

Chapter 8

How to start

There are many ways to improve legal writing and we hope we have covered most of them. But what if you have only a little time to devote to improving this essential skill? Which will give you the best quick results – that is, the most impact for the least effort?

Here we each offer our three favoured suggestions for clarity in legal writing. If you only change one thing as a result of reading this book, you might choose one of these.

DP: Here are my chosen three, in order:

- **Use headings.** Add short, informative and accurate headings. Even a badly written document will then be well organised and signposted for the reader. See Chapter 10 ('Organising your document').
- **Put the main message first.** This focuses the reader's attention where you most want it and creates a framework on which readers can hang the details as they read what follows. For instance, if you are answering a question give the answer before the reasons. This reduces effort for the reader and improves the chance of getting your main message across. Again, see Chapter 10.
- **Keep sentences short.** This is one of the easiest changes, as well as one of the most powerful. Not only are short sentences easier to read, they are also easier to edit and less likely to contain mistakes. See Chapter 17 ('Sentences').

MA: I don't disagree with Daphne's choice, but as I can't say which three I think are the most important I'll add another three that must be near the top of the list:

- **Paragraph for meaning.** There are two techniques here. One is to start a new paragraph when you move on to a new point. The other is to break long paragraphs into indented subparagraphs to guide the reader through complex material. Neither of these need involve any change in wording (except perhaps the occasional link word). You just need additional white space. See Chapter 16 ('Paragraphs').
- **Punctuation.** If you use standard punctuation when you're not being a lawyer, do the same with legal documents, however formal. Properly used

HOW TO START

punctuation helps you control a river of words which might otherwise be too wide and fast to navigate. Think of it as a series of lifebelts thrown to drowning readers. See Chapter 12 ('Punctuation').

- **Use your imagination.** Identify any gaps in your instructions. When you read over the document, imagine yourself to be the intended reader and change anything that you think needs changing. Or get someone else to do this. Or both.

If time is precious, we suggest you choose one technique and practise it briefly – a few seconds will sometimes be enough – in every piece of writing you do. Specifically, practise it in every email. For example, suppose you have chosen to work on short sentences. Before you send your next email, look for a sentence that runs over two lines. Change it before you press 'Send'. Then, in your next email, do the same. By the end of the day, you will have spent a few moments each on dozens of emails, making the sentences shorter. Before long, you will find yourself writing with more full stops in the first place, knowing as you write what you will have to change before you send it. In a few weeks, you will have developed a new writing habit that can last the rest of your life. Then you can relax and turn your attention to the next technique on your list.

Ideally, don't stop after these six.