

DEFEATING THE WRITER'S ARCHENEMY

BY ANNE ENQUIST

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Writers' Toolbox ... is a regular feature of Perspectives. In each issue, Professor Enquist offers suggestions on how to teach specific writing skills, either in writing conferences or in class. Her articles share tools and techniques used by writing specialists working with diverse audiences, such as J.D. students, ESL students, and practitioners. Readers are invited to contact Professor Enquist at ame@seattleu.edu.

Every writer has a few bad habits. Some may be no more harmful than chewing on a pencil or drinking too many cups of coffee. Others can undermine a writer's ability to complete a successful document. That second kind of bad habit, especially when it plagues a significant number of students, warrants the attention of legal writing professors.

The bad habit I'm referring to is procrastination. While almost everyone gives in to the temptation to procrastinate occasionally, some students are world-class procrastinators when it comes to writing. They will laughingly tell you that they cleaned their whole apartment, helped a friend move, and watched *American Idol*—all to avoid starting to draft the latest legal writing assignment.

While I have not been able to uncover credible numbers about procrastination among law students, several experts have suggested that between 65 percent and 90 percent of undergraduates procrastinate to the extent that it affects their academic performance. (Solomon and

Rothblum, 1984; Knaus, 1977).¹ Anecdotal evidence suggests that the percentages among law students, particularly when it comes to legal writing, are also high.

Even though procrastination is pervasive and its bad effects are well known, our understanding of procrastination may be overly simplistic, which leaves us ill-equipped for working with (dare I say, reforming?) the procrastinating legal writing student. Fortunately, psychologists who have studied procrastination extensively have a few insights that we can apply to teaching legal writing.

First of all, some experts have described two fundamentally different types of procrastinators: the relaxed type and the tense-afraid type. (Solomon and Rothblum, 1984). The *relaxed procrastinator* often feels negatively toward his or her work and blows it off by having fun, socializing, or engaging in some distracting activity. Ellis and Knaus (1977) call these individuals the "easily-frustrated, self-indulgent procrastinators." They tend to describe the work as boring or stupid, procrastinate by finding something fun to do, and then rationalize that behavior.

The *tense-afraid procrastinator* (Fiore, 1989) is often overwhelmed, unrealistic about how much time things take, indecisive about how to proceed, and angry or resentful about the demands being made on him or her. The tense-afraid procrastinator often lacks confidence in his or her ability and fears falling short or failing.

While most experts agree that there are distinctly different types of procrastinators, they don't all agree on how to categorize them. L. J. S. Walker (1988), for example, divides procrastinators into four types: the Perfectionist, the Postponer, the Politician, and the Punisher. Sapadin and Maguire (1997) categorize them into six types: the Perfectionist; the Dreamer, who has big ideas but can't work out the details; the Worrier; the Defier, who resists what others expect

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¹ Interestingly, some experts who track academic trait procrastination (ATP) say that procrastination increases as students move through their undergraduate years.

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or want; the Crisis-Maker; and the Over-Doer, who is chronically overextended.

These descriptive labels vividly capture one important truth about procrastination: there are often dramatically different reasons why students procrastinate. For example, some procrastinators' delaying behavior comes from an overdeveloped sense of optimism (“Why start? I have plenty of time”), while other procrastinators' habit stems from an overdeveloped sense of pessimism (“Why start? Whatever I do won't be good enough”).

What does all of this mean for the legal writing professor working with a procrastinating student or the legal writing student who wants to lick his or her procrastination habit? Simply put, the advice or strategy that might be helpful for one type of procrastinator may be counterproductive for another. The key is to match the advice and strategy to the type of procrastinator and his or her reasons for procrastination.

Step one in working with any procrastinator, then, is to identify why the student procrastinates when faced with a legal writing task. As legal writing faculty, most of us are not trained counselors, but we can make our students aware of the types of procrastinators and encourage them to identify for themselves the root causes of their procrastination about writing.

Step two involves developing an effective strategy for defeating the type of procrastination the student has identified.

Relaxed procrastinators may respond well to writing schedules with multiple minideadlines for each step along the way. Because they seem to need to feel deadline pressure in order to get started, having a self-imposed deadline for completing the research, for developing an outline or organizational plan, or even for small steps such as getting the rules section drafted, may help. Reporting in to someone about whether each of these minideadlines was met may also be necessary for the relaxed procrastinator.

For the tense-afraid procrastinator, what may be most important is to recognize what not to do. Exhorting this procrastinator to “try harder” or “get organized” may be counterproductive (Fiore, 1989). For this kind of procrastinator, better

strategies are those that reduce the unpleasantness (or the perception of unpleasantness) of the task.

One simple approach may be to have tense-afraid procrastinators recall the last time they had a successful writing experience. What did they write? How did they go about completing this writing task? If they still have that successful piece of writing, have them reread it before starting the new writing task. The key to this approach is to have students build on their successes.

If the student does not have or remember any successful writing experiences, an alternative might be for the legal writing professor to select the best paragraph in the student's latest draft and use it as a building block toward success. If the student wrote one successful paragraph about an analogous case, for example, walking through how and why it works gives the student specifics that he or she can apply to other, less successful parts of the draft.

The fear of failure in some tense-afraid procrastinators tends to be a deep-seated psychological phenomenon far beyond the expertise of most legal writing professors' ability to address, but the literature about procrastination provides some strategies that tense-afraid procrastinators may find helpful (Roberts, 1989). Chief among them are some simple changes in the student's self-talk² from procrastinating ways of thinking to productive ways of thinking:

Procrastinating	Productive
I must/have to _____ or (something awful will happen).	I'd like to/choose to ...
I've got to finish ...	When can I get started on ...
Oh God, this assignment is enormous.	Where is the best place to start?
I can't succeed.	I have a better chance of succeeding if I ...

Perfectionist procrastinators may need help setting realistic goals. On some level they know

² <mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap4/chap4r.htm>.

that most law students were at the top of their class as undergraduates and that not all of them can be at the top at law school. A gentle reminder of this fact helps some temper their obsession to do everything perfectly so that they will be the best.

The perfectionist legal writer can also bog down when any given paragraph, sentence, or even word choice is not going well. Encouraging them to skip over the problem area, at least for the moment, and continue working on another section while their subconscious works on a solution for the problem is a simple but powerful strategy.

Perfectionists may need help developing judgment about how much time to spend on any given part of the writing task. While it might not be advisable to tell most students something like “don’t spend more than an hour proofreading this document,” perfectionists may respond well to ballpark time frames.

Perfectionists may also benefit from a discussion about the law of diminishing returns and how it relates to efficiency vs. perfectionism. Explaining that it is doubtful that anyone in practice will be willing to pay for something to be written perfectly may jolt them into realizing that the goal of the course is something larger than getting the highest grade possible. It is really about becoming an effective writer for practice, and “effective” often means knowing when something is good enough to get the job done.

Because the “postponer” procrastinators tend to have short attention spans and difficulty staying on task for long periods, they need to adjust their writing schedules so that their writing sessions are shorter and have more variety. Postponers respond well to having others structure and direct their activities. This type of student, like the relaxed procrastinator, may need to sit down with the professor to create a writing schedule and then send in mandatory progress reports via e-mail.

Politicians are the high profile members of any law school class. They involve themselves in numerous extracurricular activities and often have difficulty saying “no” when asked to organize an event or participate in a project. Social butterflies by nature, they want to please others and thus may

have a hard time making their legal writing assignments a priority. As a rule, politicians may have two root causes to their procrastination: (1) they are overextended, and (2) they resist focusing on any task like writing that is more solitary than social.

To defeat their procrastination tendencies, politicians often have to cut one or more extracurricular activities. Once they have carved out enough time to do their writing, they may respond well to strategies that make it a more social activity. Working to develop a clear sense of who their reader is may help them see writing more as lively dialogue than lonely monologue. They may find sharing drafts or working in writing groups helpful if the rules governing collaboration in your course or school allow it.

While the scope of this column won’t allow for an extended discussion of every strategy that might be matched to a type of procrastinator, one expert claims that for approximately one-third of all procrastinators the tried-and-true time management techniques (the “to do” list, a daily schedule, rewards along the way) will work wonders. Simple things like finding the right place to work, breaking a big project into small tasks, and tricking oneself into getting started right away can also help break the negative reinforcement cycle of procrastination.

Another simple but important insight is that procrastination is always attached to what people perceive as unpleasant tasks; few of us procrastinate about doing things we like. Convincing students that legal writing is a satisfying, rewarding, and worthy challenge may be a hard sell in some quarters, but it is worth a try. It certainly beats feeding the perception that it is boring, uncreative, or tedious. It helps, of course, if the legal writing professor himself or herself is excited and passionate about legal writing, and it doesn’t hurt to remind law students that they really do want their chosen profession to be intellectually challenging. If it really were easy, would they want to spend a career doing it?

Finally, no discussion of procrastination would be complete without mentioning the importance of controlling distractions. In the course of writing this column, I had the opportunity to chat with a

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colleague who confessed she is a chronic procrastinator. She wondered whether procrastination rates were on the rise given the new temptations of e-mail and surfing the Web. She pointed out that the very machine she uses for writing is also the machine that contains all those distractions!

In the old days when we talked to students about removing distractions and creating an environment that was conducive to effective writing, we might have suggested turning off the TV, cleaning the clutter from one's desk, or unplugging the telephone. Now we should probably add turning off e-mail and cell phones and using laptops in locations that keep us focused.

As any smoker or couch potato knows, kicking a bad habit is hard. Backsliding is common, even expected. And when it comes to procrastinating about writing, some students have had the bad habit reinforced over their educational careers. They keep repeating the same scenario. They delay working on a writing project, turn in what was essentially a rough draft, are unsatisfied with the result, and become convinced again that they are not good at writing and that writing is a distasteful task, so that the next time they are faced with a writing assignment, they are even more inclined to procrastinate.

Reversing this cycle won't be easy. It will take more than just saying "Stop procrastinating." Working with students to identify their own type of procrastination and matching that to some potentially useful strategies is just a start. But as we know from the procrastination literature itself, starting is half the battle.

For more on procrastination, see *Counseling the Procrastinator in Academic Settings* (Henri C. Schouwenburg et al. eds, 2004). Numerous university learning centers also have information about procrastination on their Web sites.

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Principium est potissima pars cujusque rei.
The beginning is the most powerful part of each thing.
