

Why Are Lawyers So Bad at Writing?

Yes, lawyers are bad at writing. You can argue with me all day. After all, that's what many lawyers are *good* at. But I've edited enough material from attorneys to know that most of them hold a reader's attention about as well as Shakespeare engages a toddler.

There's a simple reason why attorneys suck at writing, and it's the same reason that many academics are terrible writers, too. It's not because they aren't smart (most are). It's not because they don't have information (they do, often relevant and important to potential clients). It's because they are trained to write in a certain way for people who are paid to read it, which turns out is really boring.

Full disclosure: These ideas aren't mine. I am inspired by Professor Larry McEnerney, the director of the University of Chicago Writing Program, and his [lecture](#) about why academics are terrible writers. His points definitely apply to attorneys. Jaffe's own [Steph Maher](#) turned me on to him, so any complaints about this article should go to her.

Before we get into why lawyers are bad writers and easy ways to improve quickly, let's discuss why lawyers should want to write good articles in the first place.

Why should attorneys care about writing interesting content?

A lot of people look for lawyers on the internet, because that's where people find everything these days. A search for counsel could start with a search for information on a legal topic, and an informative article could be the lure – or [funnel](#), if you will – that brings in leads.

Many lawyers and legal marketers know this, which is why many law firms have [blogs](#) and try to [get bylines in well-known publications](#). One avenue toward attracting business is to establish oneself as a thought leader in an area of law. Look at you, you beacon of knowledge.

Now that we've established why it's important to develop content, what may not be so obvious is why it's important that the content is interesting, organized, and perhaps even entertaining. Simply put, on the internet, you have exactly three seconds to capture a reader's attention before they click away.

What do readers want from law firm content?

Lawyers are trained to write in a certain way for a certain audience. Their goal is often to persuade. Their audience is usually a judge or other attorneys. That audience is paid to read the writing.



Ada Kase

Content Writer

ajkase@jaffepr.com

The objectives in content writing are completely different. The goal is not to persuade, except insofar as you want to persuade a potential client to hire you. Rather, the goal is to provide value – information.

The Problem: You've Been a Peacock

The Solution: It's Not About You, It's About the Reader

In college, in law school, and in the profession, lawyers are trained to write for people who are paid to assess how they think. Here you go, Madame Professor. See how smart I am? But in content writing, the writer doesn't matter at all. No one cares how you think. Readers just want the information they seek.

McEnerney analyzes what makes effective short-form non-fiction writing. The best headlines and lead paragraphs (ledes, in the biz) aren't just informative. They challenge a reader's worldview.

Turns out, people love to hear that they are wrong. If you've read this far, perhaps you've always thought you were a good writer and I've challenged that view and may even succeed in changing it. McEnerney says that the clickiest headlines are the ones that say something like, "You think you're safe with this contract provision? The Fifth Circuit says otherwise."

Human beings are wired to love information, and we love clicking on headlines that tell us that we are wrong. Next time you read the internet for fun, analyze which headlines you click on and why. Chances are, you like the articles that challenge your notions.

What is the best structure to attract and keep reader attention?

Lawyers tend to make articles boring by structuring them in two ways.

One, they write things like, "In this article I will discuss" and then explain what the article will be about and then end the article with, "In conclusion," and then summarize the article. Snooze!

This was learned in school. None of the articles you enjoy reading are structured like this, so toss this habit.

Second, many attorneys will structure articles chronologically and then give the conclusion – the point – at the end. This is called "burying the lede" in journalist lingo.

The Problem: Chronological Order With Exposition

The Solution: Structure Like a Muckraker

Newspaper journalists of old came up with standard structures for news articles and feature articles that are tried and true, and it's a good framework for anyone.

1. Use the inverted pyramid.

2. Include a nut graf.

The inverted pyramid structure puts the most important information up top, and the information will get less important as you scroll down the page. This is especially useful for [law firm web content](#).

A nut graf comes after the lede. Remember, the lede is the introductory paragraph either containing the most important information or giving the reader the promise about what they will read about. If you're feeling snazzy, it could be some nugget or anecdote that draws a reader into the story. A [nut graf](#) is where you make your point.

In this article, my nut graf said, "Lawyers are bad at writing because they were trained to write for people who were paid to read it." Then I made my promise – that this article will help fix these bad habits easily. The nut graf summarizes what the point is, but without saying, "In this article I willâ€¦!"

It often helps to write the whole article first and stick in the nut graf when you edit. Which brings me to the next point.

Why is editing more important than drafting?

Unless you are an exceptionally organized thinker, the words that flow out of your mind onto the page will not constitute a finished written product that your audience enjoys reading. From now on, remember that a first draft is only 20% of the work. The real work comes in [editing](#).

The Problem: On the Page, Out the Door

The Solution: Read It Through At Least Once

Getting words on paper is like putting paint on your tray. Editing is when you paint the picture.

When you start reading, the editing will come naturally. Guided by the structures we discussed above, you'll start making your sentences more concise and more snappy, and the natural flow of the ideas will become clearer. Review your lede and nut graf to make sure they make it clear what the point is: Here's the problem, here's the solution. Here's the legal issue, here's what the court decided and why it matters to potential clients. Finally, write your headline, which should very concisely tell your readers exactly what value they will get out of reading the piece.

What's the best way to ensure consistency?

If you want to position yourself as a thought leader, writing articles may be an integral part of your strategy. Writing – and critically, editing – take work. How can you set yourself up for consistency?

The Problem: Most People Operate Out of Fear

The Solution: Have Fun

Let's get deep for a second. Most people operate out of fear in almost every facet of life, especially professionally. So most people write with fear. They write boring headlines and boring sentences in boring language because they are afraid of coming off badly. The result is a boring product.

Your focus is providing value to a reader, but you can do that and still have fun. Writing is a creative outlet, and a blog can be a great way to express yourself while talking about law. Some of the best law blogs I've read have voice. Those authors aren't afraid to be themselves, so let go of your fear and enjoy yourself.

What if it isn't fear that's getting in your way, but rather that you don't have the time or desire to write content? Reach out to me, Ada Kase, at ajkase@jaffepr.com. I'm happy to do it for you.