

# Meet Scribes

## A Society That Promotes Legal-Writing Excellence

By Norman Otto Stockmeyer

**W**hat does the word *scribes* call to mind? For most people, it evokes the image of medieval monks copying manuscripts with quill pens. But modernly it also refers to a society of legal writers.

Scribes, the society, is a national organization dedicated to the twin goals of encouraging legal authors and improving legal writing. Bar journals and legal newspapers are continually in need of timely and informative articles. And the need for clear and compelling legal writing of all kinds is widely recognized.

For more than half a century, Scribes has addressed these needs by sponsoring awards, conducting programs, and publishing periodicals.

### The Organization

Like many mid-twentieth-century legal reforms, Scribes originated with Chief Justice Arthur T. Vanderbilt of New Jersey. In 1951, he invited several like-minded lawyers to join him in creating an organization to, in the words of its constitution, “help and encourage people who write about the law and...promote a clear, succinct, and forceful style in legal writing.”

“Plain Language” is a regular feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, edited by Joseph Kimble for the Plain English Subcommittee of the Publications and Website Advisory Committee. Want to contribute a plain-English article? Contact Prof. Kimble at Thomas Cooley Law School, P.O. Box 13038, Lansing, MI 48901, or at [kimblej@cooley.edu](mailto:kimblej@cooley.edu). For an index of past columns, visit [www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/](http://www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/).



Judge Charles W. Joiner  
Scribes President  
1963–1964



Norman Otto Stockmeyer  
Scribes President  
2005–2007

The new organization adopted the unusual name-cum-tagline “Scribes—The American Society of Writers on Legal Subjects.” Membership initially was limited to members of the legal profession who had published at least one book or three articles on legal subjects and were nominated by an existing member. Over the years, the eligibility requirement was reduced to one book or two articles, and the nomination requirement was eliminated.

Michigan attorneys have played a leadership role in Scribes from its inception. Milton Bachmann, former State Bar of Michigan executive director, was one of the charter members and the society’s treasurer for its first 11 years. Judge Charles W. Joiner, then a University of Michigan faculty member, was society president in the mid-60s. Today Michigan ranks third in Scribes membership, behind New York and Texas.

### Awards

One of Scribes’ activities is the presentation of awards to those who write well. The Scribes Book Award, instituted in 1961, is presented at the Scribes annual membership luncheon, held during the American Bar Association’s annual meeting. The recipient is invited to offer some brief remarks and autograph copies of the winning book.

Scribes also presents a Law-Review Award. Each year the editors of every law journal are invited to submit a copy of their best student-written note or comment. The entries are reviewed by volunteer legal-writing professors to select finalists, and a Scribes committee chooses the winner. The award is then presented at the “Scribes dinner” at the annual National Conference of Law Reviews.

The Scribes Brief-Writing Award works similarly. Any law-school team that wins “best brief” in a regional or national moot-court competition is invited to submit the brief. Another cadre of volunteer legal-writing professors reviews the entries and selects finalists for the Scribes committee to choose from. As with the Book Award, the Brief-Writing Award is presented at the Scribes annual membership luncheon during the ABA annual meeting.

### Programs

In recent years, Scribes cosponsored legal-writing programs at ABA annual meetings. In 2003, Scribes cosponsored with the

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## Don't Forget to Vote

If you haven't yet voted on two versions of our lawyer's oath, now's the time. They appeared in the January column.

See <http://www.michbar.org/journal/pdf/pdf4article1795.pdf>.

ABA Litigation Section a program called "Motion Potion: How to Write Better Pleadings." "How Business Lawyers SHOULD Write," was cosponsored with the ABA Business Law Section in 2004, and "How to Write Like Hemingway, Esquire: Legal Writing for Litigators Made Easy," again with the Business Law Section, was presented in 2005.

Recently Scribes began speaking directly to law students about legal writing. Under a practice initiated in 2006, law schools have hosted the annual Scribes board meetings. In exchange, Scribes has conducted legal-writing programs for the schools' students.

### Publications

An early Scribes publication was the anthology *Advocacy and the King's English*, published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1960. The book was reissued in 2010 under the title *Classic Essays on Legal Advocacy*. It is published by

The Lawbook Exchange in Clark, New Jersey, and is available on amazon.com.

Scribes' quarterly newsletter, *The Scrivener*, reports on membership and organizational news and includes short, useful pieces on legal writing and publishing. The editor is Jane Siegel, a professor at Thomas M. Cooley Law School.

Scribes established *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* in 1990. For editor in chief, the board selected Bryan Garner, then a young University of Texas law-school instructor who had just published a new dictionary of legal usage; today he is recognized as the preeminent authority on legal writing and language. Joseph Kimble, chair of Cooley's Research & Writing Department, has been editor in chief since 2001.

The *Scribes Journal* is widely read and cited. Cooley sponsors the production, printing, and mailing to some 9,000 readers. With the *Scribes Journal*, the society has taken the

largest stride yet toward fostering "a clear, succinct, and forceful style in legal writing."

### Conclusion

Although its goals have remained unchanged for more than 50 years, Scribes has evolved with the times. For example, in 1960 the board voted to cap membership at 300 to maintain exclusivity, but recently it created the category of associate member so that any member of the legal profession may join. Scribes has initiated legal writing "webinars" through its website, [www.scribes.org](http://www.scribes.org). And the tagline has been shortened to "The American Society of Legal Writers."

Doubtless, the next 50 years will bring more changes as Scribes explores additional ways to promote and pay tribute to legal writing excellence. The need remains for more legal authors and better legal writing. ■

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