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Book Review

THE VOICE OF REASON: ON THE CRAFT OF JUDGMENT WRITING[1]

by Justin Yeo

GOH Yihan[2]
Judge of the Appellate Division of the High Court, Supreme Court of Singapore.

I. Introduction

1 There are many books about judicial writing. Some tell the judge how to write, while others tell the judge why judgments matter. Justin Yeo's *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* combines these. It is a short book with a large ambition. The author seeks to explain *why* judges write reasons, *for whom* they write, and *how* the answers to those two questions ought to shape the craft. The book's organising claim, as stated in the Preface, is that a judgment "must be more than a record of decision" and must "stand, above all, as the voice of reason".[3] So far as I am aware, *The Voice of Reason* is the first monograph on judgment writing to draw its illustrations principally from Singapore case law, and that alone would justify attention from readers in Singapore.

2 Before I get into the substance of the book, I should state that the author is extremely well-placed to write this book. He is a sitting District Judge and the Executive Director of the Singapore Judicial College. More particularly, he has taught judgment writing for more than a decade to judges and judicial officers from both common law and civil law traditions. In fact, as he recounts in the Preface, the designer of the judgment-writing template that remains in use in the Singapore courts.[4]

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1 Routledge, 2026.

2 All views expressed in the present book review are personal views only and do not reflect in any way the views of the Supreme Court of Singapore. I would like to thank Mr Ryan Lee, Justices' Law Clerk, Supreme Court of Singapore, for his helpful comments and suggestions.

3 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 3.

4 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 1.

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II. The structure and purpose

3 The book's foundation is laid in Chapter 1, which asks the three questions that give the chapter its title: why, who and how. The answer to "why" is a concise account of the duty to give reasons, moving from Lord Mansfield's notorious advice ("never give your reasons") to the modern position settled in Singapore by *Thong Ah Fat v Public Prosecutor*.[5] The author identifies four purposes served by providing written reasons: strengthening the rule of law, promoting transparency and accountability, encouraging accuracy, and affirming the participation and dignity of the parties. The passage on accuracy is perhaps the most surprising. Drawing on Justice Andrew Phang's advice to him when he was a young law clerk that a conclusion which proves difficult to justify in writing is one whose correctness ought to be reconsidered, and on Judge Richard Posner's observation that a confident conclusion sometimes "will not write", the author makes the point that writing is not merely the communication of a decision but a method of testing it.[6] Every judge will recognise the experience.

4 The answer to "who" is a "constellation of audiences". This can broadly be reduced to the parties, the profession, the press, the public and posterity.[7] From these, the author derives four values which are said to run through the remainder of the book: fidelity to the law and fact, integrity of reasoning, respect for the law and for people, and institutional stewardship.[8] This makes for a coherent guiding structure, even as the author says that the values are "cross-cutting" and that the chapter references are "illustrative rather than exhaustive".[9]

5 Chapters 2 to 5 form the core of the book and discuss the four qualities of judicial prose: robustness (Chapter 2), tightness (Chapter 3), precision and concision (Chapter 4), and a judicious tone of respect and humility (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 steps back from the text to the process, following the judge from the close of the hearing into the "writing room". Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the two contemporary disruptions: the migration of the reader from paper to screen, and the arrival of generative artificial

5 [2012] 1 SLR 676.
6 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 10.
7 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 12–13.
8 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 14–15.
9 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 15.

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intelligence as a would-be co-author. Each chapter opens with an anecdote or a literary conceit and closes with some concluding reflections.

III. The substantive chapters

6 Chapter 2, on writing robustly, contains the passages most likely to be useful in practice. The author's starting point is that a conclusion "must be explained, not merely stated".[10] He illustrates the point with a pair of contrasting passages on a hypothetical licensing dispute: one which rejects a submission without analysis, and one which actually says why the submission fails.[11] He then offers two structures for engaging with the parties' positions. The first is the familiar dialectic ("Party A says X. Party B says Y.[12] The Court says X (or Z).") and the second is Professor James Raymond's "LOPP/FLOPP" method, which foregrounds the losing party's position and the flaw(s) in it. The author is careful to note the limits of the latter, including the risk, illustrated by *Mak-Levrion Kah Kay Natasha v R Shiamala*,[13] that concentrating on the loser's weaknesses may obscure whether the winner ever discharged its own burden. The chapter closes with a short but pointed treatment of "judicial plagiarism", gathering *Yap Ah Lai v Public Prosecutor*,[14] *Newton, David Christopher v Public Prosecutor*,[15] *Lim Chee Huat v Public Prosecutor*[16] and *Ler Chun Poh v Public Prosecutor*[17] into a coherent statement of the principle that the wholesale adoption of a party's submissions, or even of one's own earlier judgment, may indicate that the judicial mind has not been independently applied.[18] Perhaps, memorably, the author coins the term, "judicial ventriloquism", to describe this unwelcomed phenomenon.

7 Chapter 3, on structure, will be the most immediately useful to a new judge. While the author sets out three architectures ("Fact-Driven", "Issue-Driven" and "Hybrid"), he resists the temptation to prescribe which is the best. That is left to the reader to decide. More specifically, the discussion of headings is especially helpful. The taxonomy of

10 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 20.
11 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 22.
12 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 24.
13 [2024] 4 SLR 616.
14 [2014] 3 SLR 180.
15 [2024] 3 SLR 1370.
16 [2019] 5 SLR 433.
17 [2024] 6 SLR 410.
18 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 27–28.

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"Functional", "Descriptive-Objective" and "Descriptive-Argumentative" headings[19] is illustrated by the full heading structure of *Phoa Eugene v Oey Liang Ho*,[20] and the author squarely addresses the reservation, voiced by some of his own students, that argumentative headings sit uneasily with judicial neutrality. His answer, that the choice is "not binary but contextual",[21] must be correct. More than headings, the chapter's useful warnings against the "kitchen sink" and "over-citation"[22] are delivered with a candour that extends to the author's own past judgments, which he confesses to re-reading with a wince.[23]

8 Chapter 4 descends to the level of the sentence and the word. Much of this should be familiar ground, such as keeping subject and verb together, leading with the main clause, avoiding metadiscourse, legalese and verbosity. However, what makes this discussion especially helpful is that it is covered with well-chosen before-and-after examples. Two sections stand out. The first is the treatment of hedging and overstatement as twin failures of "saying what we mean",[24] with the useful test of deleting the qualifier or intensifier and asking whether the sentence still reflects the writer's actual confidence. The second is the three-stage approach to avoid using defined terms to the extent that a judgment reads like an alphabet soup (whether shorthand is warranted; what form it should take; and consistency). This is certainly more rigorous than anything in the standard drafting manuals and is illustrated with the kind of realistic examples ("YA" for "your Accused"; and "Fourth Uncle" rather than "the 1st Non-Party") that only a sitting judge could supply.[25] Finally, the discussion of tables, timelines, graphs and diagrams in Singapore judgments, from the glossary-style table in *Public Prosecutor v Soh Chee Wen*[26] to the Venn diagram in *Love & Co Pte Ltd v The Carat Club Pte*

19 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 41–42.
20 [2024] 4 SLR 1493.
21 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 42.
22 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 45–46.
23 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 46.
24 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 54–57.
25 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 62–65.
26 [2023] SGHC 299.

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Ltd,[27] is a genuine contribution. In fact, this would appear to be the first of its kind.[28]

9 Chapter 5, on tone, is the chapter in which the author's judicial voice is most evident. It opens with his own decision not to describe an application for discovery against a non-party (who went under the moniker "Zorro") as "the unmasking of Zorro", a line he had been tempted to write and wisely left unwritten.[29] The chapter distinguishes *respect* (the court's outward posture towards parties, counsel and other courts) from *humility* (its inward posture towards its own authority). In particular, under humility, the chapter offers a thoughtful account of "doctrinal scope", which is the discipline of deciding only what is necessary and resisting the urge to sound like an "omniscient oracle".[30] Lastly, the discussion of judicial humour is balanced and well-sourced, and the author's conclusion, that humour "must not come at the expense of the parties or the dignity of the judicial process",[31] must be right.

10 Chapter 6, "The Writing Room", is the most personal chapter and the one least likely to be found elsewhere. The author describes an "Orientation Document" in which the issues, the parties' positions, the judge's in-hearing notes and "breadcrumbs" to the record are assembled before a word of the judgment is written.[32] He commends dictation and speaking aloud as a means of unblocking thought, the "Hemingway Bridge" of stopping while one still knows what comes next, and a disciplined account of when and how a single judge may consult colleagues and clerks without surrendering ownership of the reasoning.[33] The section on consultation is, in my view, the most important in the chapter, and its insistence that the judge "lead the consultation by putting forward the judge's own reasoning and inviting critique"[34] states a principle that could usefully be more widely articulated.

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27 [2009] 1 SLR(R) 561.

28 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 68–70.

29 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 74.

30 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 85–87.

31 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 85.

32 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 93–94.

33 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 99–100.

34 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 100.

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11 Chapters 7 and 8 look forward. Chapter 7 argues that judgments are now read on screens, diagonally and in fragments, and that typography, layout, paragraph numbering and "above the fold" placement of the holding are no longer peripheral concerns. The author is scrupulous in saying that nothing in the chapter licenses a judge to depart from the prescribed house style, and that many of the suggestions are addressed to "judicial administrators, reform committees, or design teams" rather than to judges.[35] In turn, Chapter 8 is the longest and most ambitious. It canvasses the early judicial uses of large language models in England, India, the US and China. It then identifies four dangers ("Unthinking Reasoning", "Bull and Bias", "Declining Automatons" and "Compromised Confidentiality"). Borrowing from the management literature, the author commends a "Centaur" rather than a "Cyborg" model of human-machine division of labour.[36] It closes with six best practices: "Start Human", "Polish Structure", "Red Team", "Staged Review", "Engineered Prompts" and "Secure Tools".[37] These are especially relevant in an age where judges experiment with the use of artificial intelligence tools in aid of their work.

IV. Assessment

12 The book's strengths are numerous. In gist, it is grounded in principle without being abstract and it is practical without being a checklist. Indeed, from a practical perspective, the Singapore illustrations are its distinctive asset. A reader based in Singapore will find in these pages a more helpful and comprehensive catalogue of how the Singapore courts have actually deployed structure, headings, tables and visual aids than exists anywhere else. That said, the book is also useful for a reader based outside Singapore. After all, the examples are universally applicable. But above all, it is heartening that the author has practised what he has preached: the prose is clean, the sentences are short, the signposts are clear, and the block quotations are framed carefully.

13 That said, a subsequent edition may benefit from two improvements. The first concerns scope. The book is, by design, about the single judge writing a reserved judgment after a contested hearing. There is much lesser discussion on writing as a judge on a panel, as well as

35 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 106–107.

36 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 130.

37 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 131–139.

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oral and *ex tempore* judgments. This is wholly understandable for a first edition, but they are also where the next edition could add most value.

14 The second concerns the examples of bad writing. With few exceptions, the "before" passages in Chapters 2, 4 and 5 are hypothetical or, in Chapter 3, generated by a large language model from one of the author's own judgments.[38] While it is understandable that the author does not want to criticise his colleagues' work publicly, the book might benefit from more real-life examples of bad writing, even if anonymised.

15 However, none of the suggested improvements detracts from the central achievement. *The Voice of Reason* succeeds in the task it sets itself, which is not to teach the judge to write but to persuade the judge that writing is itself an exercise of the judicial function, and then to offer the tools with which that function can be discharged well. Its account of why reasons matter is as good as any in the literature; its account of structure, headings and defined terms is better than most; and its treatment of generative artificial intelligence asks extremely pertinent questions.[39] The author is to be warmly congratulated for such an outstanding book. I recommend it unhesitatingly, not only to newly appointed judges and judicial officers, but also to seasoned judges, who will find within its pages more than a useful tip or two.

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38 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at pp 36–37.

39 Justin Yeo, *The Voice of Reason: On the Craft of Judgment Writing* (Routledge, 2026) at p 121.

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