

PRESENTED AT

Robert O. Dawson Conference on Criminal Appeals

May 2-4, 2018

Austin, TX

Six (or More) Techniques for Readable, Persuasive Sentences

Wayne Schiess

Author Contact Information:

Wayne Schiess

University of Texas School of Law

Austin, TX

wayne@legalwriting.net

512.232.1333

Six (or More) Techniques for Readable, Persuasive Sentences

Table of Contents

1. Manage average and maximum sentence length.....	1
2. Deflate compound prepositions.....	2
3. Revise unnecessary nominalizations.....	3
4. Spot and fix dangling elements.....	4
5. Make correlative conjunctions parallel.	5
6. Consider subordination.	6

1. Manage average and maximum sentence length.

Lawyers have a bad reputation for long sentences. Maybe we assume an idea and all its qualifications must be in a single sentence: “[Lawyers] think that in order to achieve clear understandings, they must stuff every related idea into a single sentence between an initial capital letter and a final period. They are, of course, wrong.” So say Ronald Goldfarb and James Raymond in *Clear Understandings: A Guide to Legal Writing*. Whatever the cause of long sentences, good legal writers do two things: they manage their average sentence length and control their maximum sentence length.

Average sentence length. You can program Microsoft Word to tell you your average sentence length. Go here:

- File > Options> Proofing

Then look for the section called When Checking Spelling and Grammar in Word. Check the box for “show readability statistics.” Now after you run a spell-check, you’ll see a display that includes the average sentence length.

(To check the box for “show readability statistics,” Word requires you to check the box for “check grammar with spelling,” but most of us don’t want to run a full grammar-check each time we spell-check. So I go into the grammar settings and uncheck all the items it’s checking for. That way, I get readability statistics without running a grammar-check.

As with any automated grammar and spelling tool, the average-sentence-length tool has limits. If you have citations or headings, your average sentence

Find the full text of this and thousands of other resources from leading experts in dozens of legal practice areas in the [UT Law CLE eLibrary \(utcle.org/elibrary\)](https://utcle.org/elibrary)

Title search: Six (or More) Techniques for Readable, Persuasive Sentences

Also available as part of the eCourse

[Tips and Techniques for Legal Writing](#)

First appeared as part of the conference materials for the
2018 Robert O. Dawson Conference on Criminal Appeals session
"Six (or More) Techniques for Readable, Persuasive Sentences"