

IT'S ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR PROFESSORS: INCORPORATING K-12 STRATEGIES INTO A LEGAL WRITING CLASSROOM

Sabrina Little*

Legal writing professors often search for instructional techniques that can enrich and elevate their students' educational experiences. Several of these techniques can be found in a place where legal writing professors might not consider looking: the elementary classroom. The strategies I learned while obtaining my education degrees and implemented in my elementary classroom are the same ones I now artfully integrate into my Legal Writing, Appellate Advocacy, and even Real Estate courses. They work whether the student is nine or ninety. When developing instructional activities, my overarching philosophy is to recognize and appreciate every student in a classroom. By considering each student's strengths, weaknesses, and learning preferences, and implementing strategies that take the students' characteristics into account, my education and experiences in K-12 education prepared me to help each student realize their full potential.

In the legal writing classroom, K-12 strategies provide me with tools that allow me to tailor my instruction to students that struggle with writing as well those that come to class with a strong writing foundation. These techniques benefit students that are always on task and eager to write, as well as those that need an extrinsic push to become an effective writer. They help me address the needs of diverse learners by creating an engaging environment that benefits auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners, as well as those with learning disabilities. During the current times of uncertainty and disruption, I find the K-12 strategies even more critical because they respond to my students' immediate needs and make the students active participants in their writing education.

Below are some of the techniques from the K-12 setting that I find most helpful when attempting to ensure the success of each student in my legal writing classroom:

* Legal Skills Professor, University of Florida Levin School of Law.

Varied Content Presentation: All students benefit from variety in presentation and instruction, especially during a time when it can be extremely difficult to retain students' attention and keep them stimulated. In elementary schools, many educators revolve their lesson plans around creating engaging and appropriate content for all learners, oftentimes by integrating dynamic platforms. For example, many teachers use Doodly and Panopto because they help create novel presentations that offer an alternative to the often-uninspiring PowerPoint presentations to which students have become accustomed and which they can easily tune out. Programs like Mentimeter and Kahoots use polling, quizzes, and word clouds to help teachers continuously assess students' comprehension while also providing students with immediate feedback regarding their command of the subject area. These different modalities help all learners by exposing them to content in innovative ways and requiring them to actively participate in their instruction.

These resources can also help break the monotony in a legal writing classroom. Students appreciate the change in instructional delivery and find it more difficult to disengage, whether online or in person, when they are periodically being asked to answer live questions, draft a theme sentence or contribute to a word cloud about a particular legal concept or case. Professors can also use these platforms to quickly assess the students' command of previous class material or assigned readings.

Class Time as Draft Time: Instructional time in a legal writing class is limited and extremely valuable, but reserving class time for drafting and editing can help facilitate the writing process and alleviate students' anxieties about writing. This practice is commonplace in elementary classrooms and is used to help students build confidence during each writing stage and to create a community of writers. Students get to hear, see, and participate in the writing process together, which meets the needs of several distinctive learning styles. As an added benefit, the instructor is available and able to guide students through the process instead of limiting feedback to when the process is complete, and the product is submitted.

This strategy works remarkably well in virtual legal writing classrooms where students can be grouped into breakout rooms during class. The instructor can pop in and out of the predesignated breakout rooms to provide guidance. The group in each "room" gets the opportunity to hear responses to questions asked by their peers on a particular writing topic. The students engage in the writing process together and share the trials and tribulations that go with it.

Meanwhile, the professor is afforded an opportunity to gauge how effectively a particular concept was taught based on the questions asked and the drafting they observe. The professor can also immediately review drafts. Therefore, using class time as draft time adds value for both instructors and students.

Structured Collaborative Work: Collaborative work is used by many legal writing professors, but it could be more effective if professors adopted some of the practices used by K-12 instructors for group work. In the K-12 setting, significant emphasis is placed on providing students with specific guidelines during group work. In well-orchestrated group activities, students are often given a handout with step-by-step instructions for the assignment, a list of the assignment's objectives, and individual roles for the assignment (e.g., transcriber, orator). Detailed instructions and assigned roles allow students to focus on the task at hand and not on whether the workload is equitably shared or on what exactly they should be doing. Instead, students spend the bulk of their time analyzing the actual content. Additionally, instructors in K-12 classrooms often carefully select students for collaborative groups by considering students' different needs and aptitudes, an approach that can be replicated in the legal writing classroom.

While structured group work requires more effort from professors, the benefits in a legal writing classroom are numerous. Creating guidelines for group work allows law students to concentrate on the writing technique or legal issue at hand when time is of the essence. Grouping students in a manner that complements their strengths and weaknesses allows them to learn from their colleagues instead of learning solely from the instructor. Carefully structuring collaborative work can create a more successful educational experience for all students.

Colorful Editing Process: Editing is a huge part of the writing process at every level. In elementary classrooms, in an effort to make the process more effective and efficient, students often edit their papers with a particular objective in mind: for example, grammar, punctuation, or organization. Students are encouraged to use highlighters to distinguish between the categories of errors or concerns. This technique is especially helpful for visual and kinesthetic learners as well as those with learning disabilities and organizational challenges. Utilizing this visual approach, students are quickly able to self-assess their writing and determine their weaknesses and strengths.

This same strategy works well in legal writing classes during the editing process. In addition to using this technique to identify errors in their writing, students can be encouraged to use highlighters to color code the different components of their legal analysis: yellow for rules, green for application, etc.¹ This technique allows them to visually identify whether they have included each piece of their legal analysis and whether it was done in the correct order. This works particularly well for students who have trouble with the structure of legal writing.

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These K-12 techniques have helped me become more cognizant of my students' needs and have facilitated my students becoming more confident and effective writers. As legal writing professors continue to search for additional ways to keep students engaged, learning, and feeling as though they are all part of a writing community, these "elementary" strategies might just do the trick!

¹ See generally Mary Beth Beazley, *The Self-Graded Draft: Teaching Students to Revise Using Self-Critique*, 3 LEGAL WRITING: J. LEGAL WRITING INST. 175, 183-84 (1995).