



TIPS FOR OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION¹

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It is 9:00pm. Your twenty-five-page paper is due in exactly twelve hours, and you still have twenty pages left to write. A familiar feeling of panic is setting in, and you know you have a long, stressful night ahead.

Does this scenario sound familiar? Most of us have been guilty of procrastination on one occasion or another, particularly when confronted with a difficult or unfamiliar assignment. The tendency to procrastinate often stems from discomfort or anxiety about how to accomplish a task. While procrastination does not necessarily evince laziness, the end results may include increased stress, a missed opportunity, or a low-quality work product.

Thankfully, episodes of procrastination need not be terminal. Below are some tips to help end the vicious cycle of procrastination.

1. Assess the Assignment

Uncertainty about where to start can be a primary trigger of procrastination. Therefore, clarifying the scope of an assignment early on can help jumpstart the writing process.

Start by gathering and reviewing all available instructions. What are the content requirements for the assignment? What sources and authorities can be used? What are the length and formatting requirements? Where should the completed assignment be submitted? If the instructions are difficult to understand, consider conferring with colleagues or reaching out to the professor. If you feel confused, there is a good chance that others do too, and having a solid grasp of the assignment at the outset will make it much easier to get started.

2. Break the Assignment into Small Pieces

Legal writing assignments can feel daunting, especially if an assignment is long or involves an unfamiliar subject area. One of the quickest ways to dispel panic and build momentum is to divide a project into discrete, manageable tasks.

Start by making a list of the separate steps involved in the writing process. This list might include researching, outlining, writing a first draft, revising, and proofreading. Try to think of

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each step as an individual task. If these tasks still feel overwhelming, try breaking them down even further. For example, break “researching” into “find ten relevant cases.” If that still seems unmanageable, break “find ten relevant cases” down into “run a Westlaw search.” Similarly, try breaking “proofread” down to “check Bluebooking” or even further to “make sure all case names are underlined.” Most people find that simple, concrete tasks are substantially easier to complete than complex or ambiguous ones. Depending on the nature of your assignment, you might also explore the Writing Center’s guides for conducting [legal research](#), [choosing a paper topic](#), and [outlining a scholarly paper](#).

3. Make a Plan

Establishing a checklist or an “action plan” can make the writing process feel less overwhelming. Once you have broken an assignment down into pieces (see Tip #2), create a checklist around those concrete tasks. Drafting the checklist will help you mentally map the work ahead and conceptualize the steps that will be required to complete the project.

You might also establish a schedule. Think about dedicating specific hours to accomplishing specific tasks. For example, “Monday, 9am – 11am: Locate and annotate three relevant cases.” Try to be as specific as possible about how you will allocate your energy. Simply writing “work on paper” will make it harder to estimate how much time will be needed to complete the assignment. Some writers also find it easier to plan if they work backward. That is, to work backward from the ultimate deadline by setting interim deadlines for defined tasks that need to be accomplished in order to meet that deadline.

It is often helpful to overestimate the amount of time a task will require. Finishing something early is hugely motivating, while scrambling to finish multiple tasks at the last moment can feel stressful and depleting. Remember to include 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.

Keep in mind that writing is a highly personal activity. Everyone approaches it differently. Some writers need several days to research but only a few hours to whip up a first draft. Others need to set aside significant time to proofread. Whatever your rhythm may be, taking the time to establish a clear plan can make the rest of the process seem much more manageable.

4. Cultivate a Productive Environment

We would all like to think we have the willpower to resist temptation. But ultimately, we do not. And distracting temptations like browsing social media and answering text messages can be especially alluring when faced with a difficult writing project.

Set the stage for success by creating a work environment that is free from unnecessary temptation. Consider temporarily turning off Wi-Fi. Close all of the non-essential tabs on your computer browser. Leave your cellphone in another room. Turn on a study playlist or use noise cancelling headphones to reduce distractions.

When getting ready to write, also beware of the of the “productive procrastination” tendency. This tendency involves putting off urgent or important tasks by working on other useful but less necessary activities. For example, delaying starting a writing assignment by vacuuming your apartment, or attending an exercise class. While cleaning and exercise are indeed important, it is likely that they can wait until after you have my progress on your writing project.

Most importantly, know yourself. Instead of putting yourself in situations where you must actively resist temptation, try to avoid those temptations altogether by scheduling your writing around the paths of least resistance. Do not plan to lock yourself in the library on Friday night when you know a friend is having a birthday party. It is likely you will end up attending the party and feeling guilty for not having achieved your writing goal for the day. Similarly, when you take a writing break, make sure your planned break activity makes sense in the context of your schedule. If you have decided to take a fifteen-minute break, do not tell yourself that you will watch “just” fifteen minutes of an hour-long episode. Chances are you will end up watching the entire show. Instead, watch fifteen minutes’ worth of movie trailers or take a walk around the block.

5. Experiment with Workflow Methods

Do you ever sit down to write, filled with good intentions, only to let an hour slip by without actually writing a word? It is far too easy to spend time “writing” without getting anything done at all. If you struggle finding a productive flow, consider the Pomodoro method, or another productivity system to help get the ball rolling.

The Pomodoro method involves working for a focused, 25-minute period and then taking a timed 5-minute break.² It is often amazing how much can be achieved in just 25 minutes, and making a few strides will often engender the motivation to do another interval. Another method for getting started involves committing to a very small, manageable goal—say, writing for one minute, or writing 25 words.

Many writers find that the steepest hurdle is simply getting going, so anything that helps you take that first step is valuable. You may also find the Writing Center’s guide for [overcoming writer’s block](#) a helpful resource.

6. Welcome Imperfection

When caught in a procrastination cycle, do not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. It can be tempting to put off writing until everything feels optimal—the research is complete, the outline is flawless, and the arguments are clearly formed in your mind.

It is a natural human tendency to want our assignments to be perfect from the beginning, but this is almost never possible, and usually creates a substantial amount of stress. A crucial step towards overcoming procrastination is accepting that it is completely okay to write *terrible* first

² Francesco Cirillo, *The Pomodoro Technique: The Acclaimed Time-Management System That Has Transformed How We Work* (2018).

drafts. Research enough so that you understand the law and have a rough sense of what you want to argue, and then jump right in. Note down areas of your paper where you want to find more cases or think your research is thin. That research can be accomplished later on.

Try not to worry if your initial arguments do not make sense, your roadmaps are unclear, or your sentences are labored and halting. All these problems that can be fixed further down the road. Do not give up when your first attempt at putting thoughts on paper seems stilted or not what you hoped it would be. First drafts do not need to be perfect, and even a horrible first draft is infinitely better than no first draft at all.

There is also no obligation to write everything in the “correct” order. Sure, some people sit down, start with their introduction, and the paper flows sequentially from there. But these writers are the exception rather than rule. If you have no idea how to write your introduction, but you do know what you want to argue in the first section of your analysis, start there! You can always come back to the introduction later.

7. Work with Others

If it were easy to set and stick to deadlines all by ourselves, nobody would procrastinate. But we are human, and so it is *hard*. Consider helping yourself by creating outside accountability checks to motivate you through the writing process. For example, set up an appointment at the Georgetown Law Writing Center to discuss your draft a week before the assignment is due. Knowing that you have to show your work to another person can be a great motivator for getting things done.

Some students also find it helpful to work alongside friends or colleagues—especially at the early stages of a project when ideas are still germinating. Just talking about the assignment can be incredibly helpful. Brainstorming arguments out loud and explaining ideas to a third party are great ways to make those ideas clearer to yourself.

8. Take Intentional Breaks

Sometimes, there is value in time that you do not spend writing. There are points in the writing process when we can become too “close” to the project. This proximity makes it difficult to spot basic errors, or to think about reformulating structure and arguments. When you reach one of these points, it can be helpful to take a step back from writing and allow your latent thoughts to percolate quietly. Taking a step back does not mean that you stop thinking about your assignment altogether. Nor is it a free pass to avoid getting started. Rather, it is a tool for moving through sticky patches that arise in the middle of the writing process.

During these “time off” moments, it is often useful to engage in some form of mindless, restorative activity. For example, taking a walk, cooking dinner, or drinking a cup of tea outdoors. Sometimes it is amazing how the most stubborn paragraphs, or the most vexing counterarguments can be resolved by simply *doing something else*.

9. Seek Support

Almost everyone struggles with procrastination from time to time, and it is an especially common phenomenon among college students. But if your procrastination feels crippling, or is continually hindering your academic performance, consider reaching out for support. Working with an academic or mental health counselor can help students alleviate the root causes of procrastination and outline productive strategies moving forward.