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Robust Writing: Crafting Better Sentences

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

I love teaching legal writing in the spring! (Okay, I love teaching all the time, but the Spring Semester is especially rewarding.) My students have grasped organizational principles and learned to edit for grammar and punctuation. My students have also learned that legal writing can be difficult to read.

Sometimes the difficulty comes from hard concepts or ideas. Sometimes, however, the difficulty comes from difficult sentence structure. The writer has tried to pack too many ideas into one unit. I get to spend part of my time in the spring helping my students work on creating easily readable briefs and developing their own writing style. Part of that help includes editing their writing for more robust sentences.

This issue, we'll focus on crafting better sentences by creating shorter, less cluttered sentences.

Avoiding too-long sentences

Readers prefer shorter sentences and will struggle to absorb sentences longer than about 25 words. Readers need the quick mental break provided by the period at the end of a sentence to pause and process the information they just read. Don't believe me — read these two examples and determine which one was easier to absorb.

Spotting too-long sentences is easy, scan your writing and look for sentences longer than two lines, then highlight those sentences and have your word processing program do a quick word count; if the sentence is pushing too far beyond the 25-word "limit," edit the sentences.¹



Spotting too-long sentences is easy — scan your writing and look for sentences longer than two lines. Next, highlight those sentences and have your word processing program do a quick word count. If the sentence is pushing too far beyond the 25-word "limit," edit the sentences.

The first example is 45 words. The second example is broken into three sentences, 16 words, 14 words, and 15 words. (I counted the words in each sentence by following the advice in these examples; it took me about 23 seconds total.)

Okay, so what do you do once you've located some pesky, too-long sentences? First, try turning the sentences into multiple shorter sentences.

If that won't work, try numbering the ideas contained within the sentence to give the reader a mental break. Compare how easy to read the following examples are.

When editing for robust writing, you should check for abstract nouns that begin sentences, check for "it is" and "there are" at the beginning of sentences, check for vague verbs, check for passive voice, check for

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nominalizations, avoid too many independent clauses, avoid too many dependent clauses, avoid too many prepositional phrases, avoid too-long sentences, and create variety in sentences.² (60 words)

When editing for robust writing, you should (1) check for abstract nouns that begin sentences, (2) check for "it is" and "there are" at the beginning of sentences, (3) check for vague verbs, (4) check for passive voice, (5) check for nominalizations, (6) avoid too many independent clauses, (7) avoid too many dependent clauses, (8) avoid too many

prepositional phrases, (9) avoid too-long sentences, and (10) create variety in sentences. (Easier, right?)

Avoiding too many independent clauses in a sentence

After shortening sentences, however, your writing still might not be as robust as you would like. Even short sentences can present difficulty for the reader.

Check your writing for sentences that have too many ideas nested within them. Chances are that even if the sentence is grammatically correct, it will feel cluttered to a reader.

Whether a reasonable person would feel free to leave is determined by examining the totality of circumstances, and this test asks whether a reasonable person under similar conditions would feel free to leave. *United States v. Mendenhall*, 446 U.S. 544, 554 (1980).

This sentence has multiple ideas nested between “Under” and the period. Each of the ideas in this sentence is an independent thought. Unbundling the ideas into different sentences helps clear the clutter from this sentence.

Whether a reasonable person would feel free to leave is determined by examining the totality of circumstances. *United States v. Mendenhall*, 446 U.S. 544, 554 (1980). This test asks whether a reasonable person under similar conditions would feel free to leave. *Id.*

An easy trick to help you find multiple independent clauses in a single sentence is to look for coordinating conjunctions and a period. (Remember that to join two independent clauses into a single sentence you can use either a semicolon

or a comma followed by coordinating conjunction.)³

Caveat: Adding variety to sentences

Please don’t take this advice to an extreme. Readers also like variety in sentences. I’ll show you an example my cousin uses in her English Composition classes.

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several strung together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It’s like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length.

And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage her with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals — sounds that say “listen to this, it is important.”⁴

This advice holds true for legal writing. Don’t be afraid to use sentences of various lengths. Your reader will appreciate it!

Sources

- Megan McAlpin, *Beyond the First Draft: Editing Strategies for Powerful Legal Writing*, 48-58 (Carolina Academic Press 2014).
- Suzanne Rowe, *Keep It Simple: ‘Short and Sweet’ Brings Clarity to Legal Writing*, available at <https://www.osbar.org/publications/bulletin/08jun/legalwriter.html>.

Each of the ideas in this sentence is an independent thought.

Unbundling the ideas into different sentences helps clear the clutter from this sentence.

Endnotes

1. Megan McAlpin, *Beyond the First Draft: Editing Strategies for Powerful Legal Writing*, 48 (Carolina Academic Press 2014).
2. This editing checklist comes from Megan McAlpin, *Beyond the First Draft: Editing Strategies for Powerful Legal Writing*, 34-35 (Carolina Academic Press 2014). I highly recommend this text to every legal writer who has every struggled with editing.
3. For a refresher on coordinating conjunctions, see Tienielle Fordyce-Ruff, *Conjunction Junction: Making Conjunctions Function for You, The Advocate* 51-52 (May 2012).
4. Gary Provost, available at <http://themetapicture.com/reading-this-is-so-satisfying/> (last visited Mar. 16, 2015).

About the Author

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