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Critiquing as an Opportunity

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Teaching research assistants

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creating the risk of missing important sources or information.

- **More is More.** I instruct students to gather everything about a project, regardless of whether it is truly useful. First, although a promising source may prove to be useless, you won't remember why it wasn't helpful six months later unless it is in your files. Second, students often are poor judges of what is important because they lack much of the background that the professor has.

- **Two Heads are Better than One.** I always have more than one research assistant during the semester. Although there are some efficiencies in having only one student to work with and keep track of, there are also great risks. First, students have different skills. Some are great editors and some are great researchers. Few excel at both. By having more than one, it is more likely that you will have a complete skill set to help you with your work. Second,

a student may not work out. If you have chosen only one, it may be difficult to get additional help up to speed once the semester has started. If two is better, three may even be optimal.

- **Meet Frequently.** I insist on meeting with students once a week, regardless of the progress they are making. First, the meeting reminds them of the commitments they made with you the previous week. Second, a professor can determine if the students are on the right track if there is consistent contact. Professors are likely to be disappointed with a work product if they wait until the end of the semester to review it.

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Critiquing as an opportunity

By Joel Atlas

I spent most of the last week critiquing memoranda submitted by students in my first-year Lawyering course. The line-by-line edits—or, to be more precise, the word-by-word edits—took approximately two hours per five-page memorandum. The critiquing process, as we teachers well know, can be extremely taxing.

After teaching for the better part of 15 years, my relationship with the process of critiquing papers is still a work in progress. For the first several years, I relied on a fairly crude system of external motivation: For each paper critiqued, I would treat myself to a meager reward, such as a piece of chocolate, a song, or, if I felt generous with myself, actual human contact. During a particularly unproductive stretch, or during a particularly difficult paper, I might even reward myself on a page-by-page or even section-by-section basis. Over time, though, the reward system, even if usually effective, proved to be professionally unsatisfying. I sometimes found myself critiquing solely to obtain the rewards—that is, to finish the critiquing rather than to employ my teaching skills.

My more recent critiquing process was inspired by a passage written by philosopher Alan Watts. In this passage, Watts described the day-to-day travails of a city bus driver, who, to travel from point A to point B, had to negotiate constant vehicular traffic and unpredictable interruptions from pedestrians. One approach to the driver's job—a common yet undesirable approach, according to Watts—would be for the driver to view each trip interruption as a nuisance that engendered annoyance. At the end of the day, the driver would be frustrated and frazzled. The better approach,

Watts proposed, would be for the driver to view the traffic and wayward pedestrians as challenges—as opportunities to make decisions that could make the trip smoother and more efficient.

After reading this passage, I decided to try to apply the lesson to my own work as a teacher. The path of critiquing a paper is, in all but a rare case, laced with mines: poorly constructed sentences, non-thematic paragraphs, and mangled legal standards. But rather than view these as trip interruptions, perhaps teachers can view them as challenges. After all, every student error is a learning opportunity for that student. Teachers should both relish and seize on those opportunities. We should ask what we can do as teachers to make it as unlikely as possible that the student will again use the passive voice absent a strategic reason; to help the student understand that each paragraph should have a single theme; and to impress upon the student the importance that a lawyer state legal standards precisely. Viewed as a challenge, critiquing papers can be not only more interesting and enriching but can, quite simply, serve as an extraordinary chance for teachers to teach. It is well to remember that, as teachers, our goal ought not be simply to finish the critiques but, instead, to return papers that empower students to perform better the next time.

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