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Adeen Postar

University of Baltimore School of Law, apostar@ubalt.edu

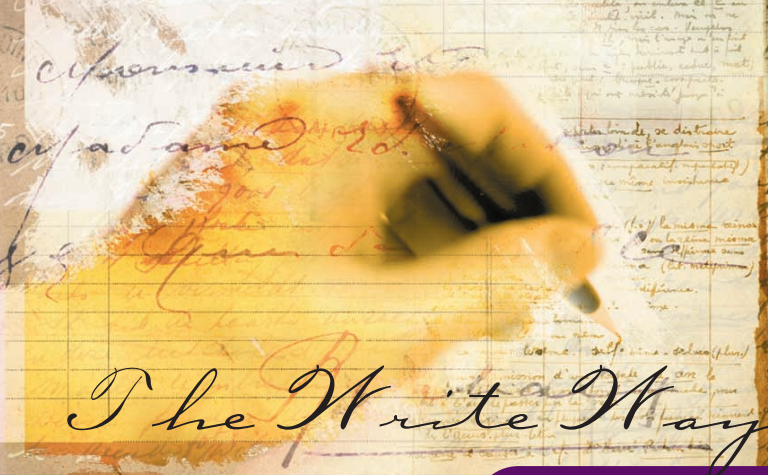
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The Write Way

by Adeen Postar

Past "AALL Call for Papers" Winners Advise the Hesitant Writer

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, Jonathan Franklin, 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.

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 integrate preexisting research, 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 contestant 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

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 preexisting literature to form the framework and personal experience to

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 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 discuss 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:

I think the Call for Papers program is one of the most important events I have participated in during my career. The competition gave me the opportunity to take an idea that I was interested in and turn it into a fully developed article. This in turn provided me with a vehicle to actively participate in the intellectual discourse of our profession. Having my papers chosen as winning entries gave me a great sense of accomplishment, recognition within our profession, and helped me stand out in the eyes of my employer. Having the opportunity to present my papers at the AALL Annual Meeting gave me the chance to interact with many law librarian colleagues whom I did not otherwise know. It gave me a chance to begin to develop a relationship with many of the leaders of our profession. I eventually received several job opportunities as a result of having my presentations viewed by law library directors.

I could go on for quite some time concerning the many positives I received as a result of my participation in Call for Papers (for

example, the generous prize money, the beautiful plaques, the opportunities to publish in *Law Library Journal*, or the fact that my Mom traveled to Chicago to see me get one of my awards), but perhaps the most lasting benefit for me is that the competition 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, a program unique in fostering and rewarding research by law librarians.

Deanna recalls that she began her writing project before hearing of the competition:

My project kept expanding until I was alerted to the Call for Papers program, and its deadline. Without having that deadline set before me, I would not have had the motivation to

summarize, write, edit, and type "The End" on what was becoming a monstrously huge endeavor. Even if I hadn't won, the Call for Papers helped me rein myself in and put my research into some semblance of finished form.

Go for It!

For Beatrice, the most rewarding thing about winning the Call for Papers award in the student division this year was

the marvelous welcome it gave me to the profession. Not only was it tremendously gratifying to have my work recognized as a scholarly contribution to our profession, but it also provided me with a unique opportunity to meet and work with members of the profession whom I wouldn't otherwise have encountered. My favorite "feedback" from the AALL conference presentation came from a librarian whose name I didn't even catch; she came up to me after the program, smiled broadly and shook my hand, and said, "Welcome to the profession!" I'll never forget that!

Beatrice adds that

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 and 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!

Take 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.

You can find a more detailed description of the competition, the three categories of entrants, and an application form at http://www.aallnet.org/about/award_call_for_papers.asp.

This year, answer the Call for Papers. Be bold. Be intrepid. Give it the old law

librarian try. Submit your best writing to the competition.

*Members of the AALL Call for Papers Committee administer the program and judge the papers. **Adeen Postar** (ajp@dejlaw.com), Chair of the Committee, is Law Librarian at Dyer Ellis & Joseph in*

Washington, D.C.

*Also contributing to this article were the other members of the Call for Papers Committee, **Karen Beck** (beckka@bc.edu) and **Maria Protti** (maria_protti@ci.sf.ca.us).*