

## Business & Careers

# Some prose and cons of editing software



**Luigi Benetton**  
Hi-Tech

Lawyers and government writers are often noted for needlessly convoluted writing.

"Lawyers often believe they are different to other professions as they have to use language interpreted by courts over centuries as the template for all current writing," says Nick Wright. "The result is often a series of mammoth sentences, archaic language

and standard phrases that make it difficult, even for other lawyers, to understand."

"Plain English is a confusing term," says Wright, the U.K.-based director of Editor Software. "Plain' conveys the impression that it's boring, simplistic, for primary school kids." He suggests lawyers shape everything they write into "a model of clarity."

Lawyers who want to create models of clarity have several options: hiring editors, using software to flag unclear writing, and simply learning how to write in plain language.

Editors could certainly help lawyers improve their prose. Decades ago, author and former litigator Gary Kinder started

approaching law firms to offer his services as an editor. "It was a hard sell. They just didn't think they needed editors," he says.

Kinder understands the law firm perspective. "Clients won't want to pay for an editor," he says. "They're going to assume that you're a great writer if you have a law degree."

His understanding doesn't extend to agreement. "When a lawyer writes something, you could have millions or billions of dollars, even people's lives, riding on it, but nobody looks at it." Meanwhile, Kinder notes that his books go through his agent, his New York-based editor and a copy editor before hitting store bookshelves.

Wright shares a similar experience. "I tried to push water up a

hill. I tried to get civil servants to write in plain English," he says.

Wright doubts the efficacy of ever-proliferating business-writing workshops. "We tried the traditional methods of changing writing style — running writing workshops, issuing guidance notes and producing a house style," Wright says. "Did this work? No. A month after training, there was no improvement as people fell back into their poor writing habits. People couldn't remember the house style rules. Often senior managers would edit good, clear English back into government-speak."

Kinder started teaching lawyers how to improve their writing in 1988, when he moved to Seattle and after he had already published

his first two books. After a time, "I noticed there were patterns," he says. "Any time you see the word 'of' you will often find unnecessary words around an 'of,' on either side of the word." "In" often starts wordy phrases, he adds.

"Once you deal with text around those words, the words that remain are now next to words they weren't next to before, so the sentence looks different to you. You see problems in those sentences that you didn't see before. Then you see other ways to improve a sentence."

After several years, Kinder figured he had a finite set of about a dozen "signal words" so he filed a patent for using them as an editing tool. **Writing, Page 22**

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### Writing: Not a cure-all, but programs can help with clarity

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ting method. (It's one of several patents granted to him by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.)

"As time went on, I started wondering whether I could teach a machine to do this. Turns out I could," he says. "Once we got the patents, I started pulling together people who could create software using the information in the patents." WordRake launched in July 2012.

Similar experiences led the U.K.-based Wright to helm Editor Software, which publishes the plain English editing software StyleWriter.

Both WordRake and StyleWriter plug into Microsoft Word (Windows only). Word itself offers tools meant to help writers improve their texts. On top of its spelling and grammar checkers, writers can turn on Word's readability statistics tool.

This tool is fairly simplistic. Word

counts words, characters, paragraphs and sentences, then does some basic math to produce several averages: sentences per paragraph, words per sentence and characters per word. It also produces the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level ratings.

Wright warns people not to trust Word's stats, saying they "boil down to saying long words and long sentences produce bad writing, while short sentences and short words produce good writing."

Wright also derides Microsoft's grade formula as being up to "six grades out from the real grade when tested by texts assessed by educationalists."

While brevity may improve the chances of clarity, Wright says his software goes further, checking text for other issues. "For example, the program will highlight thousands of Latin terms found sprinkled through legal documents," he says.

It also rates a writer's performance using

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Nick Wright  
Editor Software

words like those a teacher might scrawl on a written exam. My favourites were "wordy" and "dreadful." (Wright notes that the software is only evaluating the writing, not the writer.)

Writers might be taken aback by WordRake's more assertive modus operandi (oops)—it makes changes to the text which writers can then review and adjust as need be. Kinder asserts this M.O. (better?) saves the writer time.

While both programs run deeper than the descriptions here suggest, neither one

is a panacea. Kinder admits that WordRake doesn't always properly fix the text being "raked."

Wright quotes one person's remark on his site: "StyleWriter will teach you to write in a clear, concise and readable style—but if you write crap, StyleWriter will teach you to write clear, concise readable crap."

Software "won't fix an organizational problem, or a logic flow," Kinder adds. "It will tell you if you have unnecessary words."

Software also doesn't judge your content or the suitability of the content to the readers. That's up to the writer. It's just one aid to help the writer communicate clearly.

Both Kinder and Wright suggest using software to trim chaff from an early draft to give the writer a clearer view of how a document can be polished by either the writer or an editor.

Kinder insists the principles of good writing apply to all fields: law, science, even poetry. "Short sentences, active verbs and clear expression remove most grammatical errors and those left are obvious from reading through the text," he says.

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