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Skip the Generalities and Go Straight to the Specifics

Don't make the reader wait as you home in on your point

By Kenneth F. Oettle

We think first in larger categories, or “sets,” and then, usually with imperceptible effort, we focus on smaller categories, or “subsets.” For example, we think “interference” and then “interference with prospective economic advantage.” We think “operating system” and then “Windows” or “Mac OS X.”

Sometimes we reveal this thinking process in our writing, as in the following excerpt from a brief making the argument that even though an applicant for a gaming license may have to forfeit a nonrefundable application fee upon withdrawing its application, the applicant should not also have to contribute to an industry-wide assessment to cover a shortfall in regulatory funds:

The constitutional test for the validity of a license fee or assessment is based on the relationship between the services provided and the charge imposed. Specifically, the charge should be proportional to the licensing entity's costs.

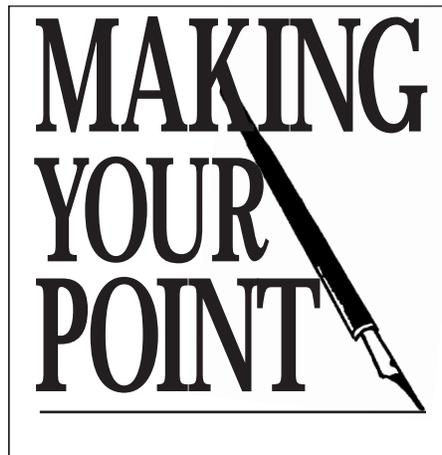
The statement in each sentence is true. The test for the validity of a license fee or assessment is “based on the relationship” between the services and the charge, and such charges should be “proportional to the licensing entity's

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costs.” If an applicant withdraws an application, the licensing agency can provide the applicant no services. If it can provide no services, it should not assess a supplemental fee for services.

Though both statements are true (relationship and proportionality), making both statements is unnecessary. The better approach is to go straight to proportionality, which is your point:

The constitutional test for the



validity of a license fee or assessment is whether the services provided are proportional to the charge imposed.

The statement that the test for the constitutionality of a fee is based on a “relationship” represents only the first step of the thinking process. You think first that a relationship exists between services provided and fees charged, and then you think that the relationship should be proportional.

The possible relationships between services and fee can be considered a “set,” and the relationship of propor-

tionality can be considered a subset. Only the subset — that fees and assessments should be proportional to services provided — is your point.

Showing how you reason a problem through can be helpful to a reader, but showing the set from which you draw a subset may be a waste of time. Save the reader work and add pace to your writing by going straight to the point.

A Second Example

Possibly drawing on the otherwise sound advice that one should reason from the general to the specific, memo writers sometimes circle before landing, as this writer did when restating an assignment:

You asked me to research the potential ramifications of Mr. X's taking bets on the recent presidential election on his application for qualification under the State Gaming Control Act. Specifically, my research focused on the issue of whether Mr. X's activities would be grounds for automatic disqualification under the Act.

“Potential ramifications” hints at an array of consequences that could result from Mr. X having taken bets on the presidential election, but the only relevant ramification for this writer is Mr. X's being denied a gaming license.

You can see the writer's mind homing in on automatic disqualification as the writer says “my research focused,” which means, essentially, “Here is the ramification with which I will deal.”

The writer should have skipped the extra step and gone straight to the point:

You asked me to research whether Mr. X's taking bets on the recent presidential election is grounds for automatic disqualification under the State Gaming Control Act.

With few exceptions, the word "specifically" — and its first cousin "in particular" — are indicators that you can eliminate unnecessary words by combining sentences. When you catch yourself using "specifically," consider whether you are gratuitously showing the reader how you developed a thought. Unless your argument will be strengthened by showing how you focused from set to subset, don't recount the entire journey, just the destination.

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

Special protection is afforded under the Sarbanes-Oxley Act to security analysts employed by

brokers or dealers who present adverse, negative or otherwise unfavorable research reports that may adversely affect an investment banking relationship.

The Sarbanes-Oxley Act is intended to increase corporate responsibility. Because the above sentence will be embedded in a discussion of the Act, the phrase "under the Sarbanes-Oxley Act" is likely to be implicit and can probably be dropped.

"Employed by brokers or dealers" can also be dropped because readers will know that securities analysts are so employed. Not only does this deletion save words, but it solves the ambiguity created by the separation of "who" from its antecedent (security analysts). The sentence could refer to analysts who present adverse research reports or to brokers and dealers who do so.

The writer must acknowledge the potential conflict of interest — that the analyst's employer (the broker or dealer) may pressure the analyst for a positive report because the employer does not want to embarrass its investment

banking client. This can be handled by a reference to the analyst's "firm."

Finally, the statute may refer to "adverse, negative or otherwise unfavorable research reports," but "adverse" is enough here, and one use of "adverse" is enough as well. If the report is adverse to the client, implicitly it is adverse to the relationship with the client.

The revised version:

Special protection is afforded to security analysts who present research reports adverse to their firm's investment banking clients.

You could trim more and add a little punch by deleting "security" and "research" as implicit and converting "report" to a verb.

Alternate version:

Special protection is afforded to analysts who report adversely on their firm's investment banking clients. ■