

## Faculty Information Literacy Stipend Final Report

**Name:** Joe Kobyłka

**Course:** PLSC 4332, “The Supreme Court Seminar”

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### Introduction

The assignment that utilized information literacy skills is the core of a seminar that I’ve now taught six times: a 25-40 (for a couple of students 45+) page original research paper. Part of the research is “traditional” library-based work – scouting legal, political science, and history literature to help identify 1) an interesting topic, 2) a viable research question that can be addressed with resources available, and 3) different scholarly “takes” on that question. All of these tasks involve extensive and informed info literacy skills.

This “library” research work set the students up for the archival work they did over five days of spring break in the Madison Building of the Library of Congress. Here they used skills I taught them, augmented by the work of LC librarians Bruce Kirby and Ryan Reft, when working in the papers of the Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court that are housed in the Manuscript Reading Room.

Megan Heuer’s presentations to the seminar – one online on 6 February as students were thinking about topic selection and research question formulation, one in person on 11 April helping the students hone and fine-tune their search for secondary material after working in the Library of Congress and sharpening still their research topics/questions – were central in orienting and focusing their scholarly research and the papers that flowed from it.

### Description of the information literacy assignment or activities

There wasn’t a *specific information literacy assignment* other than an assignment to use online finding aids to identify specific justices’ papers and the boxes that housed them that contained files on *Brown v. Board of Education*. That assignment is below:

[This link takes you to the four consolidated cases that we call \*Brown v. Board of Education\*](#). Your task here is to identify **all** of the Justices’ *papers* and *boxes* with files relevant to the decision.

DO THIS ASSIGNMENT *SOLELY ON YOUR OWN*. Do not consult with your colleagues. What you hand in to me on paper at the beginning of class on Thursday, 16 February must be solely the result of **your own** work.

The assignments that *used* the literacy skills taught in the course were 1) the topic/research question proposal, 2) the prospectus and research design paper, and 3) the final research paper. Instructional guides and rubrics in the included appendix.

## Method of assessment

Students were assessed on 1) topic/research question, 2) prospectus/research design, 3) draft introduction to the final paper, and 4) the final 25-40 pp research paper. The methods of assessment were me reading/commenting/discussing the work with the students; they also did peer review of one another's work. The week we were in D.C. working in the Library they were living, eating, traveling with one another 24/7, so they reinforced and advanced one another's learning experience. It truly was "engaged learning."

The course evaluations were very strong. They seemed pleased – one should never be *satisfied* – with what they accomplished.

Artifacts are the papers they wrote and the class presentations they gave. Two of the best papers are attached to the email that conveys this report.

## Results and impact on student learning

Every student but one improved their work and project through the steps described above and demonstrated in the assessment flow in the appendices below.

Here are some comments from anonymous student course evaluations.

- The accessibility of Dr. Kobyłka made this class more manageable; he always had wise input for my questions. Additionally, I felt pushed in a way that I knew was preparing me for my future academics and career, but it was done so in a way that was still supportive of my learning style.
- Obviously, I would say the DC trip, this was such a cool experience and I enjoyed every second of it. It was such a cool way to get to go deeper into topics we were interested in and for Supreme Court nerds, getting to go through these papers and see original copies of memos was so incredible.
- Professor Kobyłka's feedback and critique on assignments, helped me improve my work. Also, the opportunity to do research with primary sources at the Library of Congress benefited my education
- Our research trip to DC was the first time that I'd done academic research. It was an important learning experience for me and taught me a lot about staying organized and limiting the scope of my research questions
- The elements of the course that contributed the most to my learning were the class lectures and the writing assignments....The writing assignments, including preparing our prospectus and our draft introduction, were very helpful. Receiving feedback on these assignments helped guide me in writing my thesis. Also, our trip to DC and researching in the Library of Congress not only contributed immensely to my learning in the class, but the trip was a once in a lifetime experience. This class was a highlight of my time at SMU.

## Summary and next steps

I think that the enhanced emphasis on information literacy skills greatly benefited the students in the seminar. Megan's appearances in class were very helpful as they familiarized the students with

her and led them to be more comfortable in asking questions of her they might not have asked otherwise. The sequence of topic acquisition, research question conceptualization, project design, and project execution makes sense and is helpful to students; it creates an order rather than suggesting they just sit down and write.

That said, the two biggest issues I've had with student preparation for researching and writing the research paper were 1) focus and 2) organization. They are obviously linked.

**FOCUS:** Moving the students past the idea of a general topic to a narrower aspect of it and then, once there, getting them to focus on one or two closely researchable questions; there is, even in our best students, a high-school tendency to mushroom questions and lose their focus. If *everything* is interesting then *nothing* is interesting. Once they develop that focus, getting them to *take the time* to use the search tools Megan and I introduced them to *well* and not just grab the first few pieces they turn up regardless of their close fit to the question(s) they are investigating. There is still a "this is close enough" sense we need to get them past... the classic "if I read it, it is going into the paper" mindset.

**ORGANIZATION:** There is a difference between writing an essay and a research paper, and many college students struggle with this. The paper asked the students to think in terms of "sections" and "subsections" of their research and writing. The prospectus/research design asked them to outline the path their research and writing. My discussions with students – and Megan's presentations to them – stressed the different components of this process: setting the question to be addressed and its significance, laying out how others have addressed it, and then addressing it oneself with the data the student assembled. This is important in both researching and writing and, when done well, compartmentalizes the process and makes it easier... more seamless. This seems alien to many students. They have never outlined, don't see its utility – again, in both research and writing – and think of section headings and subheadings – even though the pieces they read in class and in their research all have them – as almost arbitrary.

One student suggested a possible remedy in their evaluation:

I think a couple class sessions on academic writing and paper organization / workshops would have been helpful. While most of us do have some experience writing longer papers, I think that introducing a unit (2ish) classes on how Dr. Kobyłka thinks about structuring and writing would have been really valuable, interesting, and informative. While I think visits from our SMU librarian were helpful, most of the folks in the seminar who I chatted with are comfortable / familiar with the tools she reviewed already. Maybe having an assignment where students make an appointment to go chat with her on their own would be a good substitute for her in-class lectures

I am somewhat loathe to take a week of classes to teach how to write academically because I have a lot of course-specific substantive material to cover, but it might be beneficial to give an early in the semester class over to something of a practicum on researching/writing an academic paper. Doing so in conjunction with Megan – who really is a delight to work with! – and then *strongly encouraging* students to make individual appointments with us, and to do so *well before the paper is due* (always

a problem), to fine-tune what we talked about in respect to their topic/question/research might help. I plan to ask Megan if she is up for such a thing for my Fall semester Supreme Court class (PLSC 3330).

One of my major goals in teaching college students is to move them away from the “tell me what you want me to say” approach to research/writing and toward the “show me the tools and structural elements to allow me to say what I want to say” mindset. It’s never been easy – creativity is more difficult and taxing than regurgitation – but I find that with the emphasis on formulaic, template/rubric driven writing in high school (when they write at all) it is increasingly difficult. I think the emphasis on info literacy skills, combined with focus, organization, and discipline is likely the best way to create analytically acute students... and citizens beyond that.

**Appendices** (This includes the assignment sheet, rubric if used, and example(s) of student work.)

### A. Proposed Topic and Research Question

- Topic
  - What general topic will you choose?
  - Why is it important and worthy of study?
- Research Question(s)
  - What *interesting and important* questions arise out of your topic?
  - Why are they *significant* questions?
  - How do you propose to answer them?
- Justices' Papers
  - At what Justices' Papers will you look?
  - In what boxes of what collections will they be found?
  - Why? How, *specifically*, are these papers related to your *specific* research question(s)?

### B. Prospectus Guide/Research Design

A prospectus outlines your planned plan of action. Here, you will be framing your project and how you see it unfolding both in terms of your research and the execution of the paper. I would like to see it address, in as full a form as you can manage (*5-7 pages should do it*; be focused/tight and give me as much information as you can in light of what you've got in mind and hand at the beginning of class (hard copy for me, posted on *Turnitin*, and emailed to your peer reviewer) on **Tuesday, 28 February**.

#### I. Refined and Focused Topic

Revised per Topic/RQ paper, as discussed in our office conference (and subsequent conversations for some of you).

#### II. Refined and Focused Research Question(s)

Revised per Topic/RQ paper, as discussed in our office conference (and subsequent conversations for some of you).

#### III. Outline

The strategy your paper will pursue to evaluate and answer your research question. This refers both to the logic by which you will do your reading and research and the way you structure (using internal section headings to demarcate the descriptive and analytical blocks with which you build your argument - your answer to the research question you posed). Think of these sections of research and writing as the blocks you place, one on top of the other, to build the wall of your argument. Formally outline your plan of action. The outline should be three layers deep (Roman numeral, Alpha letter, and Hindu-Arabic numeral; e.g., I.A.1.).

**IV. Thesis.** The argument your paper will make; the answer to your research question(s).

#### V. Annotated Bibliography (Secondary Literature)

I want you to note and annotate the *most important* books/articles you have and will use in researching and writing your paper. Each bibliographic entry will be an informed paragraph (2-4

sentences) that describes 1) the *specific* argument of the piece, and 2) its *specific* relevance for addressing your research question. You do not have to read all the works you annotate for the prospectus, but you need to have skimmed them carefully – and read their introductory and concluding sections closely – to write intelligent *précis* of them.

For many of you, your research questions and hypotheses will flow from this secondary literature.

## VI. Case List

A list of the cases that are central to your topic and research question, arranged into three categories (with a brief explanation for each category): A) *essential* to your research; B) *important* to your research; and C) *interesting, but not vital* to your research. Organize cases in each section by the year in which they were decided. Note too – on this page or on a separate spreadsheet – the *specific* Justices' papers and boxes in which these cases will be found.

**Remember:** the more fully developed your prospectus, the more pointed/focused commentary/evaluation I can provide, and the more focused you will be when we go to DC. You have ONE CHANCE at this research; you aren't going back this semester. Be ready when we leave on 11 March, or you will miss out... and write a substantially less informed and interesting paper.

## C. Prospectus Critique (Rubric used in faculty and peer review)

### I. Focused Research Question(s)

- Is the question tight and focused?
- Is the question interesting and significant? (*e.g.*, Has the author demonstrated, or made an argument about, why it is?)
- Is the question amenable to empirical analysis?
  - Is it well-grounded in literature? (*i.e.*, others who have looked at this or similar questions)
  - Is it logically grounded in the cases (and case area) cited?
  - Is it one that can be fruitfully addressed by evidence in the files of the Justices?

### II. Hypotheses

- Does the author clearly articulate possible alternative answers to the question(s) asked?
- Are there other potential hypotheses – given the topic, question, and evidence presented – that you think need to be considered?

### III. Outline

### IV. Thesis.

- Is the tentative thesis well-supported given the work done to this point?

### V. Annotated Bibliography (Secondary Literature)

- Does the literature cited “fit” the topic?
- Does the paper's question and outlined plan of action clearly and explicitly add to that literature?

### VI. Case List

- Are the cases noted sufficiently tied to the topic and relevant to the question(s) asked?
- Does the author make use of the papers of all Justices relevant to the research question(s)?
- Are they organized in terms of importance (if triage is needed when time in D.C. gets tight)?

## Overall Assessment

- What are the best things about this proposal/prospectus?
- What aspects of this proposal/prospectus give you concern?

#### **D. Research Paper Evaluation Template**

##### **I. Research Question(s) and Hypotheses [1 (poor) – 10 (excellent)]**

Clarity of Framing and Explanation of Significance

##### **II. Use of Data [1 (poor) – 10 (excellent)]**

a. Secondary Sources

b. Primary Sources

##### **III. Argument [1 (poor) – 10 (excellent)]**

Integration of Research Question, Data, and Findings

##### **IV. Conclusion. [1 (poor) – 10 (excellent)]**