The core of our class will be training and practice in how to convey complex legal ideas to audiences of non-lawyers—to write (and communicate) about the law in a way that is clear, non-technical, and interesting, but also accurate and sophisticated. This ability will often serve your clients well. It will also often offer chances for you to build your own visibility and career in your chosen area of law. In addition, it is a vital tool in fulfilling every lawyer’s responsibility to aid in public understanding of and education about the law.

In particular, by the end of the semester, we will have devoted considerable time to studying:

- how to be an effective editor of your own and other people’s writing, legal or non-legal;
- how to argue effectively for your point of view in opinion articles aimed at the general public;
- how to explain the complexities of a legal case to the general public using techniques perfected by writers in other specialized fields of non-fiction, such as science writing;
- how to use the skills of media reporters to gather information for use in non-fiction;
- how to conduct interviews in person or over the telephone for use in published non-fiction; and
- how to fact-check your own work and that of colleagues.

In addition, I am planning sessions that will introduce you to some of the opportunities by new media to reach the public with interesting and influential non-fiction about the law.

- We will plan, write, and edit our own blog, posting not only articles but visual and audio materials;
- We will learn how to shoot and edit videos for services like YouTube; and
- We will learn how to plan, record, post, and market podcasts.

You will have the opportunity to choose the form of your final project, which will be a significant work of non-fiction on a legal theme, using your reporting and explanatory skills. As you think ahead to the fall, I’d like to encourage you to consider what you want to get out of the seminar, and what you’d like to see us doing. Which of the above parts of the course are of most interest to you? Which ones do you already have some training in—that might help the entire class, including the instructor?

In addition, after the events of last April, it has occurred to me that we might want to devote some or all of our writing and reporting to topics about our community—in part because the material is so rich and in part because we would have the chance of actually making a difference if we report, write, and publish material about Baltimore’s bar and its justice system. Ask yourselves whether that idea appeals to you, and what you think you could contribute to such an effort.
Right now, why don’t you think about ideas you have for the seminar, questions you may have been wondering about, or concerns that remain after reading the above? Please let me know your thoughts and questions by email: gepps@ubalt.edu. I’d enjoy a chance to get to know you long distance, and to understand your aims in taking the course, before we meet in person in August. It seems a ways away, but it’s really just around the corner. And while we are on the subject, we have nine students currently enrolled, which is enough to give us a lively discussion and a wide range of projects. But five or six more will add to the atmosphere—if you have a friend who might enjoy the class, please encourage him or her to enroll.

Now, here’s the first assignment of the semester.
To begin with, the required texts for this course are 1) William Zinsser, On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction and 2) Jon Krakauer, Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town. You are welcome to read in either or both before class if you wish (neither is a law casebook and so should not give you law-school flashbacks). There will also be a number of handouts on specialized topics and types of writing.

The first writing assignment is below in the box. I am giving it to you early because you may want to give it some thought and perhaps a couple of drafts. We will concern ourselves with this assignment for at least the first two classes; thus you will get more out of it if you begin work on it now rather than leaving for the last moment.

The working title of this assignment is “The Surprising Thing I Wish I’d Known Before Law School.” This short article (+/- 1000 words) is to be written for people who are considering law school, once considered it and decided not to attend, or have loved ones in law school or considering law school. What is it that you didn’t know when you were in that position? Begin the article with a story or anecdote from your time in law school or during the time you were considering it. (The anecdote is not optional; I want you to begin your piece that way.) Then go on to explain what it is about law school that surprised you. Spend a little time gathering some facts about legal education (placement statistics, rankings, enrollment trends, costs, student-faculty ratios, surveys of student satisfaction—the information you gather is up to you as long as it relates to an undergirds what you are writing about!) Remember you’re writing to interest, entertain, and inform your non-legal reader. Make sure your piece is as close to mechanically perfect as you can make it—grammar, punctuation, style, capitalization, etc. Please prepare your piece double-spaced in a Word document with one-inch margins and indented paragraphs. Title the Word file (yourlastnamefirst)assignment.docx. Put your name in the header of the document so it appears on each page; put page numbers in the footer. I need you to observe these formatting conventions to make sure you receive credit for your assignment.