

How to root your new ideas deeply in the verdant soil of antiquity

Copyright 2016 by Richard Schenkar

Have you ever looked for a set of words that magically communicate the reason why your cause is just? Effective places to look for such words are the statements of figures in history and philosophy whose works have been hallowed by time. By discovering where their statements are congruent with yours, you borrow their credibility. By rooting your new ideas in this verdant soil of antiquity, you give them strength, power, and stability that they cannot get any other way.

This process bolsters your credibility, puts judges and juries at ease because they are familiar with the sources, and makes you more effective by increasing your own confidence in your work product. Because it is prudent and ethical to respect authors' intellectual property rights, the safest way to implement this concept is to use materials in the public domain. Public domain texts are those for which there is no copyright pending because the copyright has lapsed.

There are several useful hard copy (published on paper) and online resources that I will point out here, but before I do, we must acknowledge a possible copyright infringement, liability-producing problem in the use of these materials. Just because something is online does not mean that you can freely download it and share it. (That applies to this column, too.) The choice of an author to quote a classic public domain text is part of the author's intellectual labor and is the subject matter of copyright once that work is in a tangible (readable) format.

Have faith that the public domain is large enough that you can find a phrase that encapsulates your thoughts without invading someone else's thought-capsule. It is essential that you keep excellent, honest, and complete records of your search that allow you to distinguish between your ideas and the thoughts of others. These records help you by creating tangible evidence of your search that bolsters your self-confidence in the search result, and will be of help later if there is a question or litigation.

My favorite way of getting into this material is to use the *Great Books of the Western World* set, published by Encyclopedia Britannica. You start in volumes two and three--the "Syntopicon." The Syntopicon is an index to the ideas expressed in the rest of the volumes. The rest of the volumes include the full text of classic works of Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, John Stuart Mill, and many of the documents that contribute legal ideas like the Federalist Papers and the US Constitution. The real values of the Syntopicon are that

- 1) it is a human-created index by ideas and concepts--like TRUTH or JUSTICE--rather than a machine-created key-word index;
- 2) the coverage is from antiquity to the present, so that you can follow an idea through its developmental stages; and
- 3) the references are to the quarter of a page where your relevant issue is discussed so that you do not waste time.

The best repository of public-domain classic texts online is Project Gutenberg, at <http://promo.net/pg/> or <http://www.gutenberg.net>. You may search the Project Gutenberg files by author or title. You can also get a compressed list of authors, titles, or books on the web site.

For reference texts--including poetry, verse, and quotations, check Bartleby at <http://www.bartelby.com/>. There, you will find four major categories of materials--reference, verse, fiction, and nonfiction.

The Classic Bookshelf, at <http://www.classicbookshelf.com>, indexes its material by author.

You will find some overlap when you compare the materials on these sites. That overlap helps you because if one site is not available, you have alternatives.