



ESSAY

Lessons from a Retiring Legal Writing Professor

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I retired at the end of this past academic year from a career that I have loved, and which I believe I became good at. But I wasn't always good at it, and (dare I say) I didn't always love everything about it. Below are the top five lessons I have learned over the years as a Legal Writing professor.

1. Assume the best about students.

Early in my teaching career, I would become very frustrated by students who didn't come to class without notifying me or didn't turn in homework or other assignments on time. I realized that these things often happened when students were struggling with something, usually something personal. I started reaching out to students with a tone of concern rather than with an accusation or a demand. For example, if a student missed class, I would begin my e-mail by saying, "I noticed you weren't in class today. I hope everything's all right." This message usually elicited an explanation and sometimes an apology, and we would go from there. I would sometimes even receive a "thank you" for reaching out. This approach created a much better relationship between me and my students. It gave them an opportunity to let me know if they were struggling, and it helped me shift my attitude from thinking a student was being lazy or irresponsible to

understanding the challenges that some students were facing.¹ (I'm not naive. I know that some students are shirking their responsibilities; I just don't begin with that assumption anymore.)

2. Collaborate with colleagues at your school.

Some of my most rewarding lesson plans and assignments have been the result of working with others at my school. Legal writing professors, librarians, and writing specialists are usually amazing in their willingness to share their experience, their expertise, and their ideas—and to brainstorm with colleagues to generate new approaches.

Collaborating with other legal writing professors is beneficial in many ways. When I first began teaching, generous colleagues shared their assignments with me, helping me to learn what makes a good assignment—one that is engaging and challenging, but not too difficult for students to manage. As I gained experience, my colleagues and I would often brainstorm together, designing joint assignments, which allowed us to share substantive expertise and bring different perspectives to the creation of new assignments.

Librarians are experts on research, and they can consult on or create exercises for students to practice research skills. At Villanova, our research librarians actually teach the research aspects of the 1L legal writing courses. Villanova also requires that students take a 2L legal writing course, and I have worked with our librarians for the research aspects of this course, inviting them as guest lecturers or asking for their help to develop research guides when I introduced new areas for research, like finding forms for contract drafting.²

A legal writing specialist can work with students who need extra help mastering grammar, punctuation, or paragraphing issues that writing professors identify but may not have time to work on with students. It can also be less intimidating for students needing help to work with the writing specialist because there is rarely a grade associated with that work. (Some of my colleagues do award

¹ This more compassionate approach also aligns with many schools' recognition of the increase in mental health and wellness concerns facing our students. For more information about a survey examining law student wellness, see Katherine Bender et al., *"It is Okay to Not Be Okay": The 2021 Survey of Law Student Well-Being* (June 3, 2022), 60 U. LOUISVILLE L. REV. 441 (2021), American University, WCL Research Paper No. 2022-08, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4127297>

² Our librarians have developed an extensive array of library guides, which can be found here: VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY CHARLES WIDGER SCHOOL OF LAW LIBRARY HOME PAGE/LIBGUIDES, <https://libguides.law.villanova.edu/> (last visited June 27, 2023).

extra credit points if they refer a student to the writing specialist and he confirms that students have made a good faith effort to improve.) It's important to establish clear boundaries about what students can work on with the specialist. I don't permit help with graded assignments, although students can use those assignments to practice their skills by working on revisions once they have received a grade.

My colleagues have both enhanced and elevated my teaching, and they have provided a richer experience for my students. I hope I have also helped some of my colleagues along the way..

3. Attend and present at legal writing conferences.

The first time I attended an LWI conference, I could not believe the wealth of information being shared and the wonderful ideas I could bring back to my teaching! Since then, I've never left a conference without getting several good ideas, along with inspiration to be a better teacher.

There are many opportunities available, from national conferences sponsored by LWI, ALWD, and AALS to regional conferences and One-Day Workshops. The LWI website lists them all³ and the LWI listserv⁴ publicizes them as the call for proposals or registration availability is announced. If you decide to submit a proposal, carefully review the call for proposals to make sure your idea fits within the topic of the conference. Also make sure that your proposal is formatted specifically in the way the organizers requested. Be sure to find out what your school's travel budget allows. Some schools only reimburse if you are presenting, while others are more generous. If cost is an issue, a regional or One-Day may be more affordable.

In addition to learning from what others are doing when I attend a conference, I've also benefited from the opportunities to present at conferences. Preparing to give a formal talk to my regional or national colleagues has often helped me clarify my pedagogical goals because explaining how or why I do something forces me to examine it more closely. Plus, I've had great follow-up conversations with people after presentations, which have given me opportunities to further improve the idea I presented about.

³ LEGAL WRITING INSTITUTE CONFERENCES OF ALL TYPES, <https://www.lwionline.org/conferences> (last visited June 27, 2023).

⁴LEGAL WRITING INSTITUTE LWI'S LISTSERV, <https://www.lwionline.org/lwis-listserv-lwic> (last visited June 27, 2023).

4. Embrace technology (but don't be afraid to go "old-school").

I'll say it—I love Zoom. Virtual meetings have enabled me to meet with students more easily, especially when I need to meet with a group of students working on a project together. Scheduling those meetings in person was always extraordinarily difficult, but Zoom makes it much easier to accommodate everyone's schedule. Zoom is also a blessing when you are trying to respond to a student e-mail and the concepts don't lend themselves to an e-mail discussion. You can schedule a short Zoom meeting and clarify things quickly rather than going back and forth with multiple emails. (Screen sharing helps with this too.)

However, an in-person meeting is often useful for delicate conversations when a student is really struggling. In those situations, meeting in-person tends to create better rapport and offers a chance to assess body language, which can be difficult to do in a virtual meeting.

I also love the improved technologies that allow me to easily record short videos to introduce concepts for my next class. Assigning pre-class recordings frees up class time that might otherwise be spent on lectures and allows us to spend that extra time either doing exercises together or reviewing exercises done for homework.

But I will still sometimes eschew technology and have students hold up red or green index cards as a simple yes or no poll in class rather than using polling software. This allows me to broadly assess understanding and still continue the class discussion without sending students back to their screens with the potential for them to tune out the people around them for the pixels in front of them.

I've learned to embrace change but also to use the right tool for the moment, rather than using something just because it's available.

5. Accept that the process of grading really is awful.

Grading is boring and repetitive. It takes patience and willpower to do it well, especially to not be any harsher grading the tenth paper that got the same thing wrong as the first paper (and the second, and the third, etc.)! One important step is to prepare before you begin. A detailed rubric or score sheet will help you assess each paper on its merits and help make your grading fair and as objective as possible.

Many professors have their own mental tricks to force themselves to sit down and grade, like setting daily quotas to make the pile of papers seem more manageable. (“I don’t have to grade 40 today; I only have to grade 4.”) Some professors make pacts with each other to grade a certain number each day and then check in regularly; that accountability helps them stay on track. Most try to minimize distractions by closing email (or at least turning off any audible notifications) and closing their office doors or finding a quiet spot at home. Some even take their daily quota of papers to a coffee shop to avoid the distractions at school or at home. Most professors create small rewards for reaching a certain goal—taking a short walk, getting a snack or a cup of tea, listening to some music, or playing with the dog/cat/goldfish.

Using daily quotas, pacts with others, and rewards are good ways to help us stay on track when grading a pile of papers and help us create reasonable deadlines, avoiding the danger of leaving it all to a marathon grading session. Those marathon sessions are bad for our health, can lead to burnout, and are less likely to result in meaningful feedback for our students. (Please don’t ask me how I know!)

Whatever techniques you choose, in the end, I think it’s just force of will that gets it done. To quote Nike, “Just do it.”

6. Conclusion

As I retire, I know I will miss the students and those “aha! moments” that every teacher holds dear. I will miss my colleagues, especially at my school, but also in the wider legal writing community. I will miss nurturing the creative spark that goes into creating a good lesson plan or a new assignment. I will miss the challenge of learning a new technology to incorporate into and enhance my teaching. I will not miss grading.