

BETTER WRITING SEMINARS

PRESENTED BY ROBERT ROTENBERG

A TWO-HOUR INTRODUCTORY SEMINAR

The Purpose of the Seminar:

We lawyers write all the time. We write to clients, colleagues, opponents, experts, judges and the world at large. We write memorandums, memos to file, submissions, draft affidavits, proposals, reports, emails, texts, posts.

Much of this writing is too long. Too complicated. Not effective.

The point is: You are what you write.

The goal of this seminar is to teach you to simplify your use of language, learn the basics of good story telling and write better.

This seminar is divided into four half-hour segments. In the last five minutes of each you will be given a short writing assignment.

(Bonus: Participants can claim two-hours of CPD).

Agenda

Before the Seminar:

Before the seminar, each participant will send Rotenberg:

A piece of recent legal writing that you have struggled with. Black out any names that must not be revealed. Rotenberg will review these before the seminar and discuss. (Don't worry he will keep your name anonymous).

A piece of personal writing. A letter to a friend, an email to a colleague, a complaint about your phone bill, etc. Again, black out all personal information.

The lyrics to a song that means something special to you.

Also: bring a book (fiction or non-fiction) to the seminar, one that has been meaningful in your life. Highlight one paragraph that particularly spoke to you and be prepared to read it aloud.

First half hour:

Simplicity.

Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.

Steve Jobs

We begin with song lyrics, both yours and the ones that Rotenberg brings. Great lyrics are excellent examples of the use of simple language and vivid story telling.

This leads to a discussion of two of Rotenberg's "Five Rules of Writing" (covered in depth in the second half hour): "show don't tell," and the difference between Anglo-Saxon words (simple and direct) and Norman words (more complex).

We begin a collective list of "bad lawyers' words and phrases," which we will add to throughout the seminar. Think: heretofore, thereafter, I am of the opinion that, the aforementioned, in the event that, etc.

Five-minute Writing Assignment Number One: Haiku writing. Rotenberg introduces the concept of haiku poetry (seventeen syllable Japanese-style poems) and assigns a topic to write a quick and simple poem. This is always a lot of fun and gets everyone writing.

Second half hour:

Rotenberg's First Five Rules of Writing

He's making a list

He's checking it twice

Santa Clause is Coming to Town

J. Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie

Rotenberg's goal is to implant five key points for you to consider every time you write:

Show Don't Tell. A key to good writing is to show the reader what is happening, not tell them about it. We expand upon the earlier discussion.

Anglo/Saxon verses Norman words. Again, we expand upon the earlier discussion and begin to make a list.

Active not passive voice. The most common mistake most writers make.

Verbs. The importance of choosing powerful verbs.

Adjectives and Adverbs. The most overused types of words and how to get rid of most of them.

Rotenberg will review one or two of Lord Denning's more famous judgments and show how they follow the five rules and why they are so effective.

Five-minute Writing Assignment Number Two: One paragraph about an event. Rotenberg will give a topic to write about in a reporting letter to a client or a memo to a senior partner.

Third half hour:

Story Structure – Where to Start and How to Keep Telling the Tale.

“No, no! The adventures first, explanations take such a dreadful time.”

*Lewis Carroll,
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*

Everything you write must tell a story. But where to begin? How to structure it? How to keep it interesting?

Rotenberg will turn to the participant’s writing samples. We will discuss opening paragraphs, structure, pacing and effectiveness of the writing.

Rotenberg will show a detailed edit he’s done of the samples and key in on specifics such as: too long sentences, overly descriptive passages, weak verbs, etc.

Five-minute Writing Assignment Number Three: Rotenberg will give the participants a lengthy paragraph and the students will try to shorten it.

Fourth half hour:

Anatomy of an Affidavit.

“I apologize that this letter is so long - I lacked the time to make it short.”
Mark Twain

Rotenberg reviews in detail an affidavit he used in his practice and demonstrates the principles discussed in the seminar.

(Optional: participants can also send Rotenberg samples of affidavits they have drafted in advance and he will review them.)

Five-minute Writing Assignment Number Four: Rotenberg gives participants the opening line to a story. They then write their own first full paragraph. They then read their own work and others critique it, or, all the pages are put into a pile, unsigned, and students read a piece that is not their own.

At this point in the seminar participants will begin to see and hear when the writing contains too much tell and not enough show, the language is too and passive, spot weak verbs and excessive use of adjectives.

Throughout the Seminar

You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Throughout the seminar Rotenberg will ask participants to read paragraphs from the books they have brought with them. This leads to short discussions about why these passages are effective and illustrates many of the points discussed.

Conclusion

The seminar goes by very quickly. Everyone is actively engaged. Everyone learns, and we all have fun. The goal is to help you see that good writing is hard work, to make you a better reader, more self-critical and give you the confidence to write better.

The Instructor

Robert Rotenberg has been a criminal lawyer in Ontario for more than 31 years. He is the author of five bestselling novels. He also writes for television, teaches writing at the Humber School of Writers and frequently lectures on writing. Before he began his law practice, Rotenberg was the managing editor of an English-speaking magazine in Paris, France, (Passion Magazine), published and edited his own magazine in Toronto, (T.O. The Magazine of Toronto) and worked as a producer at CBC Radio. He has a B.A. from University of Toronto in English and Political Science, and LL.B from Osgoode Hall Law School and an LL.M from the London School of Economics. He has re-written and revised the document you are reading at least ten times.