



Legal Writing Center

Less is More?

How Writing Shorter Sentences Strengthens Legal Writing

Shorter sentences allow a reader to *quickly grasp* the point of that sentence. Writing is significantly more effective, and persuasive, when a reader can understand the point of a sentence in two seconds versus twenty-two seconds.

As many of you know, *time is precious* within the legal profession. As such, readers want to *spend less time* reading your paper to understand your point or argument. It's no secret that lawyers are very busy individuals. The average lawyer creates or receives over seventy documents — including word documents, emails client records, opposing counsel records, and Excel spreadsheets — per day. This totals more than 26,000 documents per year! As a future lawyer, you should always be thinking about how your paper can stand out from the *enormous number* of documents that will be read by your audience. Shorter sentences allow your reader to quickly “get the point” of your paper before moving on to other work. Saving time, and energy, to understand all of your points will certainly lead to your reader being a *happier reader*.

Also, the average *attention span* has been decreasing over time. With the average professional receiving more work, in comparison to twenty years ago, he or she has been paying less attention while reading documents. For example, in 2000, the average attention span in an office environment was twelve minutes. Today, it's fewer than eight minutes. If an email is lengthy, studies show that it is typically abandoned in thirty seconds.

So, how can your voice be heard above the rest? Here's some **tips**:

- During the editing phase, think about how you can shorten each sentence to concisely express the point of that sentence:
 - Editing checklist for shortening sentences:
 - Reduce the *number of phrases* in each sentence: When appropriate, change more phrases in run-on sentences into short, individual sentences.



- Use **active voice**: The subject is *performing the verb's action* rather than the subject being acted upon.
- Avoid **unnecessary padding words and phrases**: This is considered as “fluffy” language that adds no value to the sentence.
- Avoid **redundancies**: This occurs when two or more words are used in a sentence with the same meaning.

Examples of these fixes:

As a former English major, I have to remind myself that we are *not* modeling our writing like the great authors in literature including Ernest Hemingway, who was known for run-on sentences. Rather, we are writing for busy lawyers who just want to understand the main point(s) of your paper. With apologies to former English majors, check out a Hemingway sentence below from *A Farewell to Arms* and my proposed “lawyerly” revision:

- “They left me alone and I lay in bed and read the papers awhile, the news from the front, and the list of dead officers with their decorations and then reached down and brought up the bottle of Cinzano and held it straight up on my stomach, the cool glass against my stomach, and took little drinks making rings on my stomach from holding the bottle there between drinks, and watched it get dark outside over the roofs of the town.”
 - **Revised Version:** They left me alone. I lay in bed and read the papers, which included a list of dead officers with their decorations. While reading, I reach down for the bottle of Cinzano. I rest the drink on my stomach and take small sips from the cool bottle. As I drink, I watch the sky darken over the town.
 - This revised version is one of *many ways* to shorten the lengthy Hemingway sentence. One of the easiest tricks is to *minimize the number of phrases* in each sentence by making each phrase its *own separate sentence*.

Writers sound significantly more assertive when they use the active voice instead of passive voice. In the simplest form for the active voice, do the following: (1) start the sentence with the **subject**, which is the person, place, or thing *doing or being something*; (2) then transition to the **verb**, which is the action; and (3) then end with the **direct object**, the person, place, or thing that *receives the action* in the sentence. Here are two examples:

- The e-mail was sent by Sarah.



- **Revised Version:** Sarah sent the e-mail.
 - This revised version starts the sentence with the subject (Sarah), then transitions into the verb (sent) and ends with the direct object (e-mail).
- Md. Rule 5-702(1) is referred to by Maryland courts to determine whether or not a witness qualifies as an expert witness.
 - **Revised Version:** Maryland courts refer to Md. Rule 5-702(1) to determine whether a witness qualifies as an expert witness.
 - This revised version starts the sentence with the subject (Maryland courts), then proceeds to the verb (refer), and transitions to the direct object (Md. Rule 5-702(1)).

Writers also sound more assertive, and forthcoming, when they avoid unnecessary padding in sentences. Padding, within this context, means “fluffy” words and phrases that add no value to the meaning of the sentence. Consider these examples:

- In my opinion, John Doe did not murder his wife, Jane Doe.
 - **Revised version:** John Doe did not murder his wife.
 - Clearly, this revised sentence is “in your opinion” because you wrote the sentence. As such, “in your opinion” is adding no value to this sentence.
- Maryland courts do not apply a narrow, rigid, formalistic approach to determine whether a witness is competent to serve as an expert witness. *Instead*, competence is established when a witness is relatively familiar with the subject of the testimony.
 - **Revised Version:** No change needed.
 - In this example, “instead” is not unnecessary padding because it serves as a helpful transition from the first sentence to the second sentence.

Redundancies also increase the length of sentences without adding any additional value. Two examples to prove my point:

- Did you catch the redundancy in the above sentence?



- **Revised Version:** Redundancies also increase the length of sentences without *adding* value.
 - The redundant words are “adding” and “additional.” The term “additional” did not add any value to the sentence.
- In addition, I would also like to serve as your judicial clerk because I enjoy learning more about the appellate court process.
 - **Revised Version:** In addition, I would like to serve as your judicial clerk because I enjoy learning about the appellate court process.
 - **Alternative Revised Version:** I would also like to serve as your judicial clerk because I enjoy learning about the appellate court process.”
 - The redundant words are “in addition” and “also”.

These tips and examples are suggestions to shorten sentences to strengthen your writing skills. However, it’s always important to use *your own judgment* to determine when you should implement these suggestions. For instance, you may not want to use all short sentences (e.g., less than fifteen words) because your entire paper may seem choppy. Also, you could also use the passive voice for a fact in a trial memorandum, motion, or brief that is not favorable for your argument. The passive voice will weaken that sentence, which can help mask the prevalence of that fact.

Happy Writing!

