

## It's Worth the Effort

*Why you should submit an article to the AALL/LexisNexis Call for Papers Awards Program*

**“Y**ou’ve won!” These words are sweet to the ear and well within the grasp of anyone who has contemplated submitting an entry to the AALL/LexisNexis Call for Papers Awards Program. Though thinking of a paper topic, finding time to write the paper, and turning it in to a committee may seem intimidating at first, past winners tell of rewarding and career-enhancing experiences.

In the interests of full disclosure, I am a member of the LexisNexis Call for Papers Committee, and part of my function is to publicize the competition. I also won this competition in 2002 in the student division. For this article, I asked several previous winners to share their experiences, including how they came to choose their topics and what they perceived as the rewards for their efforts. I also include tips from Frank Houdek, editor of *Law Library Journal*, on how to pick a topic, as well as some nuts-and-bolts writing advice.

### How to Choose a Paper Topic

**Choose a topic you are passionate about**, not something you think will be a winning entry or something that will get published in *LLJ*. You will live with your topic for months, and your passion for the topic will carry you through the tough times.

**Seize the opportunities that surround you in your work environment**, whether that is an academic, firm, or government setting.

**If you see a need for something, try to fill it.** For example, does the profession need a new reference or research tool?

**Chronicle a project that you have to do anyway.** If you are undergoing a particular project, there are sure to be others in the profession who either have done or will soon be doing the same project.

### First Things First: Pick a Topic

There are several ways to go about finding a topic. At this year’s LexisNexis Call for Papers panel during the AALL Annual Meeting in San Antonio, Houdek, who has reviewed between 800 and 1,000 manuscripts in his role as editor of *Law Library Journal*, gave succinct pointers. Houdek stresses to **choose a topic you are passionate about**, not something you think will be a winning entry or something that will get you published in *LLJ*. You will live with your topic for months, and your passion for the topic will carry you through those moments when the going gets tough. Also, your enthusiasm for your topic will show through and illuminate your writing.

Another approach is to open your eyes and **seize opportunities that surround you in your work environment**,

whether that is an academic, firm, or government setting. Karen Beck, curator of rare books/legal information librarian and lecturer in law at the Boston College Law Library, was one of the co-winners in this year’s open division with her article, “A Working Lawyer’s Life: The Letter Book of John Henry Senter,” which will be published in an upcoming issue of *LLJ*. As Beck explained to the Call for Papers Committee when she submitted her entry, her story idea walked into the library in the form of an old book donated by a faculty member. This was a book of business correspondence, known as a “letter book,” written by John



photo by Brant Bender.

*Karen Beck, curator of rare books/legal information librarian and lecturer in law at the Boston College Law Library, was one of the co-winners in this year’s Call for Papers Awards Program Open Division for her article, “A Working Lawyer’s Life: The Letter Book of John Henry Senter.” She received the award from then AALL President Victoria Trotta.*

Henry Senter, a young lawyer living in a small Vermont town during the 1880s. Her objectives in writing about Senter and his letter book were twofold: one, to draw attention to the rich historical resources that exist unnoticed in many of our libraries’ collections, and, two, to explore what life

was like for a small-town New England lawyer during that period. She succeeded in doing both.

Many other people could have been there when Senter’s letter book came into the library, and the book might never have seen daylight again. But Beck saw the book as a door opening into an unexplored world and ran with that idea. How did she find time amid the demands made by an academic law librarian with teaching responsibilities? Beck used part of a research leave to research and write her article.

Another way to find inspiration for a potential topic is to **see a need and**

**to try to fill it.** That is what motivated this year’s winner in the new member division, David Hollander, reference/instructional services law librarian at the University of Miami Law Library. He believed that due to the unique structure and substance of the Jewish legal system, most law librarians are unable to provide basic reference service



photo by Brant Bender.

*David Hollander, reference/instructional services law librarian at the University of Miami Law Library, received the 2005 Call for Papers Award in the New Division for his article, “Jewish Law for the Law Librarian.”*

when confronted with questions of Jewish law. So he set about providing a tool that should enable any law librarian to get started researching in this area. In the process he won the award for his article, “Jewish Law for the Law Librarian,” which will be published in an upcoming issue of *LLJ*.

Bonnie Shucha, reference/electronic services librarian at the University of Wisconsin Madison Law Library, won in the new member division in 2002 for her paper, “The Circle of Life: Managing a Library Web Site Redesign Project” (95 *Law Library Journal* 47 (2003)). This article represents another way to receive inspiration for a topic—**chronicle a project that you have to do anyway**. This is a sure way to reach an audience, because if you are undergoing a particular project, there are sure to be others in our profession who either have done or will soon be doing the same project.

Virginia Kelsh, this year’s co-winner in the open division, wrote about the years she spent managing a library renovation project in her position as law librarian and professor at the University of San Francisco School of Law.

Her article, “Build It Right And They Will Come: The Librarian’s Role in Library Construction,” will appear in an upcoming *Law Library Journal* issue.

Then there is the approach chosen by me—procrastination. This approach works only if you have a serious deadline against which to react. One summer day in 2001, I sat in a research methodology class, satisfying one of my last requirements for a UCLA MLIS degree. On this day, we were to tell our professor the topic of our research paper for the class. I was in a panic, since I had no idea what to write about and it was quickly getting to be my turn to report to the class. The professor was one of my favorites, an enthusiastic teacher with many research interests, one of which was the McCarthy era. Thus, when it was my turn, I heard myself proposing to spend the next couple of weeks researching what effect, if any, the McCarthy era had on the UCLA Law Library. So I suppose **sometimes a topic can find you**.

### Is it Worth the Effort?

Beck reports that one of the aspects about both her profession and her job that she loves is the many opportunities to write. The opportunities are there if we have the courage to seize them. As for rewards, from her first days as a new librarian, Beck held in awe the winners of the LexisNexis Call for Papers Awards. “The Call for Papers Awards I have received leave me feeling deeply honored and truly grateful,” she says.

As far as rewards he experienced as a result of winning, Hollander reports that while it was an honor to be recognized by his fellow librarians, what he had not anticipated was the recognition he would receive at his institution. “News of my paper being selected was put into the library newsletter,” he says, “and before I knew it, the broader law school community, including professors and the administration, were offering me congratulations.”

Winning the competition was “one of the highlights of my career,” Shucha says. “I feel that winning this award has opened doors for my career and increased my confidence that even as a newer law librarian, I had something valuable to offer the profession. Since that time, I’ve continued to write for professional law and library publications, started a successful blog, and have received invitations to speak state-wide, nationally, and even internationally to librarians, attorneys, and legal administrators.”

Personally, winning in the student division in 2002 for “Thomas Dabaugh and the Institutional Beginnings of the UCLA Law Library: A Cautionary Tale” (95 *Law Library Journal* 347 (2003)) helped me as I entered the job market. And having the article later published in *Law Library Journal* helped me get my next job as well.

Not everyone who submits an article for consideration can hear those sweet words, “You’ve won!” Is it still worth all the effort



Photo by Brant Bender.

*Virginia Kelsh, law librarian and professor at the University of San Francisco School of Law, was one of the co-winners in this year’s Call for Papers Awards Program Open Division for her article, “Build It Right And They Will Come: The Librarian’s Role in Library Construction.”*

## Tips for Writing Your Paper

**Take every opportunity to write.** The more familiar you become with taking on a project and completing it on time, the more confident you become in your ability to do so. Write for:

- Your library or firm newsletters
- Your local bar associations
- Your legal research classes

**Know your audience.** Think of your audience when you decide:

- How sophisticated the approach should be
- What terms of art to use
- Experiences/examples to write about

**Leave time for editing and revising.** This includes giving your paper to others to read, both those who are familiar with your topic and those who are not.

- Pay attention to organization
- Spend time crafting useful introductions
- Bring the interesting part of the process to the table—your syntheses or analysis of the research based on your expertise

if you are not chosen in your category? Although everyone featured in this article experienced many rewards for winning in their respective categories, including the \$750 cash prize generously provided by LexisNexis, I think all would agree that deep rewards emanate from the process itself. The idea that I grabbed from the ether turned into a deeply rewarding intellectual journey that I pursued far longer than my anticipated couple of weeks.

I followed my topic on and off for the next six months, through the conclusion of the methodology class and a follow-up independent research class, from the attic archives of UCLA to the lofty rooms of the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. The exhilaration I felt on a late fall day as I walked away from the UCLA archives knowing I had found the final piece of the puzzle I was putting together about Thomas Dabaugh was unbelievable. And that was all before I even knew about the competition.

### Putting Words on the Paper

At this year’s panel presentation, Houdek also gave sage advice on writing. Number one, he says, is to **take every opportunity to write**. Write for your library or firm newsletters, write for your local bar

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