for New Recruits

Lessons 1-5: Vocabulary

It is no accident that Whitehall officials are known as Mandarins. Their language is often as hard to understand as anything spoken in Beijing. This document, much of which was written by David Fuhr, will provide you with the basic language you will need to get by and survive in Whitehall.

A separate document is available for advanced students. Lessons 6-9 will teach you how to write a government document. Just follow this link:-
(www.civilservant.org.uk/howtowrite.pdf)

Lesson 1

Mandarins always appear straightforward, friendly and helpful when offering an opinion, asking you to do something, and so on. **Do not be taken in!** The following translations will help you understand what they really mean.

Advice Please !

I don't have a clue what to do with this.

See also *Give me a steer on that* and *Run it past me*.

A few thoughts ...

Thank you for showing me this piece of work. It is utter rubbish for the following reasons.

As appropriate (as in "please deal with this as you consider appropriate")

You may bin this, but don't blame me if you are found out.

Blind Copy

None of the official recipients know that you have a copy of this sensitive note, therefore you cannot possibly contribute. But see “For Information” – you’ll be blamed when it all goes wrong.

CC-ing (as in “can you cc me into that”)

Copy lists can be used in a number of subtle ways. Senior staff can ask to be added to a cc list to ensure that a junior person does not receive full credit for an idea, as it will then look like their idea. Or junior staff can add senior colleagues as a way of ensuring that they are blamed for a very stupid idea.

To cc

To prevent free thought and original ideas from junior members of staff.

Concerned (as in “I was concerned to hear”)

A senior official is about to explode.

Disappointed

Used by senior officials to express the view that a particular junior official is quite possibly the most incompetent person it has ever been their misfortune to come across. Particularly devastating if used in conjunction with “concerned” and/or “surprised”.

Draft Please !

Graft for hours producing a coherent and impressive letter so that I can fulfil my teacher-fantasy by needlessly amending it.

Final Draft

The first version on which anyone senior bothers to comment as they can’t be bothered to look at the five previous drafts.

For Information

Don’t even think of commenting on this but if anything goes wrong I’ll remind everyone you knew what was going on.

Give me a steer on that

I don’t know how to decide on this one. Please make a decision for me and I’ll nick any good ideas you have.

Happy To Discuss

There’s a whole lot more here than meets the eye and that I haven’t told you. Should ring alarm bells.

Hope This Is Helpful

I'm well aware that it is not helpful at all. Please don't contact me again.

I would be interested in your views on this

This is a load of rubbish but as it emanates from a senior official I want you to be the first to say so.

Please Deal !

Do all the work on this yourself. Though see "cc"

Please do not hesitate to contact me

Please do not ever contact me again. If you really insist, try in two weeks time when I am on leave.

(I have) Reservations

"If you do this then you're an even bigger fool than I thought."

Run it past me

I don't really know the answer but obviously can't admit to it – so can you help me and then I'll incorporate your excellent ideas and take all the credit.

Seeking your agreement

Preparation is at an advanced stage, or it's already happening. If you have any concerns, no-one wants to hear them.

Surprised

Another classic senior official understatement. Signifies utter horror, disgust and fury.

Thank you for bringing this to my attention

"Damn, I hoped nobody was going to mention that/find out about that."

Thinking Out Of The Box

A favourite used by bosses who want to patronise staff into action. It means "don't be so boring:- Come up with something other than a briefing note and photo call!"

Up To Speed (as in "Are you up to speed?)

Have you got a brain? Very vague term which is often used as a way to catch you out. If you admit to being up to speed you can be asked devilishly complicated questions. However, if you admit to not being up to speed you are made to look a fool as if you are not even able to grasp a short introduction to a simple issue.

Watching Brief, Maintain a

Used when you are not in the lead on a subject but senior officials will expect you to know something about it.

We Spoke.

Lets other people know that we have spoken and have a plan, but not what that plan is. (Always followed by a full stop.)

(I would) Welcome Views (on this)

Does anyone have any ideas – I don't - although I want to appear very consultative. See also "Get a steer", "Advice please" and "Run it past me".

You may recall

You will if you're any good.

You will recall that

No you won't.

You will wish to be aware

No you won't, it's bad news I'm afraid.

You may wish to consider [doing this]

Do this or else!

You Should Be Aware

Even worse news – not my fault, honest.

Lesson 2

Mandarins work to a different calendar and clock than the rest of the population. Here is a brief introduction.

Bring Forward (as in "Please BF these papers")

I would like to see these papers again *in due course*. (See below for a translation of this other very useful phrase.)

Deadlines

Close Of Play (often abbreviated to “cop”):- The deadline is vaguely at the end of the day – resulting in several more e-mails to establish exactly what the actual deadline is. Also strengthens the fraternity against non-cricketing colleagues.

<i>In the New Year:</i>	by Easter
<i>In the Spring:</i>	by 30 June
<i>In the Summer:</i>	by 30 September or (if really desperate) by mid-October when Parliament resumes.
<i>In the Autumn:</i>	by Christmas
<i>Around the end of the Year:</i>	by end-February

Holding Reply

Forgot to do a Minister's case or “treat official”? Quick! Draft a letter explaining how complex the issue is and that you're consulting colleagues. Gives you another month not to do it in. See also “interim report”.

Immediate

Desperately overdue and should have been answered a week ago.

In Due Course

In a very long time if I remember.

Interim Report

A short document explaining why the full report will be late, how complex the issues are and how hard you are working on it. With luck, people will forget about the whole thing until you've moved to another post. Similar to “*holding reply*”.

Kick Into The Long Grass

Don't want to focus on this one at the moment or for the foreseeable future. Basically its “Parked“ in a long stay car park.

On The Back Burner

Increasingly overtaken by more modern expressions such as “parked“ or “kicked into the long grass“ but basically it means that you just had a stupid idea or identified a ridiculously complex problem but no one has the courage to tell you know, so lets just shelve it and pretend we will use or solve it later.

Parked

Increasingly popular. It means “lets just not talk about or deal with that ‘issue’ and hopefully it will either go away or be dealt with by someone else.”

Purdah

A state of grace in the run up to an election or (in the Treasury departments) in the run up to the Budget. Any amount of laziness, delay or cock-up can be excused by saying “it’s all rather tricky during Purdah”.

Routine

May be put at the bottom of the pile and forgotten.

Take Forward

Give the appearance of making progress whilst in fact never reaching a point where the issue has successfully been taken forward.

Urgent

If from a Minister’s office = It isn’t really but we would like a response some time.

If from an official to a Minister or senior official = A decision has already been taken.

Lesson 3

The development and coordination of policy has also spawned a dialect all of its own.

Ball Park Figure

This is a complete stab in the dark which I want you to think might be broadly accurate but will undoubtedly change once I’ve worked out how much the new policy costs.

Bi-Lateral

A posh sounding meeting which involves 2 people at a time having a chat, usually involving Ministers/Perm Secs/Senior Officials in their swanky offices. But bilaterals sound so impressive that the purpose of a bilateral is never asked nor is the information often given. The fact that you have no hope of ever attending a bilateral, nor do you really need to know that these meetings ever take place, reminds you that you are not and never likely to have equivalent influence. Bringing ego is essential, otherwise entry is refused.

Blue Skies / Blue Skies Review

I'm too important to discuss details but am quite happy to throw in some ethereal, unrealistic and totally impractical ideas which will never amount to anything. (Usually "blue skies" people are paid a massive salary but are rarely seen in the office)

Bottoming Out (as in "Let's bottom this out" or "wait until it bottoms out")

A very unfortunate turn of phrase. It can be used a way of attempting to actually solve something and get it sorted or ... and this is much more likely ... as a way of describing the fact that we will need to wait (and do nothing at all) and just see how bad it gets before we deal with the consequences.

Comprehensive Review

Just the same as a "Review", only likely to take up to 18 months to be completed.

Consultation Document

The Department has already decided what it's going to do. The document will contain one policy dressed up to look like several options, to give the impression that the Department is open to suggestions. It will also have a few ridiculous ideas, so officials can claim to be "thinking outside the box" (see lesson 1 above).

Co-ordination Unit

There's hundreds of units scattered across Whitehall all doing the same job in perfect isolation. A new unit is needed to duplicate the work of the existing units and to inform them of what they already know.

Cross-cutting Issues

Things on which officials across Whitehall have an opinion, but for which no-one wants to be responsible.

Czar/Champion

A figurehead, usually without real power, employed to think the unthinkable and say the unsayable about a "wicked issue". Their real purpose is to draw fire away from Ministers.

Delivery/Deliver

The last word in procrastination. Current big buzz word – means doing everything in your power not to deliver – especially if you work in the Cabinet Office – and most especially if you work in the Delivery Unit.

Elephant Traps

Cock-ups in waiting:- a term retained from the days when we had an empire.

Initiative

A totally impractical and over-expensive idea that skirts around a problem but makes it look as though we are doing something about it.

Issue

A way of lending importance to a subject or idea

Let's Drill Down Into This Issue

I've got no idea what I'm talking about, but want to show that I think there's a whole lot more to it than a part time expert like me would even dream about. It may even be a candidate for a PIU project. But can also be used as delaying tactic - see also *Parked*, *Kick into the long grass* and *Toothpaste out of the tube*).

Loop (as in "in the loop" or "not fully in the loop")

A very important phrase especially for those who are not fully in the loop as it can cause resentment and lead to temper tantrums. It is a measure of how important you are as to whether you are in or out of the loop at any one time.

Mainstreaming

An increasingly common word whose translation is not yet available. Probably means many different things in many different contexts.

Media Handling Strategy

How on earth do we interest anyone in this? (Much less often:- How on earth can we bury this?)

Menu of Options

There are two strategies for encouraging others to choose your preferred policy. One is to offer a menu which includes your favourite plus several stupid or pointless options to make them think they have a choice. Another is to bracket your preferred option between two extreme versions of the same approach. This is scarcely less subtle and almost always works.

Both strategies are of course disastrous if they fail to work.

On Board (Or Not On Board)

A favourite delaying tactic linked to sharing (or copying) ideas. Getting as many other people on board as possible is important as it results in further meetings/cc-ing others into e-mails and often bilaterals too.

Pilot Project

“We don’t really want to do this but the Minister is keen.” The hope is that there will be a reshuffle before having to commit to anything on a larger scale.

Private Sector Discipline

By emulating industry, HMG will become a lean, fit high-output organisation. Note absence of “private sector remuneration”

Punch above our weight

Attempt the impossible with no resources.

Pump priming

A significant amount of funding, used to bribe an industry or organisations to do something that no-one apart from Government wants. If set not too high then it can be forgotten about and continue for years.

Raft Of Measures

None of these ideas are any good but if we throw them together as part of a “package”, at least it will look as if we are trying. See also *toolkit*.

Resource Implications

This will cost money/need some manpower. So either the department won’t do it or it will be done badly using existing resources.

Review

This policy is going wrong but we cannot admit it. Instead, in order to defuse the controversy, we will get someone who knows nothing about the issues to examine them for 3 months, following which they will provide a helpful synopsis of everything we already knew. See also *Comprehensive Review* and *Strategic Review*.

Seedcorn Funding

A derisory amount of grant aid. The department can announce that it is spending “millions of pounds” in order to make an impact on a wicked Issue (see below) and then claim credit in the unlikely event that it works, and

distance itself from the recipient of the grant when it fails to work. (£1m is 2p per head of UK population.)

Strategic Co-Ordination Unit

There's too many co-ordination units. No-one knows what the hell is going on or who is supposed to be doing what. A new unit to co-ordinate the co-ordinators is therefore required.

Strategic Review

The same as a Review but marginally more superficial and likely to recommend the creation of a "Co-ordination Unit".

Summit

Once used to involve only Heads of State. Now anyone reasonably senior (see "Czar").

Toolkit

Silly phrase, popular in relation to delivery. As in: "we need to develop a toolkit to solve this issue". Hints at a mystical set of solutions that will somehow launch us towards public sector nirvana.

Traffic

A way of detaching oneself from a problem by reducing it to a term used to describe congestion. Means we could get a lot of interest in this (usually resulting in working groups being set up so that other people can deal with the impending work load).

Vietnam Syndrome

When Government has huge power, but finds itself in a quagmire. See "wicked issue".

A Wealth of Initiatives

A new entry in 2003, meaning a number of good ideas for which no funding is now in place, or ever will be.

Wicked Issue

A policy issue (such as drugs, crime, reforming the NHS, improving the education system) where HMG has the power to pass lots of legislation and spend huge amounts of money – with no discernable effect whatsoever. See also "Vietnam Syndrome"

Working Group

5 or more people sitting in a room failing to achieve anything.

Lesson 4

Here are a few specialist words and phrases for use when communicating with Ministers' offices.

Brief

A very misleading word as briefs are anything but. Similarly, a ...

Line to take ...

... is always a paragraph.

Diary Commitments

The Minister is far too important to go to your insignificant little event.

Draft submission

If circulated by a junior official:- I haven't a clue what our policy is on this or what you want me to say, so here is a long piece of waffle which you will totally rewrite.

If circulated by a senior official:- Don't for one minute think that I am open to rewriting any of this.

Entrepreneurial (as in "I want my officials to be more entrepreneurial")

It does not mean that you should take more risks with public money or Ministers' reputations. It really means that you should work 12 hours a day to make something happen and get no public credit for doing so.

Ministerial Submission

I know a lot more about this subject than you do, but convention demands that in the interests of public accountability I must write a clever note in which I pretend to seek your views.

The Minister was grateful for your submission which (s)he read without comment

"It definitely went in the red box and it definitely came out again. Did they look at it? Search me squire." Usually means that the submission was (a) very dull, (b) on an insignificant subject well below the Ministerial radar, or (c) both.

Treat Official

Letters from the public which Ministers delegate to officials for reply. They can generally be left at the bottom of the in-tray until you are really bored one afternoon.

Lesson 5

Finally, a few words and phrases of Mandarin management-speak.

Change Management

Finding ever new ways of saying “Like it or lump it”.

Empowerment

I’m not delegating this boring task to you because I can’t be bothered to do it. I am empowering you.

Information Management

Posh term for “filing”

Leave

Holiday. Its use perpetuates the fiction that your bosses rather than your kids’ school decide whether/when you will take your holidays.

Milestones

A form of signage still used in the civil service although they ceased to be fashionable on highways about 150 years ago. Sometimes imply strenuous exertions as in “deliver milestones”.

Plain English

Words of one syllable, with subtitles for the hard of hearing. Civil servants do not use Plain English. It is for civilians and half-wits.

Secures

... as in “first email secures place in discussion forum”. An attempt to give the impression that an unattractive event will in fact be a sell out.

Sound

The goal of all civil servants is to be considered “sound”. It means you are loyal, trustworthy and would jump under a bus if asked to do so by a senior official.

Stretch Target

A target which is impossible to meet.

Work - Life Balance

I'm off early as I am the boss even though there is a big “issue“ developing. You will stay here work late as you are not senior enough to enjoy a work-life balance. Also used by senior managers (especially in the Cabinet Office) as a way of sounding PC and employee friendly rather than improving staff's miserly salary.

Further Reading

If you enjoyed this, you will also enjoy:-

- Lessons 6-9:- Writing Government Documents:-
A Basic Introduction to Elegant Nonsense, and
- On a scale of 1 to 5:- A Course or Conference Questionnaire Form

Both can be downloaded free of charge from the “How to be a Civil Servant” website at:- www.civilservant.org.uk