



ARTICLE

Teaching After Midnight: Lessons From My First Year Directing a Fully Online Legal Writing Program

Holley S. Temple

Director of Legal Writing

University of Hawai'i Richardson School of Law

Published: May 2026

In the summer of 2025, I was given the opportunity to create a new legal writing curriculum for the University of Hawai'i Richardson School of Law's fully online J.D. program. In addition to developing materials used in the 1L Lawyering Fundamentals courses, I now teach in the program. The process has proven to be the most rewarding in my 23 years as a legal writing professor.

My first cohort of students hailed from every time zone across the mainland as well as several Hawaiian Islands. Because our writing courses meet synchronously in the evenings in *Hawai'i time*, students on the East Coast Zoomed in after midnight. These time zone differences meant that while it was well into the evening or late at night for most students, it was early morning for my student with a work assignment in Copenhagen,

twelve hours ahead. Keeping students awake in the wee hours wasn't a topic I had considered in the first two decades of my career. It was the first of many surprises that I experienced as I navigated this new pedagogical landscape.

1. A brief primer on fully online law schools

In 2023, the ABA changed its standards to allow law students to complete up to half of their coursework online without a law school requesting special permission.¹ The change ignited a race to compete in the online space, with dozens of schools beginning to offer hybrid or fully online J.D. programs.² A handful of those schools operate fully online, with no or minimal in-person requirements. Given the popularity of these programs, they are expected to multiply in the next few years.³

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, proponents of online legal education were suggesting that fully online J.D. programs could “solve a number of law school woes.”⁴ Critics argue that traditional J.D. programs engage in gatekeeping, with some contending that the “access to justice crisis” begins in law schools.⁵ Fully online law schools have greatly expanded access to the J.D. curriculum. Now students can pursue law degrees from new and often less expensive geographical areas, all while working and raising families.

¹ Standard 306 was the changed provision.

² *Council-Approved Law Schools with Acquiescence for Distance Education J.D. Programs*, AM. BAR ASS'N., https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/accreditation/approved-law-schools/distance-education/distance-education-jd-programs/ (last visited Dec. 25, 2025).

³ See Julianne Hill, *Mythbusters: What do we really know about online law schools?*, AM. BAR ASS'N. (Jan. 15, 2025), <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/journal/articles/2025/mythbusters-what-do-we-really-know-about-online-law-schools/>. For example, the fully online J.D. program at the University of Hawai'i has nearly tripled in size since its inception.

⁴ Zoe Niesel, *Seismic Shifts: Post-COVID Legal Education and the Profession*, 15 ELON L. REV. 81, 116 (2023).

⁵ Andrele Brutus St. Val, *Distance Learning: New Tech, Old problems*, 32 GEO. J. ON POVERTY L. & POLICY 59, 102 (2024).

2. My experience converting an in-person curriculum to a fully online format

Even with my decades of experience, I encountered many surprises as I attempted to adapt my in-person legal writing curriculum to the new modality. I've grouped the major challenges and solutions into three primary categories: 1) adjusting for less classroom time; 2) keeping students engaged late at night; and 3) meeting the students' unique needs as professionals juggling day jobs all over the world.

Challenge 1: How do I squeeze the content from two in-person classes per week into one tight weekly session? The first major challenge involved retooling the curriculum for a hybrid approach so that the content from two weekly in-person classes could be covered in a single weekly Zoom session. In our online program, students spend significantly less time in live classes, with the remaining instruction to be delivered asynchronously. This makes sense because even though the fully online program is extended over four years with fewer classes per semester, most of our students are working full time and can only spend so many hours on Zoom.

Here are a few strategies that helped me bridge the time gap:

- **Deliver lecture content via shorter, custom YouTube videos.** After attending an online teaching training program during the pandemic, I undertook a project to review my personal library of PowerPoint presentations and convert them into short videos, ideally no more than ten minutes. My YouTube playlist now contains more than 30 videos, and I add more each semester. My in-person students said they benefited from the videos, especially because they could rewind and re-watch my explanations of difficult concepts. My online students also relied on them heavily. Transferring traditional lecture content to video allowed me to not only save valuable class minutes for writing activities, but also allowed my online students to develop their legal writing skills with confidence. The videos served as an

online coach of sorts, assisting students as they attempted to draft their first legal writing projects.

- **Encourage as much one-on-one conferencing as possible.** While I have always viewed individual conferencing as the best way to coach writing students, these meetings seemed even more crucial for my fully online students. Because we had less time in class to practice and review answers collectively, I encouraged students to meet with me individually not only to re-view their memos but also to discuss anything from class that still hadn't gelled. With less opportunity for casual interactions, this was a crucial piece of the learning process.
- **Consider using AI as an additional form of feedback.** With time-strapped students, an AI tool like Otter can create a written record that can be consulted at the student's convenience, which is even more important when the student's today is my tomorrow. This semester, I started using Otter to record student meetings and generate transcripts of voice memos. For each meeting, Otter created a transcript and summary with action items that I could return to the students along with a voice memo and handwritten notes. While the summaries required a bit of editing, I felt they were worth the effort, especially for my online students who did not have as much time for one-on-one meetings.

Challenge 2: How do I keep my students engaged and awake? While I have been teaching with the distraction of laptop computers for quite some time, teaching on Zoom late at night posed different and even more basic challenges. I worried that students taking synchronous classes past my normal bedtime might feel like they were passively watching a movie.⁶ And in my class, many students were exhausted by the time we began! Most had worked full days, taken care of children, and attended

⁶ Mary Kate Kearney & Miranda Elizabeth Thompson, *Connection in an Age of Connectivity: An Evaluation of Synchronous and Asynchronous Law Classrooms*, 46 W. NEW ENG. L. REV. 7, 15 (2024).

another online J.D. class even before I greeted them at 6:30 p.m. Hawai'i time. For more than half the students, the class began at 9:30 p.m. or as late as 12:30 a.m. In addition, I knew students would be distracted by other screens such as cell phones and tablets during our remote classes. I needed some new tactics.

Here are a few strategies that helped:

- **Clearly outline the agenda and approximate the amount of time per topic at the top of the class, and mark every break into a new topic.** While I always gave an overview at the start of my in-person classes, this felt even more important with groggy students. If they did lose focus, they could jump back in when I alerted them verbally and via a PowerPoint slide.
- **Create several polls per class.** And pop them up randomly! The polls provided a natural energy burst, especially as they became a fixture of each class and students recognized that a poll was likely on the way. And if several students answered incorrectly, I could stop and try to address the issue in real time. I plan to create even more polls for the next iteration of my course.
- **Create at least one opportunity for small-group interaction per class.** While I also conducted small-group activities with my in-person students, these exercises seemed even more important for a group that had never met in person. The online students were exceptionally engaged in breakout rooms because they were rare opportunities to connect with classmates. In the next version of the course, I plan to be more intentional about the makeup of my breakout rooms, ensuring that students will meet new colleagues in each class.

Challenge 3: How do I meet their unique needs as working professionals living around the world? While the unique needs of non-traditional learners are well documented and beyond the scope of this piece, I became

aware that these students were different than my typical in-person 1Ls from the very first class. While my online students are ultra-professional and a pleasure to teach, they were simply crunched for time at every turn, and therefore I adopted a few strategies that they especially appreciated.

Here are my top suggestions to address this concern:

- **Create a detailed course checklist.** For each class, create a checklist divided into the following sections: 1) what should I read before class, 2) what should I download before class, 3) what should I watch before class, 4) which pre-class exercises should I complete, and, 5) what must I submit?⁷ While students in the early '00s might have found a detailed course checklist to be overly directive, my current online students, with so many responsibilities and time constraints, welcomed the assistance. In a mid-semester survey, multiple online students thanked me for creating such a detailed checklist.
- **Ask students to submit short, formative “homework” assignments to confirm their participation and progress.** Because it can be easier for students on Zoom to hide behind their squares, I took several of the in-class writing exercises that I would have conducted in person and asked my online students to do these on their own and submit them before class. This gave me confidence that my online students were keeping up in real time.
- **Provide students with options (when possible).** While I prefer to grade legal writing work product via live conference sessions, some of my online students simply could not carve out time for two “extra” thirty-minute sessions with me. For those students, I offered an alternative: a voice memo audio commentary. The students still received my personalized feedback on each page of the document,

⁷ I'm happy to share this with anyone who is interested; please just email hollee@hawaii.edu.

sans the conversation, but it was a reasonable alternative for time-strapped students.

3. Reflections

While the process of adapting my legal writing curriculum to a different modality was undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges in my career, it also brought great rewards. My online students were mature and appreciative. Many told me that they would not have pursued law degrees without the fully online option, and it felt good to be part of their journey. While I hope the online legal writing experience was rewarding for the students, it was undoubtedly a career highlight for me.

