
Writing Your Own Info-Letters and Handouts for Family Law Clients

[Adapted from "A Handout Strategy for the General Practitioner," *The Practical Lawyer*, Vol. 43, No. 4, June 1997.]

The ABCs of Handouts

For handouts and info-letters, a catchy headline or logo is the first step. The fact sheet must first catch the eye of the client with a legal problem. Common examples might be "The Legal Eagle," "The Divorce Advisor," "Legal Hotline" or "The Consumer's Lawyer." A set of legal pamphlets labeled "TAKE-1," produced by this writer, is currently in use at the legal assistance offices at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and other military bases in the state.

In addition to bold printing for the standard logo, the use of drawings at the top of the handout can be helpful. Some frequent examples include a gavel, an eagle, the scales of justice, or a judge dressed in black robe behind a bench. Illustrations may also be used throughout the text to keep the attention of the reader or to emphasize a point. Often the word-processing program used by the lawyer will have a good graphics package for use here; one can also get images from Google, Yahoo and other search engines.

When selecting the subjects for a pamphlet series to be developed, remember these rules:

1. *Each handout should cover a specific and well-defined subject.* The client should be able to recognize the subject from the title of the fact sheet, such as "Child Support and the Single Parent," "So Your Used Car Is a Lemon . . .," or "The Case of the Missing Security Deposit."
2. *Don't make the subject too broad.* It is simply impossible to treat "Texas Family Law" or "Consumer Protection in California" in a single and simple handout. The more narrow and specific the topic, the better. This, of necessity, makes for short, easy-to-read pamphlets, with less strain on the attention span of the target population. In each case, keep it short and (if possible) sweet.

Packaging the Product

3. *Decide on your format.* Some authors use a “text box” on the first page to put an eye-catching box around the information there. Your word-processing software probably has this feature, located at “Insert” on the menu bar. You can choose a border with single or double lines, thick or thin, dotted or dashed.

Others use a tri-fold pamphlet similar to ones that are available at the bank for checking account information or other bank services. With most word processing programs, just click on “File,” then on “New” or “Template,” and you’ll see a selection of brochures under “Publish” that are already formatted and ready to use.

Inquiries and Issues

4. *Make the questions and answers clear and readable.* It takes a conscious effort to write for the client and not for the judge. Where lawyers use words like “litigation,” “marital dissolution,” and “motor vehicle,” the usual client would prefer “court fight” or “trial,” “divorce,” and “car.” Keep most words at one to three syllables. Use common nouns and verbs. Write short, declarative sentences in the active voice whenever possible. A reading specialist at a local school can help in the editing process by performing readability studies to determine the reading level required for selected writing samples or pamphlets. You should be writing for a fifth-grade reading ability.
5. *Have a beginning and an ending.* A simple introduction is desirable for each pamphlet. Use it to explain the scope and purpose of the handout. Here’s an example:

INTRODUCTION. This handout is about the process of divorce. It explains how to file for divorce and how a wife may request the resumption of her maiden name. It will also tell you the legal effects of obtaining a divorce, how the hearing is conducted and what your testimony should be.

Likewise, a standard ending belongs in each brochure. Use it to remind the client to ask the attorney if he or she has any questions and to reiterate that “we’re here to help you!” Here’s a sample ending:

CONCLUSION. This pamphlet has covered the basics of how a divorce is obtained and what the legal effects of divorce are. We recognize that all your questions cannot be answered in a single handout. If you have other questions about the process of separation and divorce, or about the issues of child support, custody, or alimony, please feel free to ask us. And if you have any comments, suggestions, or criticisms about this handout, let us know. We’re here to help!

6. *Answers should usually be broader than the original question.* Too many single-line questions and answers will take up more space than necessary and provide less useful information than the format of a single-line question and full paragraph answer. The function of the question is to attract the reader’s attention when the question is relevant, and to allow him or her to skip ahead when it is not. A paragraph-length answer can be helpful in addressing the follow-up inquiries gen-

erated by the answer to the initial question. For example, compare the following alternative answers for effectiveness:

Q. 1: Can't I get an annulment if I've only been married a very short time?

A. 1: No. A short-time marriage is not a ground for annulment.

A. 1A: Just because a marriage has lasted only a short time does not mean it can be ended by annulment instead of divorce. While annulment may sometimes be faster than divorce, it is used for a different reason than divorce. A divorce is the legal breakup of a valid and legal marriage. An annulment is a judge's ruling that a valid marriage, for some reason, has never existed. Some reasons may be that one of the parties is under the legal age of marriage, was already married at the time of the ceremony, or was forced to go through with the marriage by someone. If you want advice on the grounds for divorce or annulment, please ask one of our attorneys.

Q. 2: If I am not getting any child support from my ex-husband, I don't have to let him see the kids, right?

A. 2: Wrong—you cannot withhold visitation legally for this reason in North Carolina.

A. 2A: The law in North Carolina does not allow parents to use visitation or child support to punish each other. Even if you are not receiving enough or *any* child support, it is not a legal excuse for refusing to allow visitation. You should go to court or ask for help from an attorney to obtain child support. Similarly, if you cannot obtain visitation with your children, you should go to court for visitation rights rather than withholding needed child support from them.

What's the difference between the two types of answers? The second answer in each of the above examples is broad enough to cover two or three simple questions. Because these longer answers were used to answer anticipated follow-up questions, they provide a more comprehensive response than the shorter answers.

7. *Choose the text features you want.* Choose the right size typeface (or "font") for your opus. Most manuscripts and pleadings are done in 12-point size, but you can choose a slightly smaller one (say, 10-point) for your brochure and wind up saving a small amount of space (or getting more information in the same amount of space). Ten-point size for characters is approximately the size of newspaper print.

If you're using questions and answers, which is the best way of doing a client handout, make your life easier by choosing "Outline" or "Auto Paragraph Numbering" from "Tools" on the menu bar of WordPerfect (or "Bullets and Numbering" for MS Word). This will allow you to number your items automatically, and it will also renumber your questions if you decide to move or delete an item.

Want to save half the cost of reproducing the handouts? Think about front-and-back copying. Many copiers come equipped with this feature, and it will cut in half the number of pages you need to reproduce!

Name recognition is important. Use your letterhead at the top of the first page to tell the client who developed this wonderful handout! And don't feel you're stuck

with plain paper; sometimes colored paper (gray or cream) is a better choice than plain white bond. Consider whether you want to print the pamphlets on a heavier stock than simple "typing paper" if the pamphlets are to be used and reused by your clients (or, better yet, passed on to others!).

Consider using "footers" for a copyright notice on the first page, as well as for reprint permission if that is to be given to others. A simple reprint notice might read, "Prepared and produced by Mark E. Sullivan, Attorney at Law, Raleigh, North Carolina. Reprint permission is hereby granted to other attorneys for this pamphlet so long as the preceding sentence is reproduced at the bottom of the first page of the handout." Both MS Word and WordPerfect have "footer" features.

Final Considerations

8. *Pace yourself and ask for input from others.* It is impossible to do an entire series in a month, or even a season, given the average attorney's schedule priorities and manpower constraints. Doing a fact sheet series in phases makes the project manageable and doesn't overwhelm the editor or author. It allows for ready revisions based on format modifications or changes in statutes or case law. It permits others to provide criticism, suggestions, questions, and other useful feedback. It may even be possible to obtain contributions from the local district attorney, motor vehicle department officials, consumer protection specialists, the state attorney general's office, Better Business Bureau or Chamber of Commerce, local housing or public health officials, any number of federal agencies and departments, and the federal government's Consumer Information Center in Pueblo, Colorado.
9. *Don't re-invent the wheel.* If it is possible to get permission to use and modify materials already developed by others, the resulting savings of time will allow more pamphlets in the series to be drafted or other projects to be started. Plagiarism is the sincerest form of flattery. In preparing the "TAKE-1" handout on wills currently in use at Fort Bragg, this author used and modified the questions and answers in two different will pamphlets, one from the North Carolina Bar Foundation and the other from the Naval Legal Services Office, Norfolk, Virginia. Because of the different approach in each handout, it was possible to generate about 17 different questions on matters such as interstate succession, executors, division of personal property, estate tax liability, trusts, and guardianship for minor children or incompetents. This was twice the number of questions in either individual pamphlet.

Conclusion

Handouts and fact sheets developed for clients by general practitioners can be helpful in preventing legal problems and useful in solving difficulties at an early stage. They can also reduce interview time because the client can obtain many answers before seeing the attorney. In considering the many advantages of using legal handouts with the time necessary for preparation and the cost of printing, it is clear that the handout strategy is an important phase of a serious preventive law and client education plan at the general practitioner's office. However, it is important to note that "one size fits all" does *not* apply here; you will need to adapt all material to conform to your own state laws and regulations.