

## Sentence Length

By Wayne Schiess | Texas Law | Legalwriting.net

Lawyers have a bad reputation for long sentences.

Maybe reading cases in law school started us off poorly. I used to track the longest sentence in a first-semester student paper, and the record is a sentence of 114 words. But the longest sentence I've seen in a judicial opinion is 279 words, and I'm sure I could find more extreme examples if I looked.

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 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. For a better way to use the grammar-checker, see the next section.)

As with any automated grammar and spelling tool, the average-sentence-length tool has limits. If you have citations or headings, your average sentence length will be artificially low. If you break up sentences into independent clauses with semicolons—which readers might digest as separate sentences—your average sentence length will be higher. (One option is to select a single paragraph or a single page and check its readability statistics.) Whatever you do, the more information you can learn about your own writing, the better.

What’s a good average length? The experts say between 20 and 25 words:

- below 25—Wydick in *Plain English for Lawyers*
- about 22—Enquist & Oates in *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer*
- about 20—Garner in *Legal Writing in Plain English*

When you write about complex subjects, push the length down. Steven Stark, in *Writing to Win* says, “The basic rule is this: The more complicated your information is, the shorter your sentences should be.”

So vary your sentence lengths, but keep the average around 20. Ask yourself: What’s my average sentence length, and is it appropriate for the subject and audience? Are all the sentences about the same length, or do I have good variation? Do I have too many short sentences, so that my writing is choppy?

**Maximum sentence length.** What’s too long for one sentence? Well are you confident you could write a readable and clear sentence of more than 45 words? I’m not sure I could. Of course, some gifted writers can create long sentences that are pleasant to read; they usually use long but perfectly parallel phrases in a series. It works well in literature. But for most of us doing legal writing, shorter sentences will work better.

When I write a single sentence that goes past 45 words, I usually break it up. But don’t count words while writing—who could? When you’re composing the first draft, let your creative mind produce the text without interference from your internal editor. Let the text—and the ideas—flow.

Then shorten long sentences on the edit. When you encounter a single sentence that bogs you down, tires you out, annoys you, or takes up three, four, or five lines on the page, highlight it and look at the word count. If the word count is more than 45, rework the sentence or break it up.