

I Can't Earn a Living Playing the Banjo!

Sheila Simon, Southern Illinois University

It's true. I own and operate a 5-string banjo. But even if I had talent it wouldn't be a good career choice for me. The question for me is not what keeps me going in legal writing, but why I would change. It's a matter of assessing the alternatives. What did I leave to teach legal writing, what opportunities am I missing now, and is the job worth those sacrifices?

Before I became a full time legal writing teacher I worked mostly in public interest law. I worked in legal services, in the local prosecutor's office and in the domestic violence clinic here at SIU School of Law. Each of those jobs was a good fit for me. I helped people, either as an advocate for individuals in civil cases or as an advocate for the state in criminal cases. Each job was rewarding and taxing at the same time. I loved helping domestic violence survivors who had decided to set their lives on a better course. But I'm just now getting over having my heart stop when I hear "A Jackson County woman was killed..." on the morning radio news.

I moved into legal writing partly because it was the grown-up thing to do. It offered more job security than the clinic, which was funded only by a grant. And it's a manageable job. I no longer have clients calling me at home with evening or weekend emergencies. But I feel as if I'm still doing public service work. I can choose problems that have public service aspects, and I make opportunities to talk about the work I once did. I know students will get plenty of encouragement from others to follow the money. But if I

can encourage a few students each year to hold on to their dreams of being a public defender or legal aid attorney then I am more than replacing myself. Heck, sometimes I feel like the head of a pyramid scheme!

There are other opportunities for contributing to our world, and they are tempting. It's flattering to be asked to consider those opportunities. But when I weigh those against what I am doing now I have consistently decided to stay where I am. Judges don't get to go to Bangladesh during the semester break to study domestic violence laws. Legislators can't guarantee that they will be home for their daughters' violin and cello lessons every week.

And the law school faculty is such a great fit for me personally. I hang out with word geeks! Do you know of any other group that has so much fun looking up words in different dictionaries and comparing defini-

tions? I can't imagine working on the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle with a better bunch.

The legal writing community is an even more precise fit for me. At my first LWI conference I was overwhelmed by the number of people who, like me, rewrite songs into goofy parodies for special and limited purposes. I didn't know there were so many of us on the planet, and here were so many in just one room. It was a homecoming to a group of folks I had never met.

The Grand Ole Opry will be better off without me. But I think there are some students, and their future clients, who might be better off because I'm where I am. ♦



What Gets Me Through: My Top Ten List

Lisa T. McElroy, Roger Williams University School of Law

What gets me through? I've started writing this article three or four times now, and it has finally occurred to me that, when the topic isn't that scholarly, nor must the article be. After all (we teach our students), before you begin writing, you must think about your audience and your tone. Who's my audience? Several hundred LRW professors across the country who, like me, are just trying to figure out how the heck to get through the ubiquitous stack of papers. What's my tone? Sometimes desperate, sometimes humorous, always ready for the next challenge and the next bucket of popcorn.

So, with a nod to comedian Dave Letterman, what gets me through? Here's my top ten list.

A little help from my friends.

10 It has taken a couple of years, but since I've gotten over the fear that someone will correct my grammar on the listserv, I've been lucky enough to find gurus like Sue Liemer and Suzanne Rowe, mentors like Robin Meyer, and peers like Sarah Ricks and Alison Julien, all colleagues across the country who always welcome a phone call or an e-mail and who shoot them right back at me. When I have a question about an exercise or good news about a class I've taught or frustration pouring out of me after a student conference, it's really good to know they're there. The fact that none of them is at my own school, or even in my own state helps, as each is far enough away to be both sympathetic and objective.

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Ben & Jerry's Phish Food. I've gained 12 pounds since I started teaching LRW. If Ben and Jerry ever discontinue

this perfect mix of chocolate, caramel, and marshmallow, simultaneously crunchy and smooth, then I'll be in real trouble. My husband always knows that the briefs are waiting for me on my desk when he sees four pints in our freezer. "Atkins" is a dirty word in our house.

Circle time.

My two preschool-aged daughters always want to know what I do with my students at my school at circle time. Do we sing

songs or eat snacks or finger paint? I've never broken out the finger paint in class, but Krispy Kremes have saved many a class from tanking. Singing the Preamble to the Constitution is always good for a laugh. Last year, my colleagues and I even wrote a song as the subject of our spring brief problem. And, if there's no opportunity for circle time at law school, I can always count on reliving my kids' preschool circle time over the dinner table. Hearing my four-year-old tell me about Dave, the Animal Man, who brought a boa constrictor to school, tends to focus my perspective on what there really is to fear in life. A big stack of papers? That's nothing.

Writing myself.

7

Before I started teaching LRW, I embarked upon an entirely different career as a children's book writer. Cur-

rently, I'm working on expanding this second career into writing for adults about children, as well. When I just can't take the pressure of grading legal writing any more, it's pretty

refreshing to sit down and write a picture book about an eight-year-old named Lizzie or an essay about toddler romance. Furthermore, because I'm a professional writer, I have to deal constantly with feedback and criticism and rejection (and wait endlessly for the pleasure of them), and I can really relate to the way my students feel when I (finally!) hand back their memos covered with green ink.

6

The hot tub across the street. For three years, I commuted 80 miles each way to my job at Roger Williams. Last year, my family and I

moved 73 miles closer to school. Luckily (I wish I could brag that it was by design), we bought a house right across the street from a family with 1) a teenaged babysitter, 2) a psychiatrist, and 3) a hot tub. Each has definitely come in handy in its own right. Nothing like a hot tub on a snowy evening after eight student conferences.

5

Snow angels.

Before or after the hot tub, get really, really cold, and make a thing of beauty.

4

The Barefoot Contessa. Speaking of beauty, Ina Garten really has it down. What I like about her cookbooks, though, is that she's great at

striking the right balance between planned beauty and improvisation, organization and creativity. She left a job at the White House to buy a specialty food store and has never looked back, and I think that says it all. As I encourage students to do with their writing, she has hit upon a winning formula: find out what your customers (translation: your bosses and judges) want, give it to them, but

don't lose what makes you "you" in the process.

3

Inspiration. I look for it everyday: in store window displays, in American flags flying, in movies (if you haven't seen *Miracle*, you must), in books (ditto *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer), in professionals (my pediatrician is an incredible role model for kindness, patience, intelligence, and competence), even in children. Watching my three-year-old learn to talk when her ears were so infected for over a year that she couldn't hear—that's inspiration.

2

My "feel good" file. Actually, I have two: one in a folder in my e-mail system, and one in my file cabinet. When a student e-mails me

and says, "Great class!", into the e-mail folder the letter goes. When the Dean sends me a note to say, "Congratulations on the activity you planned!", I stick it in the manila file. On really, really, low days, when the stack of papers is way too high and my morale is way too low, I kick off my shoes and sit on the floor of my office with a supersize Dunkin' Donuts coffee and read through the whole pile.

Fact is, it's way too easy to remember everything that's bugging me, everything that has gone wrong, everything there's left to do. It's way harder to remember and call upon the times that I actually got it right.

And, finally...

Actually grading the stack of papers. Sometimes, unfortunately, there's just no way around it. ♦