

NEWS RELEASE

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW

Future Lawyers Urged to Use Plain English *Syracuse University College of Law Establishes Writing Center*

Syracuse University College of Law – Common complaints of law school professors, employers and the general public are that “lawyers can’t communicate effectively” and “college graduates don’t write well.” Syracuse University College of Law now hopes to change those perceptions and make itself known as the law school with the best writers. The College recently created its own Writing Center to meet that goal.

SU College of Law Writing Center professors list the biggest problems lawyers and law students have in their writing:

- Lack of clarity and brevity
- Lack of organization in sentences, paragraphs and documents
- Missing logic
- Failure to use plain English
- Lack of a thesis
- Judicial opinion (“I want to sound like a lawyer syndrome”)

“Most colleges have a general writing center for undergraduate students, but not one teaching legal writing for future lawyers,” explains College of Law Dean Daan Braveman. “The new Writing Center targets our law students specifically and aims at making them better communicators. After all, writing is the most used and important skill in the law profession.”

“Organization and clarity are two qualities most law students lack in their writing,” says SU College of Law Writing Professor Louise Lantzy. “Many lawyers use legalese and create confusing documents because they want to be considered knowledgeable about things their clients don’t understand. We want our students to focus on giving their clients a clear understanding of their cases and documents, truly providing a service those clients can feel comfortable with.”

“I’m proud that the College of Law is confronting a problem that law schools and firms across the country have been dealing with for years,” says ALUMNI X, a lawyer at X and X in NYC. “Many of our job candidates from law schools across the country have insufficient writing skills and can’t provide real service to our clients. I hope other law schools will look at the SU College of Law Writing Center and seriously consider adopting one themselves.”

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**SU College of Law Writing Center
Tips for Legal Writing:**

- Read your writing out loud
- Read great writing for the general public (ex. The New Yorker Magazine)
- Use an outline
- Write with headings and subheading for clarity and organization
- Eliminate most forms of “to be”
- Reduce prepositional phrases
- Keep sentence length under 30 words
- Give important information at the beginning and end of the document
- Follow journalistic style of the inverted pyramid and who, what, when, where, why and how
- Read writing text books and learn more about semantical ambiguity, independent clauses, paralleled construction, etc.
- Make it a habit to use a dictionary and thesaurus every time you write
- Use consistency in terms throughout a document
- Think about your audience, purpose and tone

The solution

The Writing Center supports writing courses at the College of Law by offering activities that focus on the writing process from document organization and presentation, principles of composition, editing, expository writing, argumentation techniques and legal usage and style.

The writing center offers students one-on-one writing conferences, small-group workshops on specific writing techniques and problems, large group presentations on resume and cover letters, writing samples, bluebooking, exam-taking, time management, the MPT (??), in-class workshops and presentations and a resource library of texts, exercises, CALI, and on-line links and video presentations. An in-house College of Law writing contest may be added next year.

Professor Lantzy says that too many law students graduate thinking they'll be in court all day, when the reality is they'll be in the office writing 90% of the time.

“The ultimate goal of the Writing Center is to be able to tell our students “ we will teach you to be great writers, thereby giving you an advantage in your jobs. This is something that sets apart Syracuse University College of Law.”

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making them better communicators. After all, writing is the most used and important skill in the law profession.”

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An Increasing Problem

According to Dean Braveman, over the last decade applicants to law school have in what? The type of : come from increasingly varied undergraduate disciplines and diverse work experience..

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“Years ago, most law students came directly from undergraduate programs where the student majored in pre-law or political science—programs with strong writing backgrounds. Now many applicants students either graduated recently from majors like engineering, journalism, medicine, music and education or have been in the workforce for some time. These students’ past experience doesn’t usually include training in the type of writing lawyers use in practice – the kind required to make the law clear to their clients and make strong legal arguments in the courtroom.”

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The solution

The Writing Center enhances writing at the College of Law by offering students criterion-based, individualized feedback on their writing through a series of one-on-one conferences. The writing skills covered include the processes of writing; document organization and its presentation; principles of composition, particularly expository writing and argumentation; revising, editing, and proofreading techniques, and legal usage and legal style.

In addition to individual conferences with a writing specialist the writing center offers small-group workshops and large-group presentations. The topics for these activities arise from student requests and faculty and staff suggestions. Recent topics have included resume and cover letter writing, perfecting writing samples, bluebooking, exam-taking, time management, taking the Multi-state Performance Test. To supplement its activities and to maximize resources the Writing Center offers a library of materials on writing, and the Writing Center will debut its web site this fall. Future plans call for an in-house College of Law writing competition and a certificate program in legal writing.

Professor Lantzy says that too many law students graduate believing they will spend their days in the courtroom, when in reality, they will spend their days at their desks—writing.

“The ultimate goal of the Writing Center is to take in a first year student with a medical background, for example, and be able to tell that student: ‘In four years, we’ll not only make you a great lawyer, we’ll make you a great writer and give you a competitive advantage to take into law firms, DAs offices and courtrooms... that’s something that sets the College apart.’”