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Cooking Lessons and Legal Research

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Creating and
integrating
instructional
videos into
legal research
training

Cooking Lessons and Legal Research

By Austin Martin Williams

I used to think there were two kinds of people in this world: those who can cook and those who cannot. While my grandmother and mother are in the former category, I saw myself as very much in the latter. For many years, I refused to confront my cooking anxiety. I lived on a steady diet of fast food throughout law school, and I probably would have continued along this path if not for stumbling across a few cooking videos on YouTube. Although I am not on Gordon Ramsey's level, instructional cooking videos have helped ease my cooking apprehensions. As chance would have it, my immersion in cooking videos happened to coincide with my fellow legal bibliography instructors and I starting the annual updates of our course readings.

For several years now, we have created our own course readings for the first-year research class. As a part of our readings, we included step-by-step screenshots that demonstrated how to perform various research functions in the main legal research systems. Although this initially worked very well, we began to question how much the screenshots

actually helped students. Then I had an “aha” moment: what if I could take my experience learning to cook and apply it to teaching legal research?

Evolving from Screenshots and Recipes to Instructional Videos

When my grandmother cooked, she always referred to note cards and cookbooks. These texts are similar to our traditional way of teaching legal research: books and research guides. In both instances, if users just follow the steps, they will create the perfect dish or find their intended resources, right? If only it was that simple. It took more than a few words on a page to teach me how to cook. Several cookbooks and websites publish step-by-step pictures with their recipes—strikingly similar to our use of screenshots in course readings. Yet, even with pictures, I still found myself longing for more.

I didn't become more comfortable in the kitchen until I began watching cooking videos. My hope was that adding research videos to our course materials would have the same effect

on our students as cooking videos had on me. The videos would be easier for students to follow, and they would see the entire process from beginning to end, almost like an in-class demonstration. And unlike class, they could pause, rewind, and rewatch whenever necessary. They wouldn't necessarily become immediate experts on legal research, but videos would give our students some basic knowledge of the research process.

Considerations

There were several considerations that shaped how I created, edited, and distributed the videos. For starters, I needed to cover each of the main research systems taught in legal bibliography: Westlaw Classic, WestlawNext, Lexis.com, Lexis Advance, and Bloomberg Law. And I needed to cover the major subject areas: basic navigation, cases, statutes, regulations, digests/headnotes, and citators. This left me with three choices: (1) five videos covering all of the topics across each individual system, e.g., comprehensive research on WestlawNext; (2) six videos covering all of the systems for each

individual topic, e.g., cases; or (3) 30 videos covering a single topic on a single system, e.g., Lexis Advance regulations. After some deliberation, I decided on the third option. Videos covering a single topic and system would be much shorter and more tailored than the other alternatives. Students are far more likely to watch a five- to seven-minute video on a specific topic of interest than a 20- to 30-minute video that may include several topics of no interest.

In addition to coverage and length, I also considered the best format and location for distribution. For our goals, YouTube was the answer to both questions. Based on our student population and their digital usage, the videos needed to work on all operating systems and mobile devices. YouTube works on all of the major operating systems, and there is an app available for most mobile devices. As for location, I wanted to make sure the videos would be easily accessible for the legal bibliography students. Again, YouTube was the answer. Students and nonstudents alike could subscribe to the GSU Law Library YouTube Channel (www.youtube.com/gsulawlibrary) and quickly access all of the videos. Furthermore, students could continue accessing the videos long after the course was over when they needed a refresher in their later law school years or even in practice.

Video Production

There are several screen capture programs on the market, but I used Camtasia Studio because the College of Law already owned it. Fortunately, the program is fairly easy to learn, and a beginner can create a quality video with moderate training.

Video production consists of recording, narrating, and editing. Before trying to record a video, take some time to write a script. A script will enable you to collect your thoughts and visualize your final product. A script will also help you narrate your video. It took me three times as long to make my first video because I thought I could pick up the dialogue on the fly. More often than not, I found myself getting tongue tied and saying “um” every five words. Having a script will give you a more concise, polished narration. It will also cut down on recording time and editing. Personal preference will determine whether you record first and then add voice-over or instead narrate the video as you record. Whichever way you choose, I suggest recording in short segments; this will give you time to think about transitions and make it easier to update particular segments in the future.

The editing process will take up most of your time—shortening segments, adding callouts, zooming, and more will all need consideration. Determining which enhancements to use will depend on your own preferences. I relied heavily on callouts, e.g., circles, boxes, and arrows, to place emphasis on portions of the screen. I also used the zoom function to make areas more visible. Be careful, though; the zoom function can be a powerful tool, but too much zooming in and out may cause your viewers to get a little woozy. When it comes to using enhancements, my best advice is to keep it simple. You’re not producing the next *Star Wars*, so there’s no need for scrolling text and special effects. A simple video is easier for users to follow.

Distribution

Once you are done editing, it’s time to select a medium for distribution. For the reasons listed above, we selected YouTube. Whichever method you decide on, I suggest you choose one that’s easily accessible for students. If you want to restrict access to students only, I suggest you upload your videos to your website behind a password or onto a course management system, such as TWEN or Blackboard.

If you elect to use YouTube, you will need to consider the following: (1) privacy settings, (2) copyright, and (3) viewer interaction. YouTube has three privacy settings: private, unlisted, and public. Private limits the number of viewers to 50, and viewers must have a YouTube account. Unlisted places no limits on the number of viewers and does not require a YouTube account. However, unlisted videos will not show up on your YouTube Channel and will not appear in search results. To view an unlisted video, viewers need the video’s URL. Public, as it implies, is open to everyone. Anyone can watch your video, and it will appear on your YouTube Channel and in search results. At Georgia State, we initially went with unlisted, but we eventually decided to make all videos public, making them accessible to former students and outside researchers.

After privacy, you also need to consider how you will license your work: standard or Creative Commons. While standard will give you the expected copyright protection, we elected to go with Creative Commons. By using a Creative Commons license, we are encouraging other legal research professionals to use and expand upon our work, while at the same time requiring that they afford us due attribution. This way, we are providing a resource for the legal research

community and increasing our brand recognition.

Finally, you will also need to consider several viewer interaction features. What subjects will you tag your video with? Will you allow comments? Can viewers embed your videos on other websites? These are all important questions that you will have to decide upon before you publish on YouTube.

One last distribution step I took was to embed our videos into a LibGuide (libguides.law.gsu.edu/researchvideos). The library was already a heavy user of LibGuides, so it’s a familiar platform for many of our students. There were two major motivations for adding the videos to LibGuides. First, LibGuides is a good way to organize the videos in conjunction with class discussions. I separated the videos into tabs based on topics; that way, legal bibliography instructors could easily direct their students to review the videos on a specific topic prior to or after class. Second, I figured out how to embed the videos on LibGuides to play automatically in 720p, high definition (HD). Unless you plan on zooming in on every detail, HD is a must; it makes the text much clearer and easier for students to follow.

Words of Wisdom

Before you set off and start making your own videos, I would like to leave you with a few words of wisdom, or, more accurately put, lessons learned the hard way. I have learned that the underlying principles required to make a good final product—whether cooking or making videos—are the same: planning, time, and patience. First and foremost, have a recipe or script. While it might sound tedious, a script will give you a starting point and will save you a tremendous amount of time in the long run. Second, be ready to commit the time to doing it right. You can’t throw something together in a few minutes and expect it to be any good. It just doesn’t work that way. Last, aim for perfection, but don’t get down on yourself when you don’t achieve it. There will be aspects you would like to change here and there. However, if you try to make the current product perfect, you will never get to the next one—and your next one will likely be your best yet. So get out there and start experimenting with cooking and instructional legal research videos. ■

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