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Develop Momentum By Tapping the Reader's Emotions

Among other things, seek agreement with the reader early on

By Kenneth F. Oettle

For a change, I will analyze my own work. The goal, as always, is to uncover some truth about persuasive writing. The subject matter is my April 21, 2003 column [172 N.J.L.J. 184], titled "To Get to the Point, Get to the Verb."

The point of the column was that writers should not test readers' patience by interposing long phrases between nouns and verbs. Once a noun appears, the reader demands action and is annoyed and even confused if the verb is delayed.

A draft of the column began:

The amount of information lawyers have to impart in a single sentence can be substantial and the task of organizing it imposing.

The final version began:

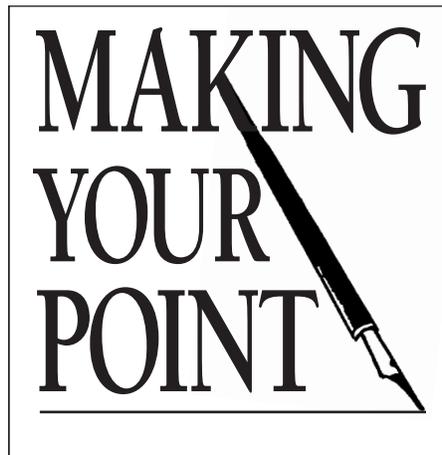
Lawyers write long sentences, which isn't necessarily bad. We write for an intelligent audience that can handle large chunks of information, and we want our prose to seem smooth and sophisticated, not choppy and adolescent. But the longer

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the sentence, the tougher the task of organizing it.

The column went through many drafts, but the expansion of the opening occurred in one burst halfway through the process. It was not a matter of accretion to, or deletion from, earlier drafts. It was a wholesale change. In my judgment, the change was good.

"Lawyers write long sentences"



creates common ground with the reader because the reader knows, and at some level probably resents, that lawyers write long sentences. The opening also alliterates ("Lawyers write long ..."), creating rhythmic appeal. Together, the sound and the sense engage the reader.

The sentence then changes direction. It says that writing long sentences "isn't necessarily bad." This reversal creates tension between the quasi-critical observation that lawyers write long sentences and the supportive comment that long sentences may not

be so bad. To see how the tension is resolved, readers will probably continue reading.

I resolved the tension by explaining why long sentences aren't necessarily bad: A lawyer's audience can handle complex thoughts, and a well-crafted long sentence often makes a better impression than two or three shorter ones.

Let's look again at the original opening:

The amount of information lawyers have to impart in a single sentence can be substantial and the task of organizing it imposing.

The first four words, "The amount of information," say nothing interesting. Can you envision "an amount of information"?

Add the next seven words ("have to impart in a single sentence"), and you still have nothing. You can't agree or disagree with it, and it isn't likely to inform you or make you angry, sympathetic or curious.

The sentence hardly improves when you characterize the amount of information as "substantial" and the task of organizing it as "imposing." The thought is obvious, and it isn't entirely accurate. Lawyers don't have to impart a substantial amount of information in a single sentence. They can write short sentences.

The Creative Process

The first version of the opening remained unchanged through several drafts. Then I wrote, "Lawyers write long sentences," and the rest followed.

I didn't derive the new version from text already written. I simply observed it. For all I know, the alliteration of "lawyers" and "long" triggered it.

In some respects, the creative process is a mystery. It's unpredictable, like answers from the "Magic 8-Ball™," a grapefruit-sized black sphere that looks like the 8-ball in pool. You ask the device a question ("Will I pass the Bar?"); you shake it; and an answer floats up in a little window (e.g., "It is certain"). Disturbingly often, our minds provide answers with what seems like the same fortuity as the Magic 8-Ball™.

Can we glean practical truths about writing from that earlier column? Yes.

Concepts don't engage readers. Details do. The original version of the opening said that lawyers have trouble organizing their sentences because they have to put substantial information in them. This is true, but "information" is vague, and so is "substantial." Say instead, "Lawyers write long sentences." It paints a picture.

Highlight actions, not obligations. Rather than discuss what lawyers have to do (put information into their sentences), say how they do it (they write long sentences).

Make statements with which the reader agrees. If you cause the reader's head to nod in affirmation, literally or figuratively, you create a sympathetic vibration and develop momentum for your version of the story.

Make statements with which the reader disagrees if you are confident

you can change the reader's mind. Contention can be a hook to draw the reader in.

Make statements to which the reader is likely to have some affect (emotion) attached. If you connect with the reader's emotions, you tap an energy source. The energy propels the reader through your piece and, if your point is solid, inclines the reader to your side.

You can tap this energy by, for example, provoking anger at an opposing party, generating sympathy for your client, or stimulating curiosity. Or you can tap the energy through nothing more than the comforting rhythm of the communication contract, in which the writer performs by being clear and direct, and the reader performs by absorbing the message. Clarity can energize a reader, partly because a "good read" is energizing and partly because a reader is likely to be pleasantly surprised by clarity because it is so rare.

The revised opening to the column began with an idea with which the reader would probably agree and about which the reader might well have strong feelings — that lawyers write long sentences. Then the opening said this isn't necessarily bad, setting up a point of contention. When I gave reasons why long sentences aren't necessarily bad, the reader hopefully agreed, and momentum developed as the reader shifted from skepticism or disagreement to agreement.

The purpose of the opening for

that column was to engage, not to begin an argument. The subject of the column was not whether long sentences are defensible, but whether subject and verb should be separated. In a brief, you would go directly to your point, but you would still look to engage.

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

The Court rejected creating a general rule with respect to the applicability of marketability discounts.

Instead of "rejected creating," try "declined to create." It's more direct. "Creating" is amorphous, and "rejected creating" is ambiguous. Did the court reject the idea of the court creating a general rule or did the court reject the idea of anyone creating a general rule?

Replace "with respect to" with "for" and reduce "the applicability of" to "applying." You need a version of "apply" to distinguish the idea from, say, "quantifying" marketability discounts. For extra credit, substitute the metaphorical "blanket" for "general."

The new version:

The court declined to create a blanket rule for applying marketability discounts. ■