

Grammar Girl here. Today's topic is readability. And just to mix things up, I'm bringing in Adam Friedman to host today's show. Adam is the author of *Party of the First Part*, a witty, entertaining book about legalese that goes on sale September 4th. I figure if Adam can make legal documents readable, then he must be on to something.

Adam?

Thanks. Grammar Girl. I love being a writer, a novelist once said. What I can't stand is the paperwork. It's an amusing quip, but there's also a real truth to it. The decidedly unglamorous task of formatting documents is an essential part of good writing. This is especially true of legal documents which, if not watched very carefully, can spiral out of control until you find yourself expunging in aforementioned *lis pendens* that you didn't even know you had.

The best writers, including legal writers, follow these rules for producing readable documents. First, use a table of contents for documents longer than about 10 pages. Whether it's a book or a legal brief, reading a thick document is kind of like taking a trip. You want to have a map. A table of contents helps prepare the reader for the journey ahead.

Next, use an eye friendly font and ample white space between blocks of text. Don't overwhelm the reader with pages of dense, single spaced text in a swirly, fussy, hard to read font. Choose a clean, serif typeface like Times New Roman for printed documents. Serifs, by the way, are those little decorative embellishments you see on the top and bottom of letters. Fonts that don't have these little doodads, like Arial, are called sans serif, and they work better for online text.

Whatever font you use, avoid setting text in all caps. The uniform size makes it notoriously difficult to read, and online is considered the equivalent of shouting. These formatting tips may seem trivial at first, but they really aren't. Like bad grammar, bad presentation can distract the reader. Or even worse, cause the reader to give up on your document altogether.

Next point. Break up your text into manageable chunks by using short sections or subdividing longer sections. You should group related material together, and order your sections in a logical sequence. Typically, you'll want to put the general before the specific, and the more important before the less important. For example, let's say you're writing a booklet about the rules of the road. You might want to start with the bit about red means stop, and green means go before tackling say, the parking regulations of Tuscaloosa. Somewhere in the booklet, you'll probably have a section on driving with children. But since that's a big topic, you'll want to divide that section into subsections. Like use of child seats, children and airbags, and leaving children unattended in cars. A hint on that

last subsection-- don't.

OK. Now that you've got sections, you need section headings. Headings should use straightforward language. This is not the time to show off your wit. For example, in your hypothetical booklet about the rules of the road, that section on child safety should probably have a heading called driving with children. Rather than mommy on board or something equally cute.

Finally, even with headings and subheadings, you'll still want to use transitional sentences as signposts for the reader. Speaking of sentences, keep yours as short as possible. Like this. Actually, they don't need to be that short. But a good rule of thumb is to keep your average sentence length to 20 words or fewer. Long sentences afflict legal and technical writing, partly because writers tend to cram lots of conditions and qualifiers into their sentences. When you feel this temptation, consider turning this sentence into a numbered or bulleted list.

Here's an example of an overstuffed sentence from a typical insurance policy. The due observance and fulfillment of the terms so far as they relate to anything to be done or complied with by the insured, and the truth of the statements and answers on the application, shall be conditions precedent to any liability of the company to make any payment under this policy. Wow. That sentence is trying to do a lot. But unfortunately, it ends up doing nothing because nobody can understand it.

Here's a better way to convey the same information. We will only make a payment under this policy if one, you have followed the terms of the policy. And two, the statements and answers in your application are true.

One final point, particularly for the lawyers and the audience, is to avoid unnecessary jargon in your writing. You may enjoy words like here with, witnesseth, and arguendo for their ye olde flavor. But don't put them in documents that you expect other people to read. And if you're wondering what to do with all that leftover legalese, you can always send it to me. At my website, [www party of the first part dot com](http://www.partyofthefirstpart.com).

We're holding a contest for the best example of bad legalese. It's called the Golden Gobbledygook Award. Winners will receive a copy of Grammar Girl's new audio book, Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips to Clean Up Your Writing. As well as my own book, *The Party of The First Part, The Curious World of legalese*.

That's it for readability. As legal writing instructor Joe Kimball likes to tell his students, go forth and simplify.

Remember, with GoToMyPC you'll never have to go back to the office to retrieve a computer file again. For a free 30 day trial, visit [GoToMyPC dot com slash podcast](http://GoToMyPC.com/slash/podcast).

Thanks Adam! Again, his website is [party of the first part dot com](http://www.partyofthefirstpart.com). That's all. People are joining the Flickr group and uploading their grammar catastrophe photos. You can see the recent entries in the sidebar of the Grammar

Girl section of quick and dirty tips dot com. Where you can also find my contact information, and a transcript of this podcast. You'll also see the Mighty Mommy page where she has a great show this week about choosing a pet when you have children in the house. Thanks for listening.