

Legal Writing Checklist

By Jim Covington, Illinois State Bar Association

- (1) **Front-load your information by starting with a *meaningful* synopsis.** Readers process information much easier if they know where they are going.
- (2) **Use descriptive headings as signposts to guide your reader followed by bite-size chunks of text.** Your sentences should *average* about 20 words per sentence because big chunks of text intimidate readers.
- (3) **Use active voice so that the actor is doing the action instead of receiving it.** We talk in active voice. For example, “I hit a home run” instead of “a home run was hit by me.” Active voice creates shorter, tighter sentences. Try to keep your passive sentences under 20%.
- (4) **Use conversational word order.** The natural flow of an English sentence is subject-verb-object. Don’t interrupt this flow by separating your subject from your verb with a long dependent clause. Don’t get bogged down starting with a long dependent clause. Ask yourself, “Who is doing what to whom?”
- (5) **Less is more.** No judge ever finished reading a concise brief or motion and wished it were longer.
- (6) **Scan through the entire document.** Can your reader understand what your point is by the document’s organization alone?
- (7) **Read it aloud to yourself.** Does it flow or is it clunky? Mistakes will jump off the page if you read it aloud. If it sounds good, it is good.
- (8) **Are your transitions OK?** Do you lose your reader by failing to transition from each sentence and paragraph to the next?
- (9) **Does each word, sentence, and paragraph do real work that is not duplicative?** If not, delete or condense.
- (10) **Ask somebody else to review it.** Don’t personalize the comments or criticism; just evaluate them to see if they improve your work. It’s not about you at this stage of the process; it’s about making your work more clear and understandable for readers.