



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW
WRITING CENTER

Break Apart Long Sentences¹

As a law student, you may have seen 150-word sentences in statutes, hornbooks, and even judicial opinions. Probably no other single characteristic does more to complicate legal writing than these long sentences.

For a clear, readable style, break apart your long sentences. The average reader can hold in short-term memory only a few ideas at a time. When there are no periods in a long string of thoughts, the reader will try to break up the sentence into smaller pieces to understand it. But the reader may not always know where to pause or which ideas to group together.² The reader gets lost.

Lengthy sentences often violate other guidelines for writing clearly. They may contain intrusive phrases, complex conditionals, nominalizations, passive verbs, and nonparallel constructions. These structural complexities add to the reader's difficulties.

Use Short Sentences.

Learn to love short sentences. When you write short sentences, you crystallize your thoughts. Begin your sentence with your subject: *The defendant*. Next, keep the subject next to the verb: *The defendant fled*. Keep your subject, verb, and object together, near the beginning of the sentence: *The defendant fled the scene*.

Avoid Intrusive Phrases and Clauses.

A sentence can be unnecessarily long if it contains a phrase or clause that has been inserted into the middle of the main clause. This incidental material disrupts the logical flow of the sentence. The remedy? Give each intrusive phrase its own sentence.

POOR: Petitioner's argument that exclusion of the press from the trial and subsequent denial of access to the trial transcripts is, in effect, a prior restraint is contrary to the facts.

BETTER: Petitioner argued that excluding the press from the trial and subsequently denying access to the trial transcripts is, in effect, a prior restraint. This argument is contrary to the facts.³

¹ Cecelia Smith, Writing Specialist, 2023.

² VEDA R. CHARROW ET AL., CLEAR AND EFFECTIVE LEGAL WRITING 170 (5th ed. 2013).

³ *Id.* at 175.

When you give the intrusive phrase its own sentence, the meaning becomes clear. Do not worry if the passage becomes longer. The goal is clarity, not brevity.

Use Variety.

Readability hinges on average sentence length. Try to keep your average sentence length to 20 words. But you want variety too. Work in some 35-word sentences and some 3-word sentences.

How can you write a balanced, longer sentence that is clear and effective? You might write a compound sentence joining two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction like “and” or “but.” You can also write a balanced, longer sentence using a dependent clause.

A dependent clause does not express a complete thought. It depends upon the main, independent clause. It begins with a subordinating conjunction: after, although, as, because, before, if, though, until, when, where, while. A dependent clause contains a subordinating conjunction, a subject, and a verb.

In this example, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis uses a dependent clause at the beginning of his long sentence:

If the Government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for the law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy.⁴

Top advocate Lisa Blatt repeats her dependent clause at the end of her 64-word sentence:

The law thus seeks to alter “[t]he marketplace for ideas on medicine safety and effectiveness,” **even though** the manufacturer’s speech is truthful, non-misleading and extensively regulated by the Food and Drug Administration; **even though** physicians are trained to use their medical judgment in the best interest of patients; **and even though** physicians have total control over whether, when, and how they communicate with manufacturers.⁵

After you write two or three longer sentences, write a short sentence. This creates relief for the reader. Chief Justice John Roberts uses this technique here:

Substituting one decisionmaker for another may yield a different result, but not in any sense a more “correct” one. **So too here.**⁶

Variety in sentence length creates rhythm in your legal writing. Read your sentences aloud to hear the cadence. Make your prose sing!

⁴ ANNE M. ENQUIST ET AL., JUST WRITING 139 (6th ed. 2022).

⁵ ROSS GUBERMAN, POINT MADE 238 (2d ed. 2014).

⁶ *Id.* at 227.