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BOOK REVIEW

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Susan McKerihan: *Clear & Concise – Become A Better Business Writer*, Black Inc Books, Melbourne 2015

ISBN: 978 1863957113 (RRPAUD\$24.99, GBP£5 online, pbk)

Susan McKerihan did not write this book specifically for lawyers. It is a text addressed to corporations and business professionals. These are the people she has been advising on plain language for 20 years. Yet her advice is equally apt for lawyers.

The structure of her book (as one would expect) is clear and simple.

- * The first part deals with selection and use of clear and concise language.
- * The second identifies a number of basics of English grammar. This addresses common mistakes. It explains the correct use of punctuation and of words frequently confused (such as 'which' and 'that').
- * The third explains the importance of 'the big picture'. By this she means using layout as 'your secret weapon' and learning how to structure communication and highlight key messages.

- * The fourth lists frequently asked questions; commonly confused words and a code-breaker that proposes simple words for cliques and space-fillers.

It is probably inevitable that a book expressing, and illustrating, simple 'rules' will sometimes contain disputable instruction. For example, nothing will persuade me to drop the apostrophe in place names like St George's Terrace in Perth. Ms McKerihan excuses her endorsement of this modern practice simply because of a '1966 decision of the geographical names board' adopted 'to help with national consistency'. In an age when many young writers are confused by placement of apostrophes, consistency might be better achieved by following the traditional rules. But this is a trifle.

On some 'rules', Ms McKerihan acknowledges the differences that have emerged in North American usage and the practice followed in most other English speaking countries. For example, the North American style might say: 'I believe *that* the decision *that* we have arrived at will be acceptable...' the British and Australian style will more commonly omit the two 'thats'. Perhaps it is because of the power of American media that I feel that the first 'that' should survive. At one point, the author offers as a test what 'sounds right'. Yet that ultimate criterion will depend on whether a speaker has English as a mother tongue. As the sign at Heathrow Airport in London tells us, more people are learning English in China today than live in the British Isles. This is a good reason for having, and teaching rules.

The biggest message for the book is to encourage the clear layout of messaging. The second main lesson is to encourage us all to write as

we speak: in simple familiar language. The language of the kitchen tends to be Germanic. We have the Norman clerks for the more wordy language of the courtroom.

This is an excellent handbook that shares the ‘secrets’ of an experienced professional in plain language. Clarity International should buy up the rights; upload it; promote a fee app; post it on *Facebook*; and draw it to the notice of law schools around the world.

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