LEGAL WRITING TAKES CENTER STAGE

Grace Tonner believes lawyers are really professional writers. As the Law School's new director of legal practice skills, her challenge is to develop a program that will train law students to excel in this essential skill.

"Lawyers write all the time," Tonner observes. "It's important that lawyers become well-trained writers in law school because often they don't have much time in practice to learn legal writing for the first time." She joined the faculty this summer to begin building a comprehensive course in Legal Practice skills that will replace the case club course for legal research and writing for the 1996-97 term.

Tonner, formerly the director of Loyola Law School's legal writing program, has a dozen year's experience teaching both students and lawyers to write clearly. She has taught legal writing and research as an independent year-long course and as a component of Civil Procedure and Contracts. She also conducted writing workshops for practicing attorneys. She has practiced insurance law and taught commercial law, sales, contracts, and insurance law courses.

In her experience, the problems most students encounter in learning legal writing are problems with the analysis of legal issues and the organization of those issues, not with the mechanics of language. She stresses that analytical skills will be a key component of the new program. "I believe research, writing, and analysis should be integrated and should be taught simultaneously," says Tonner.

Ultimately, Tonner will hire seven full-time legal practice faculty to replace the student senior judges who have served as instructors in the traditional case club system. In the meantime, "I'll provide more instruction for the senior judges, spending more time teaching them how to teach," she says.

She finds it most satisfying to teach first-year students and watch them gain skills and confidence. Brand-new students are enthusiastic, but they are also often uncomfortable with legal terminology and issues and unaccustomed to analytical thinking. If they haven't been asked to write much in high school or college, they may freeze in front of a blank page or computer screen, she explains. The process of writing "helps them learn to analyze issues and organize ideas, and it enhances what's covered in doctrinal classes. Over time, I really see improvement in their legal writing, and that's quite gratifying."

The legal practice course will serve as a "lab component" of law school. "Students will learn to research and to write memos, briefs, and client letters -- the building blocks for most of the legal writing they will do in practice. Additionally they will learn to edit their own work. They will come to understand that good writing must support their goal. They should be aware of their goal or goals for a document, memo or brief and to write with that goal in mind. We are going to do what lawyers do."

— Grace Tonner