

Too Many Dates Can Just Be **CLUTTER**



By Judge Mark P. Painter

Lawyers and judges use too many dates. Using an exact date signals to the reader that it is important and that the reader should remember it for future reference. If that's not your intention, strike it out.

Of course, if you have a case turning on what date something happened, put the date in. But most dates are clutter and make our writing very difficult to read.

You can convey continuity and order by clues like *next* and *later*. Or use *in June* then *in July* to show chronological order. The example (at right) should help.

My rule is that if you use an exact date, you must have a good reason.

A few tips for dates:

- When using month-day-year style, there is a comma before and after the year: *the ceremony of June 26, 2003, was festive.*
- In the day-month-year style (more prevalent in Commonwealth and European writing), there is no comma: *the ceremony of 26 June 2003 was festive.*
- When an exact date is not used, there is no comma between the month and year: *in June 2003.*
- To refer to decades, do not use an apostrophe: *during the 1980s* not *1980's*. Actually, either is acceptable; but the modern rule, which produces cleaner-looking text, is to leave out the apostrophe.

Readability

I always show the readability levels for the column. They are (for my writing only) 14 words per sentence, 0% passive voice, and grade level 6.8. [3]

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On February 13, 2005, Plaintiff-Appellant filed suit against the apartment owner, alleging negligence in failing to maintain the premises. On March 6, 2005, Plaintiff-Appellant visited Dr. Eugene Higginbotham, an orthopedic surgeon, who confirmed the diagnosis but concluded that surgery was not indicated, given Plaintiff-Appellant's uncontrolled diabetes and her obesity. On the following dates, Plaintiff-Appellant visited a physical therapist for her back condition: March 12, 2005, April 15, 2005, June 6, 2005, August 2, 2005, October 5, 2005, and November 16, 2005. On December 10, 2005, a month after her last therapy session, the apartment owner settled the case for an undisclosed sum.

102 Words, Grade level 20

Revision: A few days later, Walker sued the apartment owner. She claimed that he negligently failed to maintain the property. She then visited Dr. Eugene Higginbotham, an orthopedic surgeon, who confirmed the diagnosis. But he concluded that surgery was not indicated, given her uncontrolled diabetes and obesity. During the next nine months, Ms. Walker visited a physical therapist six times for her back condition. In December 2005, a month after her last therapy session, the apartment owner settled the case for an undisclosed sum.

84 Words, Grade level 11

In this example I've also fixed other problems: using the name (Walker) rather than the procedural title (Plaintiff-Appellant); cutting the nominalization (filed suit) and using the verb (sued); using a normal word (property) for the legalism.