



Just Do It: Tips for Avoiding Procrastination

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It's 9:00 p.m. Your twenty-five page paper is due in exactly twelve hours, and you still have to write twenty pages, miraculously produce some sources you can actually cite, and maybe, if you're lucky, squeeze in eight minutes for a quick proofread. A familiar feeling of panic is setting in, and you know you've got a long night ahead.

This is not the first time 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 you could to avoid working on the paper. And now, even though you have only twelve hours left, you're still not doing what you know you should be – making a pot of black coffee and settling in to work. Instead, you're staring into your refrigerator wondering if, despite having had dinner an hour ago, you're already hungry enough to take a sandwich break.

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 end the vicious cycle of procrastination:

1. Break the Assignment Into Small Pieces

When you initially get a writing assignment, do you immediately think that you will be unable to finish such a big or complicated project? Do you panic at the thought of everything that will need to get done before a major assignment can be handed in? Stop.

* Revised by Kaavya Viswanathan in 2011.

Try to remember that not everything has to be completed at once (unless you wait until the very end!). Make a list of the separate steps involved in the writing process (e.g., researching, generating a thesis statement, outlining, writing a first draft) and think of each step as an individual task. Just breaking up the idea of a paper in your mind can calm you down and help you feel more equipped to handle the task ahead. If you still procrastinate on the task after breaking it down, break it down even further. So, break “researching” down to “find ten relevant cases” and if that still seems unmanageable, break “find ten relevant cases” down to “run a Westlaw search.” Or, break “proofread” down to “check Bluebooking,” and if *that* still seems unmanageable, break it down still more to “make sure all case names are underlined.” Once your tasks are as simple as possible, you’re much more likely to sit down and complete them right away.

2. Make a Detailed To-Do List with Specific Deadlines

Is your only goal to complete the paper by the day it is due? Having a single, large goal with one deadline is a common mistake that facilitates procrastination. Break your assignment up into small tasks (see Tip # 1), then structure your to-do list around those specific tasks. For example, if you have completed your research and want to begin writing your 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. Remember to be realistic in your goal-setting – there’s no point in making overly optimistic to-do lists, because you’ll only feel discouraged if you don’t meet all your goals (nobody can write a first-draft, run five miles, walk the dog, and bake a layer cake in a single day). Finally, many people find that it helps to write a to-do list down and cross items off as they are completed – there is something intrinsically satisfying about marking off achievements, and this visual reminder of your progress is likely to inspire you to stay on task.

3. Make 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 the electronic equivalent). What do you write in your planner? Do you write, “Work on first draft” each day for a full month? Instead of setting aside this type of general time to write your paper, set aside 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 also schedule in some time to NOT work.

The most important thing to remember when making a schedule is that writing is an intensely personal process, and everyone approaches it differently. Do you know that it takes you a long time to research but only a short time to proofread? Tailor your schedule accordingly. Do you know that you'll be exhausted after finishing your first draft? Give yourself a day off instead of scheduling yourself to immediately start revising. It is often helpful to overestimate the amount of work you have so that you give yourself plenty of time to finish everything – i.e., if you think it will take you three to five hours to check for Bluebooking errors, err on the side of caution and schedule in six hours to Bluebook. Finishing something early is hugely satisfying; feeling as though you're scrambling to complete a task that you didn't give yourself enough time for can be frustrating and demoralizing.

4. ...and Stick to It

Do you ever sit down to write – filled with good intentions – only to find that an hour has somehow passed and you've yet to write a word? It's far too easy to spend two hours "writing" without getting anything done at all. To make sure you're actually *writing* when you're "writing," eliminate as many distractions as possible. Sign out of gchat, turn off the movie you're watching in the background, and resist the urge to compulsively check your email every two minutes. If you really need to, turn off your Internet altogether or work in a coffee shop that doesn't have Wi-Fi. If it still seems daunting to do nothing but write for a two-hour block, break that block down into smaller chunks of time. Set a kitchen timer or an alarm clock for a specific amount of time (say, fifteen minutes), and tell yourself you will do nothing but write until the alarm sounds. You will be amazed at how much you can achieve in fifteen minutes of solid, focused writing and, at the end of the fifteen minutes, you will often find that you are eager to continue writing. If you hit a wall at the end of the fifteen minutes, don't become anxious – working for fifteen minutes then taking a short break might not seem productive, but it is a much better use of your time than two hours of reading food blogs, checking Facebook, and taking an inordinately long time to type your name and the date at the top of your blank page.

5. Rules Are Meant to Be Broken

Once you actually start writing your paper, don't fall into the trap of feeling obliged to do everything in the "right" order – the sooner you accept that there is *no such thing* as a "right" order, the easier you will find it to begin and continue writing. You don't have to complete all your legal research and have it perfectly organized before you start writing a first draft. In fact, if you wait to start writing until you have a "perfect" research outline, you're guaranteed to be waiting for a long time. Research enough so that you understand the law and have some ideas for an argument and then jump right in. Note down areas of your paper where you want to find more cases or think your research is thin, and do that research later. Similarly, don't feel as though there is any single formula for writing a good paper. Sure, some people sit down, start with their introduction, and

the paper flows sequentially from there, but these people are the exception rather than rule. If you have no idea how to write your introduction, but you *do* know what you want to say on p. 8 of your argument, get started with p. 8 – you can come back to the introduction later.

There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to writing, so become comfortable tailoring your writing process to fit your personality. Some people like to write for long stretches at a time and find that they cannot make real gains on an assignment if they only sit down for an hour or two a day. If this is you, leave yourself a weekend to complete a project, so that you can work, uninterrupted, for two whole days. Other people find the thought of facing an entire weekend set aside for writing a draft daunting – if you are one of these people, break your “writing” hours up over four to five weekdays. Working regularly on writing will help you overcome anxiety about the writing process and make the task in front of you seem more manageable. 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, which is helpful for taking exams as well as for writing papers.

6. First Things First

Our natural tendency is to work on tasks that are easy or particularly interesting to us, while putting off assignments that seem boring or difficult. Using little tasks to put off the big tasks that *really* need to get done is a particularly deceptive form of procrastination – even as we pat ourselves on the backs for checking items off our to-do list, all we’re actually doing is putting off the most important, time-consuming work until the end. Yes, you do need to exercise, go grocery shopping, eat dinner, and check email. But make sure you are not using these activities as excuses for not writing a paper whose due date is creeping up on you. Cleaning your kitchen and doing laundry are important tasks, but you need to be able to prioritize more substantive work, especially if it has a deadline.

7. Set Yourself Up to Succeed

We’d all like to think we have the willpower to resist temptation, but ultimately ... we don’t (the fortunate few who do probably don’t need tips on avoiding procrastination). Know yourself and, instead of putting yourself into situations where you have to actively resist temptation, try to avoid those temptations altogether (there’s a reason that people who can never eat “just one cookie” don’t keep Costco size boxes of cookies at home) by scheduling your writing and writing breaks around the path of least resistance. Don’t plan to stay in the library on a Friday night and write five pages of a dense and complicated paper when you know a friend is having a birthday party. Odds are, you’ll end up leaving the library for the party, and feeling guilty for not having achieved your writing goal for the day. Instead, be realistic and give yourself Friday night off – with the promise that

you'll devote two hours to the paper on Saturday morning instead. Similarly, when you take a writing break, make sure your planned "break activity" makes sense in the context of your schedule. If you've decided to take a fifteen-minute break, don't tell yourself that you'll watch "just" fifteen minutes of an hour-long episode (it's far too easy to end up watching the entire show); watch fifteen minutes' worth of movie trailers or YouTube videos or take a short walk instead.

8. Use Rewards as Incentives

Let's be honest – we'd all rather be sleeping / eating / fill-in-the-blank-with-your-activity-of-choice than working on a writing assignment. It's much easier to focus on your writing if you know you have one of these rewards to look forward to. So make sure to schedule activities you enjoy as "rewards" for achieving your goals. You're far more likely to achieve your small, specific goal of writing two pages a day if you know that completing the goal means you can see a movie that night. Knowing that you've accomplished your goal for the day also makes it easier for you to feel good about relaxing without the stress of feeling behind schedule.

9. Write Bad First Drafts (aka Stop Being a Perfectionist)

One of the most common reasons for procrastination is fear of failure – you don't want to sit down and start writing until your ideas are nuanced, your research has left no stone unturned, and you have the introductory paragraph of your piece flawlessly composed in your mind. It's a natural human tendency to want our assignments to be perfect from beginning to end, but this is almost never possible, and usually creates far too much stress, which in turn leads to procrastination ... A crucial step to overcoming procrastination is accepting that it's ok to write a bad first draft (and second and third ...). Nobody needs to see these "bad" drafts except you – they aren't what you are going to hand in to your professor (and your professor isn't going to know if the "first" draft you ultimately turn in to him is actually your fourth). Stop worrying that your thoughts don't make sense, your roadmaps aren't clear, or your sentences are labored and halting – these are all problems that can be fixed further down the road. Don't give up when your first attempt at putting thoughts on paper seems stilted or not what you hoped it would be. First drafts don't need to be perfect – in fact, they're not supposed to be. And even a terrible first draft is better than no first draft at all.

10. There's Nothing Wrong with a Little Time Off ...

Here is the rule that is every procrastinator's dream come true – sometimes, there is value in time that you *don't* spend writing. Before I go any further, let me add a few caveats – this tip is not an excuse to take time off before you have even started researching or writing. Taking some time to "think" about your writing assignment two days before it is due, when you don't actually have a draft to think *about* will do you no

good. But, if you have followed all the other tips in this handout and you have a solid working draft, but have simply hit a mental block – it’s ok to take a break.

There are points in the writing process when you simply become too “close” to what you have written – you are unable to see flaws, to spot basic errors, or to think about reformulating structure and arguments. When you reach one of these points, it can be incredibly helpful to take a step back from writing and allow your thoughts to simply simmer in your mind until ideas take on more clarity. This may sound luxurious – time off from writing! – but don’t be fooled. Taking a “step back” doesn’t mean you stop thinking about your assignment altogether; rather, you stop *actively* thinking about your assignment, so that latent thoughts have a chance to percolate. During these “time off” moments, it is often helpful to engage in some form of mindless, repetitive activity – exercising, cooking, or showering are some good examples – where your body is focused on a task, but your mind is free to wander. You are still thinking about your writing in these moments; you are just not thinking about your writing consciously. You will be amazed by the almost effortless way that counters to difficult arguments and strategies for structuring stubborn paragraphs will come to you when you are *simply doing something else*.

11. Call in the Cavalry (aka Don’t Be Afraid to Turn to Other People for Help)

If it were easy to set and stick to deadlines all by ourselves, nobody would procrastinate. But we’re human, and so it’s *hard*. You can help yourself out by creating “outside accountability” checks to motivate you through the writing process. For example, ask your professor (or law fellow) if he or she would review a rough draft of your paper a week before the draft is actually due. If your professor doesn’t review drafts, make an appointment at the Writing Center. Knowing that you have to show your work to another person can be a great motivator for getting things done, and getting them done well. If you don’t want to make an appointment with someone who will read your writing, there are still several ways other people can help you stay on track. Make your goals public – tell your friends, your family, or your roommate that you are working on a paper and when that paper is due. Then, when the urge strikes to watch TV or put off the paper until tomorrow, you’ll have people to gently (or not-so-gently) say, “Don’t you have something due soon?” If you really have writer’s block, consider sitting down and just *talking* to someone about your assignment – explaining your ideas to a third party is an incredibly helpful way to make those ideas clearer to yourself, and might just kickstart the urge to write.¹ Most importantly, communicate before you have a panic attack – don’t be afraid to ask for help throughout the writing process; the horrible sinking feeling that hits when you have only twelve hours left in which to research and write twenty-four pages can be easily avoided by a frank discussion with a professor, Senior Writing Fellow, or counselor earlier in the semester. As a rule, we tend to avoid asking for help or sharing our difficulties with other people – telling your professor “I just don’t know what to write about,” may seem like a shameful admission of defeat, but it’s not. Professors are

¹ This is a great opportunity to utilize the Writing Center – you can make an appointment to just come in and talk about paper topics and ideas; there’s no need to have a complete draft.

here to help you and admitting that you're stuck with an assignment could lead to a productive brainstorming session.

12. Just Get Started!

Sometimes, when all else fails, you just need to get started. Fear of white space can be the most paralyzing force in a writer's life – a blank Word document and a blinking cursor induce panic in the best of us. Simply typing words on a page to eliminate that blank space is the best thing you can do to overcome this fear, and you will find that the more you type (without stopping to worry about what you're saying), the easier writing will become. There's never going to be a perfect time to write, and there will always be something else you'd rather be doing. The tips above can help you overcome mental blocks and are good strategies for making the task of completing a writing assignment less daunting, but at the end of the day – you need to make the choice to take action and start typing.