

“Student editors are grand audiences: smart, interested in every detail you can provide, willing to put your ideas into practice. It’s a heady feeling.”

TEACHING STUDENT EDITORS TO EDIT

BY TERRI LECLERCQ

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Brutal Choices in Curricular Design ... is a regular feature of *Perspectives*, designed to explore the difficult curricular decisions that teachers of legal research and writing courses are often forced to make in light of the realities of limited budgets, time, personnel, and other resources. Readers are invited to comment on the opinions expressed in this column and to suggest other “brutal choices” that should be considered in future issues. Please submit material to Helene Shapo, Northwestern University School of Law, 357 East Chicago Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611, phone: (312) 503-8454, fax: (312) 503-2035.

Whether in a scheduled course or in a meeting in the journal offices, law journal editors appreciate concrete advice about their jobs. Student editors are grand audiences: smart, interested in every detail you can provide, willing to put your ideas into practice. It’s a heady feeling. This introduction to my ongoing class, *Editing for Editors*, is meant to stimulate other law journal sponsors to teach the elements of a proper, professional edit.

Each year a group of novice editors take on the daunting chores of soliciting, choosing, editing, and publishing legal articles. Practically speaking, they have no, or little, experience except that they perhaps wrote an article that their peers approved. So it is the job of a journal sponsor to help them learn the rest.

How to Edit, What to Edit

Distribute a chart of professional proofreading marks and offer an example of the errors that lead to the use of these marks. You can find a chart inside the cover of most college writing texts; I use one created by Joe Christenson Publishing, a company that has a contract with many of our journals. In addition to providing each editor with the chart, I’ve also enlarged it and had it laminated

for the journals’ walls. If one of your journals uses a proofreading mark that deviates from your handout, ask the editors to explain their choices and insist that the editors emphasize those deviations to their staffs in small-group meetings. I also distribute a few pages of editing that I’ve done, to show them how a professional edit can look and also to show the editors how few changes I make. In the right-hand margin, I use ink and correct any error in grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, or word choice. In the left margin, I pencil questions for the author to consider about style, transitions, flow, etc. (For instance, I may suggest a switch to the active voice if the author’s overuse of the passive has created ambiguous or wordy sentences.)

1) Grammar and punctuation. At each class or meeting, ask the editors to correct grammar and punctuation errors from a handout that you’ve created: You might use a few pages from an actual submission or rewrite a page from a law journal, adding in specific errors you want them to identify and correct. Have your own proofreading edits prepared on an overhead and compare/contrast your work with theirs. My students prefer concentrating on legal examples, but you can use the Web to find samples for editing beyond the confines of legal writing, such as short quizzes from a professional editor at *Copy Editing for Magazines* <www.well.com/user/mmcadams/copy.editing>.

2) Style. A major temptation of student editors is to “repair” an author’s style instead of correcting actual error. Explain the difference between error and style choice by offering a mixture of sentences and asking whether the sentence requires editing. If you reinforce your message of error versus style each week, you might succeed with 10 percent of the editors. That is, sadly, 10 percent will accept that their job is to correct error; the rest will fight for their right to over-edit until they graduate or until the author loses patience, whichever comes first.

Dealing with Substance

Beyond distinguishing between style and grammar/punctuation errors, students will need to be taught how to edit

- organization,
- coherence,

- lack of/misuse of authority, and of course
- *Bluebook* or *ALWD Citation Manual* citation checking.

Student editors will come to your class or meeting with a preconceived notion of their roles, created by the last year's editorial board—indeed, how could they have a larger perspective? You must provide the professional atmosphere and understanding of the author's point of view. Student editors cannot accurately gauge if it is their job to reorganize an article written by a professor or practitioner. If they insist that reorganizing is a part of their job description, ask them how they distinguish between organizational glitches and actual substantive troubles, and how they articulate these problems to the author. I don't believe that organization is something students can add to an author's article, but they all try—in some Messianic quest to create the Perfect Article. Their time would be better spent in the decision process, winnowing out those articles that need hours spent on major organizational changes.

If they must edit for **organization**, though, offer a task-shortening list of editing questions:

- Does the introduction anticipate the organization to follow? (Is there an identifiable "setup" sentence or paragraph?)
- Does the conclusion answer the questions anticipated in the introduction and either reach a conclusion or invite additional thought?
- Are the major and minor divisions of the article (following the introduction) logical and accessible? Different journals use bold face, italics, bullet dots, etc., to signal divisions. These typographic devices need to be consistent within each book or issue, and the editors should investigate what other editorial boards have previously published before they decide to change anything this noticeable.
- Do paragraphs have summary or anticipatory topic sentences? If not, ask the editors to decide if it is their job to rewrite, or add, topic sentences.

The next task of an editor is to read for **coherence**, or logical flow. Should student editors change or add transitional words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs? Unless the organization is so incoherent that it affects the logic of the argument, I don't think so. But if your editors believe this is

also a part of their job description, then offer a list of transitional words/phrases that they can plug in; if they believe they need to add paragraphs or reorganize sections of the article, then suggest that they write or call the author about those changes. Some authors prefer adding these transitions themselves, believing (as I do) that transitions are part of the argument and can destroy meaning if they are haphazardly changed. Some authors may ask the student editor to make provisional changes and send them; other authors may sign off on the product and accept the student editor's changes. However the author responds, a student editor should first ask before jumping in to alter the text.

A much more thorny problem for student editors is the lack of, or abuse of, authority—when is a citation required, and what if the author blithely ignores his or her source material? You can make a strong impression on student editors by bringing this tension into the discussion. This natural tension between student editors and faculty authors evolves from their natural discrepancy in experience; authors know the material so well that they cannot imagine a reader needing a citation to a "known" fact. Student editors don't know all the facts from articles they read and edit, so they want to add references to outside authority. Student editors will save themselves a great deal of time and anguish if they return a copy of the article with unsubstantiated "facts" highlighted as questions; the author can add those references he or she knows and believes will add to the readers' education. After that, it's the editor's judgment call to add or change citations. However, student editors who seek sources for each generalization and add citations may discover that the author refuses to accept the addition even after all the editor's work—and then the journal has a public relations problem in addition to an editing fiasco.

An unsubstantiated generalization differs from misquoted or unquoted material, however. It is an important duty of student editors to check and double-check the sources of facts, opinions, and quotations that they publish in their journals—no matter who the author is. Where unsubstantiated generalizations may or may not be footnoted, facts and quotations must receive a citation or be dropped from the article. The judgment here is one of professionalism and is not debatable. To teach the difference, you might copy a few pages from a

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journal, deleting the citations, and ask the group of editors to identify where citation is necessary and then discuss why.

Don’t assume that student editors know *Bluebook/ALWD Citation Manual* rules of citation. Take a few pages from a journal and change the citation form to highlight problems with signals, spaces, etc. After they have made corrections, ask them to locate the rules that back up their changes.

Journal Organizations and Their Problems

An enjoyable aspect of working with student editors is encouraging them to create policy and record it for next year’s staff. Many, many journal staffs have taken over within a vacuum—no written explanation of the journals’ policy, publication dates or issue numbers, symposia ideas, discipline, circulation, fund-raisers, etc. These students reinvent the wheel while simultaneously soliciting articles that they don’t have criteria to evaluate and editing articles they didn’t solicit or choose.

Invite the journals to create their **organizational chart** and work flow; evaluate those jobs that appear to have several masters, like three-tier editing. Why would three students edit the same article for the same reason? Then consider what training each position requires, and where the students get that training.

All journals should have a written policy about completing edits and volumes before the staff leaves for the year; at a recent national conference, student editors reported that their most unpleasant experiences involved leftover issues, including articles accepted by one year’s board but left for the following year’s staff. A firm, articulated policy should eliminate most of these cases and allow each year’s staff to concentrate on its own articles and publication dates. As sponsor or professor, you must help them help themselves here so that the law school editing experience can become a fond memory rather than a recurring nightmare.

Encourage students to keep a record of the **number of editing hours** for each piece and discuss the reasonableness of the results. When a journal reports 60 or 80—or more—hours on an article, I question whether the article should have

been selected, or whether the editors just needed something to fill up evenings instead of studying.

A third problem with student-run journals is a political one: How do students **communicate with, and edit, professional writers**? I assign articles from symposia on student-run journals and James Lindgren’s *An Author’s Manifesto*, 61 U. Chicago L. Rev. 527. Stand back! Student editors are seriously defensive about their editing and have a difficult time understanding how professors can feel the way they do about editors. A great debate ensues!

Politics melds into attitude, and you need to openly discuss **professional attitudes**: a student editor’s attitude toward an author, an editor’s attitude toward a staff member, the committee’s attitude toward slackers. Set the tone for conversations about attitude throughout the semester—for instance, you have seen that I ask student editors questions about their choices; I don’t dictate to them (except for rules of grammar, etc.). Also, they see my editing comments in pencil, on the left margin, where I ask questions of the author rather than changing the author’s style according to my preference or whim.

Finally, you can help student journals’ staff deal with **discipline problems** within their ranks. No one enjoys criticizing a peer, but editors must do just that when a fellow student fails to complete a job or never shows up for work. Most law students have not had experience setting policy, getting groups to cooperate, setting appropriate guidelines, and deciding punishments. You can lead them to the National Conference of Law Reviews Web site for suggested policies and advice at <law.stetson.edu/nclr>.

Materials

Whether during an ongoing class or a lunch-time conversation, you will generate interest and educate best if you use actual examples of legal scholarship. To find examples, you can ask the journals to forward a few of their submissions; you can adjust published articles to meet your purpose. In my class, we edit a different submission each week and return the collective edit to the editor in charge of the piece.

For authority on footnote and citation form, we compare Harvard’s *A Uniform System of*

Citation (The Bluebook) and the new *ALWD Citation Manual*.

For grammar and punctuation authority, the journals bring their own resources, and we compare them to the *St. Martin Handbook*. For word choice, we consult the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed.), Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer*, and *Black's Law Dictionary*[®].

For advice on style, we compare the Texas Law Review *Manual on Usage and Style* (MOS), my *Guide to Legal Writing Style*, and any additional stylebook the journals keep in the offices.

I begin each class using an overhead projector to display some truly horrific proofreading goof—

frequently from the comic strips (artists are not grammarians) or newspaper. Students love to see another journal's error up there, too, but I make sure that the example is either anonymous or from a school far, far away.

Obviously, I encourage you to offer an editing course—you and your students will discover something new in each class!

Editing for Editors: 2001 Syllabus

- Syllabus
- Course content
- Objectives
- Course requirements and grading criteria
- Required texts

Syllabus

	Skills	Citations and Footnotes
Week 1	Proofreading Marks Grammar v. Style	BB/ALWD
Week 2	Format Options Table of Contents	introductory signals punctuation between signals
Week 3	Editing for Grammar Standard Reference Texts	3 functions of footnotes
Week 4	Editing for Punctuation Journal Style Sheets	source from another source
Week 5	Choosing the Article Author Relations	parentheticals
Week 6	Editing for Organization	pinpoints, page spans, short cites
Week 7	Editing for Coherence	quotations and omissions
Week 8	Write-ons and Student Notes Journal Rules and Discipline	
Week 9	Editing for Style	abbreviations and spacing

Week 10	Editing for Length	numerals, capitalization
Week 11	The Great Debate: Students Edit the Pros?	
Week 12	Editing for Word Choice	problems with case cites
Week 13	Editing Review: To Edit, or Not?	
Week 14	Symposium Issues Electronic Submissions	constitutions, statutes, documents, affidavits
Week 15	Training New and Returning Staff	

Course Content

This course teaches student editors what to edit within the text and footnotes (rules) and how to edit (techniques). It emphasizes a professional attitude and limited interference with the authors' style.

Objectives

1. Learn grammar and punctuation rules.
2. Learn *Bluebook* and *ALWD Citation Manual* rules.
3. Anticipate "hot spots" in dealing with authors.
4. Encourage journals to create organization and editing policies.

Course Requirements and Grading Criteria

1. Attendance
2. Evaluative quizzes
3. Weekly edits
4. Final examination
5. Final average of 80 required to pass: beginning with 100 points, absences -5. Then, quiz average (1/4); 100/85/70/50 on each weekly edit averaged (1/4); exam counted twice (1/2).

Texts

Required

1. Harvard's *A Uniform System of Citation (The Bluebook)* and the *ALWD Citation Manual*
2. LeClercq, *Guide to Legal Writing Style* (Aspen, 2nd ed. 2000)
3. Texas Law Review *Manual on Usage and Style* (8th ed. 1995)

Suggested

1. Theodore Bernstein, *The Careful Writer* (Atheneum 1965)
2. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed.)

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