DIAGNOSING WRITING PROBLEMS

Often, mechanical errors are much easier to find in our own writing after the passage of time. Pull up a document you wrote some time ago, read it critically, and use it to diagnose areas of weakness in your writing.

First, double space after each period and review each sentence in isolation:

- Is each group of words between the capitalized first letter and the end punctuation a complete sentence?
- Do the subject and verb match in number and make sense together?
- Does every verb that requires an object have one?
- Are modifiers close to the words they modify?
- Does every pronoun have an antecedent, and do they match in number?
- Are the sentences typically very long, containing two or three thoughts that could be separated?
- Are the sentences typically very short, dividing ideas that could more effectively be communicated in compound or complex sentences?
- Does the sentence structure vary sufficiently?
- Does every word of each sentence convey the precise meaning intended?
- If you read the sentence aloud with great inflection and pregnant pauses, does the punctuation seem appropriate, necessary, and correct?

If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” chart the errors to identify patterns and problem areas. Once you have identified your errors, learn how to fix them by reading in a grammar book or online service. Rewrite each sentence to fix the sentence-level problems.

Then reunite all the sentences for a particular paragraph and review each paragraph in turn:

- Is the first sentence a topic sentence that accurately portrays the remainder of the paragraph?
- Is every sentence in the paragraph related to the stated topic?
- Do the remaining sentences present ideas or information in a logical order for the purpose of the paragraph?
- Are relationships between sentences clearly made by references and other transitional devices?
- Do the remaining sentences develop the stated topic as completely as needed?

If not, identify, chart, and remedy errors. Rewrite each paragraph into a coherent and correct whole.

When you finish reviewing all of the paragraphs in a particular section of the document, look at the entire section:

- Do transitional devices between the paragraphs develop the overall topic or theme of the section?
- Are the paragraphs in a logical order, facilitating the development and exposition of that topic or theme?
- Are the paragraphs typically overly long, too short, or a good mix of lengths?
- Are one- or two-sentence paragraphs used only sparingly and for emphasis?

Again, identify, chart, and remedy errors. Follow the same procedure with as many written documents as possible until you can identify and eliminate errors accurately and efficiently. If you can write and punctuate good sentences and paragraphs, you are more likely to successfully adapt to the forms and structures of legal writing.