Logic Skills for Legal Reasoning: First Assignments, Fall 2015

Professor Vern R. Walker

Course Description: This is an online course designed to teach skills that are useful in analyzing the reasoning structures found in judicial decisions, and in constructing new arguments using elements of those structures. Students will learn to analyze judicial decisions as natural language documents that we search in order to retrieve the elements of legal reasoning and argument. The logic skills taught in the course include: analyzing the linguistic structure of judicial decisions, to interpret the meaning of the text (a skill applicable to all types of legal documents); searching documents and retrieving information critical to legal argumentation (a skill also applicable to search software, e-discovery, and artificial intelligence applications in law); and constructing new legal arguments using rules, findings, evidence and policies extracted from judicial decisions (a skill applicable to all types of legal reasoning and argumentation). No prior knowledge of linguistics or logic is required.

Students will work through a series of modules that are focused on particular logic skills. Each module will consist of the following online elements: background text, videos, interactive examples; exercises to be performed; and feedback on those exercises. After students have completed certain sets of modules, there will be online discussion of problems that students might be having, and online discussion of the topic more broadly. Examples, exercises and judicial decisions will be drawn primarily from Torts cases, of the kind familiar from first-year Torts courses. There will be a final examination. While a student’s performance in the course will be graded, the mandatory grading curve will not apply because the grade will be primarily determined by an evaluation mechanism involving significant individualized interaction between the student and teacher.

An important pedagogical method used in the course is “peer review, self critique.” During most weeks of the course, students’ answers to exercises will be exchanged after they are anonymized. Students then review each other’s work (“peer review”), but critique their own work in light of that review (“self critique”). The feedback received by reflecting on a peer’s work supplements the feedback received directly from the instructor.

CLASS TIME AND LOCATION

This course is conducted entirely online, without any mandatory classroom meetings. If you request a meeting with me outside of regular office hours, we would normally meet in Koppelman Hall 113 (the LLT Lab).

This is a “flipped classroom” course design. For each week of work, there will usually be: (1) initial exercises due at a stated date and time (“step 1”); (2) then a peer-review self critique based on the initial exercises, together with a second set of exercises due at a stated date and time (“step 2”); (3) then a review of my answers to the initial exercise, and an online discussion of residual problem areas; (4) ending in my providing comments to the entire class on residual problem areas. Timely meeting of all deadlines is essential, and failure to meet deadlines may negatively affect your final grade.

TWEN
I will administer this course through TWEN (The West Education Network). Important course materials and announcements will be made available / communicated via TWEN. Please sign up for the course on TWEN as soon as possible. This course can be accessed as “Logic Skills for Legal Reasoning.” The password for the course is “legaltech”. If you have TWEN-related questions, please ask one of our librarians at the reference desk for assistance.

**Required Text:** All reading materials will be available on the TWEN site or by other electronic means.

**Required Software:** Microsoft Word; whenever we work with PDF files, in order to preserve formatting and have consistent color schemes, please open them in Adobe Reader (Version 11.0 or later, available free from [http://get.adobe.com/reader/](http://get.adobe.com/reader/)).

**First Assignments (see the TWEN course page, navigate to “Assignments and Exercise Drop Box” for details and materials).** These first two weeks of the course follow the normal pattern of requiring that you submit completed exercises twice each week, before Wednesday at 1:00 p.m. and again before Friday at 1:00 p.m.

**I. Introduction to the Basics: Linguistics, Logic, and Legal Discourse Models**

**Week 1: Introduction to the Course – A Linguistic, Logical Approach to Analysis of Judicial Decisions** (Assignments due 8/26 and 8/28)

Be sure to read the syllabus very carefully, so that you understand the design of this online course. During the first week of the semester, email me or post on the TWEN discussion forum any questions you might have about the conduct of the course.

**II. Extracting Legal Rules; Formulating Complete Rules; Constructing Systems of Rules**

**Week 2: Annotating Sentences That Primarily State Legal Rules; Rule Conditions, Rule Conclusions** (Assignments due 9/2 and 9/4)