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

Beatrice Tice,  
Foreign and Comparative Law Librarian  
btice@umich.edu  
4-6151

❖ **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**

- **Browse** through recent editions of high-quality law journals (including your own!) to get a sense of what types of pieces other note authors have written. If you are interested in a particular area of law, find subject-specific journals that address your area of interest. In addition to Michigan journals, here are some suggestions:
  - ***Harvard Law Review*** (1887-) [Eng Per Harvard].
  - ***Stanford Law Review*** (1948-) [Eng Per Stanford].
  - ***Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*** (1998-) [Eng Per Columbia].
  - ***Stanford Technology Law Review*** (1997-) [Electronic]
  - ***Rutgers Race and the Law Review*** (1961-) [Eng Per Rutgers].
  - **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:
  - **Networked Electronic Resources on the MIRLYN Homepage:** Links to numerous electronic resources across all academic disciplines. Try, in particular, the following:
    - **InfoTracWeb:** Access to broad periodical indexes, some with full-text sources.
    - **OCLC FirstSearch:** Access to over 60 databases covering 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 Note Topic: STEP 1**

- **Ask yourself two questions:**
  - #1: What areas of law am I genuinely, honestly **interested in**?
  - #2: What are 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 **science and technology-related news**, look in the "Science and Technology" File, under the "News and Business" tab.

- **Westlaw**

- For **general national and world news**, look in the "ALLNEWS" file.
- For **legal news**, look under the "Legal News, Highlights, and Notable Trials" section of the Westlaw Directory.

- ***Current Awareness and Legal News Sources***

- <<http://www.colorado.edu/Law/lawlib/faculty/current2.html>>. Provides links to many online sources.

- ***Yahoo! World News***

- <<http://dailynews.yahoo.com/headlines/wl/>>. A scholarly use for Yahoo...who knew!

- ***Hieros Gamos Legal News Center***

- <<http://www.hg.org/newschart.html>>. Another compilation of online current awareness sources.

**...and many others.** Do a general web search on "law current awareness" or other subject-specific search to find them!

- **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.
- ***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 9-5. Call us, e-mail us, or stop by and talk to us. We want to help!
- **So, get started! Have fun! ...and keep us involved in the process!!**