



Plain English for Lawyers

Richard Wydick

Key Insights for Modern Legal Practice

This independent summary distills the core ideas of the book and connects them to day-to-day law practice, advocacy, and operations.



1) Overview: Why This Book Matters

Richard Wydick's 'Plain English for Lawyers' is a concise but powerful guide to legal writing. It has become one of the most widely used resources in law schools and law firms alike because it addresses a universal problem: legal documents are often unreadable, and that undermines advocacy, client trust, and justice itself.

The book argues that clear writing is not just style—it is substance. If judges, clients, or colleagues cannot understand what is written quickly, then the communication fails, no matter how legally accurate it might be.

For modern lawyers, clarity is a competitive advantage. Clients demand it, courts reward it, and legal tech platforms can reinforce it. This book provides practical strategies to transform traditional, convoluted legal writing into prose that is simple, precise, and powerful.

- Clarity enhances credibility and persuasion.
- Plain English eliminates unnecessary barriers between writer and reader.
- Effective writing respects the reader's limited time and attention.



2) Why Plain English is Powerful

Wydick emphasizes that plain English is not about dumbing down content. It is about writing in a way that ensures meaning is grasped immediately by the intended audience.

Judges, for example, often read hundreds of pages in a short time. Lawyers who can present arguments with clarity have a significant advantage because their points are understood and remembered.

- Short sentences reduce ambiguity and misinterpretation.
- Concrete nouns and strong verbs carry ideas more forcefully.
- Readers reward clarity with trust and attention.

3) Cutting Legalese Without Losing Precision

A major theme of the book is eliminating unnecessary jargon, technical phrases, and outdated legal terms that add no value. Words like 'hereinafter,' 'aforementioned,' and 'pursuant to' clutter documents and slow down readers.

Wydick shows that precise communication does not require archaic words. Instead, ordinary English can carry legal meaning with greater force and precision.

- Replace archaic words with clear, modern terms.
- Prefer 'must' to 'shall' when imposing obligations.
- Avoid multi-prepositional phrases that bury the verb.



4) Structure: Make Documents Navigable

Even clear sentences will not save a poorly organized document. Wydick highlights the importance of structure in legal writing: headings, topic sentences, and white space make documents navigable for busy readers.

Good structure allows readers to skim while still understanding the flow of argument, ensuring key points are never lost.

- Lead each paragraph with the core idea.
- Use consistent, parallel lists for tests and factors.
- Place definitions and explanations where the reader needs them, not in footnotes or appendices.

5) Editing as a Team Sport

Clear writing comes from rewriting. Wydick underscores that great legal documents are always the result of multiple drafts and careful editing.

He also suggests that lawyers work collaboratively to edit each other's writing, creating a firm-wide culture of clarity and consistency.

- Revise each draft with the goal of cutting 10–20% of words.
- Read documents aloud to test rhythm and clarity.
- Use checklists and shared style guides across teams.



6) Examples: Before and After

One of the strengths of Wydick's book is the use of concrete before-and-after examples that show how cluttered, archaic writing can be transformed into plain English.

These examples not only illustrate the rules but also inspire confidence that any lawyer can adopt the techniques.

- Before: 'Pursuant to the provisions contained herein, the party shall provide notification.' → After: 'The party must notify.'
- Before: 'It is respectfully submitted that the defendant's motion should be denied.' → After: 'The defendant's motion should be denied.'
- Before: 'Said property shall be conveyed to the aforementioned heirs.' → After: 'The property will be conveyed to the heirs.'

7) Applying Plain English in Modern Practice

The lessons of this book resonate strongly in today's legal world, where clients and courts alike demand efficiency. Modern practice management platforms can embed plain English principles directly into templates, client communications, and AI drafting tools.

For example, firms can standardize plain English templates for contracts, pleadings, and client letters, ensuring clarity is the default across the organization.

- Style Checkers: automated tools to flag jargon and passive voice.
- Clause Libraries: store plain-English model clauses for reuse.
- Client Summaries: auto-generate clear summaries alongside formal documents.



8) Checklist & One-Page Takeaway

Plain English is not cosmetic—it is a professional obligation. Lawyers who master it communicate more effectively, persuade more reliably, and build stronger trust with clients and courts.

- Are sentences short and active?
- Did you replace legalese with ordinary words?
- Do headings and topic sentences tell the story?
- Can a non-lawyer paraphrase your main points easily?
- Have you cut unnecessary words or phrases?