

The Nitty Gritty of Writing for AALL

by Paul Healey

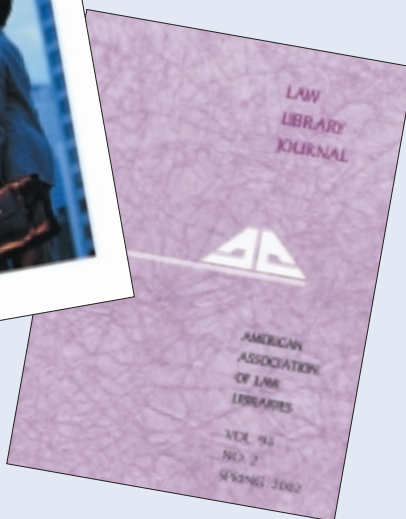
Writing for professional publications benefits everyone involved. It adds to the body of knowledge of the profession, helps other professionals and brings well-deserved recognition to the author. But for most professionals, including law librarians, the most pressing question isn't why to write for publication, but how and where.

AALL produces two periodicals, *Law Library Journal* and *AALL Spectrum*, which publish articles written by law librarians and other legal information professionals. They are different in scope and style, but both are excellent publications for law library articles.

Law Library Journal

Law Library Journal has been the "official" publication of the Association since 1908. Published quarterly, *LLJ* features scholarly articles on law, legal materials and librarianship. It also includes practice-oriented articles; proceedings of the business sessions of the AALL Annual Meeting; and annual reports of AALL committees, Special Interest Sections, representatives and chapters.

Although there are many publications in the law library field, law librarians consistently read and reference *Law Library Journal* because of the journal's long history and solid reputation. Thus, it is an ideal venue for law librarians to publish their articles, according to Frank Houdek, editor of *Law Library Journal*.



"I think it is very clear that *LLJ* is the premier scholarly journal in the field of law librarianship. Not only do authors have an immediate readership of over 5,000, they are appearing in a publication that has nearly a century of history behind it,"

Houdek says. "I think anyone wishing to have his or her ideas reach the largest possible audience with the greatest impact should give very serious consideration to submitting their manuscripts to *Law Library Journal*."

Potential authors need not be scared off by the perceived erudite nature of *Law Library Journal*. Houdek is interested in a wide variety of topics for the journal in order to address the interests and needs of law librarians in different types of libraries. In addition to scholarly research papers and case studies, the journal publishes book reviews, commentaries on law librarianship and special tributes to outstanding law librarians.

For example, the spring 2002 issue of *Law Library Journal* features a series of articles on former AALL President Harry Bitner, an influential figure in law librarianship and AALL, who died in May 2001. The articles include a memorial and several personal accounts from Bitner's colleagues reflecting on how he inspired them with his innovation in law librarianship and as a caring mentor and friend. Yet that issue also includes scholarly articles, such as an analysis of advanced legal research courses in American law schools, the educational potential of Web-based tutorials and pathfinders, and a comparative study of citations in Supreme Court opinions and briefs.

"I really have no preconceived notion about what a *Law Library Journal* article is or is not," Houdek explains. "There seems to be an impression on the part of some that an *LLJ* article must be long, scholarly and filled with footnotes. While I am certainly happy to publish such a piece — and have done so on many occasions — I am just as content to publish a short, provocative essay or first-person account that I think readers will find interesting."

by Frank G. Houdek

Houdek encourages all authors — particularly those who are starting out — to contact him early in the writing process, especially for a piece that is a little out of the ordinary. “This is not so I can discourage such an article — on the contrary, I am always interested in the unusual — but rather because I might be able to offer some suggestions at an early stage that will save an author, and maybe me, a great deal of time and effort later on,” he says.

“The key for me is writing and content,” Houdek explains. “Whether the topic be large or small, general or specific, I am looking for well-written pieces that have something to offer some portion of the *LLJ* readership.”

Because *Law Library Journal* is quarterly and publishes longer, in-depth articles, the time period between submitting an article and seeing it in print can be long. Once Houdek receives a manuscript, his goal is to inform the author of acceptance or rejection in six weeks. But the actual time in which the author is notified sometimes averages closer to eight to nine weeks.

Articles in the journal often undergo several rounds of editing. During this editing process, Houdek will edit and return the article to the author several times with requested changes before it is finally accepted for publication. Then the article enters the production cycle of layout and design, copy editing, proofreading and printing. At that point, there will be another time lag.

“The production cycle for each issue of *Law Library Journal* is about three months. Thus an article that is accepted two months prior to the beginning of that cycle will be published five months after acceptance,” says Houdek. “I have never calculated the ‘average time lag,’ but my guess is that it probably is about six months.”

So, how hard is it to get an article accepted by *Law Library Journal*? “My guess is that we eventually publish about 60–70 percent of the manuscripts that are submitted,” Houdek says. “I stress ‘eventually’ because in a large number of cases I do not initially accept

a submitted manuscript, but rather request that the author consider making changes based on my comments and suggestions.”

AALL Spectrum

AALL Spectrum is a monthly magazine that covers professional trends, concerns and developments in the field of law librarianship. It also features news on AALL and its chapters, committees, Special Interest Sections and members.

Overall, *AALL Spectrum* is looking for informative articles written in a crisp, journalistic style. Although *AALL Spectrum* does include some opinion pieces and first-person accounts, articles should report on topics with an objective viewpoint. To ensure an article’s credibility, it must be backed by sufficient research and interviews. The author should provide adequate detail, follow a logical progression of ideas, and use quotations and examples to illustrate points. Footnotes are not allowed; sources should be credited within the article. For related ideas or facts that do not fit in the main body of an article, the magazine welcomes relevant graphics and sidebars.

Editorial duties for *AALL Spectrum* are shared. As editorial director, I handle the content of the magazine. I work with authors as they develop their articles. Once the articles are submitted, I edit the content to shape the submissions into well-focused articles appropriate for the magazine’s audience and niche. Maya Norris, AALL’s director of publications, serves as managing editor of *AALL Spectrum*. She edits articles for style, grammar, clarity and length. She also oversees the myriad of other details involved in producing a monthly magazine, including layout, production and advertising.

As with *Law Library Journal*, potential authors are strongly encouraged to contact me prior to writing their articles. The content of *AALL Spectrum* is planned as much as a year in advance. In addition, other factors make it impossible to simply publish

10. Write about a topic that you know something about: You should have something to say.
9. Write on a topic that interests you: Don’t choose a topic because it is “hot.” Choose it because you are passionate about it.
8. Familiarize yourself with the journal(s) to which you intend to submit your article:
 - Contact the editor early in the process.
 - Look at representative issues.
 - Pay attention to style sheets and author guidelines.
7. Know your audience: Who are you writing for and what are they interested in?
6. Know specifically, not generally, what it is you want to say before you start writing.
5. Pay careful attention to the organization of your article:
 - Use the introduction to “hook” the reader (but don’t be so “clever” that the reader can’t tell what the article is about).
 - Use the body to logically explain your argument(s) to the reader.
 - Use the conclusion to remind the reader of your main points (and don’t introduce anything new for which you haven’t already built a solid foundation).
4. Avoid using conclusive statements unless you provide adequate support (or make sure that such statements are clearly labeled as your “opinion” and are not put forth as “fact”).
3. Mind the fine line between adequately emphasizing important points (the reader should know what you think) and verbosity (the reader should not be bored by unnecessary repetition).
2. Write with clarity, creativity and imagination. Ask yourself: “Would I read this to the end if I had not written it myself?”
1. Leave yourself plenty of time to revise and edit your submission — several times — before meeting a publication deadline. Let a “fresh,” unbiased eye read and comment on the piece during this process. Try to take ego out of your reaction to what is said.

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accepted articles as soon as they are submitted. For instance, certain issues of *AALL Spectrum* are devoted to a single topic, such as the profiles of candidates for AALL leadership positions published each December or the architectural issue each May. Other issues are devoted to particular themes of interest to law librarians.

Contacting us first allows us to give a potential author some idea of whether we can accept the article, and if so, when it will appear in print. We do receive unsolicited finished articles and make every effort to publish them if we can. But even if they are accepted, such articles often wait quite a while before they are published in the magazine. We must find an issue with enough space for the article and ensure that the article is placed in an issue appropriate for the article's topic. So we are generally unable to simply print a submitted article in the next issue.

As a monthly magazine, the production cycle for *AALL Spectrum* is shorter than that of *Law Library Journal*. Final submission deadlines for articles are about eight weeks before the publication date, but we try to make a final decision about what articles will appear in an issue as much as four months prior to publication. During the last month before the submission deadline, we maintain regular communication with the authors who are trying to meet that deadline.

If you are interested in writing an article for *AALL Spectrum*, the best thing to do is to send me a short outline of the article by e-mail. With that I can discuss with you whether the article is right for *AALL Spectrum*, and if so, how to best proceed. If we agree to publish the article, we will tell you what issue we plan to use it in and often give you some interim copy

deadlines. A rough draft is usually required about two weeks before the final submission deadline so that we can provide feedback.

How to Get Started

If you are interested in writing for *Law Library Journal* or *AALL Spectrum*, first think about what you would like to write about. If you are having trouble finding a subject, there are a number of resources available.

"The first thing I tell [potential authors] is that there are many easily available sources to consult for ideas about topics," Houdek says. "For instance, the *Law Library Journal* and *AALL Spectrum* Editorial Board and Advisory Committee annually develops a long list of topics to pursue for both publications, and I am happy to share that list with those who inquire. Also the AALL Research Committee maintains a 'Research Agenda,' which is available on AALLNET [at <http://www.aallnet.org/committee/research/agenda.asp>] that has enough important topics to keep law librarian authors busy for years."

Another option is to contact me with the topics that are of interest to you. If we have an upcoming *AALL Spectrum* issue that the topic would complement, we can suggest some specific approaches or angles that might work for your article.

The most important consideration is to find a topic that truly interests you. "Even for the best writers, writing is hard work, and it's even worse if you are not interested in what you are writing about," Houdek says. "So figure out what is intriguing to you and then write about it." I second that advice. Your interest in a topic will be reflected in the article you write, thus creating interest for readers.

With your topic in place, the next step is to contact the editor of the publication to whom you would like to submit the article. There are some factors to consider when deciding whether to aim your article for *AALL Spectrum* or *Law Library Journal*. "It really has little to do with subject matter — most things could be approached in ways that were appropriate for either *LLJ* or *AALL Spectrum*," Houdek explains. "The difference typically lies in the depth with which an *LLJ* author can treat the subject."

AALL Spectrum articles generally range between 1,500 and 3,000 words, while in *Law Library Journal* most articles are more than 3,500 words. "Another difference might be that *LLJ* is much more interested in serious research articles than [*AALL Spectrum*]," Houdek says. "Pieces where the author has done original research, gathered and organized data, and then offers some critical analysis of the issues raised by the results." *AALL Spectrum*, by contrast, is looking for objective news or feature articles, similar to *Library Journal* or *ABA Journal*.

Frank Houdek's final piece of advice to writers is to be succinct and to the point: "Write, write, write. Submit, submit, submit. And have a thick skin when you work with your editor — both of you have the same objective: to produce and publish the best possible article."

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