

Punching Up Your Writing: Advice From the Experts

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“Writing is fighting,” Muhammad Ali once said. That’s certainly true of much legal writing. Just as the boxer who punches better than his opponent is more likely to win the fight, legal writing that has more punch is more likely to accomplish its purpose. How then, do we punch up our writing? Here is a collection of tips from the experts.

Get Your Facts Right

“Fundamental accuracy of statement is the one sole morality of writing.” — Ezra Pound

“Name names. Make your writing physical. Use lots of exact nouns. ‘Food’ is an idea; ‘black-bean soup’ is a thing. Naming not only makes the writing more visceral, it makes the reader trust you. And use your own expertise, whatever ‘insider information’ you have. Use words like *soffit*, *draw shave*, *spit valve*.” — David Long

Go Easy on the Modifiers

“Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write ‘very’; your editor will delete it and the writing

will be just as it should be.” — Mark Twain

“I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English — it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don’t let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don’t mean utterly, but kill most of them — then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice.” — Mark Twain

“Cross out as many adjectives and adverbs as you can. ... It is comprehensible when I write: ‘The man sat on the grass,’ because it is clear and does not detain one’s attention. On the other hand, it is difficult to figure out and hard on the brain if I write: ‘The tall, narrow-chested man of medium height and with a red beard sat down on the green grass that had already been trampled down by the pedestrians, sat down silently, looking around timidly and fearfully.’ The brain can’t grasp all that at once, and art must be grasped at once, instantaneously.” — Anton Chekhov

“Show, don’t tell.” — Henry James

Be Plain; Be Yourself

“And yet, we know how fatal the pursuit of liveliness may be: it may result in ... tiresome acrobatics. ... Flashy effects distract the mind. They destroy their persuasiveness; you would not believe a man was very intent on ploughing a furrow if he carried a hoop with him and jumped through it at every other step. ... When virtuosity gets the upper hand of your theme, or is better than your idea, it is time to quit.” — Katherine Anne Porter

“My notion of a failed writing workshop is when everybody comes out replicating the teacher and imitating as closely as possible the great original at the head of the table. I think that’s a mistake, in obvious opposition to the ideal of teaching which permits a student to be someone other than the teacher. ... The successful teacher has to make each of the students a different product rather than the same.” — Nicholas Delbanco

“When a new writer defends his ‘style,’ the teacher smiles (or cringes) because real style isn’t an artifice. Real style — voice — arrives on its own, as an extension of

a writer's character. When style is done self-consciously and purposefully it becomes affectation, and as transparent as any affectation — an English accent on an old college chum from New Jersey, for example.” — Bill Roorbach

“Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.” — Samuel Johnson

Work at It

“Nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence. It is no fun to write lumpishly, dully, in prose

the reader must plod through like wet sand. But it is a pleasure to achieve, if one can, a clear running prose that is simple yet full of surprises. This does not just happen. It requires skill, hard work, a good ear, and continued practice.” — Barbara Tuchman

“What is easy to read has been difficult to write. The labour of writing and rewriting, correcting and recorrecting, is the due exacted by every good book from its author, even if he knows from the beginning exactly what he wants to say. A limpid style is invariably the result of hard labour, and the easily flowing connection of sentence

with sentence and paragraph with paragraph has always been won by the sweat of the brow.” — G. M. Trevelyan

“You can't rely on inspiration. I don't even *believe* in inspiration. I just believe in working.” — David Long

“The first draft of everything is shit.” — Ernest Hemingway

Have something to say; say it; and stop when you're done.
— Tryon Edwards

Let thy speech be short, comprehending much in few words.
— Ecclesiasticus