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BOOK REVIEW: WRITING FOR DOLLARS. WRITING TO PLEASE.

Joseph Kimble. *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please*. Carolina Academic Press, 2012. 184 p. Hardcover, $23. ISBN 978-1-61163-191-3.

Scholars have been wrangling over "plain language" for decades, debating the merits of simpler style versus more traditional legal writing with its unique vocabulary and seeming redundancy. Joseph Kimble has long been an advocate of plain language, and he recently led the work of redrafting the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and the Federal Rules of Evidence. In this slim volume, he cuts through the layers of debate to reach the simple conclusion that plain language – when understood holistically rather than as a mere formula or defined vocabulary – works.

Following a personal anecdote in Part One, the substance of Kimble's new book begins in Part Two where he offers guidelines for plain language. In just a few pages, Kimble hammers the essentials of clean writing – general considerations of audience, design, organization, sentence structure, and word choice. These bare guidelines seem straightforward, but, as he states later, writing for understanding is an intellectual undertaking that demands time, effort, and attention.

To my mind, the heart of Kimble's book lies in Part Three. Here, he responds to ten criticisms of plain language, attempting once and for all to put the kibosh on the naysayers. With a refreshingly honest tone, Kimble explains that plain language is not simplistic or formulaic but rather is fresh, sensible, and to the point. He emphasizes that the purpose of plain language is to reach the reader at his or her level of understanding. The reader's understanding varies across situations and circumstances, and plain language adjusts accordingly. Kimble thus refutes the idea that plain language is strictly bound by rules. As he explains, "the guidelines for plain language are not narrowly circumscribed but instead range over planning, design, organization, sentences, words, and ... testing." (p. 22)

In some instances, the criticisms to which Kimble is responding are more complex than he indicates, and a reader new to the debate may wonder what the fuss is all about. For instance, in his response to the notion that the idea of plain language is too vague to be useful, Kimble refers to formulae for plain language but does not explain until much later in the book how they work (e.g., a ratio of syllables to words) or why these formulae have been hotly debated (e.g., the formula can result in ridiculous outcomes that lack meaning and clarity). Kimble's brevity assumes a certain familiarity with the issues surrounding the plain language movement. Fortunately, he presents his arguments with such nimbleness that it is easy to grasp the larger point: plain language is a robust concept that focuses on usability rather than compliance.

In Part Four, Kimble provides a historical review of major contributions to the plain language literature along with events, projects, and organizations from several different countries. Kimble's work culminates in Part Five with an evaluation of fifty different plain language success stories. These accounts prove his point that plain language not only promotes understanding on the part of the user but also demands expertise on the part of the writer – a demand that lawyers find reassuring. All in all, Kimble presents such compelling arguments and evidence that plain language is the only sensible choice for any legal document that I am left wondering why anyone would ever choose language that obfuscates, befuddles, or otherwise complicates the meaning therein.

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