The Write Way: Past "AALL Call for Papers" Winners Advise the Hesitant Writer

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The Write Way

by Adeen Postar

Each year, the American Association of Law Libraries sponsors a writing competition, funded by LEXIS Publishing. Officially known as the “Call for Papers,” the competition sparks scholarship, fosters creativity, and recognizes some of the finest writing produced by the members of our profession. Winning papers are presented at the Annual Meeting and often are published in Law Library Journal. Over time, the scholarship has added to and shaped the Association’s collective wisdom.

To get a handle on how to write a winning paper, this year’s judges queried four past winners: Deanna Barmakian, Michael A. Slinger, and Beatrice Tice. (See the sidebar for titles and dates of their winning efforts.)

The Search for Inspiration

A common theme among the writers is the search for inspiration. Jonathan Franklin says:

Sometimes the biggest block to writing is finding something to write about. My best ideas have come precisely when I am not trying to think of something to write about. Here are some ways to find a topic without looking for one.

Read a book completely unrelated to law librarianship. It could be science fiction; it could be sociology; it could be mysteries. As you are reading or taking a break from reading, you might think about how it relates to your work life. How is information created, distributed, or used? Does the book discuss how people work together? Does it raise interesting legal issues? If you can combine the ideas you have read about with any aspect of your profession, you have a topic.

If you are reading a book related to work, think about how it relates to your own workplace or experience. What particularly resonated with you or angered you? Often the best articles come from a combination of pre-existing literature to form the framework and personal experience to tie the point to reality and draw in the reader.

Too much has been made of the notion of having been written-out. This is based on the idea that once someone has written on a topic, there is no more room to write about it. While you might not get much mileage announcing a commonly held belief, there is always room to respond to a piece you read, so don’t be dissuaded when someone tells you that someone else has already written an article on that topic.

Are there things you particularly like or dislike about your workplace? How about a decision that was made that you strongly agreed with or disagreed with? Why did you feel the way you did? The more you think about the reasoning behind your initial reactions, the more you extract certain beliefs or unexpressed assumptions. If you can verbalize them to yourself and write the idea down, you can construct a persuasive argument: a perfect topic for an article.

If you have a great thought when showering, driving, or operating heavy machinery, try to remember it, stop doing what you are doing, and write the idea down.

Michael J. Slinger, a former chair of the Call for Papers Committee, knows the program from the vantage points of both constant and judge. Michael writes:

Many times, I have had persons tell me they would like to write an article but can’t think of a topic that would be worthwhile. Of course, people discover a topic they wish to write about in a myriad of ways. The technique that has worked best for me, however, is to think about a question that has arisen in my everyday professional life. Then I research that question and if I don’t find an answer I like, voila—I have my paper topic. For example, the idea of doing a study of the career paths of academic law library directors came to me because I wanted to eventually become an academic law library director and I wanted to see what I had to do to get there. When I found nothing written that would answer my question, I knew I had a topic that was worth exploring. Next, I determined how to gather the information I needed to do the study and I was in business. If you pursue a topic you are interested in knowing the answer to, you will probably find out as I did that the project is not work, but is instead great fun.

The Rubber Meets the Road

Deanna Barmakian won the award in the New Member division last year. Deanna recommends that the writer start with a question for which you really want an answer. If you don’t find the topic extremely interesting when you start, you won’t find it the least bit tantalizing on the third re-write. Be organized with your sources, even to the point of risking ridicule by your colleagues. I find numbering sources, filing them by number, taking notes by number, and citing by source-number in drafts a good way to go.

Beatrice Tice won the award in the Student division last year. Beatrice offers this advice:

Spend plenty of time in study, research, and rumination before putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard). Such thorough preparation means that the paper should almost write itself. Also, I think it’s important to plan your time so that you can put the finished draft aside for several days before finalizing it; you can then look at it with fresh eyes and sometimes see some startling inconsistencies in your work that were not previously apparent. I was able to do this with my article, and I ended up with a good article.

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up rewriting it entirely, from a different perspective!
Jonathan suggests
breaking the process into smaller pieces and setting interim deadlines.
For example, you might give a month
each to initial research, follow-up research, drafting the first section,
drafting the second part, adding the introduction and conclusion, and final
editing and cite checking. That is
much easier than saying that the
paper will be done in six months.
To keep you on track and to avoid
making false assumptions, try to
present your paper, get other people to
talk about your topic, and have honest
colleagues read your drafts. Even if
you don’t directly address the points
your beta testers raise, you can
mention those points as avenues for
further exploration to demonstrate
that they have been considered
and rejected.

Help Yourself, Help Your Profession
Participating in the competition was
a positive experience for everyone.
Michael notes:
A positive experience for everyone.
Participating in the competition was
Profession Help Yourself, Help Your
Jonathan suggests
The Write Way
concerning the many positives
I could go on for quite some time
my presentations viewed by law
I eventually received several job
opportunities to develop a relationship with many
law librarians whom I did not otherwise
know. It gave me a chance to begin
presenting my papers at the AALL Annual
Meeting, a great sense of accomplishment,
anyway I made a
inspired me to write two articles that
I believe have in some way made a
positive contribution to our profession.

What Did They Write About?
Deanna Barmakian won an award
last year for her paper “Better Search
Engines for Law.”
Jonathan Franklin won an award in
1994 in the student category for
“One Piece of the Collection Development Puzzle: Issues in Drafting
Format Selection Guidelines.”
Michael Slinger was an award winner in
1990 for his paper “Opening a
Window of Opportunity: The Library Staff as a Meaningful and Integrated
Part of the Law School Community.”
He also won in 1985 for his paper
“A Comprehensive Study of the Career Path and Education of Current
Academic Law Library Directors.”
Beatrice Tice won an award last year
in the student division for “Too Many
Jobs, Too Few Job Seekers? A Study
of Law Librarianship Job Data Samples 1989–1999.”

Everyone Is a Winner
There are benefits for every entrant,
regardless of whether he/she wins the
competition. Deanna wholeheartedly
encourages others to participate in the
Call for Papers program:
Researching and writing is one of the
best ways to keep interested in the
profession. I’ve already started
digging into my next project. Even if
I hadn’t won, I would still be glad
I took part in the Call for Papers,
for schoolwork or pleasure, don’t let it
molder in a file drawer. Send it out the
after the paper is written, whether it is
as long as your work meets the
standards of scholarship in the
profession, it will be respected and
appreciated whether you are a
student, a first-time author, or a
frequent publisher in the field. Even
controversial arguments (as some of
mine have proven to be) are well
accepted. Furthermore, the diverse
ever-changing nature of our
profession gives rise to an almost
unlimited number of topics to be
explored through scholarship. Every
law librarian has something unique
and important to offer the profession
through writing. Go for it!
The advice of these four winners and
seize the moment. Jonathan suggests that
after the paper is written, whether it is
for schoolwork or pleasure, don’t let it
molder in a file drawer. Send it out the
AALL Call for Papers or another
competition. If your paper is not
selected, don’t despair: try to publish it!
Research the journals related to
your topic and send it out to them.
For the cost of copying and postage, it is worth a shot!

The deadline of this year’s Call for Papers is March 1, 2001. Each
winner receives a cash award of $750.

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New Librarians
Elizabeth Bennett is a new librarian at Huddleston, Beatty, Porter & Copen in Huntington, West Virginia. Elizabeth had been a paralegal at Glaser & Glaser in Norfolk, Virginia.

Mark Engsberg is a new Reference Librarian at the Yale University Law Library in New Haven, Connecticut. Mark has a JD from Williamette University and an MA and PhD in English and an MLSIS from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Veronica Salas is the new Electronic Services Librarian at Wiggin & Dana in New Haven, Connecticut. Veronica has her MLS from Rutgers University.

John Wilson is a new Reference Librarian at the University of California Los Angeles Law Library. John had been a Reference Assistant at the Law Library for the past three years. John will receive his MLS from UCLA in December.

New Places and Responsibilities
Suzanne Bailey, formerly a Washington, D.C., area Regional Information Manager Librarian Liaison for LEXIS Publishing, has relocated to Marcus Island, Florida, and is currently working as a Librarian at the Tommie Barfield Elementary School.

Sharon Blackburn has been promoted from Reference Librarian to Head of Reference and Instruction at the Texas Tech University Law Library in Lubbock, Texas.

Susana Camargo-Pohl has been promoted from Reference Librarian to Head of Reference and Electronic Services at the Rutgers University Law Library in Newark, New Jersey.

Daniel Campbell has been promoted from Head of Circulation to Head of User Services at the Rutgers University Law Library in Newark, New Jersey.

Mary Chapman, formerly Associate Director of the New York University Law Library, has retired. Mary worked in the Library since 1967, beginning as a Technical Librarian and progressing to Associate Director for Technical Services. She and her husband plan to settle in Tucson, Arizona.

Xia Chen is a new Reference Librarian at the University of California Los Angeles Law Library. Xia had been the Government Documents Librarian at Arcadia Public Library.

Cindy Chick is now the Library Technology Coordinator at Latham & Watkins in Los Angeles, California.

Elyse Fox (Principal) Legal Information Services) has moved from Boston, Massachusetts to Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Andrew Gurthet is a new Reference Librarian at the Santa Clara University Law Library in Santa Clara, California. Andrew had previously worked at the San Francisco County Law Library and the Stanford University Law Library.

Robert Hu is the new Head of Public Services at Texas Tech University Law Library in Lubbock, Texas. Robert had been the Head of Reader Services at Gonzaga University Law Library in Spokane, Washington.

Patrick Meyer is the new Electronic Resources Librarian at the Loyola Law School Library in Los Angeles, California. Patrick had been the Computer Services Reference Librarian at the Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego, California.

Masako Patrum is the new Catalog/Reference Librarian at the Texas Tech University Law Library in Lubbock, Texas. Masako has been the Acquisitions/Cataloging Librarian at the North Carolina Supreme Court Law Library and the Circulation Librarian at Vandebilt University Law Library.

Linda Tobiska is a new Librarian in the Seattle office of Dyer Ellis & Joseph in Washington, D.C. Also contributing to this article were the other members of the Call for Papers Committee, Karen Beck (beckca@blc.edu) and Maria Prouti (maria_prouti@ci.sf.ca.us).