

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LAW LIBRARY  
REFERENCE DEPARTMENT

***Selecting and Researching a Note Topic on Race & Law***

Beatrice Tice,  
Senior Associate Reference Librarian  
btice@umich.edu  
764-6151  
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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 social, political, or 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. Look at both general journals and special-interest journals devoted to race and law issues. In addition to Michigan journals, here are some suggestions:
  - ***Harvard Law Review*** (1887-) [Eng Per Harvard].
  - ***Stanford Law Review*** (1948-) [Eng Per Stanford].
  - ***Yale Law Journal*** (1892-) [Eng Per Yale law].
  - ***Rutgers Race and the Law Review*** (1961-) [Eng Per Rutgers].
  - ***Margins: Maryland's Law Journal on Race, Religion, Gender, and Class*** (2001-) [Eng Per Margins].
  - ***Washington and Lee Race and Ethnic Ancestry Law Journal*** (2000-) [Eng Per Washingt].
  - ***Wisconsin Multi-Cultural Law Journal*** (1991-) [Eng Per WI multi].
  - ***African-American Law And Policy Report*** (1994-) [Eng Per African-].
  - ***The Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice*** (1997-) [Eng Per Journal].

- 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** that also interest me?
- Make a list of your answers to these questions.
- Combine/cut down the list to no more than three items.
- *E.g.:*
  - Initial list: Labor law issues, international legal topics, history of law, China's accession to the WTO, the ILO as a lobbying body on behalf of labor issues
  - Final list: Labor law issues surrounding China's accession to the WTO, possibly also involving activities of the ILO. Perhaps from historical viewpoint.

### ❖ **Selecting a Note Topic: 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 databases and indexes to locate relevant materials.
- Gather the relevant materials and skim the information. As you educate yourself about your targeted areas, you should be trying to narrow, change, or discard topics based on what you discover.

➤ **Finding Books**

- **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.

➤ **Finding Periodical Articles**

- **Do not use Lexcalibur or other library catalogs!** 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.
- 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. Use MIRLYN, the University Libraries catalog, to search for these journals. Some suggestions:
- **Networked Electronic Resources on the MIRLYN Homepage:** Links to numerous electronic resources, including periodical indexes, 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. Look particularly at ArticleFirst for periodical articles.
- **WilsonWeb:** Another major aggregate of multi-disciplinary databases, including periodical indexes.

➤ **Finding Current Awareness Sources**

- **LEXIS**
  - Click on the "News & Business" tab. For general news, search one of the News Group Files, organized chronologically. For other news, click on "By Industry and Topic," then choose "Legal" or "Ethnic."
- **Westlaw**
  - Select a category in the "News Sources" drop-down box.
- **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.
- **Civil Rights Project (Harvard University)**  
<<http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/>>. Links to news, research, and resources on civil rights issues.
- **Race, Racism, and American Law Bibliography**  
<<http://www.dsl.psu.edu/library/lrr/guides/Race/>>. Research guide for race-related sources.

...and many others.

➤ **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: 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: STEP 4**

- When you're happy with your topic, **follow MJRL's procedures for note topic approval.**

❖ **Selecting a Topic: 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.

❖ **If you need help...**

- **Ask us!** The Reference Desk is staffed from 9 am to midnight, 7 days a week. Reference librarians are available from 9 am to 8 pm, Mondays through Wednesdays; from 9 am to 6 pm, Thursdays and Fridays; and from 10 am to 7 pm on Sundays. We are also available by appointment for individual consultations.