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2021

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Recommended Citation

Susan Greene, *Writing for the Long and Short Run*, 29 PERSP: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 27 (2021)

Available at: https://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/faculty_scholarship/1367

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Cite as: Susan Greene, *Writing for the Long and Short Run*, 29 PERSPS. ____ (2021).

Writing for the Long and Short Run

By Susan Greene

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Running has long been a life necessity for me. It got me on my feet when a particularly dispiriting professional period brought me to my knees. It has been a link, ever more tenuous, to my father, a fellow runner, as he succumbed to Alzheimer's Disease. It has been a means to quiet my racing mind, when I feel that it might never stop, and only the rhythmic motion of my shoes hitting the pavement can quell its surge. It is moments like that when I seek to embody the best advice about running I have ever heard: *All you have to do is stay upright and keep going.*

Over the past year, amidst a pandemic that ravaged New York City, I laced up my running shoes and ran through Central Park. Every day. At times it felt defiant, at times it felt selfish. But still, I ran. I ran past the temporary hospital tents the day they overtook a grassy field upon which my children had only recently played. For months, as I ran by those tents and the misery they barely concealed, I breathed a prayer of gratitude for my own lungs, filling with air and propelling me forward. I eyed my fellow runners with suspicion and kinship, in about equal measure. At times I shrank from their warm breath, as I watched it appear in the cold air like a bloom of toxic algae and then vanish. But there was also camaraderie, murmurs of hello, nods in allegiance to the only other souls we might see outside of our homes that day. Running has been concrete and metaphorical. One of my dearest friends told me that the dawning of 2021 felt like coming to the end of a marathon, battered and broken, limping to the finish line and being told, "Congratulations! You did it! Amazing! Now do it again." I laughed so hard I cried at the truth of it.

Running parallels my life in just about every way imaginable. Below are five lessons that I have drawn from my running and applied to my teaching.

1. The Long and Short of It

A long run is my favorite. Over fifteen or sixteen miles, I can relax into a rhythm and allow two or more hours to unspool ahead of me. But every run cannot be a long run. Between commitments that prevent my multi-hour absences and a body that has now approached middle age, I have come to embrace shorter runs. They allow me to hit the pavement during an unexpected, midday break or to focus on speed in shorter intervals. They even make my long runs better, allowing me to run with bursts of speed when necessary.

In each semester, there is always one final, long writing assignment—a memo in the fall and a brief in the spring. But that is not the only kind of legal writing, and I would do my students a disservice to suggest that it is. Through both semesters, I assign several shorter exercises: research journals, email memos, individual pieces of longer assignments, to name a few. Though the grading load is heavy at times, there is so much for students to gain from this variety of writing assignments. For one, shorter assignments more closely mimic the pace of workflow in legal practice. For another, they allow students to focus on just one aspect of what they are learning and seek to perfect it. Finally, in the same way that my short runs make my long runs better, these shorter writing assignments allow my students to attack longer writing assignments more efficiently and effectively.

2. Eyes Up Feet Up! Bystanders Matter

Central Park's six-mile loop is the basis of each of my runs. It hugs the perimeter of the park, soaring high into the North Woods with hills that peak over Harlem and then dipping back down to a flat stretch towards midtown and the tourists who amble there. There is just one portion that I dread: Cat Hill. It is not the steepest hill (the North Woods claim that honor). Nor is it the longest (that honor goes to the final stretch I run as I head home). But Cat Hill erupts in the middle of an otherwise uninterrupted

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span of flat pavement, surprising me with its ferocity every time. There is a sculpture of a cat, poised to pounce, just as the hill peaks. I glower at it as I pass.

A few years ago, as I ran the Shape Half Marathon through Central Park and I approached Cat Hill for the second time in that race, my mind rebelled and I feared my body would follow. With my nemesis looming, a disembodied voice floated towards me—“Eyes Up! Feet Up! Go!” I turned my head and saw a man shouting at me, tube socks emerging from his running shoes and snaking up his leg, a whistle dangling from his neck. In any other context, I would have been outraged by the exhortations of this possibly deranged, likely retired gym teacher. But when my exhausted frame faced the looming hill, I relaxed into this stranger’s demands and freed myself from the decision of whether to continue. He made it for me. I picked up my eyes, picked up my feet, powered through Cat Hill and finished that half marathon with a personal record.

I teach my students everything I can, but at some point, they must write on their own. At that point, I become a bystander. I cannot overemphasize the importance of that role. For many students, no matter how comfortable they are with the substance of the law or the organizational structure of IRAC, committing to a legal position overwhelms them. It is their Cat Hill. If I ask students to commit to an answer of “yes” or “no” in a memo, about half inevitably find some way to hedge with a “maybe.” Some of them find their way into my office first. At that point, I am the bystander. “Pick a side and go for it!” I say. “You can do this, you have everything you need, go for it!” I don’t have a whistle or tube socks,¹ but sometimes I feel like that gym teacher at the base of Cat Hill.

3. Recovery and Reflection

I love running. The unencumbered feeling of needing just my body and my shoes to travel a distance, the simplicity of achieving a goal by placing one foot in front of the other and not stopping. What I do not love, however, is the post-

run time. I prefer to jump back into my day. But I have learned the hard way² that what you do after a run (stretch, hydrate, eat, hydrate, stretch, and stretch) is as important as the run itself. It also helps me integrate my running to a greater degree into my life, so that it is not merely a siloed time of exercise. As I make choices about what I eat throughout the day or how I sit or how I move, I consider the impact on my running. Perhaps most importantly, I pause to reflect on what I have done and how I felt while I was doing it. I consider what I ate before I ran, how I slept before I ran, whether the weather factored into my performance. This list goes on.

I empathize with my many students who want to hand in an assignment and then forget it ever happened. But that would be a lost opportunity for them to integrate their hard work on an assignment into a larger process of writing. And after all, writing is iterative.

In many semesters, I ask my students to critique their own work. Sometimes this is a formal exercise, a written reflection that I ask students to bring to our conference, either answering questions that I pose or filling out a rubric that I have prepared for them. Other times I ask students simply to be prepared to discuss their work with me. In either case, the critique should address both the substantive aspects of the students’ writing and the process by which they accomplished it. Added to my own comments, and, in some instances, a peer edit, that gives students a significant body of material to draw upon when I assign a rewrite of their work or even for future, unrelated writing. I recently had the tremendously gratifying experience of conferencing with a student on an assignment and speaking hardly a word. As we sat down to conference, she started, “Professor, I know exactly what I did here . . .” and she went on for about ten minutes, critiquing her work and writing process with an admirable degree of specificity and insight.

² A nearly ruptured calf muscle, which sidelined me for a month. But if anything here has lit a spark in you to try running, don’t let my foolishness stop you. I committed the cardinal sin of failing to stretch after my runs. All the more egregious, because in addition to teaching legal writing, I am also a certified yoga teacher.

¹ Okay, I do, just not in my office.

Her comments were spot on. The opportunity to reflect on writing after completing it is essential.

And while writing may not be a physical exertion, nutrition is always essential. Up until the year 1 B.C.E.,³ I regularly brought (mostly) healthy snacks to class, and particularly to classes in which students would be writing or revising independently. It always went over well.

4. Focus on Just One Thing and Keep Moving Forward

Like many of us, I tend to hold tension in my neck and shoulders. When I run, I think about my shoulders. I try to keep them loose and relaxed. If my shoulders are tense, that is a signal that some other part of my body is not performing as it should, and a compensating rigidity has crept up my torso. If I were to think about every part of my body, the hundreds of tendons and muscles that must act in concert to keep me moving, I would be overwhelmed. So, I just think about my shoulders and keep going.

I have found that feedback on student writing is an art. Comment on too many things and students get overwhelmed. Comment on too little and they do not have enough guidance to move forward. I try to pick one focal point for the student and show the student how that one element winds its way through the writing such that strengthening it will strengthen the whole piece. Sometimes it takes a few passes of reading a submission to find a common thread and it often involves a lot of notes I scribble to myself that the student will never see. But eventually a common theme emerges from my own notes and, from that, a clear directive I can offer to the student. For example, I might say, “It seems like isolating and articulating the relevant issue was challenging in this brief.” Focusing on the issue is just one directive, but it strengthens every piece of the writing, from narrowing a rule synthesis to presenting rule explanations that are directed to the relevant issue (and not merely summaries of cases) to targeting the most critical facts in the analysis. Sometimes a single point of focus can carry the whole brief.

5. This Is a Part of You, But It Does Not Define You

I have never thought of myself as an athlete. In high school, I joined the choir simply because it met once a week at the same time as my gym class and therefore excused my absence. Yet when I reach the end of a long run, I force myself to acknowledge that I am an athlete. I say the same to my students. “You may not think of yourself as legal writers, but you are. Look at this multi-issue brief you just wrote on a subject about which you knew nothing two months ago!”

Yet my running does not define me. When I hit a personal record, I still go home to a pile of laundry, lesson plans to create, and a hungry family. Likewise, when I hear the bitter February morning wind blow outside my darkened window and I pull my pillow over my face instead of donning my running gear, I am no less a person than I was the day before. I hope my students remember this as well. They are legal writers, but their successes or disappointments in my class or others do not define them.

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³ “Before the COVID Era.” Put differently, 2019.