

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES

What makes a “good” document?

Why do some documents succeed and others fail? The difference between a “good” document and a “bad” one is more than spelling, punctuation, and grammar (although these certainly count in the equation). If we can pin down the qualities of successful documents, we are well on our way to producing them and to helping others produce them.

A. A good document achieves its designated purpose for its specific audience.

To achieve this quality, a writer should ask certain questions before and during drafting and revising:

1. For whom is this document written (audience)?
2. What will that person do with it (purpose)?
3. What question(s) is the document supposed to answer?
4. What is the answer?

In the world of legal discourse, documents are “working documents,” not academic exercises. Real people need and use the documents you write to answer significant questions. However perfectly it may be written, a legal document fails if it does not achieve its designated purpose for its designated audience.

B. A good document immediately gives its reader an overall picture of what the document is about, including the question it is answering and the answer. It also leaves the reader with a clear answer.

5. Does the document immediately (i.e. on page one) and clearly present the question or questions it addresses, the answer(s), and a brief explanation of the answer(s)?
6. Does the final sentence or paragraph (conclusion) make the answer crystal clear?

Documents are more useful to readers if they supply context—that is, if they tell the reader what the document is about right away and give the reader an overall picture of what the document will do. Legal documents, in particular, should not be “mystery stories.” Give both the question and the answer in the first paragraph.