

“I ask students to use a structure for their writing. Issue, rule, application, conclusion.”

## ORDER WHAT ARE YOUR WORDS IN? HOW FOREIGN LANGUAGES CAN HELP YOU TEACH THE STRUCTURE OF LEGAL WRITING

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“Why do they say *Fanta naranja* instead of *naranja Fanta*?” My 11-year-old daughter, Reilly, had learned to order orange soda while we were on a vacation in Spain, but she was puzzled by why she should call it *Fanta orange* instead of *orange Fanta*. I explained to her that different languages build sentences in different orders.

“But wouldn’t they understand it if we said *naranja Fanta*?” I told her that they would, but it would sound odd, just like it would sound odd to us if someone asked us for “soda orange” and “fries french.” The answer wasn’t very satisfying to Reilly, but I tried to assure her that once she got used to it, putting adjectives after nouns would sound just fine, and it would be the best way to make sure people understand her.

Our conversation took place at the end of our vacation. Maybe because we were on a plane pointed back toward the United States, the connection to teaching seemed to be right there before me like the Fasten Seat Belt light—complete with the *bing!*

### **Bing!**

I ask students to use a structure for their writing. Issue, rule, application, conclusion. Despite what the students think, this structure doesn’t come from another planet, but maybe it’s from a different country. And just like my daughter, I ask my students to give it a try and hang on until it feels natural. Even if it seems odd at first, it’s the best way to be understood.

OK, now I made the connection in my head. Would it be useful in other heads as well? I decided to give it a try. The more ways I can explain the importance of structure the better. So I devised an in-class exercise that would show everyone the importance of structure.

### **I Love My Wonderful Writing Teacher**

At the beginning of our first class session on structure, I asked each student to tell the class what language or languages other than English he or she can use. A handful of students in each class were fluent in another language. But most significant, everyone had at least studied another language. So everyone was familiar with the possibilities of different word orders to communicate the same idea.

I asked one student who had some facility in each different language to go to the board. In my two classes we had speakers of at least five different languages. Expertise in the language wasn’t important, just a general idea of how to communicate. I asked the students to write on the board in the language that they knew the following sentence: “I love my wonderful writing teacher.” Any sentence with assorted parts of speech would work, but why miss an opportunity? I told the class they were just lucky I didn’t make them all write it on the board 50 times. Once each sentence was complete, I asked the students to write a literal, word-for-word translation of their sentences, with the translated English words appearing just on top of the words in the different language. The results looked like this:

#### **Spanish**

I love to my marvelous teacher of writing.  
Yo amo a mi maravillosa maestra de escritura.

#### **German**

I have like my wonderful professor (female) of writing.  
Ich habe gern meine wunderbare Professorin den Schreiben.

#### **Hebrew**

!wonderful she. Of-mine to-writing the-teacher love I

אני אוהבת את המורה לכתובה שלי. היא נפלאה!

.....

With all of the sentences on the board I asked for reassurance that the sentences made sense in the languages in which they were written. I then asked each student to read the sentence in the language they used. Then I read the literal translations. The results were good silly fun. Hebrew was the best at making the point about what the audience expects since it is read from right to left.

I explained to my students what they already knew about languages—word order is significant. And using the literal translations, I showed how a word order that is not what we expect can make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand the message.

### *Bing, Bing, Bing!*

Then I told them that the structure of their legal writing was significant to the legal reader in the same way that word order is significant in a language. The legal reader expects a certain structure. If the structure isn't there the reader might be able to figure out the message, but it will take longer, and there is a risk that the message will be missed entirely.

In my experience there is no one single tool I can give on the importance of structure that works for everyone. That's why I give students several different tools. This foreign-language exercise seems to be a vivid way of showing how structure adds to ease of understanding. And it's a tool that I can use again later with students who are struggling with their structure.

Give it a try. You too for work it may ...  
I mean, it may work for you too.

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