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Six (or More) Techniques for Readable, Persuasive Sentences

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Six (or More) Techniques for Readable, Persuasive Sentences

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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

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