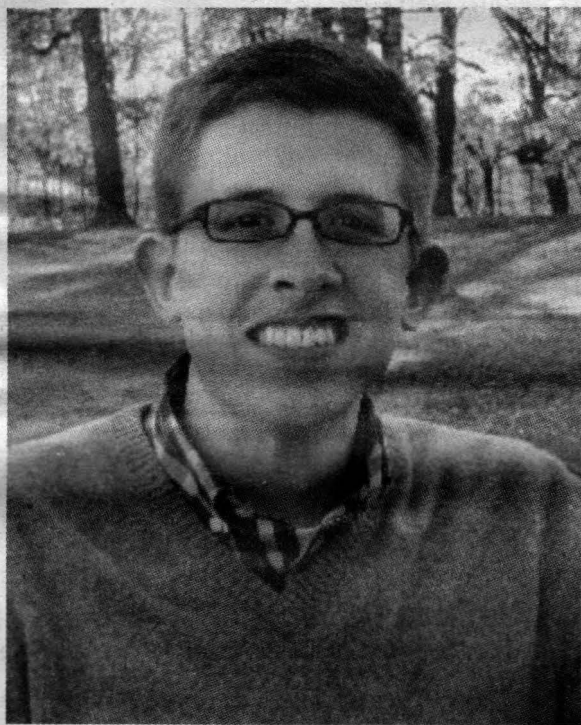


FROM THE LAW LIBRARY

MARK IT EIGHT: EIGHT RESOURCES FOR DISCOVERING A GREAT LEGAL PAPER TOPIC



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It has been my experience that finding a compelling topic is one of the most vital aspects of writing a good research paper. Unfortunately, just about all of us have felt the anguish of sitting in front of a computer screen, knowing that a due date is approaching, but feeling little, if any, connection to our topic. In contrast, many of us have also experienced the rush of adrenaline that comes from researching and writing about something we feel strongly about. Side by side, the experiences are like night and day.

Fortunately, inspiration abounds at Valpo Law. Next time you need to find that perfect law review or class paper topic, consider these eight resources:

1. **BNA Databases.** BNA publishes a vast library of topical newsletters, with titles ranging from "BioTech Watch" to "Real Estate Law & Industry Report." These newsletters are great resources for current awareness in a particular area of law, as they include, among other items, news stories, summaries of recent cases, and editorial commentary. The Law Library subscribes to over 100 of these newsletters in their electronic format, which are accessible through the "Restricted Access Databases" page on the library website.

One particularly helpful newsletter is "U.S. Law Week," which offers a monthly feature called "Circuit Splits." Here, a listing is provided of legal issues on which the various Circuit Courts of Appeals have handed down contradictory rulings. Consider taking a moment to browse through these resources to see if you can find something that piques your interest.

2. **Blawgs.** In addition to being a go-to source for snarky commentary, blawgs (legal blogs) are a great resource for identifying paper topics. One helpful place to begin is the American Bar Association's Blawg Directory, available at <http://www.abajournal.com/blawgs>. This self-described "comprehensive directory of continually updated law blogs" allows you to find a blawg based on topic, author type, or region. Visiting a blog covering a topic of interest is a smart way to identify issues for research.

3. **Westlaw and LexisNexis.** Both Westlaw and LexisNexis offer excellent current awareness resources, which tend to be rife with leads for research topics. In Westlaw, if you switch to the "Directory" view and then follow the link for "Legal Periodicals & Current Awareness," you will see the "Westlaw Highlights & Bulletins" folder. Within this folder, you will find general, topical, and state-specific bulletins, all of which summarize recent legal developments. Meanwhile, on LexisNexis, if you follow the link to "Area of Law-By Topic," you can select your area of interest. Within a specific area, you can locate helpful resources under the "Emerging Issues" header.

4. **Legal Newspapers.** Reading through legal newspapers is another useful strategy. You can try *The National Law Journal* or *The Legal Times*, both of which are weeklies, as well as *American Lawyer*, a monthly publication. You can also try a regional or local newspaper, such as *Indiana Lawyer* or *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*. The Law Library subscribes to several legal newspapers in print, and many more are available electronically on Westlaw and LexisNexis.

5. **Find a research agenda.** Some

organizations post a research agenda on their website, indicating potential avenues for research. An excellent example is the American Constitution Society's ResearchLink project, available at <http://researchlink.acslaw.org>. This project allows public interest advocates to submit research topics for law students to investigate under faculty supervision. Consider exploring organizational websites to see if areas for further research have been identified.

6. **Online Scholarship Repositories.** The SSRN Legal Scholarship Network (<http://www.ssrn.com/lsn/index.html>) and the bepress Legal Repository (<http://law.bepress.com/repository/>) are great resources for finding cutting-edge legal scholarship. In addition to housing copies of published articles, both sites contain large collections of faculty pre-print working papers. Searching these collections will expose you to current research emphases, and articles often propose ideas for further investigation.

7. **Talk to a law professor.** Because law students' primary point of contact with their professors is the classroom, they understandably forget that their teachers are also active scholars who monitor legal developments closely. As such, chatting with a professor is a great way to identify hot-button issues in an area of law.

8. **Flip through a treatise or casebook.** The authors of casebooks and treatises often include a variety of hypotheticals throughout their text. A helpful strategy is to locate a book in your general field of interest, scan the table of contents to find an appealing area, and then see if the author presents any unanswered questions.

Unfortunately, finding a great research topic is difficult, and possessing the consistent ability to do so is part of what separates prolific scholars from mere legal mortals. However, with these strategies in hand, you will be well-equipped to find inspiration and, in turn, meet your law school writing goals.

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