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Hitting a Home Run in Your Writing

My soon-to-be-9-year-old son loves to play baseball. Several weeks ago, he pitched a spectacular inning, striking out three players with only 11 pitches. He also scored and had two RBIs, ultimately contributing to three out of the team's five runs. It was a proud moment for both the team and his father.

Toward the end of the game, however, things got a little unfocused in the dugout. Several boys, including my son, started goofing around with each other, and a baseball glove ended up in the creek next to the field – note the intentional, adept use of passive voice in this sentence. When the game was over, the coach talked to the boys about what the team did well and not so well during the game. He listed one thing that disappointed him: player behavior in the dugout. He then listed three things that the team did well. My son's pitching prowess, scoring, and RBIs were not mentioned.

On the way to the car, my son was upset that the coach did not recognize his contributions to the game. I explained to him that one bit of bad behavior can overshadow all of the positives. It was a good life lesson.

So, you might ask, how does this apply to writing? In numerous columns, I have reiterated the importance of attention to detail. Perfect proofreading, grammar, format, and even Bluebook citation are critical to selling one's self as a competent, effective, and skillful lawyer. No matter how amazing your case or argument may be, it will be eclipsed if the reader cannot understand what you are saying or is distracted by careless, avoidable errors. In short, even if the substance of your document is spot-on, if it is badly written or presented, the substance will be overlooked or buried in a sea of incompetency.

In this season of baseball games, filled with hot dogs and chilled Virginia wine (I couldn't resist), here are some tips that will help you hit a home run in your writing:

1. Make sure each word conveys its intended meaning. Get rid of ambiguity. If a client has to decipher your words or plod through your writing with a machete, then she will find more suitable representation. Clients pay you to effectively represent them, not confuse them.
2. Punctuate correctly. Sure, the comma rules might have plagued you since elementary school. Take the time to

learn and apply them. The positive and lasting impression you leave with your reader will more than make up for the time it took to master the rules.

3. Sweat the small stuff. Proofreading does matter. Poor spelling and formatting errors are like goofing off in the dugout. Much like my son's coach, your reader will focus on your writing deficiencies, not anything else you might have done successfully. Don't strike out with sloppiness.
4. Take pride in your work; know that you have a team counting on you. The team might be a client, your firm, or simply a cause. It is still a team effort, as lawyering means helping some other person or entity achieve a goal. Even if you cannot knock it out of the park on your own, hand your clients an RBI. Help them score by conveying competence and taking pride in your writing. ■

As always, your comments and suggestions are welcomed at dspratt@wcl.american.edu. Play ball!

David Spratt, a professor at American University Washington College of Law, joined the VBA in 1995 and is a

former Chair of the Domestic Relations Section Council. He previously taught at the George Washington College of Law. In 2001, he was a founding partner of Schwartz & Spratt, PLC, a family law firm in Fairfax. Before that, he worked as an associate at the Law Office of Betty A. Thompson, Ltd., and at The Lewis Law Firm in Washington, D.C.

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