Scribes held its annual membership meeting at a luncheon on August 6, 2005, in Chicago during the annual meeting of the American Bar Association. Scribes’ president for 2003–2005, Beverly Ray Burlingame, a partner in the Dallas-based law firm of Thompson & Knight LLP, presided at the luncheon. Thomson-West sponsored the luncheon, held at the Fairmont Hotel.

Scribes: A Record of Success and Growth

In 1951, Arthur T. Vanderbilt, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey, proposed forming an organization of lawyers and law teachers interested in promoting good legal writing. In response, 41 like-minded lawyers convened at the 1953 ABA annual meeting in Boston to establish Scribes. Today, Scribes’ membership is nearly 1,400 lawyers, judges, law professors, publishers, and legal editors who support the society’s goal of promoting and recognizing excellence in legal writing.

In support of its goals, Scribes publishes The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing and this quarterly newsletter, The Scrivener. It also confers three annual awards:

- the Scribes Book Award, presented at the ABA’s annual meeting, for the best work of legal scholarship;
- the Scribes Law-Review Award, presented at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Law Reviews, for the best student writing in a law review; and
- the Scribes Brief-Writing Award, also presented at the ABA’s annual meeting, for the best student brief chosen from those selected as best in a national or regional moot-court competition.

Our New Officers and Directors

Norman Otto Stockmeyer was elected the 2005–2007 president of Scribes. Professor Stockmeyer previously served as Scribes’ president-elect and as a longtime member of the board of directors. He is an emeritus professor at Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan. The membership also elected Stuart H. Shiffman, an associate judge of the Seventh Judicial Circuit of the Circuit Court of Illinois, as its president-elect. Judge Shiffman previously served as Scribes treasurer and as a member of its board.

Two new directors of Scribes were elected at the meeting: Lee H. Rosenthal, a United States district judge for the Southern District of Texas, and Darby Dickerson, vice president and dean of the Stetson University College of Law. They replace Thomas M. Steele and Joseph Baca, who completed their terms.

Steven R. Smith, president and dean of California Western School of Law, was reelected to the board.
A Special Presentation: Glen-Peter Ahlers

During the meeting, President Burlingame announced the resignation of Glen-Peter Ahlers, Sr., who stepped down as executive director. Professor Ahlers, who serves as associate dean for information services and professor of law at the Dwayne O. Andreas School of Law at Barry University, had served as executive director for the past eight years. President Burlingame presented a plaque to Professor Ahlers in recognition of his many years of dedicated service.

And finally, the winners are . . .

After the luncheon, 18 legal-writing books were presented as door prizes. All the prizes were written, donated, and inscribed by three Scribes board members: Richard Wydick, Bryan Garner, and Darby Dickerson. The prizes included Plain English for Lawyers (Wydick), Black's Law Dictionary (Garner), and the ALWD Citation Manual (Dickerson).

Our thanks to . . .

President Burlingame closed the meeting by thanking Thomson-West, which has generously sponsored the Scribes Annual Luncheon for many years. She also thanked other financial contributors to Scribes programs, including Carolina Academic Press, Thomas M. Cooley Law School, Barry University School of Law, and Thompson & Knight.

Finally, many thanks are due to the Scribes members who made the 2005 luncheon meeting such a success: Professor Thomas M. Steele, chair of the Annual Meeting Committee, and his committee members, Professor Ahlers, Roger Newman, and John Williams.

President’s Column

Norman Otto Stockmeyer
Emeritus Professor,
Thomas M. Cooley Law School

Let me begin by introducing myself. I am the 41st President of Scribes. I got to this position by hanging around too long, as one by one the real leaders served and moved on. Nevertheless, I’ve had some experience heading up law-related organizations. I hope to apply whatever lessons I have learned and whatever skills I possess to the betterment of our society.

My Background

I was invited to join Scribes in 1981. After submitting a couple of articles for publication in The Scrivener, I was elected to the board of directors in 1994. I headed up the Brief-Award Committee for several years. Then I served terms as treasurer, secretary, and vice president before my election as President in August. Under our constitution, officers serve two-year terms. Yikes — that’s eight President’s Columns to write!

I’ve also devoted myself to building our membership. I do this by sending congratulatory letters to authors of legal articles that I enjoy. I suggest that they might qualify for membership in Scribes and enclose a brochure. Through these efforts and those of others (and the advent of the institutional membership), the number of Scribes members from Michigan has increased from 3 at the time I joined in 1981 to 224 today. We’re now first in the nation in Scribes members, ahead of second-place Texas (216) and third-place California (192). Membership-building is something we all need to work on if Scribes is to thrive.

As for my previous leadership experience, I was
dean (chapter president) of the Delta Theta Phi Law Fraternity at the University of Michigan in the early 1960s. In the early '70s, I was chair of the State Bar of Michigan Young Lawyers Section. And I was president of the Michigan State Bar Foundation in the mid-'80s. I thought I was done with that sort of thing until the Nominating Committee came calling earlier this year.

**My Teammates**

Let me introduce my fellow officers:

Our new vice president/president-elect is the Honorable Stuart Shiffman, associate circuit judge for the state of Illinois. Judge Shiffman joined the Scribes Board of Directors in 1994 and previously served as treasurer. He chairs our Nominating Committee.

Reelected secretary was John C. Williams, who is principal attorney editor with Thomson West. He has served on the board since 1995 and as secretary since 2003. He has also chaired our Membership Committee.

Our treasurer is Michael B. Hyman, a principal in the Chicago law firm Much Shelist. He organized the legal-writing programs that Scribes has cosponsored at the last three ABA annual meetings, and he chairs our Book-Award Committee. He was elected to the board in 2004.

Beverly Ray Burlingame, as immediate past president, continues on the board. I will look to her for guidance as well during my turn at the wheel. She is a partner in the Dallas-based law firm Thompson & Knight LLP.

All of us will be depending greatly on our new executive director, Professor Joe Kimble at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, a member of the board since 2001. He was managing editor of *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing*, 1996–2000, and has been editor in chief since 2001.

Following Glen-Peter Ahlers’s announcement of his retirement, effective in August, a special committee of past presidents recommended Professor Kimble as our new executive director and Thomas M. Cooley Law School as our new home office. The board quickly and overwhelmingly ratified the recommendation (Joe and I abstained, for obvious reasons).

That’s my cabinet. In my next column, I’ll introduce the rest of my team: the other members of our board of directors and the editorial staff of our excellent publications.

**Need Your Scribes Membership Certificate?**

If you have never received your Scribes membership certificate or you would like a replacement for any reason, please send an e-mail to kimblej@cooley.edu. Include the year you joined (as best you can remember). We’d be happy to send you another.
My First Tidbit

My predecessor instituted the practice of including with each of her President’s Columns a legal-writing tidbit. I intend to follow that precedent.

In her first legal-writing tidbit, in the Summer 2003 issue of The Scrivener, President Burlingame tackled the superstition against beginning a sentence with the word but. She rightly pointed out that rather than being incorrect or too informal for legal writing, but is sometimes the best way to start a sentence.

How far can the battle against this superstition be carried? Is it ever proper English to begin a paragraph with but? An entire chapter? My quick survey has produced an example of each, both by noted writers.

No less an authority than Bryan Garner began a paragraph with but in our own journal:

But (someone might say) we’re talking here about formal legal writing, not newspapers!1

And Stephen Ambrose, no slouch of a writer (Nothing Like It in the World, Undaunted Courage), began a chapter in his 2001 book The Wild Blue:

But the approaching end of winter brought little improvement in the weather.2

As these professional writers illustrate, it is not necessarily poor form to use but to begin a sentence, a paragraph, or even a book chapter. Is that as far as the point can be pursued? Is it possible that an entire book beginning with but is out there somewhere? Or a book title?

A recent search of Amazon.com turned up a music album by Phil Collins entitled But Seriously and an R-rated movie But I’m a Cheerleader (“A comedy of sexual disorientation”). I even found a children’s book titled But That Wasn’t the Best Part. I could not, however, locate a serious book of nonfiction with a title beginning with but. If you find one, let me know.

Endnotes

Professor Geoffrey Stone has been a member of the law faculty at the University of Chicago since 1973. From 1987 to 1993, he served as dean of the law school, and from 1993 to 2002 he served as provost of the university. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and his law degree from the University of Chicago Law School, where he was editor in chief of the law review. Professor Stone was law clerk to Judge J. Skelly Wright of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit and to Justice William J. Brennan of the Supreme Court of the United States. Professor Stone teaches in the areas of constitutional law and evidence, and he writes primarily about constitutional law.

_Perilous Times_ received the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award for 2005 and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 2004; was a finalist for the American Bar Association’s 2005 Silver Gavel Award; and was selected as among the most notable books of 2004 by the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Philadelphia Enquirer, and Christian Science Monitor. _Perilous Times_ is published by W. W. Norton & Company.
Scribes presented its 2005 Brief-Writing Award to a student team from John Marshall Law School in Chicago. Their brief, “The Case Concerning the Vessel Mari Mairu,” was originally submitted to the Jessup International Moot Court Competition. The case involved piracy, an environmental disaster, and the shipping of hazardous materials through territorial waters without consent. Shama Patari, Juliet Bikbova, Sara Boyd, and Linda Burns were team members; Stacey Kalamaras was team manager. Dean Patricia Mell and Professor Mark Wojcik of John Marshall were both present at the Scribes luncheon to receive the award. Ms. Patari spoke to Scribes members about her team’s work.

Charles Dewey Cole, Jr., a director of Scribes and a longtime member of its Brief-Writing Committee, presented the award to the team. Other members of the Brief-Writing Committee who selected this year’s winner were Judge Kenneth L. Gartner, Chair; Justice Joseph Baca; Daniel R. Caron; Stephen Fink; Michael S. Fried; Robert Lindefjeld; Christy Nisbett; Professor Laurel Oates; and Judge Mark Painter.

Thank You to Our Volunteer Screeners
These people read multiple briefs that were nominated for the 2005 Brief-Writing Award and selected the best eight to be reviewed by the committee. Scribes extends a sincere thank-you for their hard work. (An asterisk indicates that the screener read briefs in both 2004 and 2005.)

California Western School of Law
Roberta (Bobbie) Thyfault
Florida Coastal School of Law
Leigh Scales
Franklin Pierce Law Center
Linda Anderson*
University of Houston Law Center
Tobi Tabor*
John Marshall Law School
Ardath Hamann*
Lewis & Clark Law School
Sandy Patrick
Northern Kentucky University
Salmon P. Chase College of Law
Adam Todd*
Oklahoma City University
School of Law
Greg Eddington
Seattle University School of Law
Mary Bowman*
Mimi Samuel
Stetson University College of Law
Brooke Bowman*
Carol McCrory
Ann Piccard
The University of Texas School of Law
Kamela Bridges*
Elizabeth (Betsy) Chesney
Robin Meyer*
Beth Youngdale
Thomas M. Cooley Law School
Mara Kent*
Evelyn Tombers
Washburn University School of Law
Lyn Goering*
Western New England College School of Law
Beth Cohen*
Jeanne Kaiser
Myra Orlen*
Diane P. Wood of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit was the featured speaker at the annual meeting held recently in Chicago. Judge Wood earned her law degree at The University of Texas School of Law. She then clerked for Judge Irving L. Goldberg of the Fifth Circuit — and later for Justice Harry A. Blackmun of the United States Supreme Court.

Before joining the Seventh Circuit bench, Judge Wood had a distinguished career both as a Justice Department attorney and as an academic. She still teaches at the law school of the University of Chicago, where she served as an associate dean. President Clinton appointed her to the court of appeals in 1995. Judge Wood is a member of the Council of the American Law Institute and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Excerpts of Judge Wood’s remarks appear below.

This title suggests a discussion that you might expect to hear in a meeting devoted to constitutional issues. But let me assure you that I do not intend to comment on the appointment of John Roberts to the Supreme Court or on the debate between Justices Scalia and Breyer about the proper sources to consult when interpreting the Constitution.

Instead, in keeping with the spirit of Scribes, I would like to explore the written word and especially the written word for a legal audience — judges, legislators, lawyers, and clients. I have long had a great interest in linguistics and the study of particular languages. For me, these fields are truly roads not taken, for reasons that have long since become irrelevant. Briefly put, I wanted to devote myself to something with more immediate social impact than linguistics can boast.

But the interest has remained, and I have recently been listening to Teaching Company tapes on “The History of Language” — lectures by John McWhorter, who also wrote The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language several years ago. McWhorter’s message is a simple one, and it is one that I find hard to resist: Language is a living organism that changes, evolves, and shifts over time. There is nothing inherently good or bad about these shifts, which are reflected in the development of dialects, creoles, and eventually full-blown distinct languages. As this process unfolds, the written word lags behind the spoken word, but written language also changes — and changes legitimately — over time.

“Originalism”

It is much harder to pin down a time when the English language — or perhaps I should say the American version of that language — was settled, so that we could look back to that time as a point of reference for grammar, spelling, style, and usage. Constitutional originalists have the luxury of a specific date when the document was written, or when it was put out for ratification, or when the last ratification necessary to bring it into effect took place, on which to base their arguments.

Let’s say that “original” here means the style they were teaching me in school in the 1960s. Rules were rules then — no split infinitives, proper use of who and whom, proper use of can and may, never begin a sentence with the word And or But, never end a sentence with a preposition. And no self-respecting person would use a contraction in formal writing.

I studied law under one person who followed this scripture: Professor Charles Alan Wright (Charlie to his friends). And I later worked for another person who did so just as scrupulously: Justice Harry A. Blackmun. Today, I read copious amounts of other people’s prose — between 1,000 and 2,000 pages per week during periods when the court is in session, just to prepare to hear 6 to 12 cases, not to mention all the additional reading of cases and secondary materials required to

(continued on page 8)
Original Intent versus Evolution: The Legal-Writing Edition

(continued from page 7)

draft opinions. I can tell you without any qualification that most of the rules I have just mentioned have gone the way of the fountain pen and the computer punch card. Infinitives are split so frequently that only an old fuddy-duddy like me still thinks that there is a rule prohibiting this practice. Modifiers dangle precipitously, the distinction between which and that is all but lost, and the art of spelling is too. Principals become principles with alarming frequency: I cannot offer you even an estimate of the number of times I have read about a company’s principle place of business or a principle reason. Without wanting to sound like Lynne Truss, of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* fame or infamy, I also experience a momentary start whenever I see it’s used as a possessive adjective.

Maybe I am an originalist after all. But does, or can, originalism work for legal writing — or indeed for any kind of writing?

Evolutionary Language

Language evolves. Oral evolution occurs before the written word reflects the change. I do not know if the lag is a constant distance, or if it expands and contracts over time. But it is there.

Let’s consider some natural oral changes that we have all observed. First, we have seen grammatical simplifications: eliminating the *who/whom* distinction; eliminating the *shall/will* distinction for first-person, future-tense verbs (only in America, of course); use of more flexible sentence structures (“The fix I found myself in”; “The fix in which I found myself”).

Second, and more controversially, words themselves change through various natural oral processes. Latin purists will speak of a male *alumnus* of the University of Chicago and a female *alumna* and will dutifully follow the respective Latin plural forms *alumni* and *alumnae*. But, to put it charitably, Latin is quite a few years behind us as a *lingua franca*. Speakers instinctively simplify this set of words by dropping the endings altogether: *alum* or *alums*, depending on how many there are.

Simplification through adoption of the male form is out of favor. (I never liked it much; as someone with a tendency to be literal, I never felt particularly included in the set of all “men.”) We do not see people using the term *alum* in formal writing yet, but that day may arrive.

Words also change in oral language because people tend to make them easier to pronounce. A child — and maybe even some of us — is likely to say “I wanna go swimming,” not “I wanT To go swimming.” I found many examples of this kind of change in a book by Paul Brians called *Common Errors in English Usage*. My favorites include “for all intensive purposes,” “shutter to think,” and, best of all, “nip it in the butt.”

Finally, of course, we just make up new words. How many of us were talking about Googling something ten years ago? Oogling, maybe, but that’s an entirely different problem. The word *e-mail* is now firmly ensconced in English and most other languages (although here, as elsewhere, the *Academie Francaise* has decided that a demonstrably French term is required, so if you’re in Paris, you’re sending a *couri-el*). And I’m not going to even touch the subject of the language you might hear in a college dormitory, on the streets, or in rap music. My colleague Terry Evans caused an enormous stir in the blogosphere when, in a case called *United States v. Murphy*,¹ he announced that the court was taking the liberty of changing the spelling of the word *hoe* from H-O-E to H-O, following the practice of the rapper Ludacris.

Blending the Old and the New

The hard question for legal writers, like all other writers, is what balance to strike between the tried-and-true rules of grammar and a more energetic, if less orthodox, style.¹

—Judge Diane Wood

"The hard question for legal writers, like all other writers, is what balance to strike between the tried-and-true rules of grammar and a more energetic, if less orthodox, style."
to speak of *internment*. A *mantle* is not at all the same thing as a *mantel*, but they are both English words, and a spell-checker will not help you out.

One way in which I try to find the middle ground is to read aloud the opinion or article I’ve written and see if it contains any words or expressions that no one would *ever* use in written speech. When was the last time you said to someone over the dinner table something like this: “In the instant situation, we should do X”? Would you ever say, “This chocolate-chip-cookie recipe provides that one cup of sugar should be used, not two”? Yet lawyers and judges constantly talk about “the instant case,” and they find it almost impossible to avoid saying, “The statute provides that [whatever it says].”

It is no accident, in my opinion, that the best-written legal writing avoids these expressions. Remembering that oral usage is going to be ahead of written usage, you can scrub your prose of the worst archaic expressions (to which lawyers are prone) through the simple expedient of testing whether you or anyone else would ever say that thing. It is risky to be too innovative, though, at least in formal writing. Judge Richard Posner is considered daring by some people because he has decided that it is permissible to use contractions in all writing, even the most formal. Wow. But simple, direct writing that avoids clumsy, complex clauses is always welcome. A lively vocabulary is, too. It can get confusing, case after case, to read only about what Petitioner argues and what Respondent retorts. I prefer names: Smith says this; Company A responds that. It helps transform the facts into a real story — a snippet of human life in which some problem arose that the court is being asked to resolve.

Undoubtedly, I have been preaching to the choir, but it is always a pleasure to step back and think about the craft that allows us to communicate with the rest of the world. My hope is that you will all avoid the ten-clause sentence, Latinisms, and jargon like *instant* and *hereinafter*. And I hope that you will be a bit daring with your style. Make the judge look forward to your part of that 1,500 pages a week, and your case is more than half won.

**Endnote**

1 406 F.3d 857 (7th Cir. 2005).
This issue of *The Scrivener* is generously sponsored by Carolina Academic Press, a leading publisher of texts on legal subjects and legal writing, including:

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From Our Peevish Readers

We have a difficult time believing that of all our members — almost 1,400 of you — only three of you have been annoyed by some bit of legal writing in the past few months. Did the warmth of summer suffuse you with warm feelings toward all legal writing, no matter how inane, inappropriate, or just plain wrong it was? It’s time to become cold and critical once again. Send in your pet peeves! (Judges, you’ve certainly seen plenty of words and phrases that peeve you. We invite your wrath.)

Sue Liemer, professor and director of lawyering skills at Southern Illinois University School of Law, wrote:

• My pet peeve is writing two prepositions in a row. It’s a great way to pick up the cadence of certain rural American dialects, which is not generally the goal of attorneys when they write. Try it, and you’ll see what I mean. Think of a simple sentence with a preposition in it. Then add a second preposition, right after the first one. You, too, will sound like a hillbilly.

Examples:
“He concealed the weapon down beneath the car seat.”
“The fire started over out behind the shed.”

Professor Rick Bales, from Northern Kentucky University’s Chase College of Law, wrote:

• I’m peeved when writers tell me how I should feel. For example, “The issue is of great importance.” A friend, proofing a paper I wrote in law school, put it this way: A good sportswriter will never write, “The game was exciting.” Instead, the writer will write the article in a way that makes the reader feel the game’s excitement.

• I’m also peeved about words like clearly, obviously, and interestingly. Writers should use their writing to make the proposition clear or obvious or interesting. Clearly invariably signifies either that the proposition is unresolved and the writer wants to distract my attention away from that fact, or that the proposition is resolved, but the writer is too lazy to explain why.

Gail S. Stephenson, Director of Legal Analysis & Writing and assistant professor of law at the Southern University Law Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, e-mailed this peeve:

• I’m peevious about writers who assume that all state appellate courts are “courts of appeals.” Just because the feds have courts of appeals doesn’t mean every jurisdiction does! Louisiana, California, and Florida have courts of appeal. I tell my students that a lawyer who writes the court’s name incorrectly gives the judge the impression that the lawyer does not know what he or she is doing.

• Closely aligned with getting the court wrong is getting the title of the presiding jurist wrong. In a court system where intermediate appellate jurists are called “judges” and only the jurists of the highest court are called “ justices,” a lawyer doesn’t score brownie points by referring to a judge as “ justice.”

(And if you’re not sure about the name of a court, just refer to Appendix 1 in your ALWD Citation Manual.)

Keep Your News Coming

Send us news of your accomplishments, publications, and life changes.
Send your news to:

The Scrivener
c/o Jane Siegel
Thomas M. Cooley Law School
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Lansing, Michigan 48901
siegelj@cooley.edu

www.scribes.org
News from Members

No news? No accomplishments, awards, publications? Only one member of Scribes kind enough to send us his news? Perhaps you’ve all been on vacation. Now is the time to begin doing something—and then telling us all about it. Send your news to The Scrivener by e-mail to siegelj@cooley.edu.

Steven H. Sholk announced that his article “A Guide to New Jersey Corporate Political Action Committees After the 2004 Campaign Finance Legislation and Executive Order” has been published in Volume 29, Number 1 of the Seton Hall Legislative Journal.

New Members

Stephen M. Brown (Spokane, WA)  
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steeletm@law.wfu.edu
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mbhyman@muchshelist.com
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kgartner@courts.state.ny.us
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Roy Mersky (Chair)
rmersky@mail.law.utexas.edu
Glen-Peter Ahlers
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Scribes Journal
Joseph Kimble (Chair)
kimblej@cooley.edu
Beverly Ray Burlingame
Bryan Garner
Wayne Schiess
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Nominations
Stuart Shiffman (Chair)
shiffman@springnet1.com
Beverly Ray Burlingame
Bryan Garner
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Steve Smith
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Planning
Gary Spivey (Chair)
gspivey@courts.state.ny.us
Beverly Ray Burlingame
Darby Dickerson
Michael Hyman
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Membership
John Williams (Chair)
john.williams@thomson.com
Beverly Ray Burlingame
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Scrivener & Website
Beverly Ray Burlingame (Chair)
beverly.ray.burlingame@tklaw.com
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Joe Kimble
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Left: Dean Patricia Mell, of John Marshall Law School, chats with a Scribes member.
Middle: Charles Dewey Cole, Jr., announcing the winners of the Brief-Writing Award.
Right: Shama Patari, speaking on behalf of her team from John Marshall Law School, winners of the Brief-Writing Award.
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Thomas M. Cooley Law School  
300 South Capitol Avenue  
P.O. Box 13038  
Lansing, Michigan 48901  
(517) 371-5140  
stockmen@cooley.edu

**Vice President – Hon. Stuart Shiffman**  
Sangamon County Courthouse  
200 South Ninth, Room 524  
Springfield, Illinois 62701  
(217) 753-6736  
shiffman@springnet1.com

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Thomson West  
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Rochester, New York 14694  
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john.williams@thomson.com

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mbhyman@muchshelist.com

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Thomas M. Cooley Law School  
300 South Capitol Avenue  
P.O. Box 13038  
Lansing, Michigan 48901  
(517) 371-5140  
kimblej@cooley.edu

**Past President – Beverly Ray Burlingame**  
Thompson & Knight LLP  
1700 Pacific Avenue, Suite 3300  
Dallas, Texas 75201-4693  
(214) 969-1110  
beverly.ray.burlingame@tklaw.com

**2003–2006 Charles Dewey Cole, Jr.**  
Newman Fitch Altheim Myers, P.C.  
14 Wall Street  
New York, New York 10005-2101  
(212) 619-4350  
dcole@nfam.com

**2005–2008 Darby Dickerson**  
Stetson University College of Law  
1401 61st Street, South  
Gulfport, Florida 33707  
(727) 562-7858  
darby@law.stetson.edu

**2004–2007 Bryan A. Garner**  
LawProse, Inc.  
5949 Sherry Lane, Suite 1280  
Dallas, Texas 75225  
(214) 691-8588  
bglawprose@yahoo.com

**2003–2006 Roger Newman**  
5601 Riverdale Avenue  
Bronx, New York 10471  
(718) 601-0673  
rnewman412@aol.com

**2003–2006 Christy Nisbett**  
Travis County Probate Court  
P.O. Box 1748  
Austin, Texas 78767  
(512) 854-9559  
christy.nisbett@co.travis.tx.us

United States District Judge  
United States District Court  
11535 Bob Casey U.S. Courthouse  
515 Rusk Avenue  
Houston, Texas 77002-2600  
(713) 250-5980  
lee_rosenthal@txs.uscourts.gov

**2005–2008 Steven R. Smith**  
California Western School of Law  
225 Cedar Street  
San Diego, California 92101-3090  
(619) 525-1405  
ssmith@cws.edu

**2004–2007 Richard C. Wydick**  
U.C. Davis School of Law  
Davis, California 95616  
(530) 752-2899  
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