

Writing for Your Reader

By Roberta M. Gubbins

All writing involves two people—the writer and the reader. Fiction and nonfiction writers know who is reading their books. Their audiences can sometimes be narrowed down by age, gender, socioeconomic status, political views, or reading level. They write for that reader.

Lawyers also write with the reader in mind. When you write a brief for a judge, you first read the court rules to determine the required format and style. You then research other winning briefs or call fellow lawyers who have written for that judge to get insight as to what he or she likes and doesn't like.

The technique is the same whether you're writing for clients or consumers, with one big difference—now you're writing for readers who won't go over what you've written with a fine-toothed comb. These readers don't need footnotes. They aren't trying to test your arguments like judges or fellow lawyers. They're reading for information.

How can you help them easily find that information?

- Replace legal vocabulary with plain English.
- Define unusual or unfamiliar terms.
- Vary formats, e.g., Q and A's, bullet points, and numbered lists.
- Spell out an entire name or term before using an acronym.

Consider the publication. Newsletters or e-blasts help you connect with existing clients, keeping your name in their minds for future referrals. Newsletters, whether printed or electronic, are more formal than



blogs, which are short with links to other information. Feature articles cover a subject in greater depth. If you're writing for the local bar newsletter, you can use some legal terms; if writing for the general public, keep it simple.

Attorney Bob Kohn considered his readers when faced with a five-page limit for a brief for a U.S. District Court judge in Manhattan. He opted for a cartoon strip using pictures and words to present his position. The court accepted his brief, which was readable by the general public and the court.

Kohn's cartoon-strip brief might find an audience on Facebook where members like photos. You don't have to draw a cartoon, but you could post and caption pictures of your firm's staff or community events in which you participated. Your content should be informative, with links to your firm's blog

posts, e-newsletters, or relevant articles written by others. For social media sites LinkedIn and Google+, your writing style should be both interesting and concise.

Twitter, which allows a maximum of 140 characters per message, is the most limiting of the social networks. Use it to send short items of interest to your readers.

To keep readers reading:

- Use the "find" command to locate repetitive words on the same page; find synonyms for those words.
- Mix sentence lengths.
- Avoid run-on sentences.
- Use action verbs.
- Eliminate useless words; using fewer words improves speed, clarity, and impact.

Finally, review and revise. Let the article, blog, or e-blast simmer and read it later, watching for trouble spots. It's not a brief for a judge or fellow lawyer; it's a story for your clients and future clients. Enjoy the telling. ■



Roberta M. Gubbins, Esq. practiced law before serving as the editor of the Ingham County Legal News. Since leaving the paper, she provides services as a ghostwriter, editing and writing articles, blogs, and eblasts for lawyers and law firms. She is the editor of Briefs, the Ingham County Bar Association e-newsletter; and The Mentor, the SBM Master Lawyers Section newsletter.