

Bluebook Madness: How to Have Fun Teaching Citation

By Marci L. Smith and Naomi Harlin Goodno

Marci L. Smith taught Legal Research and Writing at Pepperdine University School of Law in Malibu, Cal., for four years. This year she will clerk for the Honorable Thomas G. Nelson of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Naomi Harlin Goodno is an Assistant Law Professor at Pepperdine University School of Law. During her sabbatical this academic year, she will clerk for the Honorable Arthur Alarcon of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

We look around the large, windowless lecture hall. More than 250 first-year law students are intently focused on *The Bluebook*, driven to read citation rules, and seemingly enjoying it. A dream? It seemed like one, but this actually happened at Pepperdine's first annual citation competition. And even though attendance at the competition was voluntary, the room was packed and the atmosphere was pitched. The students all wanted their section to win. Many even brought signs suitable for getting on television at a sporting event. (Two examples: *Cite This!* and *Go Section B!*) In other words, our students were actually having fun learning citation.

How did we pull off this Herculean feat? And, more importantly, can you do it? Absolutely. In fact, it's easy. All you need are basic PowerPoint skills, a few campy prizes, and a citation manual. We'll provide the nuts and bolts for creating a successful citation competition, but first, let us tell you why we held the competition.

During the fall semester, as we prepared for a *Bluebook* lecture, even we were bored to tears. (Of course that should have been our first clue that the class might be less than inspiring.¹) So we did what

all good professors do—we procrastinated. We did, however, manage at least one productive activity during this rather prolonged bout of procrastination: We read the Spring 2003 issue of *Perspectives* and happened upon Sheila Simon's article, *Top 10 Ways to Use Humor in Teaching Legal Writing*.² And there it was—tip no. 8: Who Wants to Be a Citationaire? We related completely to the opening lines of this tip: "What's more exciting than learning the citation manual? Just about anything." Simon then went on to explain that she spiced up her *Bluebook* lectures with game shows, complete with tacky prizes. We may not like *The Bluebook*, but we love game shows, so we clamped onto this idea immediately.

A. The Nuts and Bolts of a Citation Competition

But how exactly would this game show play out? After brainstorming and conferring with a few friends,³ we settled on the format described below, which worked beautifully for a classroom presentation and was then easily developed into the first annual *Bluebook* game show for the entire class. The fourth annual competition this year was just as fun as the first.

For the classroom presentation, the students were first shown the following slides, which explain the rules and rewards of the game:

¹ See James B. Levy, *The Cobbler Wears No Shoes: A Lesson for Research Instruction*, 51 J. Legal Educ. 39, 40 (2001) (discussing "the direct link between a teacher's passion for the subject matter and the student's ability to learn it").

² Sheila Simon, *Top 10 Ways to Use Humor in Teaching Legal Writing*, 11 *Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing* 125 (2003).

³ Our colleague Selina Farrell, who formerly taught legal research and writing at Whittier Law School and will be teaching at Pepperdine University School of Law beginning in the fall of 2007, created many of these specific rules and allowed us to use them in our competition.

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The Rules

- You will be given a set amount of time to identify *Bluebook* errors in a citation.
- The official timekeeper will determine the expiration of the time period. No appeals!
- The professor will have the discretion to change the time period during the game.

More Rules

- If you don't know the answer, you may use a lifeline, though you are limited to two lifelines during your turn.
- If you decide to use a lifeline, the clock stops.
- If any student identifies an error in the answer slide, that student earns a rubber duck.

Prizes!

3 correct answers = Soda

5 correct answers = Soda + Candy Bar

10 correct answers = Rubber Duck!

- Less than 3 correct answers: no prize
- You may continue after earning a prize, but any incorrect answer means that you forfeit all prizes earned.

After explaining these rules, we selected one student to act as timekeeper. And we were off.

We selected our first contestant from among the more eager students in the audience. As for the questions themselves, the student was shown a citation containing one or more errors. The student then had a set amount of time to identify the errors and provide the correct citation. For example, here's our first set of slides:

Smith v. The United States of America

25 seconds

Smith v. United States

- *Rule 10.2.1(d) – Omit “The”*
- *Rule 10.2.2 – Do not abbreviate “United States”*
- *Rule 10.2.1(f) – Omit “of America”*

At this point in the semester, the students were just learning the correct *Bluebook* form for citing case names. As the semester went on, and we hosted additional rounds of our now highly anticipated game show, the questions covered the full gamut of citation form.

The game show format worked beautifully. The students who actually played the game had a great time and were delighted to win small prizes. The students who preferred to pose as audience members were fully engaged because they wanted to help out by being a lifeline for those who were competing. We sat back in disbelief as we watched the students searching through *The Bluebook* to find out exactly where it says that you should not abbreviate “United States” or that you must omit “The.” If we had simply asked either of those questions in a noncompetitive format, perhaps 50 per cent of the class would have tuned out and waited for more ambitious students to find the answer. The class even went 10 minutes over, with students happily tracking down *Bluebook* rules the entire time. We often paused on the answer slide to discuss the rules applicable to that question, as well as related rules.

After class, several students said how much they loved (yes, they really did use the word “love”) the citationaire game. Throughout the semester, they

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kept asking for more. (Again, this is no exaggeration.) Unbelievably, quite a few students even went so far as to praise the game in classroom evaluations, including our personal favorite: “I ♥ *Who Wants to Be a Citationaire*.”

Given all this classroom excitement about the game show, we decided to have an intra-sectional competition among the entire first-year class. That turned out to be even more successful than the classroom games, despite the fact that the intra-sectional competition was voluntary, both in terms of taking the qualifying test and attending the actual competition. Here is how we made the larger competition a success.

Like many schools, our first-year students are divided into three separate sections—A, B, and C. During the fall semester, after the students had completed several rounds of *Interactive Citation Workbook*⁴ exercises and after they had received some citation instruction during class, we administered a 10-minute, multiple-choice citation test. The top four students from each section were crowned Section Citation Wizards and they advanced—as a team—to the final competition, which was held several weeks later, during the spring semester. Importantly, this intra-sectional competition was held one or two days before a citation exam, which accounted for 10 percent of the student’s final grade in the class. So the final competition served as a fantastic review session.

The format of the intra-sectional competition was similar to the in-class citationaire game described above. The only difference was that teams competed against each other rather than individual contestants. We asked one of the law school deans to serve as the host of the game show. In addition, we conducted the competition in rounds. During round one, each team (A, B, and C) fielded a question and had the opportunity to score one point. During round two, each team had the opportunity to score two points, and so on. We tried to ensure that all three questions in any round

⁴ See Tracy L. McGaugh et al., *Interactive Citation Workbook for The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation* (2006).

were roughly at the same difficulty level. In addition, during each successive round, the questions increased in difficulty. We also had a judge resolve any disputes about the answers—and trust us, there will be disputes. We used the editor in chief of our law review, who also happened to be a legal research and writing (LRW) teaching assistant. You could use any citation expert, but we advise against using the LRW professors. (That would be sort of like having the coaches at a basketball game decide the close calls.)

B. The Benefits of Using a Citation Competition

As described, the citation competition was a terrific success. Not only was it fun and easy to put together, it also significantly enhanced the students’ learning experience. Indeed, there are at least four pedagogical benefits to using a citation competition.

1. The Students Mastered Citation Form

First, and most importantly, the students mastered the material. The students’ citation form in the final appellate briefs that year was noticeably better than that in previous years’ briefs.

2. The Students Were More Motivated to Learn Citation

Second, the students were more motivated to learn the material.⁵ Of course, Pepperdine students always have some motivation to learn correct citation form—we have a citation test every year and, in each written assignment, correct citation form improves the score on that assignment. In addition, we always tell students how important citation is in the “real world” and we throw in a few war stories for good measure. But even if citation counts for as much as, say, 15 percent of the students’ LRW grade, and the students really believe your war stories, how

⁵ James B. Levy, *Legal Research and Writing Pedagogy—What Every New Teacher Needs to Know*, 8 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing 103, 106 (2000) (“Educational theorists agree that effective learning cannot take place unless students are motivated to learn the subject matter. That motivation can arise either because the material is inherently interesting to students or because it relates to educational or professional goals they want to achieve.”) (internal footnote and citations omitted).

motivated are they to learn correct citation form during their first year of law school?

In our experience, during the first year, many students are preoccupied with doing well on their exams, which is understandable because those scores will significantly impact their legal careers. Mastering *The Bluebook* pales in comparison to getting a good cumulative GPA. And many students will do a cost-benefit analysis: How much time and effort should I put into citation, which counts for around 10 or 15 percent of my two-credit LRW course? Moreover, students often perceive the subject matter as tedious and boring, and the reward for mastering the material as miniscule and remote. Offering an immediate reward⁶—even a small one, such as a candy bar, a soda, or a rubber duck, or a purely psychological one, such as the glory of being crowned Section Citation Wizard⁷—motivated the students to learn the material.

3. Classroom Time Was Fun and Engaging

A third benefit of the game show format is that class time spent on *The Bluebook* was fun and seemed to engage all students in the room. In theory, the Socratic method will engage only the student who is actually on the spot. The remaining students are mere passive learners.⁸ Theoretically, that should be true of the citationaire game—only the student who is in the hot seat is engaged in active learning. But as we watched the game play out in class, we noticed that the entire classroom was actively searching their *Bluebook* for the answers. Perhaps the students wanted to be a

lifeline, or maybe they were simply anxious to test their knowledge of *The Bluebook*. Each question had immediate relevance; we had told the students that any one of these questions could be similar to an exam question they would face, so this gave them the chance to practice. Further, within 20 to 30 seconds of posing a question, the students would receive an answer. This type of immediate feedback helps students master the material.⁹

4. The Students Worked Together

A fourth benefit was that the competition brought the entire class together. The students in each section worked together and were focused on intra-sectional competition rather than competing with each other. Working together toward a common goal—or, cooperative learning—is one of the most effective ways for adults to learn.¹⁰ We saw many of the benefits of cooperative learning, such as higher achievement, increased social support, and an improved attitude toward the subject matter.¹¹

5. We Became Better Teachers

A final benefit of the competition is that you may actually find yourself with a new, improved attitude toward teaching citation. In fact, you might even become downright enthusiastic about the subject. Inevitably, this will make you a better teacher.¹² And everyone benefits when that happens.

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⁶ See, e.g., Tracy L. McGaugh, *Generation X in Law School: The Dying of the Light or the Dawn of a New Day?*, 9 *Legal Writing* 119, 134–38 (2003) (explaining that today’s law students need “multiple and varied stimuli so they can fully engage”).

⁷ See Levy, *supra* note 1, at 49 (“Commentators have noted the positive effect gaming can have on student motivation.”) (citing Joseph D. Harbaugh, *Simulation and Gaming: A Teaching/Learning Strategy for Clinical Legal Education* (Report of the AALS-ABA Committee on Guidelines for Clinical Legal Education) 191, 192 (1980)).

⁸ See Vernellia R. Randall, *Increasing Retention and Improving Performance: Practical Advice on Using Cooperative Learning in Law Schools*, 16 *T.M. Cooley L. Rev.* 201, 206 (1999) (“[E]ven the best of socratic questioners can only actively and effectively engage four to eight students per fifty minutes”) (citations omitted).

⁹ See Elizabeth A. Reilly, *Deposing the “Tyranny of Extroverts”*: *Collaborative Learning in the Traditional Classroom Format*, 50 *J. Legal Educ.* 593, 601–02 (2000) (noting that students learn better “when they receive immediate feedback on their level of performance.”) (citing David W. Johnson & Roger T. Johnson, *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive and Individualistic Learning* 57–58 (4th ed. 1994)).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Levy, *supra* note 1, at 41; Reilly, *supra* note 9, at 601–02 (defining cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and competitive learning; noting the benefits of cooperative and collaborative learning) (citations omitted).

¹¹ See Randall, *supra* note 8, at 218–22 (listing the benefits of cooperative learning as (1) producing higher achievement; (2) reducing student attrition; (3) increasing critical thinking competencies; (4) increasing social support; (5) improving attitudes toward the subject matter; (6) leading to healthier psychosocial adjustment; and (7) increasing respect for diversity).

¹² See, e.g., Levy, *supra* note 1, at 41.