

# Client Alerts — Audience Analysis

by [Mister Thorne](#)

4 January 2010

I'm editing a client alert. The final draft begins with a 223-word intro — a single paragraph covering three separate topics. In short order, I whittle it down to 103 words set as two paragraphs, each covering a single topic.

After that, I hit upon lots of copy like this:

While Congress funded the FHA at the time of its creation in 1934, the FHA repaid those funds by 1940, and it has been entirely self-funded since that time with proceeds from borrowers' mortgage insurance being used to operate the program.

I do some fact checking, and then I whittle it down to this:

While Congress funded the FHA at the time of its creation in 1934, the agency repaid those funds by 1940. It has been entirely self-funded since then.

When I'm done, what had been a 4,200-word article — essentially a verbose rehash of information available at the [FHA's Web site](#) — is down to a more palatable (and more likely to be read) 3,400 words.

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Most client alerts deal with technical issues, and most are written for an audience of lawyers versed in a particular area of the law. Even so, most are written *as if* the audience consisted not of corporate counsel, but of law clerks. That's why they so often begin by defining household terms like SEC or IRS, even when the target audience consists of attorneys well-versed in securities and tax law.

Writing an alert designed to attract or inform in-house counsel is one thing, but writing an alert for a much wider audience (e.g., bankers and mortgage brokers and business journalists) is quite another.

The alert I'm editing is intended for a broad audience. It's intended to gain media mention and to attract new clients. The attorneys who wrote it told me so.

And that's why I'm tossing each and every unnecessary word and phrase I can find. You see, the most coveted potential clients (the key audience) have money to spend on outside counsel, but their time is very precious (to them). Because of that, they'd much rather read an edited (i.e. polished) alert that's shorter and easier to read than a longer, unedited version stuffed with fluff.

If an alert begins with three paragraphs stuffed into one, then business journalists won't bother to read it at all (because their time is also precious), and they won't contact the author for a quote (because he seems so flatulent).

Here's a simple rule for client alerts: when it comes to how many words you use to express an idea, *less is more*. (Consider this quote, often attributed to Mark Twain: "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time.")

When you're writing one, remember this: a client alert is not for the pleasure of the author. Its purpose is to influence the reader, who generally considers fluff (more words than necessary) a waste of time. Forgetting that can be costly. All the time an attorney put into writing an alert can be wasted, unless — of course — an editor polishes the alert before it's published.

In some cases, an attorney's effort is worse than wasted. What had been a potential client is no longer interested in the attorney or his firm because [something](#) that attorney wrote left such a bad first impression. ("If a [misplaced comma](#) is worth \$2.3 million, do I trust this attorney to prepare an important legal agreement for my company? I think not!")

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Here's an article about audience analysis, written by [Douglas Abrams](#), a law professor who's written several books and whose law review articles have been cited in four Supreme Court decisions. It's titled [The Writer's Theatre](#). For attorney-authors who like to make a solid first impression, it's very well worth a read.

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***Mister Thorne is a freelance editor in San Francisco. Skilled and experienced, he does for an attorney's appearance in print, what a stylist does for an attorney's appearance in person — i.e., he makes that attorney look as good as can be.***

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