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Teaching the Habits of Law School Success: Lessons from the Legal Writing Classroom

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I. The conversations we already have

As a legal writing professor, I spend a surprising amount of time teaching students things that have little to do with legal research, citation, or large-scale organization. I encourage them not to dwell on disappointing grades, remind them that persistence and resilience matter just as much as raw ability, urge them to practice self-care, and reassure them that confusion is a normal part of learning to think and write like a lawyer. At first, I viewed these conversations as little more than one-off moments that happened to arise while teaching legal writing. Over time, however, I realized that they were all part of the same broader lesson: I was teaching many of the habits and mindsets that help students succeed throughout the first year of law school.

I believe conversations like these arise naturally in legal writing because of the way the course is taught. Unlike most first-year classes, legal writing is taught in relatively small sections that emphasize collaboration, formative assessments, and frequent one-on-one interactions between professor and students. We work with students over the course of an entire semester, read multiple drafts, discuss setbacks, and watch them struggle, improve, and gain confidence over time. These sustained interactions reveal not only

how students write but also how they learn. We observe the habits that shape students' success, which create natural opportunities to discuss those things that implicate broader law school success—resilience, preparation, professionalism, and resourcefulness—alongside CREAC, rule synthesis, and other core writing skills.

For years, I taught these lessons one student at a time. A conference about a draft became a conversation about embracing confusion and recognizing that working through uncertainty is often the path to genuine understanding. A late assignment became a discussion about planning and professionalism. Office hours became an opportunity to encourage a struggling student to seek help or reassure another that one disappointing grade does not define their place in law school. Eventually, I began to wonder why I was waiting for those moments to arise instead of introducing these ideas to all of my first-year legal writing students before the pressures of the fall semester began.

This led me to develop a presentation that brings those lessons together in one place.¹ The presentation addresses topics ranging from attending class and preparing consistently to embracing confusion, seeking help, responding constructively to setbacks, and maintaining perspective throughout the first year. I now deliver it during Hofstra Law's elective pre-orientation program for entering first-year students. This fall, I plan to introduce it to my own legal writing section in the first week of class. The presentation is not intended to replace the individual conversations that occur throughout the semester. Rather, it gives students a common framework that we can return to in class, conferences, written feedback, and office hours.

Part II reproduces the presentation substantially as I deliver it. Part III reflects on the experiences in my legal writing classroom that gave rise to it.

II. A sample presentation on law school success

What follows is reproduced largely as I deliver it to students, in the direct, conversational register I use with them, rather than in the voice of the surrounding sections. The presentation below is a distillation of those recurring conversations and addresses the same habits and mindsets that once arose only one conversation at a time. I like to preface the presentation itself with a brief disclaimer: Following this advice will not make you number one in the class, guarantee Law Review, or transform you into the person who understands personal jurisdiction the first time. What I hope it will do is give you a small but meaningful edge—the kind that comes not from being the

¹ My presentation is titled *How to Succeed in Law School by (Actually) Trying*. I'm happy to share the underlying PowerPoint slides that accompany it upon request.

smartest person in the room, but from showing up with the right habits and the right mindset from day one.

Then I tell them this:

1. Go to class

No, really, go to class. Every. Single. Class. It is the simplest, most consistent thing you can do to help yourself succeed. Even if class feels confusing, go anyway. Especially then. Missing a class may feel harmless in the moment because you only miss one day. What's the big deal, you think? But small, consistent habits matter.² And when you miss a class, what you actually miss is a link in a chain of understanding. Law school concepts build on each other, and small gaps quickly become large ones. You can't cram a semester of Contracts the way you might have crammed for an undergraduate exam. The only way to keep up with the forward tempo is by going to class steadily, day after day, week after week. So even when it feels inefficient, even when you are confused, even when you think you would "just study better on your own," go to class.

2. Pay attention in class

Now that you're in class, pay attention. Close Amazon, Instagram, Zillow, whatever. Stop writing that breakup text. And if you're gaming, truly, get out of here! Going to class is, of course, important. But equally important is what you do when you get here. You have to pay attention in class for it to be worthwhile. I recognize that there are many distractions; in fact, most of them are sitting on that laptop right in front of you. The material is hard, and the moment you feel the least bit lost or bored, your brain looks for relief. But that's when you should pay the most attention. Try to push through the urge to surf the net or do other things when your mind wanders. Partial attention equals partial understanding. Once you get distracted by something else on your laptop or your phone, it takes an average of twenty-three minutes to refocus.³ That means you miss almost a quarter of the typical law school class. If you've taken the time to show up to class, reward yourself by getting as much out of the class as possible. Also, think of this as training for your future profession. Being a lawyer will require sustained

² James Clear's book *Atomic Habits* explores this principle in depth, namely, that small, persistent habits can make big changes to outcomes over time. See generally JAMES CLEAR, *ATOMIC HABITS: AN EASY & PROVEN WAY TO BUILD GOOD HABITS AND BREAK BAD ONES* (2018).

³ See Jennifer Robison, *Too Many Interruptions at Work?*, GALLUP (June 8, 2006), <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/23146/too-many-interruptions-work.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/BJ8E-NWC6>] (last visited May 3, 2026) (interviewing Gloria Mark, whose research measured how long office workers took to resume an interrupted task). Multi-tasking laptop use also negatively affects those students sitting near the culprit. See Faria Sana, Tina Weston & Nicholas J. Cepeda, *Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers*, 62 *COMPUTERS & EDUC.* 24, 29 (2013).

attention to detail. You will spend many hours reviewing wordy contracts, reading dense cases, and trying to get your head around complicated facts. Class helps you build that muscle now.

3. Take good notes

Don't write down verbatim everything your professor says in class. That's called a transcript, and that's what a court reporter does. But you're not a court reporter. You're a law student trying to learn and understand something brand new. Instead of channeling all of your mental and physical energy into capturing as many words as possible, just listen. Typing makes us *feel* like we're doing something. And I know it's hard to sit there when your fingers aren't moving because you worry you're missing something important, or that you won't remember it later. But think of listening as an active activity, just like typing.⁴ Because it can be. Listen actively. Try to discern what matters first, and why it matters. Then write down the keywords and phrases that will help you understand and remember the concept. This will serve you much better in the long run, because you'll have been fully present in class when the concept was first explained to you. And that just might be the best way to learn it!

4. Do your homework

Every day, for every class. You learn the law by reading the cases for your class. That's how it works. And your classes are built on the assumption that you've done the reading. The cold calls, the hypotheticals, all of it assumes that you've read the cases before you walk through the classroom door. If you haven't, you're not just unprepared (which is never a good look), you're shut out. You can't participate in the learning that's happening live in front of you. And that live learning is one of the most important things law school offers. So do the reading. Every day. No exceptions.

Also, reading cases makes you better at, well, reading cases! Reading cases is a skill, not just a task. And like any skill, you get better at it by doing it. Reading cases *well* means being able to move through dense legal prose and quickly extract what matters and what it means. That takes practice. The first time you read a case, it will probably feel bewildering. The language might be dated, the procedural discussion is confusing, and it may not even be obvious what the court decided or why! The more cases you read, however, the better you will get at understanding these things. You'll read faster. You'll spot the issues more easily. And you'll understand more quickly what's important and

⁴ One study suggested that longhand note-takers outperformed laptop note-takers on conceptual questions, apparently because they processed and reframed the material rather than transcribing it. See Pam A. Mueller & Daniel M. Oppenheimer, *The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking*, 25 PSYCH. SCI. 1159 (2014).

what's not. This only happens if you put time and effort into your daily homework to get to this place. So, don't shortchange yourself; do your homework.

5. Treat law school like your full-time job

Because it is. Students sometimes make the mistake of walking into law school thinking of it as more school. Three more years of an academic rhythm you already know. And in some ways, sure, it looks like school—there are classes, professors, and exams. But law school is a pre-professional program, and the best way to tackle 1L is to see it not as the continuation of your academic life, but as the start of your professional one. In other words, it's a full-time job, and you should treat it that way. This is your primary, professional commitment, starting now. So, build a schedule and stick to it. A typical 1L week runs five full days and at least part of a weekend. Get up at the same time every morning, get dressed, have your coffee, and then go to work. If it's class, go to class. If it's not class, go study. You should structure your days around your classes but fill the rest deliberately. Reading for tomorrow, reviewing notes from today, working through concepts that didn't land, or going to office hours. All of these are part of your job. Having a physical routine matters more than you might think. When you treat the day like a workday, your focus follows. When you roll out of bed at noon and open your laptop in yesterday's clothes, it doesn't. Set up a routine, and the routine will set you up for success.

6. Build your own outline

Use other outlines to check your work if you need to, but at the end of the day, build your own. At some point in the fall semester, someone is going to offer you their outline. It might be well-organized, it might be comprehensive, and it will *definitely* be tempting. It's ok to take it as a reference if you want. But do not mistake it as a substitute for building your own because it isn't. Students who rely on borrowed outlines are cheating themselves out of the most valuable part of outlining. The outline is not the point; the making of it is. Wrestling with the material, talking it through with your study group, and then expressing it in your own language is what will solidify the law in your head.⁵ A finished outline handed to you skips all of that. It's something to read, but it doesn't really teach you anything. My best analogy is this: Think of it like weight training. If you want to build muscle, someone else offering to do your reps at

⁵ Studies back up the idea that producing information yourself leads to better retention than just reading it. See, e.g., Norman J. Slamecka & Peter Graf, *The Generation Effect: Delineation of a Phenomenon*, 4 J. EXPERIMENTAL PSYCH.: HUM. LEARNING & MEMORY 592, 601 (1978); Zachary A. Rosner, Jeremy A. Elman & Arthur P. Shimamura, *The Generation Effect: Activating Broad Neural Circuits During Memory Encoding*, 49 CORTEX 1901, 1906 (2013).

the gym doesn't make you stronger. To build *your* muscle, *you* have to go to the gym and lift weights.

7. Embrace confusion

The first year of law school is confusing. Certain subjects will be especially confusing. Maybe all of them. One day you may feel like you completely understand something in Civil Procedure, and the next day you'll have no idea. About the exact same thing. Don't panic. That's normal, I promise. You will not understand everything right away. You will not have all the right answers, all the time. You will struggle. You will be confused. When that happens, you must embrace it—wholeheartedly. Wait, that sounds crazy! I know, it is. And it's easier said than done. Confusion is not a comfortable feeling. But it is natural when you are trying to make sense of concepts your mind has never encountered before. So, the question isn't whether you'll be confused. You will be. The question is what you do when it happens. Some students take confusion as some sort of proof that they aren't smart enough or shouldn't be here, and they pull back. Others take it as a sign that the material needs more time and more work, and they dig in. That second response is what researchers who study learning call a growth mindset.⁶ In other words, confusion and struggle aren't a sign of inability; they're a sign of growth in progress—and you have to work through them.⁷ You are not just learning new subject matter in law school. You are learning an entirely new way of thinking. That kind of transformation is supposed to feel hard. And in fact, struggling with that feeling and working through it is what helps you learn. So, embrace the confusion. And here's the most important thing to remember: you are not alone in your confusion. You are surrounded by people who feel the same way. Every single one of them. Whether your classmates say it or not (and most don't), they are often just as confused as you.

8. Office hours give you superpowers

Office hours are criminally underused.⁸ Most students don't go to office hours, or they go only when they're struggling or have a last-minute question about an assignment. But that's the wrong approach because it leaves one of law school's most valuable resources almost entirely untapped. How so, you ask? Because office hours are where

⁶ See CAROL S. DWECK, *MINDSET: THE NEW PSYCHOLOGY OF SUCCESS* 7 (2006).

⁷ See Carol S. Dweck & Ellen L. Leggett, *A Social-Cognitive Approach to Motivation and Personality*, 95 PSYCH. REV. 256, 261 (1988).

⁸ See, e.g., Melissa Ezarik, *Students Seek Stronger Connections with Professors but Rarely Take the Lead*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (May 19, 2022), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/05/20/survey-students-want-connections-professors-may-not-initiate-them> [https://perma.cc/36FS-QAK3] (last visited May 4, 2026).

you build relationships with your professors. And those relationships can be invaluable. Your professors are experts in their fields who genuinely want to help you learn. They love to talk about the law. Who better to help you understand that issue that's been dogging you for the last five weeks? Why not spend some time talking directly to the person who grades your final exam?

Professors are also the people who write recommendation letters, make phone calls to prospective employers, and open doors that you didn't even know existed. That's a hard thing to do if they've never had a one-on-one interaction with you. So, go to office hours. Go because you found a topic fascinating and want to dig deeper. Go because you want to understand something better than the casebook allows. Go simply because you want your professor to know who you are! That's an absolutely *a-ok* reason to stop by and say hello. Come prepared, though! Before you walk through that professor's door, compile the questions you want to ask, flag that concept you can't crack, and read the model answer first. A student who walks through the door curious, prepared, and engaged leaves a great impression. That impression is what turns into a letter, a phone call, a connection.⁹ And when you're done, leave. Read the room, give the professor time to talk to other students, and make your graceful exit. The relationship is the superpower, but only if you show up and build it.

9. Don't let grades get you down (or up)

Law school is a marathon, not a sprint. Your first set of grades, whatever they may be, is not the verdict on your potential or your future. Whether you do better or worse than expected, the same advice applies: don't let grades derail you. Acing your first mid-term doesn't mean you take a vacation. And bombing your first mid-term doesn't mean you give up. You have two semesters of 1L and three full years of law school before your transcript is complete and your final standing is calculated. There is a lot of road between here and there. And a lot of road means a lot of time to improve (or not improve) grades-wise.

Also, if you take advantage of it, a lot is happening on that road beyond grades. Moot court, trial teams, clinics, law journals, internships, externships, and student organizations, to name a few. Countless opportunities to succeed and to distinguish yourself are everywhere, and plenty of them won't be solely tied to your GPA. Instead of letting grades dictate your life, stay focused on learning and engaging with the material. This is how you will develop your analytical skills, and those skills will serve

⁹ Many professors, myself included, will pick up the phone or send an e-mail to a prospective employer on behalf of a student they got to know in office hours who really impressed them with their interest and dedication.

you in practice, in the courtroom, and on the bar exam, long after your 1L GPA has faded into the background. That focus will pay off in ways that a single exam score never could. And if you focus on the material, good grades may likely follow anyway.

10. Take care of yourself

Just because this is last doesn't mean it's the least important. On the contrary, it's the most important thing for success in law school. Law school is hard. It can be stressful, nerve-wracking, and downright awful. Be proactive about your mental and physical health. You don't have to train for a marathon or [insert the latest, over-the-top, intense physical fitness craze]. Walking is just fine. Take a walk between class, after class, or before class. Learn a breathing technique or two.¹⁰ Use the mental health resources the school offers. That's what they're there for. At least once a week, do things that have nothing to do with law. Go to a ball game. Watch trash television. Bake bread. Spend an afternoon with your dog. Do whatever it is that makes you feel like yourself again. Give yourself permission to not be a law student every hour of every day. You have time for this; I promise you do, even when it doesn't feel that way.¹¹

And, finally, if it ever feels like too much, please ask for help! Here's something most people don't know: Drowning doesn't look like what you imagine drowning looks like. In real life, a person can go under surrounded by a crowd of people who have no idea anything is wrong. There's no violent splashing or calling for help.¹² It's just a silent struggle.¹³ Law school stress can work the same way. You can be struggling badly but appear, from the outside, completely fine. No one will necessarily know unless you tell them. So, if you feel like you're starting to go under, tell someone. Go to Student Affairs. Call your family or your best friend. Reach out to a faculty member. Reach out to me. You don't have to have it figured out before you ask for help. You just have to ask.

¹⁰ Box breathing is a controlled breathing technique in which a participant inhales, holds, exhales, and holds again for equal durations, and repeats this "box" over a set period of time. A 2023 randomized controlled study found that participants practicing box breathing experienced improved mood and reduced anxiety. See Melis Yilmaz Balban et al., *Brief Structured Respiration Practices Enhance Mood and Reduce Physiological Arousal*, 4 CELL REPS. MED. 100895 (2023), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9873947/> [<https://perma.cc/C36X-WK3T>] (last visited May 8, 2026). I like to teach my class the box breathing technique at the start of spring semester in anticipation of oral argument. The response from my students has been uniformly positive.

¹¹ See, e.g., LAURA VANDERKAM, 168 HOURS: YOU HAVE MORE TIME THAN YOU THINK 16 (2010). Vanderkam's central thesis is that most people have more discretionary time than they realize when they track their time more honestly.

¹² Mario Vittone & Francesco A. Pia, *It Doesn't Look Like They're Drowning*, ON SCENE: J. U.S. COAST GUARD SEARCH & RESCUE, Fall 2006, at 14.

¹³ *Id.*

III. Why these conversations arise in legal writing

The presentation in Part II emerged gradually from recurring experiences in and around my legal writing classroom. Certain conversations surfaced repeatedly in class, conferences, written feedback, and office hours until I realized I was teaching many of the same lessons over and over again. Of those recurring experiences, three arose more often than the rest: embracing confusion, keeping perspective on grades, and the attention, engagement, and professionalism the presentation asks of students. The reflections below trace each experience and explain why they arise naturally in first-year legal writing.

Embracing confusion

Confusion is often the first thing students bring to a legal writing conference. They may be struggling to synthesize rules from multiple cases, distinguish precedent, organize a CREAC, or understand the analytical difference between deductive and analogical reasoning. Sometimes the underlying legal substance is also confusing. I often encounter this confusion early in the semester because our class includes multiple writing assignments, formative feedback, and individual conferences.

What begins as a conversation about legal writing, however, rarely stays there. Students who initially come to discuss confusion about a legal writing problem often end up admitting that they feel confused about law school generally. They may tell me they do not understand personal jurisdiction, cannot follow their Contracts professor, or worry that everyone else seems to understand concepts that still feel foreign to them.

These moments create the opportunity to discuss something much broader than legal writing. I reassure students that confusion is not evidence of inability; it is an expected part of learning to think like a lawyer. Learning an entirely new way of reasoning, analyzing, and communicating is supposed to feel difficult. The goal is not to avoid confusion but to embrace it and work through it.

Perhaps the most striking part of these conversations on confusion is my students' reaction. They are often visibly relieved to hear that confusion is normal. Many seem to interpret their uncertainty as proof that they are imposters or somehow less capable than their classmates. Reframing confusion as a natural or even necessary part of learning changes the conversation and helps students see confusion not as a failing, but as a sign that they are engaged in the hard work of becoming lawyers.

Keeping perspective on grades

Another recurring conversation that eventually became part of my presentation concerned grades. Because legal writing includes multiple graded assignments rather

than a single final examination, I watch students respond to both success and disappointment in equal measure throughout the semester. Some students become discouraged after an early grade falls below their expectations, while others respond to early success by assuming they have already mastered the course. When those moments arise, I try to remind students that the grade itself is only part of the story. Whether they are disappointed or overly encouraged by an early result, my advice is essentially the same: keep learning, keep improving, and don't let a single grade determine how hard you continue to work.

Teaching legal writing also offers a more complete picture of my students, beyond a single grade. Because legal writing teaches a wide array of skills, I see many different sides of the same student over the course of a semester. Students who struggle with predictive writing may be naturals at oral argument. And other students who write exceptionally well still need to find their footing with professionalism or collaboration. These moments allow me to remind students that they are more than any one grade, or even a semester of grades. When I notice a strength that a transcript alone would never reveal, I encourage the student to keep developing it because it may become one of the very things that distinguishes them, in law school and in practice.

Attention, engagement, and professionalism

Attention, engagement, and professionalism show up more in what I observe and less in what students say. These conversations often arise because of the nature of the legal writing classroom. Not only is legal writing typically taught in smaller sections, but the class is also more collaborative, interactive, and personal than other first-year courses. Students often work in small groups and critique one another's writing. They also meet with me individually in conferences throughout the semester, where I give them frequent, direct feedback on their work. Because students are required to be actively engaged, both with the material and with me, I often have the opportunity to observe not only what they produce, but how they approach learning itself.

This may show up in small ways at first: a student who doesn't show up to class, seems elsewhere during a class breakout session or writing conference, or turns in an assignment late without explanation. On their own, these moments are easy to miss. But because I work closely with the same students across small-group sessions, formative feedback, and individual conferences over the course of a semester, I see them more closely and more often than a professor in a large, lecture-style course typically would. What looks at first like an isolated moment can soon turn into a pattern.

In my experience, a pattern like this rarely stays confined to legal writing. A student who routinely comes to class unprepared, disengages during class, or does not put in

the consistent work necessary to improve is usually approaching other first-year courses in much the same way. When I notice those patterns emerging, I often pull the student aside to talk with them. We discuss the importance of showing up consistently, paying attention even when the material becomes difficult, doing the daily work, and approaching law school with the professionalism it demands.

Although these conversations can be uncomfortable, I often learn something important about the student and how to help them. I may learn that a student is the sole caregiver for a younger family member or is feeling overwhelmed by another personal or medical issue. Or I may learn that a student is working substantial hours outside of law school or dealing with a significant legal issue of their own. These conversations then allow me to better understand how to support the student, whether by talking about self-care or connecting them with our school's counseling, academic success, or other appropriate resources.¹⁴

IV. Conclusion

Legal writing professors are tasked with teaching students how to think and write like lawyers. Yet, because of the way legal writing is taught, it also creates unique opportunities to teach the habits and mindsets that help students succeed throughout the first year of law school. Those lessons are not ancillary to legal writing instruction; they are a natural outgrowth of it. By embracing them intentionally and introducing them at the very beginning of law school, I believe we can better prepare our legal writing students not only to produce stronger legal writing but to navigate the challenges of the first year with greater confidence, resilience, and purpose.

¹⁴ The ten categories from my presentation in Part II are not as neatly separable in practice as the presentation format might suggest. A conversation that begins with attention or professionalism can just as easily lead to the topic discussed in item 10, *Take care of yourself*. In practice, these conversations overlap and inform one another far more than a linear presentation can capture.