

READING LEGAL WRITING TOGETHER:  
READING GROUPS CAN BUILD THE  
DISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY OF LEGAL WRITING SCHOLARS

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The intellectual communities that develop around activities like disciplinary reading groups are key to the continued development of the discipline of legal writing and play a special role in building a community of scholars. This past year, I participated in the Classical Rhetoric & Contemporary Law Reading Group, an informal electronic meet-up of law professors, most of whom teach foundational legal writing courses in law school. The Group met by conference call every few weeks to discuss our reading of ancient rhetorical texts, including works by Isocrates, Gorgias, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, with the goal of exploring those texts as they relate to the teaching and study of legal writing,<sup>1</sup> broadly defined. At the 2018 LWI Biennial Conference, Group participants shared our experiences in forming and participating in the Group.<sup>2</sup> I shared how the Group functioned

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<sup>1</sup> How to name this community—as “legal writing,” “legal rhetoric,” “legal communication,” or something else—is the subject of ongoing debate by the community of scholars who study the subject. For simplicity, I use “legal writing” to refer to the relevant subject matter.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Larson, Ted Becker, Lori Johnson, Sue Provenzano, and Kirsten Davis, *How We Built a Scholarly Group Devoted to Classical Rhetoric (You Can Do the Same for Another Topic)*, LWI Biennial Conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (July 12, 2018). Another panel discussed the pedagogical and theoretical implications of the classical texts the Group read. Angela Morrison, Megan E. Boyd, Sue Provenzano, and Lori D. Johnson, *Way Back to School: Intersections of Classical Rhetoric and Contemporary Law*, LWI Biennial Conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (July 12, 2018).

to build a disciplinary community for those who teach and study legal writing. This essay briefly outlines my thoughts about why reading groups can help develop the legal writing disciplinary community.

**1. Reading groups can provide a positive sense of disciplinary identity.** Sometimes, at their home institutions, faculty who teach legal writing courses have few peers who share their scholarly interests. In the worst cases, institutions disregard or marginalize the academic discipline of legal writing. Reading groups, however, can provide affirming spaces for the discussion of legal writing-related topics to which participants are commonly devoted. In our group, for example, participants engaged with others who share their interests in classical rhetoric. This positive identity feedback encourages participants to invest themselves in developing the discipline.

**2. Reading groups can effectively include both novices and experts in developing the discipline.** Unlike a symposium panel, for example, reading groups can be composed of participants familiar with the chosen texts and those new to them. In our group, there was space in the conversation for everyone to engage with the readings. In leading a discussion on a particular text, even a novice can become a specific sort of expert responsible for guiding others through a worthwhile conversation. This development of expertise gives the novice a sense of belonging, ownership of the subject matter, and pride in mastering the material. Experts, too, have a role in being mentors and leaders, helping others to become acquainted with the text, and advancing the sophistication of the scholarly conversation. Interaction in a reading group allows experts and novices to develop a shared vocabulary to talk about their disciplinary endeavors and creates a community that is inviting and inclusive of both new and experienced scholars.

**3. Reading groups can promote collegiality through a non-hierarchical disciplinary interaction.** A reading group builds a disciplinary community in a way that is different from the traditional symposium or conference presentation; the flow of information is multidirectional, both scripted and spontaneous, informal, casual, and conversational. In our group, for example, participants were always both speaking and listening, acting and observing, collaborating and working independently. Roles were constantly transforming as the group worked. Importantly, a unique feature of a reading group is that participants are equals in the community, sharing thoughts, ideas, and problems that relate to the texts at hand. This helps to develop a community that fosters sharing of scholarship and support for the development of new voices and ideas—both of which help develop a disciplinary community.

**4. Reading groups can help develop and define the legal writing canon.** Legal writing as a scholarly discipline is still young, and scholars are still identifying theoretical principles and foundational texts that govern the field. Reading groups can play an important role in identifying, creating, and communicating a legal writing canon. Our reading group, for example, collaboratively identified classical rhetoric texts to read, discussed the relevance of those texts to the field, and argued about their importance. In the future, our group participants can teach others about those texts, allowing disciplinary knowledge to be passed on to others. This process of identifying and sharing will help build a cohesive community and a cohesive field, and other reading groups have the capacity to do the same.

**5. Reading groups can help link professional practices to scholarly thought.** Reading texts related to the theory of legal writing helps faculty ask important questions about the link between theory and professional practice. Reading groups can explore texts to reveal spots for critique of—and research into—effective and ethical legal communication practices. For example, in our group, we explored the connections between ethics, morality, and practical legal argument; the nature of the modern ideal legal speaker; the location of the legal speaker's ethos; and the role of analogy in contemporary legal argument. By discussing texts in reading groups, participants identify practical questions that can be informed by future research and translated to practical legal skills.

In sum, in an emerging discipline like legal writing, creating communities for disciplinary development is essential. Reading groups, like the Classical Rhetoric Reading Group, are one way to create those spaces and can serve to build a community—of people and of knowledge—that takes legal writing seriously as a scholarly and practical discipline.