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***Selecting and Researching a Note Topic on International Law...in 5 Easy Steps!***

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❖ **Characteristics of a (Good) Note Topic**

- **Original:** A note should offer original research, ideas, and/or conclusions; it should bring something new to the world of legal scholarship.
- **Topical:** A note should concern itself with issues of current interest and/or “hot topics”
- **Unlikely to be rendered moot in the near future:** There is no point in writing a note on a split between circuits when the Supreme Court has granted cert. to decide the issue before your note can be published. Also, avoid basing your note on volatile world situations that may well change substantially at any time.
- **Narrow:** You cannot take on the world in a note. It is much better to choose a narrower topic and consider it thoroughly, than it is to become overwhelmed by a broader topic to which you cannot do justice.

❖ **Hints for Selecting a Topic in International Law**

- **Browse** through recent editions of MJIL and other (international) law journals to get a sense of what types of pieces other note authors have written. Some suggestions:
  - ***Michigan Journal of International Law*** (1979-) [JX2 M762 Y39].
  - ***Harvard International Law Journal*** (1967-) [JX2 H331].
  - ***Cornell International Law Journal*** (1968-) [JX2 C814].
  - ***Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*** (1961-) [JX2 C72].
  - **And many others...**

- Research your area of interest in **journals of other disciplines**. This can give a valuable interdisciplinary perspective, and may give rise to some ideas that can be translated to a legal note topic. Some suggestions:
  - **Expanded Academic ASAP** (1998-present): Index database of journal and newspaper articles across all academic disciplines. Some full-text. Click on "LegalTrac" on the Law Library homepage, then choose the Expanded Academic database to search.
  - **Networked Electronic Resources on the MIRLYN Homepage**: Links to numerous electronic resources across all academic disciplines.
- Keep a **research log**. You will thank me (and yourself). As you proceed with topic research, you will be gathering many pieces of information that you may or may not end up using for your note. Devise a system to keep track of that information, so you do not ever have to re-do research to find something again that you already found once.
- Stay **organized**. This comes naturally to some people, and is a foreign concept to others. Try to do it, anyway. You will feel much more in control of this project if it is organized; otherwise, you may start to feel as though IT is controlling YOU.

#### ❖ **Selecting a Topic in International Law: STEP 1**

- **Ask yourself two questions:**
  - #1: What areas of international law am I genuinely, honestly **interested in**?
  - #2: What are international law topics of **current interest**?
- Write down your answers to these questions.

#### ❖ **Selecting a Topic in International Law: STEP 2**

- With the information from Step 1 in mind, do **topic research**.
- The goal of topic research is to **find a thread that is narrow enough to cover thoroughly, is topical and interesting, and about which you can say something new**.

- Using the information from Step 1, brainstorm some **key words and phrases** that cover your area of interest. Then, **search** those key words and phrases in various types of databases to locate relevant materials.
  
- **Current Awareness Databases: Some Suggestions**
  - **LEXIS**
    - For **general national and world news**, look in the "News Group File" in the Most Recent 60 Days, 90 Days and/or 2 Years databases.
    - For **international news and current issues**, look in the "News>By Country or Region" file. There are numerous international publications here, all current.
    - For **EU-related news and current issues**, look in the "EC News-International Law (EC NEWS)," "RAPID," and/or "European Insight" (EURINS) databases.
  
  - **Westlaw**
    - For **general national and world news**, look in the "ALLNEWS" file.
    - For **international news and current issues**, look in the "International/Worldwide Materials" folder under "News and Business."
    - For **EU-related news and current issues**, look in the "European Update (EURUPDATE)," "PTS NEWS," "European Report (EUROREP)," and "Spicers Abstracts (SPICERSEU)" databases.
  
  - ***Keeping Current with International Law and Developments via the Web*** <<http://www.llrx.com/features/keeping.htm>>. An **excellent** website; **highly recommended!** Suggestions and links to current awareness tools on the web. Prepared by a law librarian, so sure to be good!
  
  - ***Yahoo! World News*** <<http://dailynews.yahoo.com/headlines/wl/>>. A scholarly use for Yahoo...who knew! Very 9/11/01-oriented right now, but does cover other events in the world. Also has country-specific links, such as Yahoo!UK & Ireland, Yahoo!Argentina, etc. Beware...not all pages are translated into English!
  
  - ***Hieros Gamos Legal News Center*** <<http://www.hg.org/newschart.html>>. Includes a section on "International Law News."

- **Europa** <<http://europa.eu.int/index.htm>>; also linked through Law Library home page. The vast, interinstitutional server for the European Union. Includes a "News" section, with a list of "Key Issues" for the EU.

➤ **Journal Indexes and Databases: Some Suggestions**

- **Do not use Lexcalibur!** Lexcalibur does not catalog at the article level; it catalogs only at the journal level. For instance, Lexcalibur will tell you that we hold the Harvard Law Review, but it won't tell you which authors or articles are published therein.
- **LegalTrac.** Index database, linked through Law Library home page; 1980-present. Indexes articles in all major law reviews, law journals, bar association journals and legal newspapers. Some full text.
  - Use "Keyword Search" option to start; then use "Subject Search" option when you've identified relevant subjects from articles found in the keyword search. LegalTrac has its own set of subject headings, so the Library of Congress headings you're used to using in Lexcalibur will not necessarily work here.
- **Index to Legal Periodicals and Books.** In paper in the Reference Collection [Indexes Index to], 1908-present. Online, linked through the Law Library home page, 1981-present. Indexes articles in legal journals, yearbooks, institutes, bar association journals, law reviews, and government publications.
- **European Integration Current Contents:** Linked through Law Library home page. Covers most recent two years. Updated biweekly. Provides access to the tables of contents of journals relevant in European Integration research, including law, human rights, economics, history and political sciences. Currently covers 109 journals published in nine languages and 14 countries. Where available, abstracts are also included.
- **RAVE:** Linked through Law Library home page. 1995-present. Updated every 3 months. Contains citations to decisions, articles, and essays in public international law and European law. Links to cited material are provided when possible.
- **Public International Law: A Biography of Current Sources** [Ref Coll: Bibliog Pulbic i]. A paper source! Published twice yearly.

- ***Index to Foreign Legal Periodicals:*** Linked through Law Library home page. Covers 1985-present. Updated quarterly. Index of articles and book reviews from more than 450 legal periodicals, including journals, essay collections, festschriften, and congress reports. Covers international law (public and private), comparative law, and municipal law of countries other than the United States, British Isles, and British Commonwealth.
- ***Legal Journals Index:*** In paper at [Ref Coll: Indexes Legal jo]; also on Westlaw (LJI-INDX). Covers 1986-present. Indexes articles from legal journals published in the United Kingdom and Europe and journals covering topics pertaining to the laws of the European Community and member states.
- ***MIRLYN: Networked Electronic Resources:*** The home page of the University library. Linked from Law Library home page. Click on "Networked Electronic Resources" to find links to literally hundreds of useful resources. Give it a browse – you may be surprised at what you'll find!

➤ **Books: Some Suggestions**

- **LEXCALIBUR:** The Law Library online catalog.
- **Mentor:** The Business Library online catalog.
- **MIRLYN:** The University libraries online catalog (i.e., everything else!)
- Use keyword searches to start. When you've identified some subject headings that are relevant, switch to subject searches.
- Order your retrieval lists by date, for efficiency.

➤ **You'll Know You're Done with Topic Research When...**

- You can write a one-sentence description of your topic (a thesis statement!).

### ❖ **Selecting a Topic in International Law: STEP 3**

- You must make sure that your potential **topic has not been “written out.”**
- Using key terms from your thesis statement, run searches AGAIN in LegalTrac, Current Index, and other databases to make sure no one has already written your note.
- Read any articles that are on similar topics to yours. Determine whether you plan to say something different. For example, will yours be a political vs. a technological perspective? Supportive vs. critical? Are you able to incorporate new cases or concepts?
- If you discover 13 articles on your topic and/or you cannot think of anything new to say, repeat Step 2.

### ❖ **Selecting a Topic in International Law: STEP 4**

- When you're happy with your topic, **check with your editor.** Her final approval means it's a go!

### ❖ **Selecting a Topic in International Law: STEP 5**

- Now it's time to begin **focused research.**
- Brainstorm and/or use a thesaurus to create an exhaustive list of search terms for your topic.
- Search the databases, catalogs and indexes discussed above for secondary sources. Yes, you are doing it all over again, but this time you have a different research goal!
- Search for primary sources (cases, statutes, treaties, etc.).
- “Follow the trail” of citations...follow up cites in primary and secondary sources, both forward and backward in time, to locate relevant materials.
- Remember, if you will need materials that are not available on campus, order them early through Interlibrary Loan. If you even think that it's merely a possibility that you will need something, order it anyway. It can take up to 4 weeks to receive ILL'd materials!

- **You'll know you're done with focused research when** your research comes full circle; when you start seeing the same cites over and over again.

❖ **Some Final Thoughts...**

- **Do not put this off!** Start early. Start now. No matter how much time you think this will take, it will take more. That is reality; accept it. Don't sabotage yourself by procrastinating. Commit to spending x number of hours per week on this project; treat it like a class or a job. You'll be glad you did!
- Remember, **ask us!** Reference librarians are here to help you, Sunday through Friday, from 9-6. Call us, e-mail us, or stop by and talk to us. We want to help!
- **So, get started! Have fun! (it IS fun)...and keep us involved in the process!!**