



Avoid clichés and buzzwords like the plague

Poor writing is an instant turnoff. Be it incorrect grammar, overused and tired phrases or a simple failure to proofread adequately, sloppy writing comes across as lazy and unprofessional. For attorneys who must be able to communicate with a range of audiences, from judges to peers to clients and prospective clients, bad writing habits can be costly.

You have read them – sentences that seem to drag on endlessly without actually saying anything at all. Sometimes you will find you have read an entire paragraph about “doubling down” on “client-focused results” where “the bottom line” is “thinking outside of the box” only to realize that you actually feel less informed than you did before reading it. If phrases like these grate on your nerves, you are not alone. Clients and judges do not like them either. And marketing materials filled with overused platitudes are not likely to send eager prospects flocking to your office.

As a profession, lawyers have built a reputation for using a writing style that is needlessly wordy and obtuse. But stereotypes were meant to be overcome.

Watch out for clichés and buzzwords. Overuse of clichéd statements is another nail in the coffin and the straw that breaks the camel’s back for your writing’s effectiveness. It makes your sentences appear longer at the expense of actually saying something to your readers. Every profession is guilty of spawning its own insider language, some of which is helpful and even necessary. But in many cases words and phrases get used so often that they no longer have any real meaning or value to offer. They are simply information-free filler.

Consider making a list of words to avoid that you can keep handy whenever you are writing. Ask others what their pet-peeves are. Do a search for overused industry terms. The marketing profession has its share of fluff, like “guru”, “synergy” and “innovative.” Keep your list updated and be vigilant when clichés rear their ugly heads.

Eliminate unnecessary language. Some of the most commonly used extraneous words and phrases include “on the other hand”, “anyway”, “for example” and “in other words.” You could probably come up with several more without much effort. Most avoidable expressions are transition words placed at the beginning of a sentence in an effort to make writing flow or appear more cohesive. Leave them out. If the statement cannot stand on its own, it is superfluous.

Know your audience. Legal briefs, scholarly works and blog entries require different levels of formality and the language contained within them should be adjusted accordingly. People in need of legal services are not interested in law review articles. Representatives for Google have repeatedly stated that website copy should sound like it is being written for human beings, not keyword-hunting robots. When you speak directly to clients and attempt to address their needs, your writing will stand on its own. There is no need to stuff it with unnecessary jargon.





Use a thesaurus. One of the surest ways to make your writing appear as though it was written by someone still in grade school is to use the same word repeatedly – especially within the same sentence. Everyone is a little guilty of liking some terms more than others, which is why it is helpful to always have a thesaurus handy. If you find your word processing software auto-completing too many words, start looking them up. You do not have to use difficult or awkward substitutes, but you may be surprised at how many good options are out there from which to choose.

Have others proofread. For important documents, consider employing the services of a professional editor. For other items, at least give your colleagues a chance to catch mistakes you may have missed. It is difficult to edit your own work. You have been immersed in it for long enough that it is easy for your mind to skip over errors or fill in blanks that will be glaringly obvious to new readers. Editors and proofreaders can help save you from embarrassing public misstatements.

You are a well-educated professional and you should sound like one. Give your writing the attention it deserves. Do not fall into the trap of embellishing with filler and fluff. Unless annoying your audience is your real goal.

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