

Understanding the Upper-Level Writing Requirement at the University of St. Thomas School of Law

FIRST THING TO KNOW

It's a requirement for graduation. So says the school's website:

After successfully completing the required first-year lawyering skills courses, but before graduation, all students must satisfy an upper-level writing requirement. Students are strongly encouraged to complete this requirement before their last semester of law study.

THE PARTICULARS

The upper-level must meet six criteria. A satisfactory paper:

1. reflects substantial legal research and critical analysis;
2. is well-written and carefully edited;
3. contains no fewer than 7,500 words, including appropriate footnotes or endnotes;
4. reflects revisions incorporating the critique and suggestions of the supervising instructor on at least one previous draft;
5. has received a grade of C+ or better from the instructor for the paper, and
6. is certified by the instructor as satisfying all of these requirements.

HOW YOU GO ABOUT GETTING IT DONE

As criteria numbers four, five and six make clear, the upper-level requires faculty supervision. There are two ways to get the necessary faculty input on your paper. You can either write the paper as a requirement for a seminar class, or as the fruit of a 2-credit supervised research and writing course.

1. SEMINAR COURSES

Several classes offered each semester either allow you the option of writing your upper-level in lieu of a final or require you to write one to complete the course. Some examples include: First Amendment Religious Liberties with Professor Berg, Islam and Civil Liberties with Professor Kahn, and Bioethics with Professor Collett. Check the course descriptions online to determine if a

course you're interested contains an upper-level opportunity. If you choose this option, your choice of topics will likely be limited to the course materials and related subject matter.

2. SUPERVISED RESEARCH AND WRITING

Throughout your tenure at St. Thomas, you may take up to four supervised research and writing credits. Supervised research and writing courses come in either one or two-credit versions. Generally, a student will design a research project under the supervision of a faculty member and then produce a paper reporting their findings. The one-credit version requires a 15-page, or 3,750-word paper. The two-credit version requires a 30-page, or 7,500-word paper. Students that choose this option are generally freer to write on the topic of their choosing. The one-credit version alone will not satisfy the upper-level writing requirement and will probably only be of interest to those who have already completed their upper-level.

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH LAW JOURNAL?

The Law Journal at UST accepts submissions from students for publication three times a year (usually in September, January, and May). If the Journal accepts a student's paper for publication that student also receives an invitation to join the Journal staff. Students who become staff members this way have receive all of the same benefits from membership as the students that received invitations through the write-on competition following spring finals.

Not only is the upper-level required for graduation, but all Law Journal members must submit an article to be considered for publication before they graduate. The core requirements are the same, but Journal has added this requirement to encourage its members to approach their own upper-level with publication in mind. The Journal would like its members to be known in the legal community for having great writing skills in addition to being able to edit the work of others.

SOME GENERAL ADVICE

Many law students at UST put off writing their upper-level until the last semester of their final year. This is not ideal. Students who put off writing their upper-level are often forced to write it when their enthusiasm for school is waning and when graduation is only days or weeks away. This creates two problems: (1) the papers themselves aren't very good; (2) even if the paper is good enough for publication, the student has missed the benefit of talking about their publication with potential employers while still in school. Being intentional about writing your upper-level allows you to avoid these pitfalls and take full advantage of what can be the greatest accomplishment of one's law school career.