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Tailor Your Possessives to the Convenience of the Reader

Sometimes a prepositional phrase works better than an apostrophe

By Kenneth F. Oettle

We all know instinctively that to form the possessive for nouns of more than one word, such as New York or New Jersey, we place an “apostrophe-s” after the concluding word (e.g., “New York’s”). What some of us haven’t learned is that applying this rule to names with multiple words can be awkward, as in the following title of a brief:

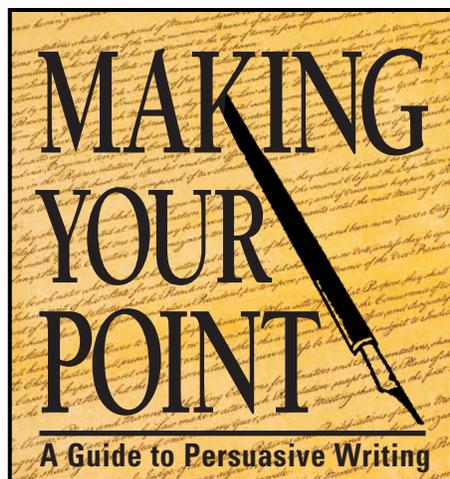
PLAINTIFF’S BRIEF IN
OPPOSITION TO THE COMMUNICATION
INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION OF NEW JERSEY’S
MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

The association’s name has seven words. Signaling the possessive with an “apostrophe-s” after the last word is grammatically correct but unwieldy because the reader has to backtrack to parse out the possessive. The reader may even think, albeit momentarily, that the possessor is not the association but the state, in other words, that the motion is “New Jersey’s motion.”

Not only is the possessive at the end of a long name confusing and, for the reader, labor-intensive, but it makes the reader wait to find out what the brief

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opposes. After the title tells the reader that the brief is in opposition to something, the reader has to wade through seven more words to learn that the brief opposes a motion for summary judgment. One way to solve the problem is as follows:



PLAINTIFF’S BRIEF OPPOSING THE SUMMARY JUDGMENT MOTION OF THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION OF NEW JERSEY

By using a prepositional phrase instead of an “apostrophe-s” to indicate possession, you communicate more directly and make less work for the reader.

A way to solve the problem if the association is the only defendant is to substitute “DEFENDANT’S” for the association’s long name. The resulting

sentence is well-balanced, juxtaposing plaintiff’s brief and defendant’s motion:

PLAINTIFF’S BRIEF IN
OPPOSITION TO DEFENDANT’S
MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

By dropping the association’s name, you obviate the need for a prepositional phrase. You also place defendant on a depersonalized par with “plaintiff,” whom you likewise haven’t named.

The writer of the original version of this title probably liked the structural balance between “plaintiff’s brief” and “the ... association[’s] ... motion,” or maybe the writer was dutifully using a possessive rather than a prepositional phrase to save words. In either case, the writer didn’t realize that the length of the defendant’s name would dominate, and the writer didn’t go back to make sure the title was reader-friendly.

Awkward possessives can also turn up when a writer uses an appositive at the first mention of a person’s name, as in the following example, where the object of the possessive (“statement”) is separated from the possessive (“John Doe’s”) by seven words:

John Doe’s, the Director of the Company’s Compliance Group, statement that he did not learn of the back-up tapes until months later was intended to mislead the Court. [Emphasis added].

Making the reader wait to learn which of John Doe’s possessions is the focus of the sentence is inappropriate.

Revise the sentence as follows:

The statement by John Doe, the Director of the Company's Compliance Group, that he did not learn of the back-up tapes until months later was intended to mislead the Court.

Even better, mention first that the declarant held the important position of Director of the Company's Compliance Group:

The statement by the Director of the Company's Compliance Group, John Doe, that he did not learn of the back-up tapes until months later was intended to mislead the Court.

Finally, if the facts are strong enough to support a direct accusation, use the active voice and bring the intent to deceive forward:

The Director of the Company's Compliance Group, John Doe, intended to deceive the Court when he said that he did not learn of the back-up tapes until months later.

Here is another example of a possessive creating a problem in an appositive setting:

In response to the Township Engineer's (Smith) comment regarding increased run-off from the development, the applicant agreed to add more catch basins.

The inconsistency between the possessive ("Engineer's") and the appositive

("Smith") is jarring. One solution is to create consistency by making Smith possessive:

In response to the Township Engineer's (Smith's) comment regarding increased run-off...

Because duplication of the possessive is redundant, I prefer to indicate possession with a prepositional phrase:

In response to the comment of the Township Engineer (Smith) regarding increased run-off...

The following awkward possessive stumbles on both a long name and an appositive:

NOT GOOD: This memo examines arguments that may be asserted in opposition to *plaintiff Pine Tree Chemical Production Associates'*, a partnership trading as Aromatics, Inc. ("Aromatics"), application for a preliminary injunction.

BETTER (because it eliminates the awkward possessive): This memo examines arguments that may be asserted in opposition to *the application by* plaintiff Pine Tree Chemical Production Associates, a partnership trading as Aromatics, Inc. ("Aromatics"), for a preliminary injunction.

BETTER YET (because it does not make the reader wait to find out what the application is for): This memo examines arguments

that may be asserted in opposition to the *application for a preliminary injunction* by plaintiff Pine Tree Chemical Production Associates, a partnership trading as Aromatics, Inc. ("Aromatics").

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

The secretary alleged that there was wrongdoing on the part of her boss in the circulation of the memo.

To shorten the sentence, drop "that there was," which is unnecessary and unhelpful; replace "on the part of" with the much shorter "by"; and reduce "the circulation of" to "circulating."

The new version: The secretary alleged wrongdoing by her boss in circulating the memo.

For an alternative, more verb-centric version, say that the boss "wrongfully circulated" the memo. Wrongfully connotes dishonesty, immorality or illegality, which "wrongdoing" in the original version seems to suggest. "Wrongly" would indicate mere inaccuracy or mistake.

Alternate version: The secretary alleged that her boss wrongfully circulated the memo. ■