

# TIPS ON EFFECTIVE WRITING

National Training Conference

U.S. Administration on Aging

Pension Counseling and Information Program

May 1, 2014

Writewell

Copyright 2014

Kate Sylvester



# **Pension Rights Center**

## **Table of Contents**

• Using a Calendar to Plan Writing	1
• Methods of Organizing	2
• Avoiding Weak Verbs	4
• Changing Passive Voice to Active	5
• Avoiding Nominalizations; Using specific Nouns	7
• Eliminating Prepositional Phrases	8
• Redundant, Empty, Bureaucratic, and Latin Terms	11
• That and Which	13
• Grappling with Commas	15
• Using White Space and Entry Points	18
• Editing Your Own Work	22
• Recommended Books and Web Resources	23
• Numbers	27
• About Writewell	28



---

---

### USING A CALENDAR TO PLAN WRITING

Imagine you receive a major writing assignment and that it is due in two weeks' time. Mark the calendar to show how much time you would devote to researching, writing, and editing. Be honest!

---

---

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

---

---

## **METHODS OF ORGANIZING**

Before you begin to write, it helps to come up with a general strategy for organizing your work. You may revise it more than once before you're through, but an outline or plan provides a method for grouping ideas that belong together.

This process is not daunting or elaborate – no Roman numerals are necessary. Simply decide on document's major elements and plot the best sequence in which to present them. Start by thinking about what you are trying to do. Are you proving a point, narrating, explaining, or responding to an argument? Knowing this will give you an idea about what method to use.

The idea, along with your outline, will help you maintain parallel structure. What is parallel structure? As a service to your reader, you should provide a preview of the elements to be included in the rest of the document. Then, use parallel structure by arranging the elements in the same order in which you have introduced them. Here are some general outlines to adapt.

---

---

### **PERSUADE**

1. Question to resolve
2. Facts of case
3. Three main arguments for
4. Three main arguments against
5. Which alternative we should choose
6. Action steps and conclusion

### **INFORM**

1. Introduction – summary of information or action required
2. Most important information
3. Second most important information
4. Third most important information
5. Action required and conclusion

### **COMPARE**

1. Introduction – whether to adopt Solution 1 or Solution 2
2. Advantages of Solution 1; advantages of Solution 2
3. Disadvantages of Solution 1; disadvantages of Solution 2
4. Recommendation
5. Conclusion and next steps

---

---

Here are a few of the most commonly used sub-organizational techniques once you have chosen an overall format.

---

---

### **ORDER OF IMPORTANCE**

This method is extremely useful for briefs, legal memos, and most correspondence. It allows you to organize your writing in a sequence that is convincing to the reader. Break the ideas down into broad categories; then put them in an order that is logical and persuasive. It is probably the best method to use when trying to prove a point.

### **GENERAL TO SPECIFIC and SPECIFIC TO GENERAL**

Another persuasive way to organize a document involves making reference to a general idea, then explaining why it applies (or does not) in a specific case. Alternately, a writer can take a specific case and prove why it fits (or doesn't) into a broad framework.

The best way to apply this method is to start with what your audience knows – either the broad principle or the specifics of the issue at hand – and show how it relates to the other element.

### **CHRONOLOGY**

When you want to narrate a series of events, consider using a chronology. This method can be useful for a progress report, a history of legal proceedings, or meeting minutes. When you do it well, this technique is extremely easy for readers to follow.

This approach has limitations, however. It can be boring. And it makes it more difficult to emphasize one element over another.

One way to modify this approach is to begin the memo with a lead – a statement that tells the reader why the document is important – before moving into a chronological development. For example: “In the *Rosenblatt* decision, the Supreme Court further defined the meaning of ‘public official’ set out in its landmark libel case, *New York Times v. Sullivan*. The *Rosenblatt* case began...” [*chronology follows*]

### **SEQUENCE**

This is often the best method for explaining. It is most useful for descriptions of tasks or processes; instruction manuals; and handbooks. Think of this method as a process for describing the order in which a series of events must take place with no particular emphasis on importance or time.

---

---

## AVOIDING WEAK VERBS

These include: am, are, is, was, were, being, been, and have. Instead, look for the action in the sentence and put it in your verb. Try to avoid starting sentences with: “It is,” or “There is.”

---

---

WEAK: **It is** the hope of the applicants that the court will grant their request.

BETTER: The **applicants hope** the court will grant their petition for injunctive relief.

WEAK: **There is** insufficient evidence of an unreported side agreement.

BETTER: The plaintiff **has produced** insufficient evidence/**has failed to produce** sufficient evidence of an unreported side agreement.

WEAK: **Proof** that the defendants were not negligent **is** in two appeals court decisions.

BETTER: Two appeals court **decisions prove/bolster/support** the defendants’ contention that they were not negligent.

---

---

## Exercise

---

---

When all of this time **is** treated as vesting service under the plan as ERISA mandates, it **is** clear that Mr. Smith **is** vested in a pension pursuant to the plan. Accordingly, please note that this request **is** a claim for waiver subject to ERISA claim procedures.

Individually, such breaches **are** serious offenses under the law, and plan administrators may be held personally liable for the consequences of such failings.

Mr. X had been working for the company for 18 years at his Contribution Date of 7/1/1979 and **had** a total pension credit of 22.25 years at his annuity start date.

He **has/ has accumulated/managed to save a small amount** small savings that he must **rely (!)** on for monthly expenses, car, and home repairs.

---

---



## CHANGING PASSIVE VOICE TO ACTIVE

Passive slows the reader, obscures the action, and buries the subject and verb. Use it when you must hide the actor, when the actor is unknown, or when the actor is much less important than the receiver. This is rare.

There is a simple way to recognize the passive voice. It uses a form of the verb “to be.” It puts the sentence’s action verb in participial or adjectival form (usually ending in -ed, -d, -t, -en, or -n). And it often uses a “by” phrase. If there is no phrase beginning with “by,” it is often implied, and you can insert one mentally.

PASSIVE: The man was **(form of verb to be) hit (participial)** by John **(by phrase)**.

ACTIVE: John hit the man.

## APPROPRIATE USES OF PASSIVE:

- The bank was robbed. (need to hide actor)
- The problem cannot be solved. (actor unknown)
- All the ballots were counted. (subject important; actor unimportant)

---

---

PASSIVE: **It was argued** by the defendant that the **evidence be suppressed**.

ACTIVE: The defendant **argued** that the **court should suppress** the evidence.

PASSIVE: After competitive bidding, QTC **was given** a contract.

ACTIVE: After competitive bidding, the **government awarded** QTC the contract.

ACTIVE: After competitive bidding, QTC **won** the contract.

PASSIVE: It **was determined** that the facility was not licensed properly.

ACTIVE: The zoning board **determined** that the facility was not licensed properly.

---

---

## Exercise

---

---

These distributions **are projected** forward to January 1, 2007 using the same interest rate used (**by whom?**) to calculate our client's lawful lump sum (4.68%), then offset against the \$132,641, resulting in a benefit still **owed the client by the Plan**.

According to telephone conversations with the successor company's manager, the company did not acquire liabilities of any hospitals, and the **pension plans were terminated**.

David Smith **should be credited** with vesting service under the plan for the years 1966 through 1982.

When calculating service for purposes of vesting, **plans are required** to include all years of service with the plan sponsor.

Mr. Doe **was found eligible** for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) in December 2010.

---

---

### AVOIDING NOMINALIZATIONS; USING SPECIFIC NOUNS

Watch out for nominalizations, which are verbs made into nouns, often ending in -tion, -ment, -ance, or -ence. These endings slow readers. Whenever you use a noun expressing action, you should try to change it to a verb.

Avoid vague nouns when you can use specific ones. If specificity bolsters your argument, let the facts work for you.

---

---

WEAK: A **declaration** by this court of the meaning of the letters will serve to terminate an uncertainty about the relationship.

BETTER: When this court **declares** what the letters mean, the uncertainty about the relationship will end.

WEAK: The case involved the **placement** of families in **hotel-style shelters**.

BETTER: The case arose because the defendants **placed** families in **motel rooms**.

VAGUE: Further, the act provided defendants **a long time** in which to attain **compliance**.

BETTER: The act gave defendants **one year** to **comply**.

---

---

### Exercise:

---

---

The PBGC's **certification** of a final asset **distribution** does not affect the agency's **obligation** under Section 4022 to guarantee **payment** of all nonforfeitable benefits.

Examples provided of such improper **distributions** include the **omission** of a participant from the **distribution**.

The **employees** worked **many hours** of overtime.

---

---

## **ELIMINATING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES**

These slow down sentences and lose readers. Condense when you can, and when you have more than three in a row, rewrite. Sometimes using a possessive construction can eliminate a preposition.

---

---

### **Some examples:**

at the present time – now or currently  
concerning the matter of – about  
during the course of – during  
despite that fact that – because, since, why  
for the purpose of – for, to  
for the reason that – because  
give consideration to – consider  
have need for – need  
in need of – need  
in order to – to  
in spite of the fact that – though, although  
in the creation of – creating  
in the amount of – for  
in the event that – if  
in view of the fact that – because  
in the course of – during or while  
make use of – use  
of great complexity – complex  
of the opinion – believe  
on the occasion of – when  
owing to the fact that – since, because  
subsequent to – after  
the reason for – because, why  
the question as to whether - whether  
there is no doubt but that – no doubt, doubtless  
until such time as – until  
with respect (or reference) to – about  
with the exception of – except  
with regard to – regarding

---

---

Grammar experts list different words or word groups as prepositions and prepositional phrases. The following are the most common prepositions, according to *The Ins and Outs of Prepositions* and *The Little, Brown Handbook*.

---

---

- |                       |                         |                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. about              | 26. by                  | 51. onto          |
| 2. above              | 27. close to            | 52. on account of |
| 3. according to       | 28. concerning          | 53. on top of     |
| 4. across             | 29. despite/in spite of | 54. opposite      |
| 5. after              | 30. down                | 55. out           |
| 6. against            | 31. due to              | 56. outside       |
| 7. ahead of           | 32. during              | 57. over          |
| 8. along              | 33. except/except for   | 58. past          |
| 9. among              | 34. excepting           | 59. regarding     |
| 10. around            | 35. far from            | 60. regardless of |
| 11. as                | 36. for                 | 61. since         |
| 12. as for            | 37. from                | 62. through       |
| 13. aside from        | 38. in                  | 63. throughout    |
| 14. at                | 39. in addition to      | 64. till          |
| 15. back to/back from | 40. in back of          | 65. to            |
| 16. because of        | 41. in front of         | 66. toward        |
| 17. before            | 42. inside              | 67. under         |
| 18. behind            | 43. instead of          | 68. unlike        |
| 19. below             | 44. into                | 69. underneath    |
| 20. beneath           | 45. like                | 70. until         |
| 21. beside            | 46. near                | 71. up            |
| 22. besides           | 47. next to             | 72. with          |
| 23. between           | 48. of                  | 73. within        |
| 24. beyond            | 49. off                 | 74. without       |
| 25. but               | 50. on                  |                   |

FLABBY: The grant **of** both absolute and qualified immunity **to** all defendants **to** this action is such a departure **from** the usual course **of** judicial proceedings **as to** call **for** an exercise **of** this Court's power **of** supervision.

LEAN: Granting all defendants both absolute and qualified immunity is so unusual that it requires this court to exercise its supervisory powers.

FLABBY: **In** order **to** prevail, the complainant must show **by** a preponderance **of** the evidence that the reason presented **by** management is a pretext **for** discrimination.

LEAN: To prevail, the complainant must show, **by** a preponderance **of** the evidence, that management's reason is a pretext for discrimination.

---

---

## Exercises

---

---

**Prior to** January **of** 2009 Mr. Doe worked **in** employment covered **under** the XYZ Local Union No. 123.

This Memorandum is submitted **on** behalf **of** our client **in** support of appeal **with respect to** the issue **of** an alleged overpayment **of** pension by the National Union.

Our client replied **to** the Plan Administrator's email **on** the same day it was received and requested the formal actuarial analysis as well as a copy **of** the provision **in** the Plan defining "compensation."

While years **of** service for purposes **of** benefit accrual generally begin and end **with** actual participation **in** the plan, the statute dictates that years **of** service **with** the employer **as** a nonparticipant **in** the plan must be credited **toward** vesting.

---

---

## REDUNDANT, EMPTY, BUREAUCRATIC, AND LATIN TERMS

Your writing will be better without them. As you edit, look for words that add nothing to the meaning of what you have written, phrases that take five words to say what one well-chosen word can say, words or phrases that repeat what you have already said, and Latin words that have simple English equivalents.

---

---

**Redundant modifiers:** anticipate in advance; consensus of opinion; could possibly; first annual; flawless perfection; new innovation; new record; mix together; repeat again; free gift; final outcome; final conclusion; first introduced; new record; new baby; past history; pre-measured; pre-screened; pre-planned; repeat again; reflect back; share together; split apart; terrible tragedy; true fact; very unique

**Redundant pairs:** cease and desist; null and void; over and above; full and complete; true and accurate; including but not limited to

**Throat clearers and empty words and phrases:** actually; very; clearly; large in size; bright in color; it is interesting to note; kind of; needless to say; at this point in time; period of time; point in/of time; practically; virtually; 10 a.m. in the morning

**Bureaucratic and legalistic words:** ascertain; commence; endeavor; facilitate; finalize; goes to the question of; initiate; instant case; interface (as a verb); mode; prefatory; prior; prioritize; proliferation (except referring to nuclear); purchase (as a verb); pursuant; remuneration; supportive; time frame; said (as an adjective); same (as an adjective); such (as an adjective); utilize; verbalize

**Polysyllabics:** aforementioned, forthwith, foregoing, hereto, hereinabove, hereinafter, heretofore, insofar, insofar as, inasmuch as, therein, whereas, wherein

## LATIN

**Category 1:** bonus, quorum, quota, vice versa, ad hoc

**Category 2:** *de facto*, *de jure*, *res judicata*, *prima facie*, *pro se*, *habeas corpus*

**Category 3:** *abusus non tollit usum*

**Category 4:** *i.e.* (that is, namely); *e.g.* (for example); *et al.* (and others); *inter alia* (among other things); *etc.* (and others/including)

---

---

## **Exercises**

---

---

The evidence outlined above and attached hereto shows that Ms. X was a partially vested participant in the Retirement Plan

For the reasons discussed above, we hereby request that the plan immediately calculate and pay the retirement benefit to which David Smith is entitled pursuant to the plan and ERISA.

A copy of Mr. Smith's complete pension file including, but not limited to: records or summaries from which can be ascertained the years and/or portions of years for which she was receiving or should have received credit under the Plan; all documents and correspondence between the Plan and Mr. Smith.



---

---

### THAT and WHICH

In a restrictive clause, the information is defining or essential and is not set off by commas. Use **that**. In a non-restrictive clause, the information is not essential and is set off by a comma. Use **which**.

To look at it another way, if you don't use a comma, you don't use which. Another test is to read the sentence aloud using that.

You are unlikely to make a mistake if you try **that** first instead of **which**. For example:

I like to read about dinosaurs **that** went extinct during the Cretaceous period.

OR:

I like to read about dinosaurs, **which** went extinct during the Cretaceous period.

In the first sentence, the clause is restrictive because it describes certain kinds of dinosaurs – those that died in the Cretaceous period. The sentence assumes that there are dinosaurs other than those that died. This kind of assumption is the hallmark of restrictive clauses. In the second sentence, the descriptive clause is non-restrictive because it pertains to every dinosaur.

---

---

The dog **that** bit me lives next door.

The neighbor's dog, **which** bit me last week, today bit the mail carrier.

All persons **who** are shareholders must consent to the election.

The shareholders, **who** must consent, have been notified about the S Corporation election.

---

---

## Exercises

---

---

ERISA Section 203(b)(1)(A) through (G) refers to certain time periods **which** can be disregarded by a plan when calculating a participant's period of service.

Mr. Doe obtained a Social Security Administration earnings report **which** he provided to the Plan.

These requests are made pursuant to Section 104(b)(4) of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA), **which** states that a plan must provide a copy of the plan document and any other instrument under which the plan operates.

---

---

## COMMAS

The following legal dispute points out why commas matter.

---

---

For years, legal scholars, historians, and grammarians have debated the meaning of the amendment because of its enigmatic wording and odd punctuation:

**“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”**

In part, the amendment’s interpretation depends on the meaning of *the third comma*.

Gun-rights supporters said the words guarantee the right of individuals to possess firearms. (*ignoring the comma*)

Gun-control supporters said the words convey only a civic or “collective” right to own guns as part of service in an organized military organization. (*keeping the comma*)

The U.S. Supreme Court decided the case in favor of gun-rights proponents.

---

---

Highlights of the comma rules.

---

---

- **The Oxford, or serial comma, between adjacent parallel items**

INCORRECT: The cases involve proceeds of sales, insolvent taxpayers, bankruptcies, or simply do not address the question presented herein.

CORRECT: The cases involve proceeds of sales, insolvent taxpayers, or bankruptcies. Several cases do not address the question presented here.

CORRECT: The department required that the company **install** an oil recovery system by May 2002 to remove the oil from the groundwater, **conduct** monitoring for six months, and **advise** the department of the status of the cleanup.

- **Around parenthetical elements.** If you use one comma, check to see if you need a second.

INCORRECT: Defendants further argue that even if they were in violation of the Social Security Act, they would not be liable.

CORRECT: Defendants further argue that, **even if they were violating the Social Security Act**, they would not be liable.

CORRECT: **In the context of a high-speed chase**, Professor Beckman suggested that using a patrol car could constitute deadly force.

CORRECT: Professor Beckman suggested that, **in the context of a high-speed chase**, using a patrol car could constitute deadly force.

CORRECT: Professor Beckman suggested that using a patrol car could constitute deadly force **in the context of a high-speed chase**.

- **To avoid misreading or to emphasize**

If you want, a man can take you there.  
If you want a man, go to Alaska.

TO CLARIFY: He would have given all that he had, had he owned anything of value.

TO EMPHASIZE: Whatever else may be said about the Supreme Court's current term, which ends in about a month, it will be remembered as the time when Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg found her voice, and used it.

- **Two standard forms: dates, quotations**

**Dates:** Consider the month and date as an inseparable element – two components that are never separated by a comma. Then, if a date includes *more* than two elements, you must use commas to separate the elements.

If referring to the month and year only, or the month and date only, don't use commas.

INCORRECT: The Court of Appeals ruled **Monday August 2, 2009** and denied a rehearing **Tuesday October 19, 2009**.

CORRECT: The Court of Appeals ruled **Monday, August 2, 2009**, and denied a rehearing **Tuesday, October 19, 2009**.

INCORRECT: Our client began working for the company on May 20, 1996 and left employment at the end of August, 2001.

CORRECT: Our client began working for the company on May 20, 1996, and left employment at the end of August 2001.

**Quotations:** Commas and periods always go inside quotation marks. Other punctuation goes inside the quotation marks if the words are part of the quoted material, outside if it is not.

INCORRECT: The two cases “provide a reasonable basis for a rule allowing invocations and benedictions on ceremonial occasions”, wrote Judge Campbell.

CORRECT: The two cases “provide a reasonable basis for a rule allowing invocations and benedictions on ceremonial occasions,” wrote Judge Campbell.

CORRECT: Bernard Lewis writes about contact between the Islamic world and Western civilization in “What Went Wrong?”

CORRECT: Have you read “DNA: The Secret of Life”?

CORRECT: I enjoyed reading “DNA: The Secret of Life.”

---

---

## **WHITE SPACE AND ENTRY POINTS**

Visual presentation is key to making writing accessible. Consider the appearance of this page.

---

---

The other co-payment documents in the record are dated 2008, 2009, and 2010 and show the provider as Dr. AF (CD IF, Tab 6, pp. 11-12). The complainant's testimony indicated that he received psychotherapy and medication for PTSD and depression from Dr. AF in connection with work related stress he experienced at the VAMC in Durham, North Carolina. According to his testimony, the complainant retired early because of permanent disability that occurred following his unsuccessful EEO complaint in 2007. The complainant's testimony indicates that his conditions of PTSD, depression, and anxiety worsened because of the work related stress at the VAMC in Durham, North Carolina. His testimony indicated that his conditions worsened because of several factors. One factor involved the 2007 EEOC decision in favor of the agency regarding his EEO complainant filed in 2006 involving management officials at the VAMC in Durham. In his explanation of the incidents in the 2006 EEO complaint, the complainant's statements indicated that he had a period of work when he performed very well as a Housekeeping Supervisor. The evidence suggested that the complainant began having work related stress when he disagreed with upper level supervisors about his work assignments and leave practice involving subordinate employees. The complainant reported that the EEOC decision in 2007 continues to affect his mental condition. As of April 16, 2010, when he completed his compensatory damages affidavit, the complainant had continued to receive psychotherapy and medication from Dr. AF in Fayetteville, North Carolina (CD IF, Tab 2).

---

---

Now, consider the appearance of this revision.

---

---

The other co-payment documents in the record are dated 2008, 2009, and 2010 and show the provider as Dr. AF (CD IF, Tab 6, pp. 11-12). The complainant's testimony indicated that he received psychotherapy and medication for PTSD and depression from Dr. AF in connection with work related stress he experienced at the VAMC in Durham, North Carolina.

According to his testimony, the complainant retired early because of permanent disability that occurred following his unsuccessful EEO complaint in 2007. The complainant's testimony indicates that his conditions of PTSD, depression, and anxiety worsened because of the work related stress at the VAMC in Durham, North Carolina.

#### **What Caused His Disabilities?**

His testimony indicated that his conditions worsened because of several factors. One factor involved the 2007 EEOC decision in favor of the agency regarding his EEO complainant filed in 2006 involving management officials at the VAMC in Durham. In his explanation of the incidents in the 2006 EEO complaint, the complainant's statements indicated that he had a period of work when he performed very well as a Housekeeping Supervisor.

The evidence suggested that the complainant began having work related stress when he disagreed with upper level supervisors about his work assignments and leave practice involving subordinate employees. The complainant reported that the EEOC decision in 2007 continues to affect his mental condition. As of April 16, 2010, when he completed his compensatory damages affidavit, the complainant had continued to receive psychotherapy and medication from Dr. AF in Fayetteville, North Carolina (CD IF, Tab 2).

---

---

## Spacing

---

---

### Single vs. double spaced?

Modern typographers agree on the one-space rule. So do all authoritative style guides, including the *Modern Language Association Style Manual* and the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Double spacing was adopted in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to accommodate the manual typewriter.

Why? Typewriters used monospaced type, with every character occupying an equal amount of horizontal space. This reversed a long tradition of proportional typesetting, in which skinny characters (like I or l) were given less space than fat ones (like W or M).

Monospaced type produces text that looks uneven, with a lot of white space between characters and words, so it's difficult to determine where sentences end. The two-space rule made text produced on typewriters easier to read.

But monospaced fonts fell out of vogue in the 1970s, replaced first by electric typewriters and then computers. Now, nearly all fonts on PCs are proportional – with the major exception of Courier.



---

---

## Headings

The best way to ensure that your readers can follow your logic is by using headings that show how it's organized. Headings are especially useful for web documents.

The Center for Plain Language created a chart that makes this distinction about the three types of headings.

---

---

Type of heading	What it is	How it looks
Question Heading	A heading in the form of a question	Why Do We Use Headings?
Statement Heading	A heading that uses a noun and a verb	Headings Help Guide a Reader
Topic Heading	A heading that is a word or short phrase	Headings

**Question Headings** are the most useful headings, but only if you know what questions your audience would ask. If you know those questions, use them as headings.

**Statement Headings** are the next best choice because they are still very specific.

**Topic Headings** are the most formal. But sometimes they're too vague to be helpful. Topic Headings such as "Application," and "Scope" may confuse users. For example, "Application" might mean an application for someone applying for a job. But it might as easily mean what the document applies to.

---

---

## EDITING YOUR OWN WORK

Knowing the material both helps and hurts you as you edit. Mostly, it hurts. You become so familiar with your work that you can't see the problems. Try to give yourself enough time to let the document sit overnight, or over a weekend, before you edit.

When you edit, read as a newcomer to the material. You know your own failings better than anyone else, so devote one reading to your bad habits. As you practice, some of this will become automatic; if you check for a bad habit often enough, you will soon stop writing that way on the initial draft. Consider this checklist—or devise your own—for editing.

- 
- 
1. Go back to your outline and make sure you've included each point.
  2. Make sure the relevant points are grouped together and that they are presented in logical order. If you change the order of the ideas in the document, remember to revise the introduction to maintain parallel structure.
  3. Go through the document several times; look for a different problem on each read-through. You might start by checking all your verbs, looking for weak verbs and passive voice. On a second read, check the nouns. Watch out for too many prepositional phrases.
  4. Check the paragraphs for topic sentences and good transitions.
  5. Survey the document visually for sentence length, long paragraphs, and white space.
  6. Finally, read over the lead and make sure that the document supports it and that it is as crisp and clear as you can make it.

---

---

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND WEB RESOURCES

Many books and online guides will help your writing. Some recommendations follow.

---

---

### **Garner's Modern American Usage**

Bryan A. Garner

Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2009

Garner is probably best known as the founder of LawProse, Inc., and the editor of the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of **Black's Law Dictionary**. This book is a comprehensive, general English usage guide.

Other books by Garner: **The Winning Brief: 100 Tips for Persuasive Briefing in Trial and Appellate Courts**, 2nd edition, 2004

**The Elements of Legal Style**, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2002

**Legal Writing in Plain English**, 2001

### **The Lawyer's Guide to Writing Well**

Tom Goldstein and Jethro K. Lieberman

McGraw-Hill, 1989/Paperback edition 2002

An excellent book. Analyzes in depth the problems lawyers face, gives good and bad examples, breaks writing process into small steps, has a sense of humor.

Authors are a lawyer-journalist and a lawyer.

### **The Elements of Style**

William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

Allyn & Bacon, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition 2008

Online: <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

Will do more to help your writing in one hour than any book you could read.

### **On Writing Well**

William Zinsser

Harper Perennial 2006, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition

Deals mostly with writing articles, but has good advice on writing on a computer and makes you want to write. Zinsser is a longtime writing guru. We also like **Writing to Learn**, published in 1993, which explores how to write clearly about difficult and technical subjects.

**Eats, Shoots & Leaves – The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation**

Lynne Truss

Gotham Press 2003/Paperback 2006

This popular best seller by a witty British writer offers engaging examples that make the case for the preserving punctuation standards.

**Plain English for Lawyers**

Richard Wydick

Carolina Academic Press, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition 2005

Offers brief explanations of common mistakes and exercises for improving your writing style; updated with advice on drafting formal documents.

**Style: Toward Clarity and Grace**

**(Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing)**

Joseph M. Williams

University of Chicago Press, 1995

Chicago style manuals are all reliable references.

**Mightier Than the Sword: Powerful Writing in the Legal Profession**

C. Edward Good

Word Store Publications, 1989

Good promises to help lawyers learn “enough grammar and the right kind of grammar” to make their writing better. The book has a useful index and includes excellent examples. Out of print, but available from amazon.com.

Also by Good:

**A Grammar Book for You and I . . . Oops, Me!**

Capital Books, 2002

**When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better and/or Worse**

Ben Yagoda

Broadway Books, 2007

More than a discussion of parts of speech, the book describes how words are used in sentences, how they should be used, and how usage has changed.

**Lapsing Into a Comma: A Curmudgeon’s Guide to the Many Things That Can Go Wrong in Print – and How to Avoid Them**

McGraw Hill, 2000

Bill Walsh, a *Washington Post* editor, writes lively books about style and grammar. Also by Walsh: **The Elephants of Style: A Trunkload of Tips on the Big Issues and Gray Areas of Contemporary American English**

McGraw Hill, Paperback, 2004

**Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English**

Patricia O'Conner

3rd Edition, Riverhead Trade, 2010

This former *New York Times* Book Review editor and linguistic expert offers witty explanations of grammar and language.

**Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer**

Roy Peter Clark

Little, Brown and Company, 2008

This book offers some quick and fun tips to polish your writing.

**Typography for Lawyers – Essential Tools for Polished and Persuasive Documents**

Matthew Butterick

Jones McClure Publishing, 2011

A primer on type composition and page-layout techniques specifically designed for legal documents. Includes many striking examples.

---

---

Supplement your bookshelf resources with some online resources.

---

---

The **Center for Plain Language** [centerforplainlanguage.org](http://centerforplainlanguage.org) is a nonprofit that advocates for clear communication and plain language in the public and private sectors. The site includes excellent examples both government and legal writing.

**The Vocabula Review** [www.vocabula.com](http://www.vocabula.com) strives to combat what its sponsors call “the degradation of the English language” by battling non-standard careless English and embracing clear, expressive English. Read amusing essays and learn about new publications on writing. A subscription service.

**Guide to Grammar and Style.**

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/>

Jack Lynch, a Rutgers University English professor, proves a witty and companionable coach in troubleshooting. He provides entries in two categories. The first covers specifics, such as when to use a semicolon or how to decipher a dangling participle. The second provides suggestions for making your writing clearer, more forceful, and more graceful. Includes an extensive reference list.

**Online Writing Lab (OWL):** <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

This Purdue University site offers online assistance in writing, grammar, and style. It addresses everything from general writing concerns (planning, writing, and revising) to sentence structure in argument and persuasion.

**Grammar Slammer:** <http://englishplus.com/grammar/contents.htm>

Consult this site for quick guidance on curing run-on sentences, misplaced modifiers, and punctuation problems. This shareware comes from **English Plus+** (<http://englishplus.com>), which began as a spin-off of an SAT tutoring program.

**Grammar Untied:** <http://www.grammaruntied.com/>

In addition to advice on how to use the parts of speech, this site has good advice on accuracy, spelling, word choice, clarity and conciseness. It's well organized with lists, charts, and quizzes.

**Other resources:**

- Sign up for Bryan Garner's Writing Tip of the Day at [www.lawprose.org](http://www.lawprose.org)
- Enjoy engaging podcasts about language debates at Lexicon Valley  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon\\_valley.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley.html)

---

---

## **APPENDIX: NUMBERS**

Two conventions govern this rule. One requires writers to use numerals beginning with the number 10; the other requires using numerals beginning with the number 100. The examples below follow the zero-through-nine rule.

What's important is that you choose one convention and be consistent. Always use numerals for ages and money. Avoid beginning a sentence with a number. It's awkward and hard to read. If you must begin a sentence with a number, spell it out.

---

---

INCORRECT: The state requires that students remain in school until they reach age eighteen.

INCORRECT: Louisiana elects justices to ten-year terms.

CORRECT: The court issued a 57-page opinion by all members of the panel.

CORRECT: The benefits started at five weeks and continued through 12 weeks of unemployment.

INCORRECT: While at the motel for 2 months with her two youngest children, ages 7 and 15 months, she lived in one room with a bathroom, but no cooking facilities.

CORRECT: While at the motel for two months with her two youngest children, ages 15 months and 7 years, she lived in one room with a bathroom, but no cooking facilities.

INCORRECT: 18 members of the bar association joined in the suit by Koskoff.

AWKWARD: Eighteen members of the bar association joined in the suit by Koskoff.

BETTER: Koskoff's suit was joined by 18 members of the bar association.

CORRECT: The case focused on whether the one-man, one-vote rubric applied to judicial elections.

---

---

## About Writewell

Writewell has been offering courses on effective writing since 1992. Clients include law firms, government agencies, foundations, and private businesses. Writewell's standard and advanced courses for lawyers are offered regularly by the Continuing Legal Education program of the DC Bar.

Director **Kate Sylvester** is a Washington, DC-based children's advocate. Most recently, she was director of the Initiative for Military Families at America's Promise. Previously, she served as director of the Social Policy Action Network and vice president of the Progressive Policy Institute.

A former journalist, Sylvester reported for *Governing* magazine, *The Washington Star*, National Public Radio, and NBC News; she also served as Washington bureau chief of the *National Law Journal*, covering the U.S. Supreme Court and the Department of Justice.

Sylvester earned degrees from Georgetown and Wesleyan universities; studied at the Yale Law School; and was the recipient of a John S. Knight journalism fellowship at Stanford University. More recently, she participated in the executive program for nonprofit leaders at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

[www.writewell-online.com](http://www.writewell-online.com)

412 7<sup>th</sup> Street, SE

Washington, DC 20003

202.543.8825

email: [writewellconsulting@verizon.net](mailto:writewellconsulting@verizon.net)

---

---