Ethical Judicial Writing—Part II

Gerald Lebovits

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United States v. O’Leary

by William H. Manz

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Ethical Judicial Writing — Part II*

Last issue the Legal Writer offered some suggestions on writing ethical judicial opinions. We continue.

Tone and Temperament
Judges must maintain impartiality, credibility, and objectivity. The Rules Governing Judicial Conduct (RGJC) require judges to promote integrity in the judiciary, to maintain order and decorum in the courtroom, and to be patient, dignified, and courteous to all. Judges must not be advocates: “An ethical judge cannot be a polemicist.”

The RGJC prohibits judges from showing bias or prejudice “based upon age, race, creed, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, disability, marital status or socioeconomic status.” Some judges, even United States Supreme Court Justices, have written biased opinions. In Plessy v. Ferguson, for example, Justice Henry B. Brown commented that if segregation offended African-Americans, it was “solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.” When the Sioux Nation sued to get land promised by the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, a dissenting Justice wrote that “Indians did not lack their share of villainy.” Judges must refrain from making any statement that could be construed as biased. They must “identify and understand [t]heir own biases and how they affect [t]heir reaction to a case.”

Judges should likewise refrain from incorporating graphic sexual descriptions into their opinions except as necessary to resolve a case. Opinions should be dignified. They must not cater to voyeurs. In our Internet age, in which the public has access to many more opinions than before, judges should be careful about how and whether to identify individuals unimportant to the litigation.

Judges should treat lawyers and litigants respectfully. Lawyers aren’t always prepared. Sometimes litigants behave poorly or are involved in seemingly humorous situations. Litigants don’t always bring perfect cases. Delusional litigants bring bizarre claims. A judge tempted to condemn an unprepared lawyer, berate a nasty or delusional litigant, or ridicule a litigant’s unfortunate situation might use sarcasm, humor, or scorn to attack or make fun of lawyers and litigants. Attacking lawyers or litigants is unseemly. Judges who write this way undermine “public confidence in the integrity . . . of the judiciary.” As Judge Joyce George wrote, “propriety is at the very core of what a judge writes . . . . A judge’s professional responsibilities require him to select carefully the language and phraseology necessary to communicate the decision and not to be humorous at the litigants’ expense or to satisfy some personal need to be funny.”

One Bankruptcy judge from Texas used humor to deny a defendant’s motion as incomprehensible. The judge compared the defendant and his motion “to Adam Sandler’s title character in the movie ‘Billy Madison,’ after Billy Madison had responded to a question with an answer that sounded superficially reasonable but lacked any substance.” Billy Madison, like the defendant in this case, was berated for his stupidity:

Attacking lawyers or litigants is unseemly.


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Treating litigants respectfully means avoiding innuendo. In Main v. Main, a divorce action, an Iowa court attacked a husband for his past failed marriages and the wife for marrying for money. The reader is left wondering whether the court denied the divorce for legal or private reasons. This question recurs with judges who have had negative experiences in legal matters, like an unpleasant divorce or custody case. Judges affected by personal experiences must take precautions against prejudging cases or litigants. They must leave their baggage at the courthouse door.

Litigants don’t always see eye to eye with one another. Judges don’t always get along with other judges. Judges shouldn’t use opinions to criticize other judges, whether on a lower court, a dissenting judge, or the author of a majority opinion. Judges are entrusted to promote public confidence in the legal system. Judges who engage in infighting set a poor example to the public, who will believe that the case was decided because of animosity, not on the merits.

Judges should also avoid writing in formats foreign to opinion writing. Some judges have written opinions as poetry and prose. Others have included fables, animal references, folksy language, parody, or popular references. One judge disparaged the work of the Alabama Legislature in the area of medical liability by writing that “the bastard offspring of intercourse among lawyers, legislators, and lobbyists, having no pride of ancestry and no hope of posterity.” Judges who use unusual formats send a message that they take lightly their opinions and their role as judges. Using clever prose or poetry forecloses the best and clearest language. A judge who tries to be a poet can’t use all available language and hence creates the appearance that the attempt to be clever had priority over clarity and candor.

A good opinion is credible and impartial. A dispute that requires judicial intervention is serious to society and the litigants. Judges owe a duty to deal with litigants’ claims. They may inject their own style and character in their written opinions. They may include emotional themes, without writing emotionally. But an opinion should be written in the format the public expects: It should address the litigant’s claims in an organized, reasoned, and honest manner. Deriding litigants, using droll references, and treating the opinion as though it were literature diminishes the opinion’s quality.

The Facts
Facts set the stage for a judicial opinion. The law can be applied only to the facts the judge incorporates into a written opinion. It’s an ethical problem when a judge fails to include key facts or incorporates too many facts. Judges should use accurate facts and use them accurately. Without accurate facts, the ruling will be wrong. A judge who includes too many facts forces the reader to sift through irrelevant ones. That makes the opinion unfocused and results in dictum. Irrelevant facts lengthen an opinion and decrease clarity. A judge who omits important facts will write an erroneous opinion, one that will affect a litigant’s ability to appeal. An appellate court can’t consider what’s absent from the record.

Litigants shade facts to further their interests. Judges may never shade facts. An opinion should make the reader agree with the judge’s rationale and conclusion without crossing the line from persuasion to distortion. Nor should judges adopt a litigant’s version of the facts verbatim or fail to verify the facts in the record. The law belongs to the judge, but facts belong to the parties, who won’t forgive a judge who cheats or doesn’t think independently.

Judges should incorporate facts helpful to the losing side to strengthen the opinion and assure the reader that the judge considered the relevant facts. Without facts helpful to the losing side, the court’s reasoning might be unsound — the judge couldn’t justify the result in the face of the losing side’s facts. Litigants question the impartiality of a judge who fails to consider the losing side’s facts.

Getting the facts right on appeal is important not only to the litigants but also to the trial judge: “The prime expectation of the trial judge, when his adjudication goes to an appellate court, is that the latter, in its published decision, will make an honest statement of the case.”

Claims, Issues, and Standards of Review
Litigants are taught to pose issues persuasively. Judges should “write a judicious opinion, not a brief [, and state the question to be decided neutrally.” Claims and issues should be introduced by combining law with fact. Only after they frame the issue can judges accept a party’s argument. Judges who use headings in an opinion should write them neutrally, too.

Judges shouldn’t choose one line of authority over another without explaining why. When judges don’t explain themselves, a reader familiar with the authority ignored will believe that the judge was sloppy, unable to distinguish the authority, or agenda-driven.

As to issues, a trial-court opinion should offer a logical, disinterested explanation of the case for the litigants that allows appellate review. Intermediate appellate courts review trial-court opinions for correctness and sharpen the issues for further appellate consideration.
An appellate court that reviews a lower-court or agency determination must state the appropriate standard of review, such as “reasonable doubt,” “clear and convincing evidence,” “clearly erroneous,” or “arbitrary and capricious.” The standard should be stated neutrally, followed by a fair application of law to fact. Standards of review, and how they’re written, often determine outcomes. Judges should avoid polarized standards, defined as one line of cases in which one class of litigant (e.g., defendants) prevailed. Polarized standards, which lead to inevitable conclusions, confuse litigants. They allow “the court merely [to] invoke[] the ‘tough’ or ‘easy’ version of the standard of review.”

**Next issue:** This column continues with judicial writing style, boilerplate, plagiarism, law clerks, and extrajudicial writing.

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1. 22 NYCRR 100.2(A).
2. Id. 100.3(B)(2).
3. Id. 100.3(B)(3).
5. 22 NYCRR 100.3(B)(4).
6. See, e.g., Nat’l Endowment for the Arts v. Finley, 524 U.S. 569, 597 (1998) (Scalia, J., concurring) (attacking French immigrants); J.E.B. v. Alabama ex rel. T.B., 511 U.S. 127, 156 (1994) (noting that majority’s decision “is an inspiring demonstration of how thoroughly up-to-date and right-thinking we Justices are in matters pertaining to the sexes (or, as the Court would have it, the genders) and how sternly we disapprove the male chauvinist attitudes of our predecessors.”) (Scalia, J., dissenting); Bowens v. Hardwick, 478 U.S. 168, 197 (1986) (Burger, C.J., concurring) (“To hold that the act of homosexual sodomy is somehow protected as a fundamental right would . . . cast aside millennia of moral teaching.”); Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200, 207 (1927) (Holmes, J.) (affirming sterilization order against mentally challenged woman, stating that “[t]hree generations of imbeciles are enough”).
7. 163 U.S. 537, 551 (1896) (Brown, J.).
references in case about taxing cat’s earnings), aff'd, 710 F.2d 1542, 1544 (11th Cir. 1983) (per curiam).

31. E.g., State v. Knoljes, 739 S.W.2d 753, 754 (Mo. Ct. App. 1987) (Nugent, J.) (“Old Dave Baird, the prosecuting attorney up in Nodaway County, thought he had a case against Les Knoljes for receiving stolen property, to-wit, a chain saw, so he ups and files on Les”).

32. E.g., Schenk v. Comm’r, 686 F.2d 315, 316 (5th Cir. 1982) (Goldberg, J.) (parodying Ecclesiastes 3:1); Allied Chemical Corp. v. Hess Tankship Co. of Delaware, 663 F.2d 1044, 1046 (5th Cir. 1981) (Brown, J.) (parodying opening line from Edward George Earle Bulwer-Lytton’s 1830 novel Paul Clifford: “It was a dark and stormy night.”).


36. 22 NYCCR 100.2(A) (requiring judges to act with integrity).

37. Bablitch, supra note 35, at 40 (noting that opinions should “neither [be] laden with emotion nor totally bloodless”).

38. Moses Lasky, A Return to the Observatory Below the Bench, 19 Sw. L.J. 679, 689 (1965) (“[H]onesty allows no leeway in [a judge’s] statement of facts, for they are not his.”).

39. Timothy P. Terrell, Organizing Clear Opinions: Beyond Logic to Coherence and Character, 38 Judges’ J. 4, 38 (Spring 1999) (“Although the urge behind overinclusion is the defendable one of thoroughness, a truly controlled presentation is also focused.”).

40. For more about writing shorter opinions, see Gerald Lebovits, The Legal Writer, A Pox on Vox Pop, 76 N.Y. St. B.J. 64 (July/Aug. 2004).

41. See Anthony D’Amato, Self-Regulation of Judicial Misconduct Could be Mis-Regulation, 89 Mich. L. Rev. 609, 619 (1990) (noting that one of worst things judges can do is ignore or misstate facts).

42. Judith S. Kaye, Judges as Wordsmiths, 69 N.Y. St. B.J. 10, 10 (Nov. 1997) (“Writing opinions is a lot like writing briefs. Both are, at bottom, efforts to persuade.”); accord Alan B. Handler, A Matter of Opinion, 15 Rutgers L.J. 1, 2 (1983).

43. Although this practice is disapproved, “even when the trial judge adopts proposed findings verbatim, the findings are those of the court and may be reversed only if clearly erroneous,” Anderson v. City of Bessemer City, 470 U.S. 564, 572 (1985), or if the court didn’t exercise independent judgment, see Kristen Fjelstad, Comment, Just the Facts, Ma’am — A Review of the Practice of the Verbatim Adoption of Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, 44 St. Louis U. L.J. 197 (2000).


48. Ruggero J. Aldisert, Opinion Writing 7 (1990) (stating that judges err when they don’t explain why they choose one line of authority over another).


Gerald Lebovits is a judge of the New York City Civil Court, Housing Part, in Manhattan and an adjunct at New York Law School. His e-mail address is Glebovits@aol.com.