



**JUST DO IT:  
TIPS FOR AVOIDING PROCRASTINATION\***

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It's 8:30 a.m. Your 25-page paper is due in one-half hour. You still have to write five more pages (while praying that what you write will make some sense), print the paper and take a 15 minute Metro ride to school.

This is not the first time that you have pushed a paper deadline. You think, "How did I get myself into this situation again?" Then you remember that in the three months since the paper was assigned, you did everything (including cleaning your apartment) to avoid working on the paper. You vow never to put yourself into this situation again.

Does this scenario sound familiar to you? Most of us have been guilty of procrastination on one occasion or another, particularly when confronted with an unfamiliar writing task. The tendency to procrastinate may stem from anxiety, fear, embarrassment or discomfort. The end result of procrastination may be a missed opportunity, a frustrated goal or a low quality work product. Whatever the causes or frequency of their occurrence, episodes of procrastination need not be terminal. With a small amount of reflection upon your particular modes of procrastination, you may be able to identify techniques that will help you enter the writing process with less stress.

Here are some tips to help you fulfill that vow you took on the Metro and end the vicious cycle of procrastination:

1. Break the Task Into Small Pieces.

When you initially get a writing assignment, do you immediately think that you will be unable to handle such a big or complicated project? Stop. Try to remember that not everything has to be completed at once (unless you wait until the very end!). Think of the separate steps involved in the writing process (e.g., researching, generating a thesis statement, freewriting, outlining, writing a first draft, etc.) and jot each down on a piece of paper as an individual task.

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2. Set Up Small, Specific Goals.

Is your only goal to complete the paper by the day it is due? While that result might be part of your large goal, you may want to set up smaller goals that will lead you to the successful achievement of the larger goal. For example, if you have completed your research and you want to write a first draft, set a goal of writing two pages a day, so that you can have a first draft in two weeks. Don't forget to include specific personal goals in your planning. If you schedule time to exercise, do laundry, and go grocery shopping along with your project goals, you will increase your overall sense of control and your feeling of accomplishment.

3. Reward Your Accomplishments Right Away.

You've set up your small, specific goal to write two pages a day for the next two weeks. You've written your two pages on the first day. Now what? Stop writing, go out with your friends and have fun. You can feel good about relaxing because you've accomplished your goal for the day and you have plenty of time left to accomplish your remaining tasks.

4. Use a Time Schedule.

You're a soon-to-be lawyer, so you've probably got a daily planner. (If you don't have one, you need to get one, or invest in an electronic planner or computer scheduling program.) What do you write in your planner? Do you write "Work on first draft" each day for a full month? Instead of setting aside general time to write your paper, set a specific time period (i.e., "Monday 7-9: Write two pages for first draft") and make yourself adhere to the schedule. Some writers find it easier to plan if they work backward. That is, set a deadline for the project and then work backward to set interim deadlines for defined tasks that need to be accomplished in order to meet the deadline. No matter which mode of scheduling you use, make sure you schedule an appointment with yourself for some quiet down time, or a favorite activity.

5. Learn How to Tell Time.

Do you chronically underestimate the amount of time it will take you to complete a task? Take your time estimate and increase it by 100%. Then, block your specific times for work on each small task in your daily planner accordingly. You may also want to scrutinize your final schedule for "undiscovered" blocks of time. For example, you may find that you have 15 minutes of down time that could be used to run a Westlaw search. Or, you may have thirty minutes between classes that could be used for case briefing. Maximizing these small intervals can ease your progress toward your goal and will prepare you for the

practice of billing clients, if your career leads you to a law firm.

6. Optimize Your Chances for Success.

Do you accomplish more in the library, or do you end up socializing with friends? Do you accomplish more at home, or is the temptation of the remote control too strong? Be honest with yourself, and choose to write in the location where you are the most effective. Sometimes switching locations after you accomplish a task will give you the energy and creativity you need to keep going. Or, you may find that you associate a certain spot with a period of high productivity and choose to work there. Paying attention to these psychological factors may give you the edge you need to keep the project on track.

7. Just Get Started.

Do you hesitate to start writing because you do not know what to say? Instead of waiting for an epiphany, sit down and write whatever come to mind. Set a kitchen timer and just write continuously for 15 minutes. Turn off the computer monitor and just type your thoughts. You can worry about organizing your ideas or rewriting your sentences later. You may need to lock yourself in a quiet room and tell your roommate not to let you out until you have written two pages! Do whatever it takes, but make sure that you do *something!*

8. Work in Short Sessions.

Working regularly on writing will help you overcome anxiety about the writing process and make the task in front of you seem more manageable. Rather than facing an entire weekend set aside for writing a draft, break the hours up

over

four to five weekdays. You are more likely to follow a writing schedule that does not supplant all of your other normal activities. Working in short sessions will also help you practice the skill of getting into your writing quickly and effectively. Developing this skill will hone the focus and confidence you need to write fifteen minute or one hour exam questions.

9. Acknowledge Accomplishments.

Try to acknowledge the value of each small task that you accomplish. If you have written five pages out of twenty-five, you have written one fifth of the entire paper! Writing is an incremental and ongoing process; a small amount of work today can lead to an easier (and less stressful) job down the road.

10. Be Realistic.

Writing can be a very time consuming process. Do not try to do too much at once. If you are able, try to balance your schedule so that you are not taking on too many tasks at once (i.e. "A" paper, journal note and clinic in the same semester). Being busy does not necessarily equal being productive.

For further reading on overcoming procrastination:

Robert Boice, Procrastination and Blocking (1996).

Stephen R. Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (1989).