



## We Write: LWI Scholarship Retreat

### Operating Instructions: How to Have a Successful Writing Retreat

#### <sup>1</sup> 1. Find the right time and company for writing.

Schedule your retreat at a time when you have two full days to a week (or more) to focus only on writing. During this time, stay away from grading, emailing, preparing for next semester, running committee meetings, writing reports, or anything else that takes any significant part of your time or attention away from your writing.

Schedule your retreat with people who are compatible writing partners. Compatible writing partners are interested in some of the same things you are, like writing and teaching, and they want to see all the writers at the retreat succeed in pursuing their goals. They will leave you alone when you want to concentrate, and they will talk with you when you need just a few minutes to sort something out.

#### 2. Find a topic.

Two to three months before the retreat begins, determine your topic and your goals for writing about the topic at the retreat.

A brief aside: most of us have been thinking about potential topics for years. What topics make you excited in the classroom? What would you like to know about persuasive writing, transactional drafting, blogging? What topics related to law inspire, anger, encourage you?

We know that the topic you first describe probably will not be your final topic. Research and writing will refine and polish your thinking, perhaps even change it altogether. But in order to plan to meet your goals, you must start with a fairly narrow and fairly specifically defined topic. So, for example, not “Justice Scalia’s Rhetoric,” but “Justice Scalia’s Rhetorical Use of ‘No Reasonable Person Would Think That’ as a Persuasive Argument.”

#### 3. Set a research agenda.

Once you have determined your topic, establish your research agenda.

Another brief aside: depending on your topic, you may already have done much of the research. Still, you will need to focus and organize it.

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<sup>1</sup> Checked off because the Discipline Building Working Group has done this for you.

What books, articles, and other sources will you need to write the piece that you want to write? Chart and calendar a plan for gathering as much of the essential material as you can well before the retreat begins. Check for available bibliographies in the general and specific subject area first. They will save you lots of time that you can use to narrow down your sources more quickly. From there, determine what kinds of research you can do yourself and how much you can reasonably accomplish before the retreat. What research might you consult with a librarian about, in an effort to help you get through more quickly or to dig more deeply? What research and source collection can you ask your research assistants to do?

□ 4. Ask a librarian.

If you are lucky enough to have easy access to a research librarian, send the librarian an outline of your topic. Ask them (purposeful use of “them” as a gender-neutral singular pronoun) for their advice about the most efficient way to do the background research. Do they know about already-compiled background resources? Do they know about non-legal sources that might be useful? Can they help you collect articles or books through online sources, interlibrary loan, or otherwise?

□ 5. Work with research assistants.

If you are lucky enough to have research assistants, gauge their strengths. Some research assistants can synthesize and summarize materials for you. Many cannot. But all research assistants can do background research—consulting with you as they go along on key words and concepts for their searches—and all research assistants can organize it in ways that are useful for you, for example, in outline, index, or table of contents form. Excel logs work well and can include name, citation, research issue, summary, and quoted material. Also consider having your research assistant prepare a single-topic research memo. If you are working on an interdisciplinary topic, you may be able to find a research assistant who knows something about the other discipline.

Just as all research assistants can do background research, all research assistants can prepare full source lists in proper citation format (given the eventual publication outlet you envision). Make sure your research assistants give you a full list of all your sources along with PDFs or Word Docs of all the important sources so you can bring them with you in electronic format. Ask your research assistant to use a naming convention that makes it easy for you to match each electronic document to the source list so you have the proper citation format at your fingertips.

□ 6. Take stock.

About three weeks before the retreat, think about your progress. Where are you in your process? Have you read the main sources? Do you have rough notes, an outline, a draft? Depending on where you are, it’s time to chart and calendar the work you—and your research assistants—can do before the retreat.

□ 7. Packing your materials.

Once your background research materials have been organized, make sure they are in a format that makes it easy for you to “pack” them for the retreat. Some folks want their

research materials in binders; others would like to refer to them on laptop or e-reader, collecting their materials in online folders, located in Box or Dropbox or even Westlaw or Lexis. In hard copy or e-format, bookmark or “tab” your materials. Highlight key words. Perhaps organize your materials with a barebones outline.

□ 8. Packing other essentials.

Remember that once you get to the retreat, you will want to establish an environment that supports focused writing. You will need to have your tools. For most of us, this means some or all of the following: a laptop computer (and accessories, including batteries for mice); your background research packaged in whatever format works for you; pens, pencils, and notepads; printer cartridges and printer paper; perhaps a recording app for your phone (to remember those great ideas that occur to you when you are not actually writing); a couple of key books; and, of course, coffee and chocolate. Your mileage may vary.

□ 9. Use your retreat time wisely.

Set several achievable goals. What can you realistically accomplish on Day 1? Perhaps an introduction, a fleshed-out outline, a key example, a section of explanation, a draft of the conclusion. What can you realistically accomplish on Day 2? By the end of the retreat?

Everyone is different in their writing approaches and habits, of course. Still, doing background research during a writing retreat probably is not the best use of your focused time for writing. A little touch-up research, to wrap up one section of a draft, is a different story. Going for a walk or on a run first thing in the morning—or midway through the day—can help you work through your thinking or get back on track or just get started when you think there is nothing worthwhile to say. Spending the afternoon talking about the movies? Almost certainly not so helpful.

□ 10. Give and receive support.

Writing is lonely. Even when it ends well, the writing process is marked by sh\*\*ty first drafts and at least a few rejections. Good companions can help you through these troubles, so treat your fellow writers as future readers, mentors, and collaborators.

□ 11. Community support.

From funding to mentoring to general writing advice to specialized feedback, the legal writing community supports you as a scholarly writer. To encourage and disseminate well-supported and wide-ranging scholarship about legal communication, LWI and ALWD sponsor and publish peer-reviewed journals, the *Journal of Legal Writing* and *Legal Communication & Rhetoric: J.ALWD*. LWI and ALWD, along with Lexis, provide jointly funded scholarship grants on an annual basis.

Now, with the addition of *We Write*, LWI and ALWD sponsor an impressive range of writing workshops. These workshops have different lengths and goals; and they are scheduled at times throughout the year and locations across the country. At least one of these workshops will work for you.

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Consider starting a scholarship group of like-minded writers, from your school or neighboring schools. Members of a scholarship group can support one another in reading abstracts/outlines/drafts, encouraging writing deadlines and conference presentations, and getting articles published.

Finally, almost all law schools provide writing support for professors. This support takes the form of summer research grants, semester-long and year-long research leaves, and year-round speaker series, faculty development programs, and other scholarship-related activities. If your law school has been providing professional development programs and opportunities on an unequal basis, once you've finished this writing project, perhaps it's time to chart and calendar your plan to change that status quo.