



Law Students and Digital Reading: H2O Usability Test

By Seonghee Lee, RA, and the H2O Team

Law students do vast amounts of active reading during law school with casebooks. Recent advances in technology have introduced a number of digital casebook options, including the H2O Open Casebook platform. In order for these digital casebooks to become successful learning tools, they need to take the unique active reading process of law students into consideration. This study provides insights into the digital annotation, search, and reading habits of law students that can inform design decisions of digital learning tools for the law school classroom including the H2O platform.

In this summary report, we share our findings from a summer spent investigating the experience of law students reading digital casebooks when we conducted 9 in-depth user interviews and distributed a user survey with 15 responses. Through this study we found that a majority of law student participants prefer digital casebooks over physical casebook formats, and that they would further benefit from enhanced digital annotation features. Since conducting the user study, the H2O team has made feature updates to improve the digital reading experience for students such as the 'take notes' feature, and is exploring options for UI differentiation between student and professor accounts.

Summary of Findings

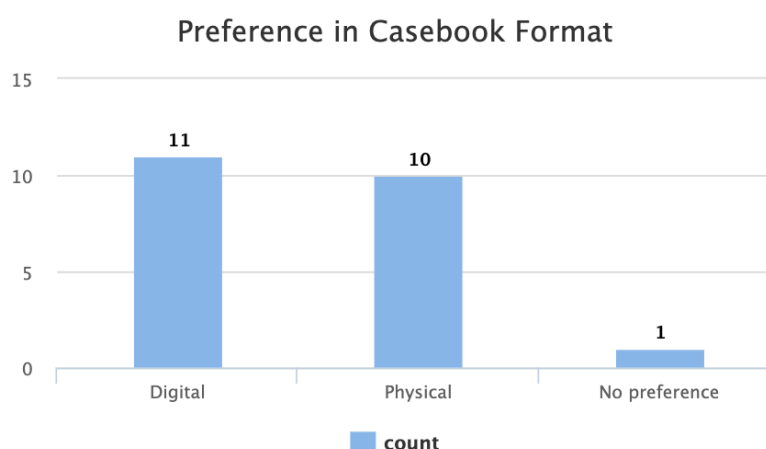
While prevailing wisdom holds that students prefer reading physical books, we were surprised to find that more than half of the law students (53.3%) who participated in our study reported that they preferred digital casebooks or were indifferent to format, with a majority also reporting that they would prefer to exclusively use digital casebooks. Traditional printed casebooks are expensive and unwieldy to carry around - students repeatedly cited these characteristics as reasons they would prioritize easy-to-access and inexpensive casebooks over a specific format.

We additionally found that those students who initially reported a preference for printed casebooks were quick to change their preference once they became familiar with the digital options available to them. By the end of our conversations during the usability test, all student users who initially told us they preferred physical casebook formats reported seeing themselves using H2O directly on the digital platform due to the availability of digital annotation tools, collaboration, and additional search features. The few students who reported that they would

prefer a pdf version to the H2O version were primarily concerned about the limitations of H2O's annotation features, and were more familiar with those included in their pdf reader of choice.

Student casebook preferences

Through this study we found that among the group of students we spoke to, there was a slight preference for digital casebooks. Out of the total of 21 participants in both the survey and interview, 11 participants preferred digital casebooks and 10 participants preferred physical casebooks. One participant showed no strong preference for either of the formats. Additionally, we learned that many students prioritized easy and inexpensive access to casebooks over the format. The cost of casebooks were cited as a great financial burden to students.



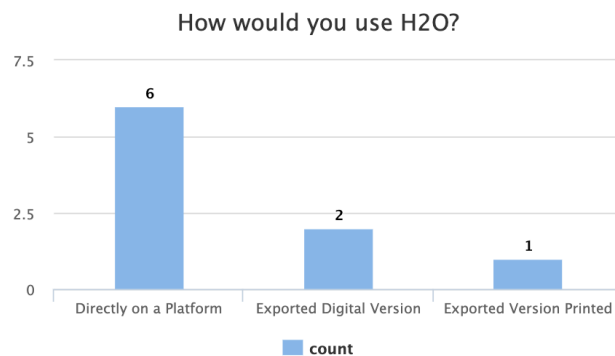
Additionally, more than half of the students (53.3%) reported seeing no differences in their ability to remember information better between formats, while 60% of participants responded that they would be comfortable exclusively learning from digital casebooks. The greatest factor that kept law students from using digital textbooks was the poor user experience of most digital casebooks.

Law students and notetaking

Law school outlines are legendary, and the students in our study explained a note taking process of marking their casebooks based on key information in the text (evidence, holdings, etc.) and then using those annotations to create their outlines. All of the participants in the user interview reported creating these outlines in a digital format regardless of the format of their casebook. When they had access to a digital version of a casebook, they would often copy parts of the text directly from the casebook and paste them into their outlines. We were further able to observe that each law student has a unique system of marking their casebooks, which has implications for how to design effective annotation tools.

How would you use H2O?

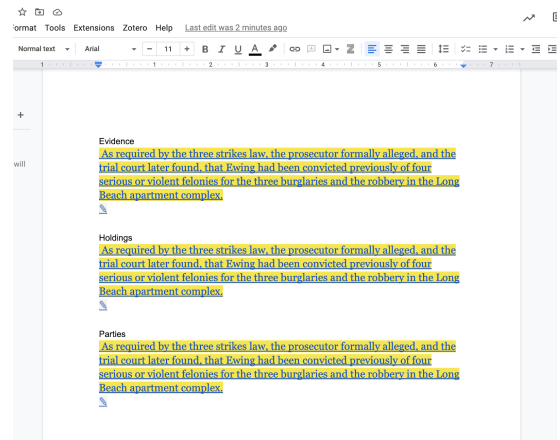
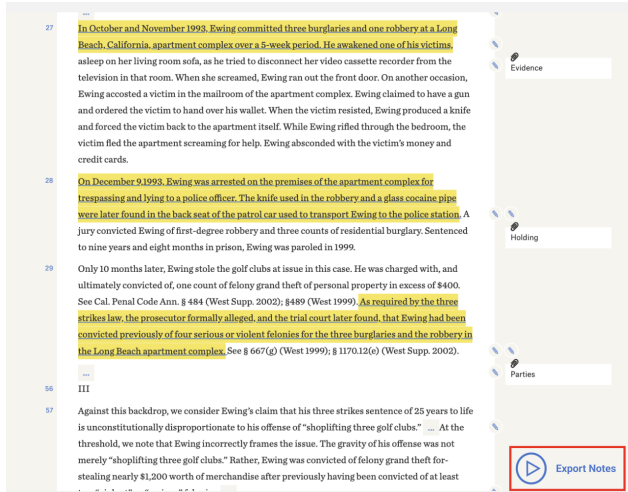
During the usability test with 9 law students, we had the chance to show them how H2O worked. Once they were familiar with the platform, we asked students how they thought they would read an H2O casebook if it was assigned in their course. Out of the nine participants in the usability test, six students said they would read and annotate H2O directly on the platform, two students responded that they would export the book and read it in another digital format like a pdf, and one student said that they would print out the exported version. Those who said they would read H2O directly on the platform cited its collaboration features, cloning and copying of the content onto the notebook, and good formatting of the text as benefits of using the platform directly.



Future Development of H2O for Students

As mentioned above, annotation options came up frequently as a requirement for any digital reading platform, and H2O could better meet this need by building out **student-centric annotation options** that allow for more personalized annotation processes. Already, we have launched a “take notes” feature that better directs students to the existing annotation tools through improved UX.

Given how students copy their annotations into an outline, having a feature within the text that allows law students to **export their digital annotations** to create fast outlines would be a feature that would be helpful to these students.



The study confirmed that collaboration among law students is common, especially for first year students. By **emphasizing the collaboration options in H2O**, we can equip students with easier tools to collectively collaborate in digital learning spaces. H2O offers a greater advantage here to students by having the direct text available for them to annotate and refer back to.

Finally, **further discussion with law students** is essential. While we were glad to see that students feel they can learn effectively from digital casebooks and that H2O already meets many of their needs for a digital reading platform, we would like to replicate a version of this survey with a wider swath of law students to confirm these findings and our directions for future development.

In the meantime, we hope this study helps professors make decisions about whether to rely on the digital version of their H2O casebook or to offer a print option as well. At the very least, professors should feel comfortable having this conversation directly with students rather than assuming that print remains the preferred format. H2O will continue to support exports, whether by professors who choose to prepare a print-on-demand book for students, or for students to use to select which readings they prefer to read in print. But we are eager to explore ways to further improve our digital-first reading platform to enhance student learning while lightening their financial burden.