

Library Lifesavers: Bite-Sized Research Instruction

Teachable Moments ... is a regular feature of Perspectives designed to give teachers an opportunity to describe techniques or strategies for presenting a particular research or writing topic to their students. Readers are invited to submit their own “teachable moments” to the editors of the column: Elizabeth Edinger, The Catholic University of America, e-mail: edinger@law.edu, or Craig A. Smith, Vanderbilt University Law School, e-mail: craig.smith@law.vanderbilt.edu.

By Ann Hemmens

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During the 2006–07 academic year, the reference librarians at the University of Washington’s Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library decided to try a new form of instruction: brief research sessions during the lunch hour every Tuesday. These bite-sized instructional sessions were called “Library Lifesavers.” While the target audience was law students, all members of the law school community were invited to attend the sessions. Library Lifesavers sessions were held in a law school classroom between 12:45 and 1:15 p.m.; the student lunch hour runs from 12:20 to 1:30 p.m. Each session consisted of two 15-minute presentations on distinct legal topics, for a total presentation time of 30 minutes per week. The short session length was designed to appeal to busy students on tight schedules and to minimize preparation time by librarians. One of the major goals of the sessions was outreach—we wanted to give the reference librarians face time with the students in order to promote our services and our role in helping them succeed in their coursework and research.

The selection of topics for Library Lifesavers was based on many resources including a brief online survey of the law school community, a review of the first-year legal research and writing assignments,

and a review of the topics covered in our annual Bridge the Legal Research Gap programs, a legal research refresher program held at the end of each school year. After developing the initial list of topics, we brainstormed about how to promote the sessions. An artistic staff member created a nautical image of a “library lifesaver” to use on fliers throughout the year. The sessions were advertised on a regular basis, through the law school’s weekly newsletter, e-mail announcements, and fliers. All five reference librarians and one law librarianship student taught sessions.

During the fall quarter, participation was light: five or six students attended each session. During the winter quarter, when one of the first-year legal research and writing faculty members gave extra credit to students who attended sessions, attendance rates soared to 25 students per session. This type of faculty endorsement is worth encouraging. In the spring quarter, attendance dropped to five or fewer attendees per session. Attendance incentives included offering candy throughout the year and running a “raffle” in the spring quarter with the chance of winning either a copy of *Washington Legal Researcher’s Deskbook 3d* or a \$25 gift certificate to the University Bookstore.

Over the course of the academic year, there were 28 sessions covering 56 topics. Attendance totaled 545 students and 102 staff members. The law school staff who attended sessions expressed appreciation that they were included, and several were regular attendees. At the end of each quarter and at the end of the year, we surveyed students to assess the effectiveness of the sessions. While we received a limited number of responses, the submissions indicated that the Library Lifesavers sessions reinforced the message that the library staff is accessible and willing to help. Another positive result was the increased awareness of our large

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collection of online library research guides. Two of the more popular guides, created for Library Lifesavers, include Word Tips (available at <lib.law.washington.edu/ref/wordtips.html>) and *Bluebook* 101 (available at <lib.law.washington.edu/ref/bluebook101.html>). The major drawback affecting attendance appeared to be that the lunch hour time slot presented too many conflicts for students—student organization meetings, guest lectures, socializing, class preparation, etc. Additionally, we noted that the students usually did not have a “need to know” about the topic we were covering at that moment—so their incentive to attend was not very high. After extended discussion and reflection, we decided to discontinue the weekly Library Lifesavers series and redirected our student outreach efforts to targeted campaigns throughout the school year. Some ideas included offering more targeted research sessions for student organizations, clinics, and journals (trying to reach the students at the “need-to-know” moment) and sponsoring fun student events and relating them to the library (e.g., the weekly Student Bar Association student social gathering during National Library Week). On balance there were many positive outcomes from offering a series of bite-sized, drop-in instructional sessions: we increased our visibility outside the library, we developed our teaching expertise, and we benefitted from regular interactions with students and staff.

Selective List of 2006–2007 Library Lifesavers Sessions

If you are considering implementing bite-sized instructional sessions, these topics worked well.

- Using the Library Catalog
- Finding the Right Westlaw® and LexisNexis® Databases
- Google Tips
- Finding a Paper Topic
- Word Tricks
- Word Tricks for Outlines
- HeinOnline and Law Review

- *Bluebook* Tips
- *Bluebook* 101: Statutes
- *Bluebook* 101: Secondary Sources
- *Bluebook* 101: Congressional Materials
- Fifty-State Surveys
- Bloglines
- Movie Trivia
- Selecting CALI Lessons
- Creating Links in Documents
- Exams on the Web
- Westlaw: Advanced Searching with Terms and Connectors
- Effective Natural Language Searching on LexisNexis and Westlaw
- Foreign Law Research: Starting Points
- International Legal Research: Starting Points
- Federal Legislative Research: LexisNexis Congressional
- Westlaw Cite Checking Tools
- LexisNexis Cite Checking Tools
- Low-Cost Resources: Casemaker
- Low-Cost Resources: Loislaw
- Litigation “How To” Tools
- What you always wanted to know about legal research but were afraid to ask

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