



Be a *Better* Writer

by Janis L. Johnston

Professional Perspectives—Tools and Techniques of the Trade. *The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional, and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Mary A. Hotchkiss at 206/553-4475 or hotchma@u.washington.edu.*

Oh my! I am on shaky ground here. I write tolerably well, but have never myself felt a master of grammar or the author of prose that has “flow.” You, dear reader, will see evidence of my shortcomings in what follows, but bear with me and read on. There are some things here for both of us to consider.

Much of my day is spent in front of the monitor, hands on a keyboard, composing letters, reports, memos, articles, e-mail messages, faxes, etc. While technology has added to the means of communication, we still communicate primarily through the written word. And yet, even with all this time spent writing, I can’t remember when I last reflected on the quality of my written work. Am I effective in my written communications; does my writing reflect a professional style; do my readers stick with me to the last word, or do they drift off to other things after the first paragraph?

Room for Improvement

We all work with and for lawyers, some of us are lawyers, so it is important to recognize that the audiences for much of our communications are experts at using the English language. They notice unorganized paragraphs, grammatical errors, rambling sentences, and poor punctuation. I’d rather not shoot myself in the foot by circulating poorly written documents to the managing partner, the judge, or the faculty. The level of our professionalism is reflected in all we do, and while some of you are excellent writers, I suspect for many us there is room for improvement.

When I write, it is usually to accomplish one of two things: I need to convey information, or I want something. All of us are advocates for our libraries. We are often involved, directly or indirectly, in persuading others of the value of our work and the need for additional support. The lawyers, deans, judges, and other librarians to whom we make these requests are highly trained in the art of persuasive writing. To be successful in our efforts we should be experts too. To improve your persuasive writing, I highly recommend Armstrong and Terrell, *Thinking Like a Writer: A Lawyer’s Guide to Effective Writing and Editing* (CBC, 1992). But mastering persuasive writing only comes after you have really learned how to write well.

Coming in April:

“Librarian/Trainer: Our Evolution.” This article examines librarians’ evolving roles as teachers, trainers, and problem solvers. Read about the increasing demands of doing reference and providing user services while in the role of trainer. Gain insight by taking a close look at the professional lives of two librarians—Rachel Jones, Director of Training and Professional Development in a large law firm, and Pamela Gregory, Librarian in a large county law library. (Co-panelists in Baltimore on the “Nutshells to Netscape” program, Rachel and Pam have kept in touch about training since then.)

How do you become a better writer? Go to the local college and take classes? That’s not a terrible idea, but probably not necessary either. Those rules of grammar, usage, and style are still embedded somewhere in your brain. Browsing through a good grammar handbook will help. At the very least, it will bring back memories of when you had to go to the blackboard in junior high and diagram a sentence.

Personally, I found the experience mortifying. But then I found all of junior high mortifying. Perhaps that is why my grammar still needs improvement. However, the truth is, I have a bigger problem to overcome. To appear professional and scholarly, I fear my writing tends to be dry (arid, parched, zero humidity, no living thing for miles). After all, the caricature of a true academic is a boring figure in plaids that don’t match. How interesting can

that be? I can guarantee you that no one has read one of my annual reports from cover to cover. So what I need most is to achieve clarity, brevity, and readability in my writing.

Clarity

William Zinsser (*On Writing Well*, 2d ed. Harper & Row, 1980) tells us clear writing is the key to keeping the reader’s attention. Clarity is achieved by removing clutter and rewriting sentences until they are precise reflections of logical thinking. In his words, “a clear sentence is no accident.” (p.13) Achieving clarity is the opposite of garnishing our writing with erudite words and convoluted phrases. You can still employ a sophisticated vocabulary, but only when it helps your reader to a better understanding instead of using fancy words just to impress.

Brevity

Armstrong and Terrell (*Thinking Like a Writer*, CBC 1992) give us insightful guidance on brevity. “Brevity is not a function of a document’s length—the number of its words—but of the time and effort the reader expends to absorb its content.” (p. 3–2) This is not an invitation to write as in a first-grade reader, “See Spot run.” But rather it is encouragement to phrase concepts in manageable bites. Even long sentences that contain complex ideas can capture the idea of brevity, if the sentence is written to convey its meaning on the first reading. Obviously brevity and clarity go hand in hand.