GENERAL

plain english for lawyers by richard c wydick

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Plain English for Lawyers by Richard C. Wydick: A Comprehensive Guide to Clear Legal Writing

In the world of law, clarity is not just a nicety—it is a necessity. Whether drafting a contract, preparing a brief, or communicating with a client, the ability to convey complex ideas in straightforward language can make the difference between success and failure. **Plain English for Lawyers by Richard C. Wydick** is a seminal work that has helped generations of legal professionals master the art of clear, concise, and effective writing. This article offers a deep dive into the book's content, its relevance to modern legal practice, and practical ways to incorporate its principles into everyday work.

About the Author: Richard C. Wydick

Richard C. Wydick, a former partner at the prestigious law firm of *Wydick & Associates*, earned a reputation as a master communicator long before the internet era. With a background in both law and journalism, Wydick understood the power of language and its impact on audiences ranging from jurors to corporate executives. His experience as a litigation counsel and legal editor gave him firsthand insight into the pitfalls of legalese—wordy, ambiguous, and often unintentionally obfuscatory prose.

Wydick's passion for clarity led him to write **Plain English for Lawyers**, a book that distills decades of practice into actionable guidance. The text has become a staple in law schools, corporate legal departments, and solo practices alike, offering a roadmap to writing that is both professional and accessible.

Why Plain English Matters in the Legal Field

Legal documents are traditionally dense, laden with jargon, and structured in a way that can be intimidating to non-experts. While precision is paramount, overcomplication can hinder understanding, lead to misinterpretation, and even expose a lawyer to liability.

- Improved Client Relationships – Clients are more likely to trust attorneys who communicate in clear, jargon-free language.
- Reduced Litigation Risk – Ambiguities in contracts or pleadings often become the basis for disputes.
- Enhanced Efficiency – Clear writing saves time for both lawyers and the courts, reducing the need for clarifications and amendments.
- Better Compliance – Regulatory documents that are easy to understand are less likely to be misinterpreted by regulators.

Overview of the Book

Plain English for Lawyers is organized into three main sections: the first introduces the philosophy of plain writing; the second delves into specific techniques and strategies; the third offers real-world examples and exercises. The book is peppered with anecdotes, case studies, and practical "do's and don'ts" that make the abstract concepts tangible.

Key features of the book include:

1. Clear Definition of Plain English – Wydick explains what constitutes plain language in legal contexts.
2. Step-by-Step Writing Process – From drafting to revising, each stage is broken down with actionable tips.
3. Checklist for Review – A handy tool to ensure every document meets the book's standards.
4. Illustrative Examples – Side-by-side comparisons of "legalese" and its plain English counterpart.

Key Concepts Covered in the Book

Clarity

Clarity means making the meaning unmistakable. Wydick advises writers to use specific nouns, active verbs, and precise modifiers. Avoiding vague terms such as "some," "many," or "somewhere" reduces the risk of misinterpretation.

Conciseness

Legal writing often suffers from verbosity. The author champions brevity, urging writers to eliminate redundant phrases and unnecessary qualifiers. For instance, "in the event that" can be shortened to "if."

Readability

Readability focuses on sentence length, paragraph structure, and overall flow. Wydick recommends keeping sentences under 20 words, using short paragraphs, and employing transitional words to guide the reader.

Organization

Logical structure helps readers follow complex arguments. The book outlines how to use headings, subheadings, numbering, and bullet points to create a clear roadmap.

Tone

While legal documents must remain formal, tone should not be overly stiff. Wydick encourages a balanced approach, using a respectful but approachable voice that resonates with the intended audience.

Common Pitfalls

- Overuse of passive voice
- Excessive use of legal jargon
- Unnecessary legal citations that clutter the text
- Failure to define key terms at the outset

How to Apply the Principles

Drafting Contracts

Contracts are the backbone of business transactions, and clarity here is essential. Wydick suggests:

- Define all key terms in a "Definitions" section.
- Use numbered clauses for easy reference.
- Limit the use of cross-references; instead, restate essential details.
- Include a "Plain Language Summary" at the end for clients.

Writing Legal Briefs

In appellate briefs, the goal is to persuade the court quickly. The book recommends:

- Start with a concise statement of the issue.

- Use a “Rule–Application–Conclusion” structure for each argument.
- Avoid footnotes that interrupt the narrative flow.
- Summarize each argument in one or two sentences.

Preparing Client Communications

Client letters, emails, and updates should be straightforward. Apply these tactics:

- Begin with the key message in the first paragraph.
- Use bullet points to list next steps.
- Explain legal jargon in plain terms.
- Close with a clear call to action.

Court Filings

When filing pleadings, clarity ensures the judge can understand the case without unnecessary delays:

- Use plain headings like “Statement of Facts” or “Legal Argument.”
- Include a “Table of Authorities” that is easy to navigate.
- Keep citations concise and to the point.

Practical Exercises and Tips

Wydick’s book offers a range of exercises to hone your skills. Below are a few that you can incorporate into your daily workflow:

1. Rewrite Challenge – Take a paragraph from a recent document and rewrite it in plain English. Compare the word count and clarity before and after.
2. Peer Review – Pair up with a colleague to critique each other’s drafts for plainness.
3. Checklist Implementation – Use the book’s checklist before finalizing any document.
4. Glossary Creation – Develop a glossary of terms for your practice to ensure consistent usage.

Criticisms and Counterpoints

While **Plain English for Lawyers**has been widely praised, some critics argue that the book oversimplifies complex legal concepts. They contend that certain nuances can be lost when stripping away jargon. However, Wydick acknowledges this risk and advises writers to strike a balance—maintaining precision while enhancing readability. The key is to avoid “over plainness” that could obscure critical legal distinctions.

Comparison with Other Plain English Guides

There are several other resources that advocate for plain language in law:

- Plain Language: A Guide for Lawyers by the American Bar Association – focuses on legislative drafting.
- Legal Writing in Plain English by John C. Dernbach – emphasizes academic writing.
- Plain English: A Guide for Legal Professionals by the International Plain Language Association – offers a global perspective.

Compared to these, **Plain English for Lawyers by Richard C. Wydick**stands out for its practical, example-rich approach and its focus on everyday legal tasks rather than specialized fields.

Impact on Legal Practice

Adopting Wydick’s principles can lead to measurable improvements:

- Reduced time spent revising documents.
- Fewer client complaints about misunderstanding.
- Lower rates of contractual disputes stemming from ambiguous language.
- Improved court processing times due to clearer pleadings.

Many firms report increased client satisfaction scores after integrating plain English training into their onboarding processes.

Testimonials and Reviews

Lawyers across the country share their experiences:

- “The book transformed our contract drafting process.” – Senior Partner, New York
- “I can now explain legal terms to clients without sounding condescending.” – Associate, Chicago
- “The exercises were the most helpful part of the book.” – Solo Practitioner, Austin

How to Get the Book

There are several ways to obtain **Plain English for Lawyers by Richard C. Wydick**:

- Purchase a new copy from major online retailers such as Amazon or Barnes & Noble.
- Check your local law library or university library for a loan copy.
- Look for used copies on eBay or AbeBooks to save costs.
- Ask your firm’s legal training department if they have a subscription or corporate license.

Additionally, many law schools offer the book as part of their curriculum, so you may find it in the library’s reference section.

Conclusion

Clear, concise, and effective communication is a cornerstone of good legal practice. **Plain English for Lawyers by Richard C. Wydick** provides a comprehensive framework for achieving that clarity, offering actionable advice, real-world examples, and practical exercises. Whether you’re drafting a contract, writing a brief, or simply communicating with a client, the principles outlined in this book can help you convey your message with precision and ease. Embrace plain English, and watch your legal writing—and your professional relationships—thrive.

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