

TECHNO TIPS

Microsoft Word Tools to Refine Your Writing

By Sharla J. Frost

Along with all the other challenges presented by the lingering pandemic, lawyers face the reality of preparing documents and proofreading the results without easy access to staff support. The age of individually-assigned legal secretaries seems as distant as the Jazz Age; however, until the COVID-19 Age, firms still had a semblance of technical support for lawyers who needed help with tasks like preparing briefs and proofreading written documents. If you can effortlessly finalize a document and proofread it into submission without a second thought, this discussion is not for you. If, however, you could benefit from some digital assistance on these fronts, keep reading.

As background, my proofreading skills lack finesse. Or, put another way, they stink. I have tried all the classically recommended ways of proofing my work: (1) start from the end; (2) read out loud; (3) set the document aside and reread it the next day; (4) read one sentence at a time, and also backward to ensure that you catch all spelling mistakes. These techniques all help, but when I decided to write a book without the assistance of a skilled professional -- a.k.a., a secretary -- I found that I needed a better system than any I had used before. Fortunately for me, Microsoft came to the rescue. More accurately, Microsoft Word ("Word") came to the rescue, and it can do the same for you.

1. Word Count

When you open a new document, you see the word count in the lower left-hand margin of the page in Word. If you have not turned on that feature, do. You will benefit from the automatic count when you are "helping" your home-schooled student write an essay for English class in the middle of the night. Her grade may depend on hitting that 600-word mark, instead of 550.

2. Table of Contents

Whether you are preparing a student essay or struggling to prepare a legal brief while working remotely, the "Reference" tab of Word provides tools that impersonate your favorite administrative assistant from back in the day. For example, you can automatically generate a table of contents. You do this by using the correct "style" of type to generate content headings. (You can find these styles on the "Home" page of the Word document; arrow down to the one you want, such as "Heading 1," "Title," or "Subtitle.>"). As you refine and edit your headings and

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subheadings, you can click on the always-useful “Update Table” button to automatically change them as you go along.

3. Footnotes and Citations

Need a footnote? No problem. Just click on the “Insert Footnote” icon in the second column of the “Reference” tab. The program automatically updates the footnote numbers as you change and move them.

Need a citation? Click on the “Insert Citation” icon in the fourth column, and voilà! Your citation goes where it belongs.

You may even choose the appropriate citation style by clicking the adjacent “Style” button, allowing you to conform your writing to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the APA, the MLA, or other language conventions.

Forgot your *Bluebook* rules? No worry. Click on “Mark Citation” in the last column, and input your information. The system conveniently allows you to choose a “Category of Citation,” such as “Cases,” “Statutes,” “Other Authorities,” or “Rules.” You may wonder why you spent all those hours memorizing the rules for proper case citation back in law school. (However, if you are preparing a formal brief, you should probably compare the computer-generated citation to the *Texas Greenbook*, if such a thing still exists.)

4. Enhanced Spelling and Grammar Check

The latest version of Word comes with an “Editor” function that includes the usual spelling and grammar applications, but also includes five other categories to help the “proofing impaired.” These categories are “Clarity,” “Conciseness,” “Formality,” “Punctuation Conventions,” and “Vocabulary.” The developers at Microsoft evidence some bias against certain Southern language constructions, but the “Editor” function gives the writer the ability to accept or reject the recommended changes, so you need not turn your prose into vanilla pudding unless you want to. “Editor” saves you from the endless repetition of favorite phrases that you (or at least that I) discover have crept into documents. “Clarity” and “Conciseness” seem at odds with basic legal writing, but they would satisfy the sensibilities of jurists like Justice Lynn Hughes who have internalized the old Strunk & White adage to “omit needless words.”

5. Reading Aloud

The “Review” tab groups “Editor,” “Thesaurus,” and “Word Count” all in one conveniently labeled “Proofing” section. You will find nearby the “Read Aloud” function, which will save you the trouble of having to orate your document yourself. The computer obligingly will read your document to you, albeit in a somewhat artificial tone of voice. Reading the document aloud, in my view, should be an automatic part of your computer-supported document review process because that recitation may reveal a missing word or an absent pronoun. These are deficiencies that the various Word tools cannot catch. The program fixes the incorrect; it does not supply the missing.

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6. Accessibility and Translation

Once Word has polished your prose and read the document to you, you may check its accessibility to ensure that people with disabilities do not have difficulty reading it.

Then, Word will obligingly translate the document if you click on the “Translate” option in the “Language” section of the “Review” tab.

Word, in other words, contains the tools you need to refine your document preparation and proofreading skills. Spend some time experimenting with the various tabs and functions of the Word program. None of Microsoft's computer-generated writing tools will ever replace the keen eye and moral support that a human assistant brings to your day, but they can help us virtually to finalize our written words.

** Sharla J. Frost, a strategic counsel in Houston, recently published a book entitled Power at the Table: The Women Lawyers Guide to Developing Clients and Control. She can be reached at sharlafrost@gmail.com.*

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Texas Attorneys' Rules Vote

By Sara Dysart



Beginning this month, Texas attorneys have the opportunity to make their voices heard regarding eight proposed amendments to our Disciplinary Rules and Rules of Disciplinary Procedure. This vote is the result of the Texas Legislature's enactment of Subchapter E-1, “Committee on Disciplinary Rules and Referenda; Disciplinary Rules Proposal Process”, Tex. Gov't Code Secs. 81.0871-.0894. The statute addressed many of the problems which impeded the success of prior referenda, the most recent being in 2011 when Texas attorneys voted 4 to 1 against proposed amendments to the disciplinary rules.

Since January 1, 2018, the nine-member committee, consisting of seven attorneys and two public members appointed by the President of the State Bar of Texas and the Texas Supreme Court, has worked to modernize the Disciplinary Rules and the Rules of Disciplinary Procedure (collectively the “Rules”). For information about how the eight proposed amendments to the Rules were initiated and drafted as the committee (referred to as the CDRR) received input from Texas attorneys who submitted hundreds of public comments, you can visit “Rules Vote” on the State Bar website.

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