

Teaching Students to Harness the Power of Word Processing as They Write

By Susan Liemer

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When I started teaching legal research and writing in 1990, I had to show students how to turn on the computer. Fast forward 15 years, and I found I had to persuade students that a natural language search on Google was not thorough legal research. More recently though, I have realized that this generation, who grew up using keyboards, needs direct instruction on how to use its computers as effective writing tools. Today's law students need to learn to harness the power of basic word-processing features to improve their writing process—and their writing product.

Identifying this need was a gradual process. In a writing conference one day, I reminded a student that changing a particular word throughout the paper would be a quick edit: “just click on edit-find-replace.” The student's reply was a blank stare. I described how to accomplish this edit in more detail, and the student thanked me for the tip.

Then I tried a little experiment. Whenever appropriate in future conferences, I asked if the student knew how to edit-find-replace. Most assured me quickly that they did. But for about a quarter of my students, this simple editing feature of their word processing was welcome news.

So our students are not always as savvy about word processing as we assume they are. Our students may be able to share MP3 files *sub rosa* or Twitter with *élan*. But they do not necessarily know how best to use their primary writing tool, their word-processing software.

Now I find myself in the classroom giving specific word-processing advice for the initial writing process. I acknowledge that the most angst-ridden part of the writing process is that window of time

when students have done significant research but have not yet started writing. They have a lot of information and ideas ricocheting around in their heads. And they have nothing on paper. The process of taking thoughts, zinging mentally around, and capturing them in text requires time and effort on task, wrestling with the material.

Here I introduce the concept of the “brain dump” draft.¹ I tell my students, “give yourself psychological permission to just dump whatever is in your head into the computer as you type.” Think of it as a freewrite (a technique we will have already tried in class).² Set a specific time, say half an hour, in which you will write down everything you are thinking about your research topic. Keep typing for the allotted time. Then see what you have. But if you are on roll, do not stop.

Here the students need some more guidance: Print out the brain-dump draft. Read it over. Look for points that coalesce into subtopics that can be pulled together for an IRAC. Develop those IRACs (or CREACs or whatever acronym you use for reporting and applying the law on an issue).

Already got IRAC? Cut and paste that errant, off-topic paragraph into the IRAC it really belongs in. Do the same for any “A” that wandered in “R.” If a few lines of “A” have wandered into “R,” just cut and paste them at the end of “R.” Cutting and pasting takes only seconds. Then reprint, reread, and modify the language for better flow.

¹ Anne Lamott has a slightly less polite term for it, in her iconic book on writing, *Bird by Bird* 21 (1995).

² On freewriting in the legal writing teaching context, see Linda L. Berger, *Applying New Rhetoric to Legal Discourse: The Ebb and Flow of Reader and Writer, Text and Context*, 49 J. Legal Educ. 155, 174–175 (1999); Elizabeth Fajans & Mary R. Falk, *Comments Worth Making: Supervising Scholarly Writing in Law School*, 46 J. Legal Educ. 342, 349–352 (1996).

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If the brain-dump draft contains material for which you cannot find the right location, do not delete it. Never waste perfectly good text. It takes a lot of time and energy to hammer out good text. It takes seconds to cut and paste. So open a new document and dump in there any miscellaneous paragraphs, sentences, and phrases that are not fitting in well elsewhere. You can always pick up those lines of text again later, when you identify the right location(s) for them in your paper. (Some text you may even end up saving for the next paper or one you do not even know yet you will write.)

In addition to guidance on using word processing to ease the angst of the initial writing process, students need a gentle warning: That first brain-dump draft pulled off the printer? It is not the draft to bring to a writing conference with the professor. It is the draft in which you create raw material, the rough text. This raw material needs polishing, through several more drafts, before it is ready to bring to a conference with the writing professor. It is your job to wrestle with the text and shape it to its task to the best of your understanding and ability.

Working through several drafts, however, should be easier now, because you have something to work with. The paper is no longer just ideas ricocheting around in your head; there is actual text on the paper, raw material to work with now.

And it is so much easier to work with something than nothing. A brain dump, followed by cutting and pasting, adding and subtracting, and, yes, edit-find-replace, is a much more productive process than staring anxiously at a blank computer screen or painstakingly perfecting each line before moving on.

There are many computer applications with specialized features that may help law students create specific documents. For example, some word-processing software has a shortcut to assemble a table of authorities in an appellate brief. Compiling a complete catalogue of all such features, though, would likely require writing an entire book. Here I mean to focus only on the most basic features common to all word-processing software: the cut, save, paste, find, and replace features that changed the way those of us who grew up with typewriters compose. Our tech-savvy students, too, need instruction in using these core word-processing features to make the most basic parts of the writing process efficient and effective. Permission to brain dump, generous cutting and pasting, and saving extraneous text in a separate document are parts of the core writing process that will help students harness the power of their word processing.

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Another Perspective

“The brain’s two halves emphasize different tasks. Although individuals vary in how these hemispheres function, the left brain generally focuses on linear, sequential ideas, while the right brain concentrates on patterns and connections. The left brain, for example, helps an individual predict the next symbol in a series of letters or numbers. The right brain enables that person to quickly choose two identical graphic designs out of a larger collection. The left brain analyzes the pieces, while the right brain synthesizes the big picture.

In learning, these two processes complement one another. The left brain grabs bits of potentially useful data from the environment, while the right brain relates them to one another. The left brain captures ‘text,’ whether composed of words, numbers, or other isolated pieces of information, while the right brain interprets the context of those data. The best learning draws on both parts of the brain, pursuing both the forest and the trees.”

—Deborah J. Merritt, *Legal Education in the Age of Cognitive Science and Advanced Classroom Technology*, 14 B.U. J. Sci. & Tech. L. 39, 42–43 (2008).