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A guide to building good sentence structure

By Lisa Healy and Julie Baker

Write On is an occasional feature providing guidance for attorneys on writing legal memoranda and briefs.

Ernest Hemingway was once asked why he had rewritten the ending to "A Farewell to Arms" 39 times. His response: "I wanted to get the words right."

While it is extremely unlikely that you have time to rewrite any part of a legal document 39 times, Hemingway's answer underscores an essential and often overlooked writing chore: editing sentences. Here are a few tips to make that editing a little easier.

Read aloud

You will be surprised at how many awkward sentences, grammatical mistakes and inaccuracies can be caught this way. Hint: If you need to take a breath in the middle of a sentence, it is too long.

Sometimes you just have to scrap the whole sentence

If you work and work on a sentence and cannot get it right, simply crossing out or rearranging a few words might not work. Ask yourself what point you are trying to get across, and start again.

Avoid nominalization

Nominalization is the overused art of turning verbs into nouns:

Mary gave an analysis of the problem and offered a solution.

An alternative: *Mary analyzed and solved the problem.*

"But the first example is more lawyerlike," you may say. And, in response, we would ask, "What is the reputation of lawyers' writing?" Right.

Avoid filler

Thesis sentences like "*Massachusetts courts have examined the issue of vehicle stops*" are useless. An effective thesis sentence teaches the reader something concrete and, in persuasive writing, teaches it in a way that supports the argument:

Police officers can stop a car if they reasonably believe that the driver or occupants have committed, are committing or are about to commit a crime.

Or, if you are representing the defendant:

A police officer cannot stop a vehicle unless the officer has reasonable suspicion based on specific, articulable facts showing that the driver has committed a crime.

Less is more

Why use five words when one will do? For example, *due to the fact that* can easily be replaced with *because*.

Subject, verb, object

You learned this in fifth grade: subject, verb, object. That is the order of a simple sentence. For example:

After receiving a phone tip, the police (S) found (V) the body (O) in a dumpster.

Rearrange this classic order and your sentences will automatically be more complicated, not to mention grammatically incorrect:

The body (O) was found (V) by the police (S) in a dumpster, after they received a phone tip.

Who was in the dumpster? The body, the police or both?

The best thing about editing at the sentence level is that, after a while, you will not need to do it. Having seen your mistakes pointed out with your own red pen, you will likely start writing more simply and effectively, incorporating your editing into your writing as it appears on the paper.

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