

Ellen Onione's Final Thoughts

I'd already done so much work on the opening, headings, and paragraph stress positions, that I could not imagine how the final check could show me anything more. But looking at only the highlighted portions cleared away distracting material so I could focus on whether the main messages were logical and stood out enough. I noticed three things. First, I am thinking about reordering the sections. Maybe I should start with the procedural point – the landlord cannot possibly evict Ms. Feld at the end of the month because he has not given written notice with reasons, and he must apply for an order to vacate. The procedural point completely addresses Ms. Feld's immediate fear – that she will be thrown out on the street at the end of the month. Why not put it first? If this were a legal memo to a senior lawyer, I would have started with the procedural point because it is the winning argument. So I might just move that section up.

Second, I think I should revise the last sentence under the heading, "The Clinic's Recommended Next Steps" because as written it just doesn't say enough. Ms. Feld is very anxious. I can make her feel more confident if I tell her what we will do if later on she receives any written notices from the landlord. Something as simple as changing the end of the sentence so that it reads, "if you receive a written notice please let me know right away so that we can immediately act on your behalf." That ending completes the message better and echoes the letter's first paragraph.

Finally, and somewhat embarrassingly, I left out a standard letter element – the subject line. The subject line is a mini-heading; it identifies the client and announces the subject matter.

O.K. This is a short letter and it didn't take very long to do the final check on structure. What about longer documents? So I tried the highlighting technique on a legal memo and wound up reorganizing. Highlighting let me see exactly what the reader sees. I knew right away that my structure needed to change in order to make my analysis stand out. I made some good changes and later on the assigning lawyer told me it was a well-structured memo.