

## What is your best tip, advice, and/or technique for teaching or training legal research?

The following responses are available on AALLNET only. For the responses published in the March 2010 issue of *AALL Spectrum*, please see the issue in its entirety.

“Find a way to grab the audience’s attention so you engage them immediately. Use humor or ask an unexpected question or relate an anecdote—anything to begin on a upbeat note. Don’t stand in one place reading your lecture. Instead, circulate through the audience, make eye contact, and most of all, be enthusiastic.”

*Andrea Battel, branch librarian at the U.S. Court of Appeals Branch Library in Newark*

“My tip, believe it or not, is to use candy. When I see a room full of students who look quite disinterested in the subject matter (or the teacher), and who are somehow unable to raise their hands to volunteer an answer to an easy question, I will employ candy as a motivational tool.

“I simply toss a piece of candy (wrapped) to the first student to raise his or her hand. When I ask the next question, several hands (amazingly enough) reach upwards. Hershey’s Kisses, Tootsie Rolls, and Jolly Ranchers work well, as do small boxes of Dots, Goobers, and Good & Plenty. However, I’ve found that Dum Dum Pops and Tootsie Pops have the added benefits of being sweeter than carrots and having their own sticks.”

*Francis Norton, reference librarian and associate professor at Loyola University College of Law Library in New Orleans*

“Keep it real. Allow students to apply their research skills to real world examples and exercises. In doing so, students not only get to hone their skills but also get concrete examples of how to use their newly acquired skills in practice.”

*Kathy Darvil, reference/access services librarian/adjunct assistant professor of law at Brooklyn Law School in New York*

“I start from first principles and explain that legal research is not the same as researching a topic on Google. Although finding the three best hits on Google may be sufficient for some research purposes, finding only the top three cases is not sufficient for most legal research. I emphasize that legal research has to be comprehensive and that you must find all of the relevant cases—because your opposing counsel surely will. Providing students with this explanation for why most legal research can’t be completed in the five minutes that it takes to search Google helps take some of the frustration out of the process.”

*Tracy Braun, reference associate at the Northwestern University School of Law Prizker Legal Research Center in Chicago*

“Try to learn about your trainee or trainee group beforehand and be flexible in your training. Often you’ll get an e-mail before the summer associate, paralegal, or lateral partner comes aboard that might provide background information, including education and/or work experience. If you can’t find out about your trainees ahead of time, it can be helpful to ask at the start how comfortable/experienced they are with legal research. You might find they are very self-sufficient in LX, WL, or other services, and you can tailor your approach to just glean some of the new enhancements or concentrate on the services they don’t know. Other times, he or she could be a relative novice with regard to anything computer-related. Questions to consider include: How much research does he or she actually plan to do? Is the research generally done by junior associates or law clerks? This may be too touchy a question to ask, but if you at least find out his or her comfort level, you might be able to make an assessment on how to proceed.”

*William J. Stafford, senior law librarian at Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart, P.C.*

## member to member

“A lesson I learned the hard is to always set the context for a teaching or training session. As a young trainer, I remember many times when I just started a training session without any introduction to my goals for the session—I didn’t let the students know how this training was going to be useful to them. When I started to become more aware of students’ puzzled looks or wondered why I was getting the questions regarding when they might use this information, I took that as a great ‘lesson learned.’ The old adage, “tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them,” is a good one to keep in mind. It helps both with planning a teaching session and keeping it focused.”

***Bobbie Studwell**, associate dean of library and information services and professor at the Charlotte School of Law in North Carolina*

“Students are unlikely to remember an instructor’s suggestions for legal research methods unless they are required to perform them shortly after hearing them. My best tip for teaching or training legal research is to provide in-class online research exercises so that students can apply their newly-learned skills immediately. In addition to providing immediate reinforcement of the content of the lecture that preceded the exercises, in-class exercises: (1) encourage discussion and cooperation among students in class regarding the relative advantages of alternative approaches to research problems; and (2) allow the instructor to supervise the students and provide assistance when the research process goes off track.

***Tom Kimbrough**, associate director for public services and adjunct professor of law at Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law Underwood Law Library in Dallas*

“I’ve taught paralegals for years, but I think my favorite would work with law students, too. I give a for-credit test in the first class, which requires them to read poorly-written statutes and cases and answer questions about them. You’d be amazed at how the test drives home the value of reading carefully. I suspect first-semester law students are as bad at this as first-semester paralegals-to-be. And it shows them I mean business. I wish I’d thought of it when I was teaching law students.”

***Marie Erickson**, head of public services at the Law Library of Louisiana in New Orleans*

“Nothing beats hands-on training. When possible, being in the same room with your audience and doing live trainings makes all the difference. Our most effective training program so far was with a class of new fall associates. We posed a research question and had one group look for the answer in print materials, one group using an online paid database, and one group using the Internet. We then came together to compare answers and discussed the pros and cons of using each type of source. The associates walked away with some real-life experience, a better understanding of conducting cost-effective research, and some great get-to-know-you time with their friendly librarians.”

***Stephanie Murphy**, reference librarian at Nixon Peabody LLP in Boston*

“The primary tip the librarians at Widener Legal Information Center would give for teaching legal research is to provide the students with as much ‘hands-on’ practice as possible. Whether learning print or electronic resources, students seem to grasp the principles of legal research better if they are given in-class exercises to complete during each research session. In this way, students immediately use the skills they learn, which both serves as valuable reinforcement and gives instructor librarians the opportunity to see which research principles require additional instruction.”

***Brent Johnson**, reference and state documents librarian at Widener Law Library in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

“Think like a detective—or a reporter. Look at the possible question from the point of view of the entity that would have the information: Who might have published/collected the information? Why might the information be created/collected? Where might the entity publish or display the information?”

“For instance, if statistics on religious affiliation are needed, where would you look? We know the government does *not* collect this data, so who does? What reason would there be for the collection of the data? If it is collected, to whom is it reported? Where might the collector publish it, *or* what entity might pick up the data for publishing? Does the entity have a website? If a legal cite can’t be found in Westlaw or Lexis, *why not*? Is it too old? Is it a bad case cite? What other resources might contain case tables/information? Does the case pertain to a particular issue? Is there a treatise that might cite the case in question?”

“The detective finds a body (the need for information) and assumes nothing. She looks at the evidence, views the autopsy, questions those affiliated, etc. The reporter gets a tip. Is it for real? Who/what might confirm or prove it false. Who might want you to publish the information? Motive: Who would it gratify? Who would it harm? Where will the tip lead? Investigate. Don’t regurgitate briefs and well-written arguments—*think*.”

*Deborah K. Showalter-Johnson, branch librarian at the U.S. Court of Appeals Library in Kansas City*

“We try to impress upon our students that law librarians are their best resources when conducting legal research. Make friends with your librarian. We tell our students that we are here to help them while they are in law school and they can always call us (or e-mail) after law school—no matter where they are in the world. If they go to work for a big firm that has its own library, the first thing they should do is go meet the firm’s librarian. If they need information from a foreign jurisdiction, they should look for a law library in that jurisdiction and call or e-mail the librarian. A politely asked question/plea for help can save you a lot of work.”

*Wanita Scroggs, international law librarian at the Stetson University College of Law in Gulfport, Florida*

“I have taught different renditions of legal research, including an advanced legal research course for several years. One of my primary ‘tips’ that I give to each class is” ‘the computer is an inanimate object; it cannot think like you can—it is an expensive piece of metal but it cannot think.’ In other words, the computer cannot translate ‘car’ when you want ‘automobile.’ It reminds me of a classic ‘Twilight Zone’ episode in which a computer is brought in to replace the human employee. The boss then realizes that he no longer has human contact and the social aspect of work is lost.

“This social aspect is obviously key to library services, but I try and stress the importance of doing research and thinking through the process. I talk about the search terms one enters online being no different than the terms one uses in looking up print indexes or digests. I believe that emphasizing the human element in doing research does get some people ‘weaned’ off their reliance on the computer and makes them realize that it is their brain that is doing the research—the machine is only computing the search one does. In many ways, I show that while the tools of the trade have changed, the basic process of legal research is really the same as it was decades ago.”

*Mark Bernstein, director of the legal research center and professor of law at the Earle Mack School of Law at Drexel University in Philadelphia*