Chapter 9: Prewriting

Think about the last time you needed to write a paper. Did you sit down at your desk with your laptop, open up Microsoft Word to a new blank document, place your fingers on the keyboard, and start composing beautiful prose that flowed from your mind through your fingers onto the screen without any need to stop until you had finished writing a complete and perfect paper? Wait, does that not sound right? What about this: Did you sit down at your desk with your laptop, then get up to get a drink, then text some friends, then go to the bathroom, then return to your laptop and think to yourself, “I will never ever find a single word to write on this paper and the assignment is stupid and I just can’t”?

You could also be a student who has never written a lengthy paper, so you do not have prior writing experiences to reflect on. Maybe you are returning to school after some time out of school and you cannot remember how you used to write a paper of any length. Or maybe you do not yet see how projects you have completed also count as writing projects, or at least will benefit from the same steps that are used in the writing process. Making a presentation to a boss, generating a lab report, and filling out spreadsheets with collected data are all projects that benefit from implementing the writing process, including these prewriting steps.

One of the biggest mistakes that writers make is to fail to consider the entire writing process timeline of a document. **Prewriting**, that time before you sit down to put words on a page, is an often-overlooked part of the writing process. There are two parts to prewriting. The first step is to assess what you need as a writer to create the best possible environment and the second step is to perform the preparation steps that come prior to writing.

# Self-Assessment

Assessing yourself as a writer is something that you should complete in-depth every semester. You should be sure to implement what you learn about yourself as a writer for every writing project you undertake, but you will not have to complete a full assessment each time. For a starting point, consider completing this self-assessment questionnaire from Pam Jenoff, The Self-Assessed Writer: Harnessing Fiction-Writing Processes to Understand Ourselves as Legal Writers and Maximize Legal Writing Productivity, 10 Legal Comm. & Rhetoric: JALWD 187, 192 (2013).

Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Part One - Environmental/Atmospheric Preferences

1. What is your preferred time of day to write? Why?
2. What is your preferred writing environment? (Location? Activity or quiet?)
3. What is your preferred writing medium? (Desktop, laptop, longhand?)
4. Are there particular foods or beverages that enhance your writing experience?

Part Two - Substantive Assessment

1. What are your writing strengths?
2. What are your writing weaknesses?
3. Describe some of your prior favorite writing experiences. Least favorite?
4. Describe your writing style.
5. How do you like to begin a writing project?

You should consider these questions to be a starting point to assess yourself. Other things you can consider for environmental and atmospheric preferences include what you prefer to wear when you write, whether you want to listen to music, and how much space you like to have to spread out your materials. When completing your substantive assessment, also ask yourself what evidence you have to support your strengths and weaknesses. Ask why you identify certain previous writing experiences as favorites and least favorites; what do the favorites have in common and what set them apart?

Once you have determined what your preferences are to create an ideal writing environment, you will then need to assess whether you can meet those preferences. If you cannot, and chances are there will be times when you cannot, have a plan for what to do to cope with writing environments that are less than perfect. Consider how you can use your current environment to work best for you. If you have to write in a noisy environment, can you use earplugs or noise-canceling headphones? If you do not have access to a desk, can you use a dining room table? If your internet is unstable, can you go to a library or coffee shop?

# Preparation Steps

The second part of prewriting is the series of steps that you should take prior to sitting down to put pen to paper. This part should feel familiar! However, many people forget to include these steps as vital parts of the writing process, which can result in either people not budgeting sufficient time for these steps or feeling like they are wasting time when they should be writing. Paying careful attention to these steps of the writing process is just as important as the others! This list is an overview of the prewriting process that you should use before starting to compose your written document:

* Read the assignment and any accompanying documents.
* Gain mastery over the facts.
* Develop your research plan.
* Read the authorities you find.
* Develop what categories you will use to determine relevancy.
* Retain the authorities that are relevant to deciding your legal issue.
* Analyze the remaining authorities to determine what narrow issue to use to answer your legal question.
* Map out how you will use the authorities to support the conclusion you draw.

And then, write.

# Conclusion

Accept that there is more to creating a quality written document than just the time spent typing away on the keyboard. Discover the set-up that works best for you and build in time to your writing process to lay groundwork that sets you up for success.