Top 10 Tips on Writing for Professional Journals

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Houdek encourages all authors — particularly those who are starting out — to contact him early in the writing process, especially for a piece that is a little out of the ordinary. “This is not so I can discourage such an article — on the contrary, I am always interested in the unusual — but rather because I might be able to offer some suggestions at an early stage that will save an author, and maybe me, a great deal of time and effort later on,” he says.

“The key for me is writing and content,” Houdek explains. “Whether the topic be large or small, general or specific, I am looking for well-written pieces that have something to offer some portion of the LLJ readership.”

Because Law Library Journal is quarterly and publishes longer, in-depth articles, the time period between submitting an article and seeing it in print can be long. Once Houdek receives a manuscript, his goal is to inform the author of acceptance or rejection in six weeks. But the actual time in which the author is notified sometimes averages closer to eight to nine weeks.

Articles in the journal often undergo several rounds of editing. During this editing process, Houdek will edit and return the article to the author several times with requested changes before it is finally accepted for publication. Then the article enters the production cycle of layout and design, copy editing, proofreading and printing. At that point, there will be another time lag.

“The production cycle for each issue of Law Library Journal is about three months. Thus an article that is accepted two months prior to the beginning of that cycle will be published five months after acceptance,” says Houdek. “I have never calculated the ‘average time lag,’ but my guess is that it probably is about six months.”

So, how hard is it to get an article accepted by Law Library Journal?

“My guess is that we eventually publish about 60–70 percent of the manuscripts that are submitted,” Houdek says. “I stress ‘eventually’ because in a large number of cases I do not initially accept a submitted manuscript, but rather request that the author consider making changes based on my comments and suggestions.”

### AALL Spectrum

AALL Spectrum is a monthly magazine that covers professional trends, concerns and developments in the field of law librarianship. It also features news on AALL and its chapters, committees, Special Interest Sections and members.

Overall, AALL Spectrum is looking for informative articles written in a crisp, journalistic style. Although AALL Spectrum does include some opinion pieces and first-person accounts, articles should report on topics with an objective viewpoint. To ensure an article’s credibility, it must be backed by sufficient research and interviews. The author should provide adequate detail, follow a logical progression of ideas, and use quotations and examples to illustrate points. Footnotes are not allowed; sources should be credited within the article. For related ideas or facts that do not fit in the main body of an article, the magazine welcomes relevant graphics and sidebars.

Editorial duties for AALL Spectrum are shared. As editorial director, I handle the content of the magazine. I work with authors as they develop their articles. Once the articles are submitted, I edit the content to shape the submissions into well-focused articles appropriate for the magazine’s audience and niche. Maya Norris, AALL’s director of publications, serves as managing editor of AALL Spectrum. She edits articles for style, grammar, clarity and length. She also oversees the myriad of other details involved in producing a monthly magazine, including layout, production and advertising.

As with Law Library Journal, potential authors are strongly encouraged to contact me prior to writing their articles. The content of AALL Spectrum is planned as much as a year in advance. In addition, other factors make it impossible to simply publish

1. Leave yourself plenty of time to revise and edit your submission — several times — before meeting a publication deadline. Let a “fresh,” unbiased eye read and comment on the piece during this process. Try to take ego out of your reaction to what is said.

2. Write with clarity, creativity and imagination. Ask yourself: “Would I read this to the end if I had not written it myself?”

3. Mind the fine line between adequately emphasizing important points (the reader should know what you think) and verbosity (the reader should not be bored by unnecessary repetition).

4. Avoid using conclusive statements unless you provide adequate support (or make sure that such statements are clearly labeled as your “opinion” and are not put forth as “fact”).

5. Know your audience: Who are you writing for and what are they interested in?

6. Know specifically, not generally, what it is you want to say before you start writing.

7. Pay careful attention to the organization of your article:
   - Use the introduction to “hook” the reader (but don’t be so “clever” that the reader can’t tell what the article is about).
   - Use the body to logically explain your argument(s) to the reader.
   - Use the conclusion to remind the reader of your main points (and don’t introduce anything new for which you haven’t already built a solid foundation).

8. Familiarize yourself with the journal(s) to which you intend to submit your article:
   - Contact the editor early in the process.
   - Look at representative issues.
   - Pay attention to style sheets and author guidelines.

9. Write on a topic that interests you: Don’t choose a topic because it is “hot.” Choose it because you are passionate about it.

10. Write a topic that you know something about: You should have something to say.

### Tips on Writing for Professional Journals

by Frank G. Houdek

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