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### Writing Specialist as Rescue Club

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# Writing Specialist as Rescue Club



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I recently took up golf, relatively late in life. I reach for my “rescue club” whenever I’m out in the rough, the tall grass and weeds beyond the edge of the manicured course. As a wildly inaccurate golfer, I spend a lot of time out in the rough, with my trusty rescue club. Although my golfing skills are sub-optimal, I seem to have a natural affinity for golf metaphors. So, allow me to explain how, if I find myself in the rough in a conversation with a lawyer or judge, talking about our Writing Specialist functions as my rescue club.

Part of the fun of being a law school dean is the opportunity to talk almost daily with an incredibly diverse array of lawyers, judges, policymakers, and business leaders. Bar association meetings, alumni events, and advancement projects put me in conversations with lawyers in all manner of positions, from modest perches to places of extraordinary power and success. These discussions offer a feast for anyone curious about the state of our profession, or just interested in the stories and perspectives of people doing interesting work. But, in truth, no matter how different the worlds of the lawyers and the liveliness of our exchanges, some of what comes up is astonishingly predictable. And, as you may have noticed, some attorneys and judges are strongly critical of law schools.

Concern about the writing skills of new lawyers comes up all the time. Some of this is the ageless tendency of older people to find subsequent generations wanting. But there is more to it. I hear too many stories about new lawyers who do not know how to write a letter, or a professional email. Judges fret about dodgy memos. Managing partners complain about having to set up writing programs, and how ineffective those programs can be.

No matter how critical the tone, I welcome any complaint about lawyers’ writing. Inwardly, I grin. I always want people to come away from our conversations being more knowledgeable about our law school and more impressed by the education we are offering. Complaints about writing in the profession set me up perfectly to promote MSU Law. I love talking about our writing programs.

Sometimes I am the one who brings up writing. Not infrequently I find myself in conversation with someone who is hyper-critical of legal education, often based on long-ago experience. In that situation I might ask, “how do you find the writing of new lawyers?” And then I’m on firm ground.

Whether I am responding or initiating the conversations about writing, my message is as predictable as the complaints. I say that teaching writing well is a serious challenge, even with great students. Serious challenges require smart, creative responses. I explain that part of our response is the one professor on our faculty who does not have a law degree. That surprises everyone. I tell them about Professor Jeremy Francis, Associate Clinical Professor of Law and Writing Skills Specialist, a key member of

our faculty. Our commitment to educating fine legal writers took us beyond traditional law faculty credentials.

I explain that Professor Francis has a Ph.D. from MSU in Critical Studies in the Teaching of English, which I translate as a doctorate in how to teach the writing skills of excellent lawyers to smart law students who are adept at texting and social media, but not necessarily in the formalities of excellent writing. I explain that Professor Francis concentrates on punctuation, grammar, and style. Invariably, my audience is impressed and intrigued. They practically cheer when I say that every MSU Law student has to pass a proficiency test on grammar, punctuation, and style before finishing the first year. We have moved from the rough and gotten back on course.

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I describe our students very positively. I say that our students have passions and values and technical skills that will transform our profession for the better. And I acknowledge that the reading habits of many students today are very different from those of their predecessors, leading to different writing habits. I agree that writing matters. Teaching legal writing to students accustomed to the protocols of texting or the conventions of tweeting is one of the big challenges for law schools.

I explain that we give a writing inventory test to every

student in his or her first week of class. Professor Francis works with his Research, Writing & Analysis colleagues to present workshops, seminars, and one-on-one instruction for countless students. There are plenty of other great things to talk about, of course, but describing our writing program, featuring our Ph.D. in teaching writing, is a sure-fire winner. Professor Francis and his co-authors have written an impressive paper on the writing skills proficiency program at MSU Law and its results, which you can find at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2664618](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2664618).

Although I talk about him all the time, I never have time to explain all the ways that Professor Francis impacts our law school. He is often in our clinics, where writing skills matter. He works with students on Upper Level Writing Requirement papers, and is a familiar presence in paper courses. He helped to develop our strong Legal English program for LL.M. students. On occasion, he coaches staff members whose writing skills are limiting their potential for advancement.

My conversations out in the world do not provide enough time to describe our writing programs very fully. Professor Francis is one of nine full-time professors who deliver a very ambitious Research, Writing and Analysis curriculum, and a variety of upper level courses. We operate from the conceptual premise that our legal writing program fits squarely in the center of the law school's central project of professional identity formation. Law students accustomed to different writing styles for different media embrace their legal writing work as learning a new professional language. Our program starts in the first semester with an option for students to choose a specialized writing course with an Intellectual Property, Criminal Law, or Social Justice focus. We are proud of the expertise of our RWA faculty, the scope of our RWA program, and our efforts to integrate writing throughout the curriculum.

But out on the campaign trail I rarely have time to say much of that. So I lead with our non-lawyer faculty member. Our writing program, especially our Writing Specialist, is a dependable redirection topic, transforming skepticism to engagement, even, when necessary, turning hostility into praise. When I am out and about, our Writing Specialist is my ace in the hole, my secret weapon, my special sauce. Talking about Professor Francis is like pulling out my trusty rescue club, getting me back on course.