



From Complexity to Clarity

Ten tips for creating clear LawSpot responses

LawSpot and Write Limited

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This document contains 10 tips for writing clear responses to LawSpot questions

Using the following tips will help you to write LawSpot responses that are reader-friendly, and work well for online readers. The ten tips draw on Write Limited's plain English principles, and are the result of collaboration between Write and LawSpot.

1. Think about your readers
2. Analyse the question
3. Research the answer
4. Answer the question in one sentence
5. Use an inverted pyramid structure
6. Choose relevant content
7. Write short, clear sentences
8. Choose familiar words, and define legal terms
9. Edit for purpose, accuracy, and structure
10. Proofread for spelling and grammar

Think about your readers

Being clear about who your audience is will help you to write answers to suit them. We know the following things about readers of any LawSpot question.

- Your answer may have an impact on their lives.
- They have minimal, if any, legal knowledge.
- They are reading online.

A useful technique is to imagine you are writing your response for a family member who knows nothing about the law.

Analyse the question

- Decide if the question you are looking at is a LawSpot question. See <http://www.lawspot.org.nz/terms> for details about the questions LawSpot doesn't answer.
- Answer the question in the headline—not questions found in the extra detail.
- Don't skim-read the question and assume you know exactly what's being asked. Some questions may be asking something subtle, and others may be quite clear. Some people asking questions may not be sure exactly how to word their question, so you may need to examine the question in more detail.

Research the answer

Decide before you write how long it will take you to research the answer and gather your content. The following questions are useful for your planning.

- What resources will I use? (websites, people, legislation, books)
- How long will this topic take to research? (five minutes, two hours, a week)
- How much information do I need? (how long is the response, how much is too much)
- How will I gather my information? (mindmap, word document, electronic folder)

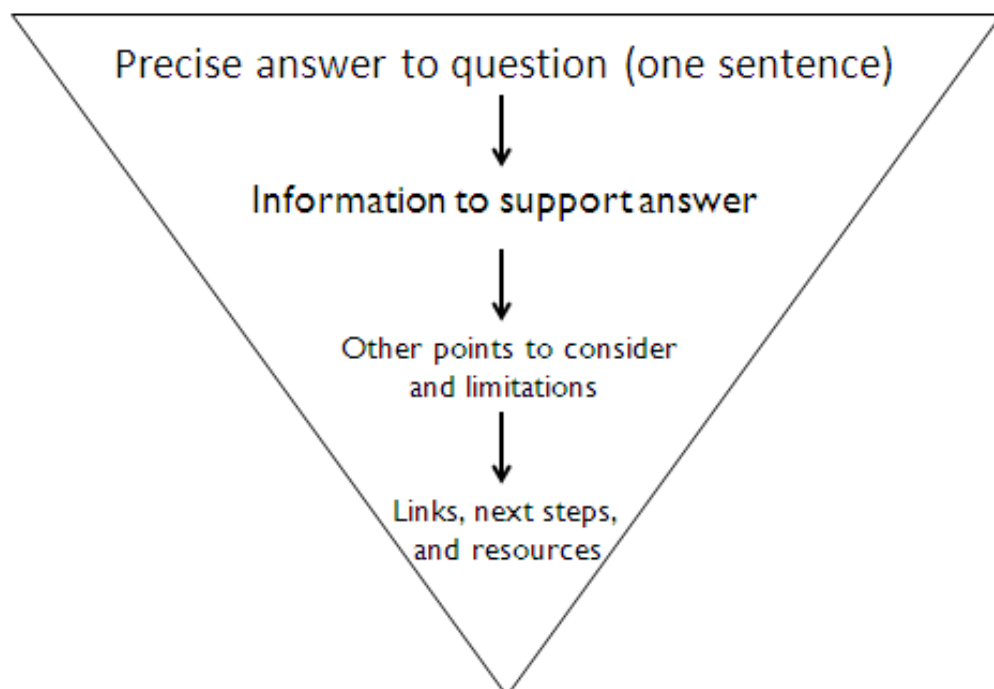
Answer the question in one sentence

Once you have analysed the question and researched the answer, write your answer in one sentence. If it's a 'yes or no' question, this will be quite simple. If the answer is more complex, then make this complexity clear in one sentence. See responses published on the website for great examples of one-sentence answers.

Starting your response with one sentence will make it easier for readers to skim-read responses. Your answer can also be displayed clearly on the webpage that shows a range of questions and answers readers can click on.

Use an inverted pyramid structure

Using an inverted pyramid structure will ensure your main message is first, and that the rest of your content follows logically for your reader.



Choose relevant content

You'll find choosing relevant content easy if you write a one sentence answer and plan your structure beforehand. Then you can decide quickly which information serves your purpose, and which information can be discarded.

Ensure you include useful next steps, or helpful questions for readers to ask themselves. You don't need to paraphrase content from other websites—just link to it.

Write short, clear sentences

Aim for an average sentence length of 12 to 18 words

Long sentences are difficult to read and understand easily, especially when the text is onscreen. Short sentences will also help you to communicate complex ideas clearly.

Stick to one main idea per sentence

An easy way to keep sentences short is to stick to one main idea.

Before

You can give your landlord a 14-day notice to fix the leak and then if the landlord doesn't fix it you can go to mediation to talk about options—for example you could ask for the landlord to fix the leak and to reduce your rent until the lead is fixed. (52 words)

After

You can give your landlord a 14-day notice to fix the leak. If the landlord doesn't fix it, you can go to mediation to talk about options. For example, you could ask the landlord to reduce your rent until the leak is fixed. (13, 15, 16 words)

Use short, strong verbs

Use the most precise verb for what you want to say. Instead of 'We recommend you *complete* an *application* for...' say 'We recommend you *apply* for...'

Instead of this...

make provision for
give consideration to
make an adjustment to

Write this...

provide
consider
adjust

Choose familiar words, and define legal terms

Prefer familiar, simple, and precise words to longer or more complex words. Your response will be understandable to a larger audience if you use familiar words.

Avoid jargon

Use the following alternatives to legal jargon.

Instead of this...	Use this...
cognisant of	aware of, know
erroneous	wrong
designate	appoint, show
domiciled in	living in
occasioned by	caused by
prior to	before
remuneration	salary, pay
in lieu of	instead of

Define necessary legal terms and acronyms

You may need to include legal terms in your response. Write a plain English definition of any term that may not be understood by a general audience. Avoid acronyms if you can, but if you need to include an acronym, spell it out in full as well.

Hot tip

Download our free ebook 'Unravelling Legal Jargon' from our website.

<http://www.write.co.nz/>

<http://www.write.co.nz/Plain+English+resources/Products+and+links+to+help+you+write+clearly/Free+ebooks+to+unravel+jargon.html>

Edit for purpose, accuracy, and structure

When you have finished your draft, go back and check that it matches your planning from the first two steps. Make sure your answer is one sentence, and that it answers the question that is asked in the headline. Check that your supporting information is clear, and that you've offered the reader useful and correct next steps. And make sure your structure is clear and easy to follow.

Use the checklist given to you by LawSpot.

Proofread for spelling and grammar

Here's an effective process to follow for proofreading your response before you upload it to the website. Proofreading is vital—errors will damage the credibility of your response, and of the LawSpot website.

Use this process yourself, or ask someone else to proofread the answer for you.

Step 1	Print out your draft in large font and with at least 1.5 spacing.
Step 2	Skim-read the document once and circle mistakes that jump out at you.
Step 3	<p>Place another piece of paper on top, and slowly move it down the page, revealing one line at a time. Read slowly, and circle mistakes.</p> <p>You could also reveal the last sentence, and reveal lines going up the page. This will prevent you reading the words for meaning.</p>
Step 4	Go through and fix the mistakes you have circled. Keep an eye out for any more mistakes.



Write Limited is LawSpot's plain English advisor

We are pleased to be providing volunteer plain English advice and support to LawSpot.

We are a professional consultancy and training firm specialising in plain English documents and web content. We work with public and private sector organisations, including law firms. We are New Zealand's leading provider of plain English expertise.

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