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Is Courtesy No Longer Contagious

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Is Courtesy No Longer Contagious?

As you read this column, flowers will be budding, even blooming, and the trees will be plush with foliage. As I write this column, however, Virginia still sits in the dead of winter, where many of us are experiencing freezing temperatures, dangerous ice, and more snowfall than most of us natives and longtime residents have ever seen. Now, as a cold weather enthusiast, I can handle Mother Nature, but what is becoming increasingly hard to handle (and quite frankly sad) is what, at least in the Washington metropolitan area, seems to be the loss of common courtesy. Despite the weather, more and more drivers are only out for themselves, speeding recklessly in and out of traffic with a total disregard for safety or how their actions or lack thereof might affect others. In my day (a comment that makes me sound far older than my 46 years), drivers were respectful, recognizing that the road did not belong only to them. Drivers took turns merging, and a smile was far more common than a middle finger. How times have changed. Even when one driver is nice, the other often responds with aggression or selfishness. Is courtesy no longer contagious?

Unfortunately, the lack of common courtesy does not stop on the highway. In legal writing, the lack of common

courtesy manifests itself through procrastination and sloppy, careless work product. Sure, we are all busy, jumping from task to task, and wishing that there were more than 24 hours in a day. But our personal schedules should not act to the detriment of others who have no need to put our schedules first. A colleague (or, worse yet, a client) should not be forced to scramble to review and correct our work product because we waited until the last minute and then hastily completed a draft replete with errors. In short, one person's poor planning should not become another person's emergency. In the words that remain, this column offers some quick advice on how to become a more courteous writer.

PLAN AHEAD

Chart out your schedule. This sounds like an easy task, but it can be quite challenging. Make a list of what needs to be accomplished, and move the tasks that involve other people reading, reviewing, and editing your work to the top of the list. Even though writing is sometimes overwhelming, if writing for someone else, do not make your reader have to drop everything on a Friday afternoon to look at something that you could (and should) have completed the previous

Strive for excellence, not perfection.

Monday morning. Prioritizing tasks that involve others allows them to control their schedules better and prevents your poor planning from running the show.

COMBAT WRITER'S BLOCK

Now I am the first to admit that the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. Writer's block sometimes gets the best of all of us. Worry not, my frazzled readers. Here are some common techniques that can be used to combat writer's block (and I won't wait until tomorrow to tell you):

1. Think outside the box. If writing a brief, for example, perhaps presenting the facts chronologically isn't always the best idea; sometimes starting at a different place in the narrative is more effective. Within reason (and time constraints), be creative. Through trial and error, you will improve and overcome the stalemate.
2. Persevere. Keep writing, even if it means you end up with multiple drafts (which a good writer should), or spend too much time trying to write one perfect sentence, when, in reality, there is no such thing. Putting pen to paper or, more appropriately, typing text on what was a blank screen signifies accomplishment; seeing that you have made some progress is an incentive to continue with the task until it is completed.
3. When daunted by a massive writing project, focus on a smaller subtask. For example, if you are drafting a trial brief and the argument section seems overwhelming, start working on the facts or prayer for relief — you know what happened in the case and what you want the court to do, so these sections should not be nearly as difficult to complete. Completing one part of a larger task reduces the anxiety imposed by the writing, eventually allowing the writer to successfully accomplish the larger task.
4. Strive for excellence, not perfection. Deadlines, costs, and reality of competing pressures make a truly perfect

document the thing of legend. Mediocrity won't hack it, but excellence will.

5. Remain focused on the big picture. Ask yourself what you must do to satisfy your audience and achieve your purpose. If time permits, add in bells and whistles; if not, address the essentials.

Above all, however, keep in mind that there is neither one perfect document nor one fail-safe way to draft an almost perfect document.

PROOFREAD CAREFULLY

The work that you submit to another person should be a well-edited and nearly final work product, not a sloppy first draft. Although some of us might have the luxury of an editor (insert: trusty paralegal or legal assistant), it should not be someone else's job to sweat the small stuff in our writing. Take the time to submit a polished work product. As noted above, this does not mean that the document you submit needs to be perfect. Still not convinced? Put yourself in the shoes of your recipient. How would you feel if you received a document that was full of typos and poor grammar, forcing you to spend a lot of time editing the work? Enough said. In such circumstances, why not simply do the writing yourself in the first place?

As I type this last paragraph, it is snowing outside. Luckily, there are no school delays, and the roads are passable. If someone lets me merge as I am getting on the beltway, it will be a good day. Make your reader's day by producing timely and non-rushed writing. It doesn't take much effort, and, I hope, courtesy will be contagious. ■

Questions, comments, and suggestions (but only if you ask them before Friday at 5 p.m. and don't expect me to drop everything to respond to your email) are welcome at dspratt@wcl.american.edu.