2021 ALTERNATIVE READING LIST: INTRODUCTION

Hello, and welcome to Syracuse, Syracuse University, the College of Law, to the Legal Writer’s Toolkit, and to its 2021 Alternative Reading List. You’ve doubtless been welcomed many times, and will continue to be welcomed right up until classes start, but let me add my welcomes to the list.

My name is Ian Gallacher. I’m a Professor of Law at the Syracuse University College of Law and was, for sixteen years, the Director of the Legal Communication and Research (“LCR”) program until I stepped down last year to work on the Legal Writer’s Toolkit. You’ll take three LCR courses: two in your first year and one upper-level course. It’s the program that helps you learn how lawyers write, research, and present written analysis to readers. The legal writing style is a challenging one and it will take you some time to get used to it. The good news is that you have a group of excellent, dedicated, and enthusiastic professors who will help you become the best legal writers you can be.

The Legal Writers Toolkit (you can find it at https://legalwriterstoolkit.law.syr.edu) is a platform that includes multiple series of short videos designed to help you with questions you might have about the writing process, particularly as it relates to legal writing. There are video series designed for law students and for practicing lawyers who might need a refresher, but there are also series designed for incoming students, like you, who might want to start working on aspects of their writing before they come to law school. It’s important that you know that nothing about the Legal Writer’s Toolkit is mandatory. You’re not required to spend a minute on the site if you don’t want to, there are no tests or exams related to any of the materials, and no one will check up to see if you’ve been using the site or not. The entire site is designed to be helpful, not stressful.

Part of the Legal Writer’s Toolkit initiative is what I call an Alternative Reading List. No doubt you’ve been sent details of the College of Law’s official reading list, and it’s filled with worthy and important books that would benefit all law students if they read them before coming to law school. With the Alternative Reading List, though, I tried something different. I asked several faculty members - the Professors you’ll be learning from during your time at the College of Law - to select books they thought incoming law students might find interesting or useful before coming to law school. I didn’t ask them to pick books that were specifically about the law, and many - most - picked books that are tangentially
related to the law. All of the books, though, are stimulating and should entertain you as well as inform you.

All of the books should be available and in print. You can find them at bookshops or online, and some, at least, are available as downloads for electronic readers. You can also find most, if not all, of the books on the list in libraries.

One of the things you’ll need to get into the habit of – both for law school and in your life as lawyers – is practicing active reading. Most of us are passive readers most of the time. We sit and let words pass in front of our eyes, recalling plot details in fiction, perhaps, and maintaining a general sense of the narrative thread in non-fiction books. As lawyers, though, that isn’t nearly good enough. We have to read carefully, mining every detail and nuance from the material we’re reading. We need to understand not just what the writer is saying, but why the writer is saying it, what the writer might be missing out or glossing over, and what the writer’s choice of words tells us about what the writer really thinks about the subject. We do this by constantly asking questions of the text: what does that word mean, why did the writer choose that word, where is the writer going with this, and so on.

You’ll discover that your doctrinal classes – torts, contracts, civil procedure, and most of your other courses in law school – are conducted in a form of this active reading approach. Your professor will constantly ask you questions about the cases and materials you’ve been asked to read for that class, and will challenge your answers with more questions. The best way to prepare for this Socratic approach to learning is to become a Socratic questioner yourself, asking the text the same type of questions your professor will ask you. You’ll be surprised at how many answers the text will yield once you become an adept active reader.

To model this approach as you’re getting started in it, most of the books in this summer’s Alternative Reading List will include focus questions for each chapter. They’re by no means all the questions you could, or should, ask the text, and if you use them at all (and, as with all things to do with the Legal Writer’s Toolkit, you’re under no obligation to ask these questions or even look at them if you don’t want to) you should use them as guides to the active reading approach.

If you were reading the previous paragraph carefully you would have noticed that I said “most” of the books have focus questions. For three of the books on this year’s list, focus questions seemed to be unhelpful: one book is simply too long to prepare meaningful focus questions, one book does a good job of asking its own questions, and for one book, focus questions seemed inappropriate. I have included some questions for each of these books that you might consider asking as you read the text, but they’re not questions that are tied to specific chapters or parts of the book.
There are nine books on this year’s list, and they’ll be unveiled one week at a time for the next nine weeks. If you want to double up on your reading, though, the materials from last year’s Alternative Reading List should be on the Legal Writer’s Toolkit site by the time you read this. Even if you don’t want to read the books, you might want to take a look at which of your professors picked a book, and see what book they picked. You might learn something about your professors that you might not have known before.

Not all the books are light or make for cheerful reading. As lawyers, we have to deal with the problems people and organizations experience and that can often make for unhappy reading. But all the books on the Alternative Reading List will help to prepare you for law school and will allow you to develop and refine your active reading skills in an informal way before those skills are put to the test once classes start.

I hope you find the idea of the Alternative Reading List, and the Legal Writer’s Toolkit, to be useful and helpful. We faculty at the Syracuse University College of Law care a great deal about our students and we want you to do well. The Legal Writer’s Toolkit is an initiative designed to give you some additional support and help when you need it; the videos are available 24 hours a day so if you have a question about a particular topic or sub-topic you can go to the website and get some basic information that might help you, at least until you can speak to your LCR professor in person. And the Alternative Reading List aims to do the same thing for your active reading skills. The added bonus is that you now have a series of books to read that will entertain and educate you during the summer, if you want them.

We’re delighted you’ve chosen Syracuse as the place to study law for the next three years and we all look forward to meeting you and working with you soon. In the meantime, have a great summer!

Ian Gallacher