



N.J. judge turned award-winning author releases handbook on writing, arguing

Judge Nelson Johnson wants attorneys to write and argue better. The former state Superior Court judge turned award-winning author, who penned the book that inspired the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*, is in a great position to give advice. His newest book, *Style & Persuasion: A Handbook for Lawyers*—published by the New Jersey State Bar Association—offers concepts for attorneys of every ilk to build confidence and transform their writing styles. Judge Johnson spoke recently about the inspiration behind his latest work, the most common writing and arguing mistakes lawyers make and practical tips for improvement. His responses have been lightly edited for clarity.



Where did the idea come from? Why did you write it?

I've been thinking about publishing a book on writing for nearly 40 years. When I started practicing law, I had a good mentor who impressed upon me the need to cut to the chase and make your message as simple as possible, so there's no misunderstanding about what you're saying, and you don't waste words. Over the years I've seen a lot of bad writing. I own

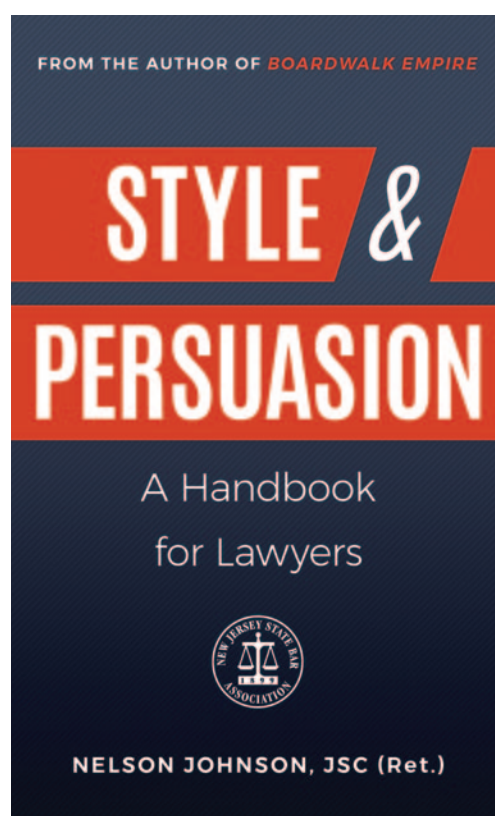
many books on writing, but many of them don't get to the heart of the problem, which is the need to push for simplicity.

After writing historical books about real people and events, how different was the process of writing about your thoughts and personal experiences?

It was a very different process, because now I'm not expressing observations and drawing conclusions about other people. What I'm trying to do is to explain why we need to write simply and how to do that.

You were a Superior Court judge for many years and presided over several cases. What are the most common pitfalls attorneys make in their writings or oral arguments?

One problem is that people are long-winded. I tell most lawyers to give me something you can say in 100 words and say it in 75. You must learn how to squeeze down your content. But the biggest criticism is that I find lawyers spend too much time talking about their opponent's issues. I think you need to focus on your own position. I learned that very early in my career, and I've lived it. You win your case by making your case. You don't win your



The book offers QR codes that allow the reader to access a video summary of each chapter. Describe that feature and why you included it.

I decided to include QR codes because I know, from personal experience, that when you get a book on writing, you're interested in what will help you in your particular area. You may not read the whole book. You might scan the table of contents and find the chapter that will be most beneficial. I had the idea of doing a 'vook,' basically a video of a portion of the book itself. So, I prepared a summary of each chapter that I could explain in under five minutes. It gives lawyers the opportunity to learn about the contents of the book in less than an hour. And if they want, they can go back and decide which are relevant. I figure let's make it easy for them, because I'm the same way.

Is the book targeted for a specific kind of lawyer—someone early in their career or a trial attorney—or does it have broader appeal?

I would say two-thirds of the book applies to writing in the general sense. The other third applies to legal writing. My suggestions on editing would apply to anyone to does it. Topics like how to structure your composition or how to create a lead, that's relevant to anyone who writes. Of course, there are chapters on pleadings, briefs and oral arguments. Those three chapters are aimed toward the lawyer who is still finding their way in litigation. The rest of the book is for everyone. ■

case by trashing the other side. The court wants to know why it should rule in your favor. I see lawyers spending a lot of time talking about the other side. Why give the judge a second look at their position? Just show them your position.

What advice can you offer attorneys on how to improve their writing and arguing?

Here is an often-overlooked concept: look at the number of syllables in all your words. One- or two-syllable words are no big deal. They may be an article or a preposition and they're likely there for a reason. But when you start getting in four- and five-syllable words, then you should really scrutinize it. They become potholes or bumps in the sentence that the reader might not be able to absorb quickly. If you write a few long words or sentences, you need to punctuate that portion of the text with either a really good short sentence of four or five words, or several really good, short, one-syllable words to give the reader's eye a break. Otherwise, you run the risk of losing your reader.

NJSBA

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Foundation lets students be the jury

Winners of the New Jersey State Bar Foundation's Law Fair and Law Adventure mock trial competitions presented their original cases before juries of their peers at the New Jersey Law Center earlier this month. The "You Be the Jury" events gave more than 1,000 elementary and middle school students an opportunity to experience what it's like to be a juror in a mock trial.



Volunteer attorneys sought for Union City community clinic

The New Jersey State Bar Association will hold its fourth Union City Law Day in conjunction with Senator and Union City Mayor Brian Stack, the Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey, the Hudson County Bar Association and the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office.

Volunteers are needed for the June 14 event to provide brief consultations on a variety of topics. Volunteer at askthenjsba@njsba.com. All are welcome, as interpreters will be on hand to provide additional support.

The event has previously attracted hundreds of residents of Union City and the surrounding area to learn about legal issues and speak briefly with attorneys.

A plenary program will offer an overview of legal issues facing the community. Following that program, volunteer attorneys provide assistance in the following areas of law: immigration, guardianship for children, landlord-tenant, divorce, domestic violence restraining orders, criminal law/expungements and criminal law/victim's rights. ■

Celebrate Juneteenth with the NJSBA

Join New Jersey State Bar Association's Minorities in the Profession Section for its Juneteenth commemoration at the New Jersey Law Center on June 8.

The program will feature a panel discussion with notable Black leaders in the law on empowerment and why representation matters. Speakers include U.S. District Court Judge Julien X. Neals and Bergen County Sheriff Anthony Cureton. Additional panelists are being added. The evening includes music, food and refreshments.

Register to attend at njsba.com or call the NJSBA customer service department at 732-249-5000. ■

Apply today to be part of the skill-building NJSBA Leadership Academy

The New Jersey State Bar Association is now accepting applications for the 2023-2024 class of Leadership Academy Fellows. The deadline for applications is June 30.

The Leadership Academy provides intensive learning, career planning, knowledge sharing and networking opportunities essential to leadership: in the bar, workplace and in the community.

Leadership fellows meet in person for one half-day session each month, with additional opportunities for networking and conversation. As part of their tuition, fellows will receive free



registration for select NJSBA programs throughout the year. Select programs will be eligible for CLE credits.

The fellows also will be recognized during the Opening Business Session of the NJSBA's Annual Meeting and

Convention in Atlantic City in May 2024. Upon graduation, each fellow is eligible for a seat on an NJSBA standing committee.

The academy is open to all New Jersey attorneys who have been in practice for at least five years. Care will be taken to ensure that each class of fellows reflects the diversity of the profession, and that new and historically underrepresented attorneys are equitably afforded this opportunity for growth and leadership. Fellows must be members of the NJSBA.

Visit njsba.com to apply.