

Don't Give Your Adversaries Free Airtime

By Kenneth F. Oettle

Advocacy is like advertising: if you keep putting the thought out there, sooner or later the consumer may try it on for size. Don't do your opponents' advertising for them. Don't give them free airtime.

An associate representing a defendant began a preliminary statement by repeating six of the plaintiffs' allegations. I deleted the paragraph. She acknowledged that she was giving plaintiffs free airtime by restating their case, but she thought she was obliged to begin by listing the points she would need to refute. She also thought the allegations would be neutralized if she preceded each one with *Plaintiffs allege*.

Saying *plaintiffs allege* won't neutralize the allegations unless they are incredible on their face. To the contrary, restating the allegations may fix them in the reader's mind, especially if the reader, whether judge or law clerk, has just finished plaintiffs' brief, which probably cast the allegations in their best light.

Naked reiterations of the other side's position are frequently (actually, just short of invariably) followed by what I call the "no-no statement." You write, *Plaintiff says X*, and then you follow with, *Plaintiff is*

wrong, misses the point, falls short of the mark, or fails to understand the issue. Initially, you provide no *because*, just a negation, a no-no statement.

The no-no statement seems necessary to you, as indeed it might. You've just finished stating plaintiff's position, so every fiber of your advocate's body demands that you say the opposite, fast. So you do. You make a no-no statement.

Sometimes no-no statements are immediately followed by a supporting rationale, which repairs some of the damage, but sometimes they are not. Even if you supply a rationale, you lose a tempo because you spend two "beats," as it were, accomplishing nothing—one beat to restate plaintiff's argument and another to deliver the bare negation, the no-no statement, which has little value other than to assure the reader that you haven't given up yet.

The following no-no statement is accompanied by, but delays, a rationale:

Insurer X alleges that ABC Co.'s retention of environmental consultants shows that ABC Co. knew or suspected that its groundwater was contaminated. *This is untrue, and Insurer X is unable to muster any evidence to support this contention*. Quarterly groundwater testing was mandated by RCRA.

All the information the writer wishes to convey is in this paragraph, but in the wrong

order. First the writer gives the other side free airtime, restating the insurer's contention that the hiring of consultants to test groundwater shows knowledge of contamination. Then the writer makes a no-no statement (*This is untrue, and Insurer X is unable to muster...blah blah blah*). So far, the score is 1 to nothing for Insurer X, and ABC Co. is 38 words into the paragraph.

Changing the order of presentation avoids giving the insurer free airtime and eliminates the no-no statement:

ABC Co. retained environmental consultants because RCRA mandated quarterly groundwater testing, not because ABC Co. knew of or even suspected groundwater contamination as Insurer X contends.

As in the first version, the writer presents the insurer's position and the company's position, but the order is different. In the revised version, the writer provides the explanation first, so when the reader sees the insurer's position, it is with the explanation in mind. Not all no-no statements are this easily eliminated, but many are.

A second example appeared as the opening paragraph of an appellate reply brief:

Respondent argues that, for this Court to reverse the trial court, it must repudiate the holding in *Smith v Jones*. Respondent is mistaken. Contrary to Respondent's argument, this Court need not

"Plain Language" is a regular feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, edited by Joseph Kimble for the Plain English Subcommittee of the Publications and Website Advisory Committee. We seek to improve the clarity of legal writing and the public opinion of lawyers by eliminating legalese. Want to contribute a plain-English article? Contact Prof. Kimble at Thomas Cooley Law School, P.O. Box 13038, Lansing, MI 48901, or at kimblej@cooley.edu. For more information about plain English, see our website—www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/.

You've just finished stating plaintiff's position, so every fiber of your advocate's body demands that you say the opposite, fast. So you do. You make a no-no statement.

challenge the holding in *Smith* in order to find in Appellant's favor. *Smith* is silent on federal law. It does not mention ERISA or cite even a single federal case.

This opening grants free airtime and uses not one but two no-no sentences, beginning with *Respondent is mistaken*. We do not learn until the last sentence of the paragraph, 43 words in, why the Court would not have to repudiate *Smith* to find for Appellant.

Minor adjustments shape up the opening:

Respondent incorrectly contends that this Court will have to repudiate *Smith v Jones* to reverse. *Smith* is not an ERISA case and doesn't even mention federal law. Thus, it is inapposite.

Changing the order
of presentation
avoids giving the
insurer free airtime.

The word *incorrectly* interrupts the free airtime and provides the negation for which the writer previously used a no-no statement, allowing the writer to get more quickly to the point. Replacing the phrase *to find in Appellant's favor* with the punchier phrase *to reverse* further shortens and sharpens the passage, propelling the reader toward the conclusion. ■

Reprinted with permission of the publisher and copyright holder from Making Your Point: A Practical Guide to Persuasive Legal Writing, by Kenneth F. Oettle. Published by ALM Publishing (www.lawcatalog.com) and copyrighted by ALM Properties, Inc. All rights reserved.

Kenneth F. Oettle is a graduate of Cornell University and Harvard Law School and senior counsel in the Newark, New Jersey office of Sills Cummis & Gross P.C., where he chairs the firm's writing program. His columns appear regularly in the New Jersey Law Journal and the Texas Lawyer, on Law.com, and in other ALM publications nationwide.