

Finding Your Voice in Law School

Finding Your Voice in Law School

*Mastering Classroom Cold Calls, Job Interviews,
and Other Verbal Challenges*

Molly Bishop Shadel

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Prologue

On my first day of law school, I was terrified. I had the sense that my classmates had always known that they wanted to be lawyers, and probably had majored in some sort of “pre-law” subject in college. They already knew a lot about the legal system, I imagined, from some college class they had taken (and I had missed). They probably spent their summers working at law firms, read all the newspapers and books that lawyers read, and mastered the basics that I should have already acquired somewhere along the way, but hadn’t. When I started law school, I felt like some weird interloper in a world that wasn’t mine.

To prepare for my first class, I completed the assigned reading and I also watched *The Paper Chase*. Doing the reading was a good idea. Watching the movie wasn’t. *The Paper Chase* is a fictionalized account about how humiliating law school can seem, and I became petrified about “The Socratic Method.” As the movie portrayed the method, a professor calls on a student in front of a huge classroom full of people and asks questions that no one could possibly answer. It seemed to me that the whole point of the Socratic Method was to showcase the student’s ignorance, not so anyone would learn from it, but so people would laugh.

My most terrifying nightmare came true the next day. I walked into my first class—Legal Methods—sat down, and opened my book. The professor looked up and said, “Ms. Bishop?” And so it began.

I have no idea what question I was asked or what I said because the whole experience seemed so traumatic. But I can remember my next cold call, because it happened during the first meeting of my next class. The scene: Contracts. The first student called on? Me. And then again in Civil Procedure (where I was called on every week for the rest of the semester). The professor quizzed me in my first Copyright Law class as well, and also in Corporations, where, as in Civ Pro, I was one of the stable of students called on again and again and again.

I am now a law school professor, and I have a theory about why I so often was called on first. It wasn't because anyone was out to get me—it was because my last name (“Bishop”) was near the beginning of the alphabet and was easy to pronounce. I think professors continued to call on me because I hadn't mastered legal jargon, so when I answered their questions, I used words that everyone in the room could understand. Also, I didn't break down under questioning (much as I might have wanted to). Most importantly, I quickly developed strategies to make it through class without making a fool of myself. I was not very good at the Socratic Method when I started law school, but by the time I graduated, I was an expert.

Performing well in class didn't always guarantee me a good grade. I was surprised to discover that the same professor who called on me week after week had no qualms about giving me an unspectacular grade, because for many classes only the final exam counts. But even if it didn't always help my transcript, I now think that the verbal education I received in law school was more important than any grade. Being able to articulate an idea aloud, to think under pressure, to keep your cool in a stressful situation—these are the skills that can make you stand out a job interview. Once you have the job, your skills of verbal persuasion can help you succeed in it. I found that when I joined a law firm, I could snag more interesting assignments simply because I was willing to speak up at team meetings and could articulate my ideas effectively. I served my clients better because I could communicate effectively with and for them. Now that I'm a law school professor, I draw on my rhetorical education every day to teach classes and make presentations. It is worth the time to learn how to speak effectively, because it's a skill you will use for the rest of your life.

The good news is that anyone can learn to speak well. *Anyone*. As a professor who teaches oral advocacy and rhetoric, I have seen student after student face the challenge of public speaking. I've seen them overcome their fears, stumble, get back up again, practice, and improve. Yes, there are some people who are naturals at this. But anyone can become competent, even brilliant, at verbal persuasion. The purpose of this book is to help you figure out how.