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Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick

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Why Plain English Matters in the Legal World

For decades, the legal profession has been synonymous with dense, jargon-filled language that often leaves clients confused and frustrated. The phrase "legalese" has become a shorthand for convoluted sentences, archaic terms, and passive constructions that seem designed to obscure rather than clarify. At the heart of the movement to change this stands a small but transformative book: **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick**. First published in 1979, this concise guide has become a cornerstone of legal writing instruction in law schools and law firms across the United States and beyond. Its enduring relevance speaks to a fundamental truth: clear writing is not just a nicety but a professional and ethical necessity for lawyers.

The book's central argument is deceptively simple and powerful: lawyers can communicate more effectively by writing in plain English without sacrificing precision or nuance. Richard C. Wydick, a professor of law at the University of California, Davis, did not advocate for dumbing down legal concepts. Instead, he championed a style of writing that is direct, concise, and accessible to its intended audience. The principles outlined in **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** have influenced generations of legal professionals, shaping how briefs, contracts, memos, and client letters are crafted. In an era where access to justice and clear communication are more critical than ever, revisiting Wydick's wisdom is essential for any lawyer seeking to improve their craft.

Who Was Richard C. Wydick and What Inspired the Book?

To fully appreciate the impact of **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick**, it helps to understand the man behind the book. Richard C. Wydick was a professor of law at UC Davis School of Law, where he taught for over four decades. He was known for his dedication to clear expression and his frustration with the unnecessary complexity that plagued legal documents. Wydick was not alone in his concern. During the 1970s, the "plain English movement" gained momentum in various fields, including government and consumer advocacy. Laws like the Truth in Lending Act and various state plain language initiatives pushed for clearer communication in contracts and public documents.

Wydick channeled this broader movement into a focused, practical resource for the legal profession. The first edition of his book was a slim volume, but it packed a significant punch. It was direct, witty, and immediately useful. The success of **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** lies in its pragmatic approach. Instead of just complaining about bad writing, Wydick provided concrete, actionable techniques. He showed lawyers exactly how to rewrite convoluted sentences, eliminate unnecessary words, and structure their arguments for maximum clarity. The book became a staple of legal writing courses because it offered a clear roadmap for improvement, a resource that students and seasoned practitioners alike could turn to time and

again.

Core Principles from the Book: A Practical Guide

Wydick's book is organized around a handful of core principles that form the foundation of effective legal writing. These are not abstract theories but practical rules that can be applied immediately. **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** is celebrated for breaking down the transformation from legalese to plain English into manageable steps. Let us explore the most influential of these principles.

Omit Needless Words

The most famous and perhaps most impactful principle in **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** is the command to "omit needless words." This echoes the advice of Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style*, but Wydick applies it specifically to the verbose habits of lawyers. He provides numerous examples of wordy phrases that clutter legal writing:

- Instead of "in the event that," write "if."
- Instead of "during the time that," write "while."
- Instead of "for the purpose of," write "to."
- Instead of "not withstanding the fact that," write "even though."
- Instead of "at that point in time," write "then" or "at that time."

Wydick shows that eliminating these wordy constructions does more than just shorten a document. It makes the sentence easier to read and understand by removing unnecessary mental processing. A lean, direct sentence is more persuasive than a bloated one. The principle of omitting needless words is not about cutting corners or losing meaning. It is about removing the verbal fat that obscures the meat of the argument. Wydick's exercises in this section are particularly effective, forcing readers to cut sentences by half or more while preserving their original meaning.

Use Active Voice

Another cornerstone of **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** is the advocacy for active voice over passive voice. While passive voice is not grammatically incorrect and is sometimes useful, Wydick argues that overreliance on it is a hallmark of weak legal writing. Passive constructions often hide the actor in a sentence, creating ambiguity or shifting responsibility.

Compare these sentences:

- Passive: "It was determined by the court that the contract was breached."
- Active: "The court determined that the defendant breached the contract."

The active sentence is shorter, clearer, and more direct. It tells the reader exactly who did what. Wydick teaches that active voice energizes writing, making it more engaging and easier to follow. The passive voice has its place, particularly when the actor is unknown or when the writer wants to focus on the recipient of the action. However, the default setting, according to **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick**, should be active voice. This single shift can dramatically improve the readability of any legal document, from an appellate brief to a simple letter to a client.

Break Up Noun Clusters

Legal writing is notorious for long, confusing strings of nouns used as modifiers. For example, "the property tax assessment appeal procedure" forces the reader to untangle the relationships between the words. These noun clusters are difficult to parse because they load too much information into a compact space without grammatical clues. Wydick's advice is simple: break them up using prepositions and possessive forms.

Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick suggests rewriting the phrase as "the procedure for appealing a property tax assessment." This version is longer by one or two words but is immediately clearer. The reader can understand the logical relationship between the words without having to stop and re-read the phrase. This principle is especially important in contracts and statutes, where clarity is paramount to avoid misinterpretation. By untangling noun clusters, the writer transforms opaque language into a transparent statement of meaning.

Use Verbs, Not Nouns Hidden in Phrases

Wydick observes a common habit in legal writing: burying the verb inside a noun phrase. Instead of "decide," a lawyer might write "make a determination." Instead of "investigate," the phrase becomes "conduct an investigation." This nominalization, as it is called, weakens the sentence by adding unnecessary words and turning a strong action verb into a vague construction. **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** urges writers to use the verb form directly.

- Instead of "give consideration to," use "consider."
- Instead of "is applicable to," use "applies to."
- Instead of "has knowledge of," use "knows."
- Instead of "reach a decision," use "decide."

This technique instantly makes sentences more dynamic and concise. The principle is simple: let the verb do the work. Verbs are the engines of sentences, and hiding them inside noun phrases only creates clutter. By following this tenet of **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick**, legal writers can make their prose sharper and more forceful.

Beyond Grammar: The Ethical Dimension of Clear Writing

Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick is more than a style guide; it is an ethical call to arms. Wydick understood that lawyers have a professional responsibility to communicate clearly with their clients, opposing counsel, and the courts. Clients pay for legal advice and representation, yet they are often left in the dark about the content of their own legal agreements or the arguments being made on their behalf. Opaque language creates a barrier that undermines trust and access to justice.

A lawyer who writes in plain English demonstrates respect for the reader. This is especially critical in documents that have a direct impact on people's lives, such as contracts, will, and settlement agreements. If a client cannot understand the terms of a contract, they cannot give truly informed consent. Similarly, a court's time is valuable, and a judge is far more likely to appreciate a brief that gets to the point clearly. The principles in **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** help lawyers fulfill their ethical duty to communicate effectively. In this sense, plain English is not just a matter of style; it is a matter of professional competence and integrity.

Practical Applications: Where to Start Using Plain English

The techniques in **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** can be applied to nearly every document a lawyer writes. Here are a few common examples where implementing Wydick's principles can have the most significant impact:

Client Letters and Emails

Replace formal, passive language with direct, conversational tone. Instead of "Your request for an extension has been reviewed by this office," write "We reviewed your request for an extension." This builds better rapport and avoids misunderstanding.

Legal Briefs and Memoranda

Use active voice and short paragraphs to state the facts and arguments clearly. A judge reading a brief that follows the guidance of **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** will have an easier time following

the legal reasoning, which can make the difference between winning and losing a motion.

Contracts and Agreements

While contracts require precision, they do not require confusion. Break long sentences into shorter ones, use "if" instead of "in the event that," and define terms clearly. A well-written contract reduces the risk of disputes arising from ambiguous language. The principles of **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** are a powerful tool for drafting contracts that are both precise and readable.

Legal Advice and Explanations

When explaining the law or a legal process to a client, avoid jargon. Use concrete examples and analogies. The goal is to inform and empower, not to impress with obscure terminology. Wydick's approach encourages lawyers to see writing as a bridge, not a barrier, between themselves and their readers.

The Enduring Legacy of Richard C. Wydick

Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick has gone through multiple editions, each updated with new examples and exercises. It remains a bestseller in its niche because the problem it addresses - unclear legal writing - has not gone away. If anything, the need for plain legal language has grown in an age of information overload. Clients are more sophisticated and expect transparency. Courts are encouraging or even requiring plain language in filings. Law schools have integrated Wydick's methods into their core curriculum.

The book's legacy is also evident in the broader legal writing community. Many judges, including the late Justice Antonin Scalia, have championed clear writing in opinions. Bryan Garner, a leading authority on legal writing, has built upon the foundation laid by Wydick. The phrase "plain English" itself is now a standard term in legal discourse, thanks in large part to the influence of this single book. **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** did not just offer advice; it changed the standard of what constitutes good legal writing. It made clarity a respectable and desirable goal in a profession often addicted to complexity.

Common Misconceptions About Plain English in Law

Despite the overwhelming evidence in favor of plain English, some resistance remains. A few common misconceptions are worth addressing, as **Plain English For Lawyers By Richard C Wydick** itself does in its pages.

Mistake 1: Plain English is imprecise. This is simply not true. As Wydick demonstrates, clear language is often more precise because it reduces ambiguity. When you say "the tenant must pay rent on the first of each month," there is no confusion. Convoluted language often opens the door to multiple interpretations, leading to litigation. Precision does not require complicated sentence structures or

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