



# Insight from a first year law student



AS PRESENTED BY:  
SHARI-ANN HARRIS

## "The Importance of Being a Good Writer"

When I decided to go to law school, I knew it would be a challenge to me academically. I had little knowledge of archaic Latin legal terms and didn't watch Court TV. In fact, the extent of my knowledge regarding the legal system was *Law & Order*. The battles seemed to be won in the court room

during oral arguments or cross examination. Most people have that basic understanding of how cases are won. How many times have people encouraged others to go to law school simply because they talk so much?

Armed with the consolation of my verbal skills, I felt only slightly less unprepared for my first semester. At Rutgers, we take four classes, each worth four credits, except the writing class. Our writing classes are only worth two credits. Naturally, this would give you a false impression about the importance and value of being able to write well in a legal profession: It can't be that important if it's worth so little. Not true.

I came from a strong writing background that loved embellishments and flowery language. Legal writing is the complete antithesis of that mold. All the multisyllabic SAT words you've learned have to go out the window, unless it is one of the party's



names. Sentences are reduced to subject and verb. Legalese ("heretofore", "thereof", etc) is frowned upon, if not abhorred. Common *Law & Order* phrases like "clearly" and "obviously" will result in whole paragraphs being skipped.

These kinds of changes in one's writing can demoralize. We're taught that judges and lawyers don't have any time to read what you've so lovingly crafted. They have to know what you are trying to say with one quick glance. How do you undo years of writing for book reports and term papers? Practice, practice, practice. And try not to be afraid of red ink.

The one thing I've learned from my legal writing classes, as well as my job at Basile & Testa, is that the argument is mostly won on paper. The verbal battle is simply to back it up. Most judges (and professors) make their decisions based on what we write in briefs. Most lawyers that we'll work for base their arguments on our written research. My writing has adapted to what the legal field requires: conciseness and clarity.

Writing is the first impression other



legal professionals have of you. I work at a General Practice firm where I have an opportunity to write many different kinds of documents. Many times I'm asked to write documents I've never seen before. It feels like sink or swim, but that's how many of us learn in the legal profession. I have to confront the newest document with the same writing skills I know already. I value my experience at Basile & Testa, because it allows me to appreciate the importance of being a good writer.

"The one thing I've learned from my legal writing classes, as well as my job at Basile & Testa, is that the argument is mostly won on paper. The verbal battle is simply to back it up. Most judges (and professors) make their decisions based on what we write in briefs."

*Shari-Ann Harris is a summer law clerk at Basile & Testa law firm in Vineland, NJ. Her current duties include legal research and document drafting. Shari was born in St. Catherine, Jamaica on September 12, 1984. She emigrated to the U.S. at the age of five. After graduating from Vineland High School in 2002, Shari received her B.A. in Sociology from The College of New Jersey. Shortly thereafter, she became a social worker with Robin's Nest in Glassboro, NJ. At Robin's Nest, Shari worked closely with the Division of Children and Families to reunify children with their biological parents or relatives.*

*Shari had no intention of going to law school, but rather had post-graduate ambitions of studying West African History. These plans fell through and Shari was contacted by Rutgers Camden by mail. She did not apply to law school or take the LSATs. The law school had implemented a pilot program to see if students with high GRE scores could do as well in their first year of law school as students who took the LSATs. She accepted the offer and in August of 2007, Shari began her first year of law school at Rutgers School of Law--Camden. Shari has just recently completed her first year with a strong academic performance.*

*Ms. Harris is interested in Family Law, Criminal Prosecution, and International Human Rights Law. She enjoyed oral arguments and would like to join Rutgers' Hunter Moot Court. Shari has also applied to the Rutgers Journal of Law and Religion. She would like to practice law in New Jersey and New York. Her dream, which has long been her parents' dream, is to become a state Supreme Court judge.*

*In her spare time, Shari likes to travel, learn other languages, draw, and work with her church's Youth Ministry. She, and her old undergrad roomies, like to travel to a different location every 2 years. Last July, they went to Malta, Sicily, Milan, and Rome. Next year, they plan to visit Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Shari can say conversational phrases in Polish, Italian, French, and Spanish. She also choreographs and leads her church's praise dance ministry, Daughters of Judah.*

## Basile & Testa, P. A.

Counselors at Law

424 Landis Avenue,  
Vineland, New Jersey 08360

Phone: 856.691.2300 - Fax: 856.691.5655

[www.basiletesta.com](http://www.basiletesta.com)

e-mail: [info@basiletesta.com](mailto:info@basiletesta.com)

MICHAEL L. TESTA

CERTIFIED CIVIL TRIAL ATTORNEY  
CERTIFIED CRIMINAL TRIAL ATTORNEY

TODD W. HECK, LL.M.

MASTERS DEGREE IN TAXATION  
MEMBER NJ, NY AND PA BAR

RENEE E. SCROCCA

MICHAEL L. TESTA, JR., LL.M.

MASTERS DEGREE IN TRIAL ADVOCACY

ROBERT J. CASELLA

MARIA V. GO

MEMBER NJ, NY AND PA BAR

JUSTIN R. WHITE

MEMBER NJ AND PA BAR

FRANK G. BASILE

(1963-2005)

FRANK J. TESTA

(1940-2001)



- Personal Injury • Medical Malpractice
- Criminal • Workers Compensation • Traffic
- Real Estate • Zoning • Wills • Employment Matters
- Tax Planning • Corporate Contracts & Litigation