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The Final Legal-Writing Class: Parting Wisdom for Students

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The Final Legal-Writing Class: Parting Wisdom for Students

By Joel Atlas, Estelle McKee, and Andrea J. Mooney

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The last class of a legal-writing course is a beginning rather than an end for our students. Soon, they will have the opportunity to employ, in real life, the skills they have learned in the course. And professors want their students not only to succeed, but to excel, in practice. To help realize this goal, and as a fitting finale to the course, a professor may choose to provide students with tips for the immediate and long-term future in their profession. Below are some of these tips:

1. Learn about the policies and culture of your office. Follow the writing guidelines covered in your legal-writing course, but be attentive to any writing and style guidelines used by your workplace. Ask a supervisor to see well-regarded sample documents and any style guides, but be sure not to create “boilerplate” documents.
2. Observe and take cues from the relationships among the senior and junior attorneys, including interactions in person and in writing. Err on the side of formality, both in terms of your dress and in terms of the way you address people. Follow the general work hours and attire of others in your job position.
3. Begin to develop a strong professional reputation. Your professional reputation begins from the moment you enter the office. Act respectfully at all times. Meet all deadlines; if you cannot, seek extensions as early as possible.
4. Find a way to work with all others, even if your personalities clash. Colleagues need not be friends. And avoid drama and gossip. Be courteous: say “please” and “thank you.”
5. When speaking with a supervisor about a problem, be prepared to offer two or three possible solutions. A top-notch employee does not just “dump” problems in a supervisor’s lap.
6. Treat support and court staff well—they deserve such treatment. If you do so, they will do more, and better, work for you. Do not ask support staff to do personal tasks for you. Respect their work and responsibilities, and do not assume that they exist solely to serve you. Do not expect that they will be able or willing to drop other tasks to handle something for you.
7. Find a balance between being self-sufficient and dependent. When you have a question, consider whether you should first independently research the issue, or whether your supervisor would prefer that you save time by simply asking someone. Then, before you ask, consider who would be the most appropriate person to answer your question. For example, does your question concern formatting? An administrative assistant would probably be able to answer that question. Does your question concern the scope of the assignment? Your supervisor would probably be the best person to ask. Most importantly, if you are struggling with a project, seek help early on rather than at the last minute.
8. When you have meetings, either one-on-one or as a group, be ready to take notes—do not arrive empty handed. Also, be wary of using technology in these contexts, and consider using a legal pad, particularly with senior colleagues. Even if using technology is the norm in your office, be sure to turn off all chat, email, appointment, and similar notifications, which can distract others—and potentially embarrass you.

9. Do not be lured into submitting a draft to your supervisor. Re-write and polish every document before submission. Be sure to use proper citation form; follow any local citation practices.
10. Show confidence, and, to the extent practicable, be sure that your memoranda take a stand. Attorneys are paid to provide concrete, useful advice.
11. Receive feedback gracefully. Do not be defensive about your work. If it is necessary to provide some context for your conduct, do not try to explain away, or shift blame for, your errors. Your reputation will be hurt, and in the end you will receive less feedback. Likewise, acknowledge mistakes, offer to remedy them, and learn from them. Ask specific questions to obtain feedback if too little is provided. The more specific you can be in your questions, the more specific the supervisor will likely be with answers. For example, rather than asking, “How did you like my memo?” you might ask: “Did I provide the proper amount of background law?” Questions such as this will help you to refine your future work and learn what supervisors expect from you.
12. Engage in professional battles rarely, and choose them carefully. In an office, you often do not set the rules. You may privately disagree with decisions made by your supervisors, but do not publicly do so unless circumstances warrant (such as if you are asked to accept a project that you are unable to accomplish or asked to act unethically). Likewise, accept that you will receive inconsistent advice (even from the same person), and react professionally.
13. Be human. Although the life of an attorney is intellectual, remember that attorneys work with and are trying to help real people who have, or wish to avoid, problems.
14. Volunteer for assignments, and apply for positions that interest you. Let your supervisor know if you are interested in a particular area of law—supervisors like enthusiastic attorneys. As an attorney, you will have multiple opportunities to work on a particular team, project, or case. Do not rule yourself out up front (your lack of experience, for example), and do not get overly discouraged by rejections. Pro bono opportunities can be great learning opportunities—seek them out.
15. Use self-reflection as a means to improve your work. After you complete major tasks, consider the choices you made and why you made them. Consider your internal reactions to and your comfort level with the work that you completed. Ask yourself whether you are satisfied with your performance and how you could improve it.