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Do the Pomodoro®!: Timed Writing Labs in the Classroom

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While you can never be certain you're accurately tracking changes in student performance over time (damn you, Heisenberg!), it's uncontroversial to note that today's students often struggle to master the metacognitive skills required to write. Thus, today's LRW teacher must help students develop their own practice of writing, in addition to teaching the specifics of legal writing. Online teaching during the pandemic has only underscored the value of helping students develop practices they can use outside of class to increase comprehension and productivity.

One such practice I have recently introduced in the first semester LRW course is timed writing labs, which I use both to help students generate assignments and to teach them broader time management skills. I initially conducted timed writing labs during in-person classes; last year I employed them in my virtual classes as well.

1. Timed Writing Practice: The Pomodoro® Technique

The timed writing method I use is a modified version of “The Pomodoro® Technique.” First developed by productivity consultant Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s,¹ The Pomodoro Technique can be employed for any task and in any industry. It has a special following among academics seeking to be more focused while writing their scholarship. In fact, I am using it to write this article.

Simply put, The Pomodoro Technique (named for the iconic red tomato kitchen timer) involves organizing work time into discrete tasks that are accomplished during timed intervals, punctuated by brief breaks. The “Pomodoro” in the Technique is the work session; the goal is to not “cut the tomato” by multi-tasking.²

The recommended practice is to set a timer for 25 minutes and devote yourself exclusively to a pre-selected task—e.g. writing a legal memo—for that period.³ During this dedicated time, screen out all distractions. This means no glancing at your phone, no checking email, no answering text messages, etc.⁴ And no doing *other* work tasks during the allotted time.

When the timer rings, take a five-minute timed break. A break should be fully a break—not time spent answering work emails or researching issues that arose during your writing session. I try to avoid electronics altogether for the break, preferring activities such as taking a brief walk, staring out the window, or getting a drink. After the break is over, return to your next work interval, timed as before. After four work sessions, you can take a longer break, say 15-30 minutes.

It’s best to use a timer rather than periodically checking your clock, and luckily interval timers abound. Dedicated Pomodoro apps and software are available for purchase, including timer software by Cirillo himself.⁵ There are

¹ See Francesco Cirillo, *The Pomodoro Technique* (last visited June 16, 2021), <https://francescocirillo.com/pages/pomodoro-technique>.

² I use a simplified version of the trademarked Pomodoro Technique, which involves additional steps (e.g., assessing the number of sessions required to complete a task, adding time for recapping and reviewing work, and documenting your work). See *id.*; see also FRANCESCO CIRILLO, *THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE: THE ACCLAIMED TIME-MANAGEMENT SYSTEM THAT HAS TRANSFORMED HOW WE WORK* (2018).

³ I adjust the duration of Pomodoro intervals based upon the specific task I’m undertaking. For example, when I am focused on a longer piece of complex writing, I might go for 30-35 minutes, with 10-minute break intervals.

⁴ Some Pomodorians use dedicated apps that help screen out distractions on their working laptops. See Bryan Collins, *The Pomodoro Technique Explained*, FORBES (Mar. 3, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryancollinseurope/2020/03/03/the-pomodoro-technique/?sh=1eb7ce283985>.

⁵ Francis Cirillo, *Pomodoro Timer Software* (last visited June 16, 2021), <https://francescocirillo.com/products/pomodoro-timer-software>.

also free interval timer apps you can download (I use the “Repeat Timer”). Or why not go IRL and use the eponymous tomato timer?⁶

2. Goals of Timed Writing Labs

I first introduced timed writing labs into the classroom as part of a larger goal to intervene in students’ writing process more directly and immediately. While I require students to conference with me once per memo assignment, many don’t take full advantage of conferences, neglecting to bring in a draft, for example. And some don’t come back for additional help when they need it, despite my encouragement. During the labs, I am available to answer questions as students write.

Another goal of the writing labs is to get students motivated to start assignments early. While I set interim assignments (e.g., outlines) to keep students on track, some students still put off getting started on their memos, only to run out of time (despite repeated warnings from Yours Truly). The writing labs ensure that students start earlier.

The labs also provide an opportunity to model the level of commitment, time management, and persistence required to write successfully. This is where The Pomodoro Technique comes in, giving students a concrete method to develop those habits, in addition to structuring the lab sessions. And by using the Technique in labs, students learn how to use it on their own to help screen out distractions when undertaking writing assignments or other school work.

3. Timed Writing Labs Using The Pomodoro® Technique

My use of timed writing labs in the classroom is evolving. Currently, I schedule writing labs during regular class time, conducting three a semester. The labs are held during a one-and-a-half-hour class and are roughly keyed to writing assignment due dates.⁷ The labs are dedicated to different tasks: developing a completed memo outline into a first draft; revising the closed memo after it is returned with comments; and getting started on a research memo. We are able to

⁶ See, e.g., *Small Alarm Clock 60 Minute Tomato Shaped Kitchen Timer, Student Countdown Timer*, HOZZ (last visited June 16, 2021), <https://www.houzz.com/products/small-alarm-clock-60-minute-tomato-shaped-kitchen-timer-student-countdown-timer-prvw-yr~116614968>.

⁷ When teaching in person, I book a larger classroom for the lab so students can spread out, both to avoid plagiarism concerns and to minimize distractions from other students. When I use the Technique in Zoom-based classes, crowding is obviously not a concern, but many students turn off their cameras during the writing sessions for privacy, re-opening them during breaks for check-ins.

complete three timed sessions of 20 minutes each during a lab session, leaving time for introductory remarks and subsequent lab debrief.

I encourage the students to get comfortable for the sessions, allowing them to bring food, listen to music on headphones if they desire,⁸ and bring in anything that might make them feel more comfortable while writing (e.g., slippers, relaxed clothing). I strive to facilitate student comfort while learning the Technique to encourage them to create their own habits around writing, hopefully increasing the likelihood that they will adopt timed writing for use outside of class.

I begin the first lab session with a brief PowerPoint explaining The Pomodoro Technique. Depending on the assignment we are working on, I offer some general advice or feedback. For example, our first writing lab is conducted after they submit their outline for the closed memo and receive comments on it. Prior to the lab, I ask them to incorporate those comments into their outline so that they are ready to start writing the first draft during the lab.

In this first lab, I direct students to open their outline document and begin typing it out into the first draft, thus emphasizing that the outline is part of the writing process, not simply an assignment to submit for class and never revisit. I may also more narrowly focus the lab task, for example, by directing them to begin writing the first major rule for the rule section.

I act as timekeeper for the lab to encourage a synchronized work space. I invite students to synchronize their timers with the class timer, if they wish. Of course some students will not strictly abide by work sessions, getting up for bathroom breaks, etc., rather than using the built-in breaks. I am flexible within work sessions, while students are learning the Technique. I also work alongside the students during the sessions (camera-on during the virtual labs) to model the Technique.

Another variation I make is to allow students to do a “mini-conference” with me, preferably during the break period but also during the work period when necessary to accommodate a larger class. (For virtual classes, this is accomplished either through chat message questions or by student-requested break-out sessions.) Mini-conferences do not fit neatly into the Pomodoro model: they obviously entail shifting tasks, thus “cutting” the tomato, and they certainly aren’t breaks. While not ideal in terms of the Technique, this modification allows me to engage closely with the students while they write.

Many students do take advantage of the “mini-conferences,” especially in the in-person labs. The ease of teacher access during the writing lab seems to encourage conference-shy students to seek help. Some students come back more than once, underlining the strength of the writing lab in facilitating immediate support for the writing process.

⁸ I confess ambivalence about this. Music *can* be a distraction when writing, but it can also aid some students. Accordingly, I leave the decision to them.

4. Student Feedback on Timed Writing Labs

After my first semester of using (in-person) timed writing labs, I conducted a brief anonymous survey to gauge student response. Key survey prompts included:

- *“I was able to productively use the writing labs I attended to concentrate on my writing.”*
- *“I found the timed writing technique used in the Writing Labs (known as ‘Pomodoro’) helpful to my writing.”*
- *“I have tried using [T]he Pomodoro [T]echnique outside of the Writing Labs as well.”*
- *“My favorite aspect of the Writing Labs was . . . [fill in the blank]”*
- *“My least favorite aspect of the Writing Labs was . . . [fill in the blank]”*

For the in-person classes, the results of the survey, with roughly 62% of students responding, were encouraging. First, 90% of respondents said they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement that the writing labs had improved their ability to concentrate on their writing. The vast majority of students said they found The Pomodoro Technique useful, with no students disagreeing with that assessment.

For the virtual classes, the response rate was, not surprisingly, lower — roughly 48%. Only 72% of respondents said they agreed that the labs had improved their ability to concentrate. However, only one student “disagreed” that the labs had helped; the other respondents were neutral.

As for students’ favorite aspects of the writing labs, feedback included the following:

- *Freedom to write while having the opportunity for direct feedback.*
- *It forced me to sit down, in silence, and focus on writing in a controlled setting. I appreciated this discipline and I found that once I started writing, it became easier for my thoughts to flow onto the paper. And the chocolate!! [Another incentive: I bring mini candy bars for the in-person labs.]*
- *The timing method being controlled by the professor so I couldn’t goof off.*
- *I was able to focus better knowing the time was allowed and spaced out.*
- *Having time to write in class where the professor is there to answer any questions as I work through the process.*
- *The built-in time to get writing done is almost like a gift; it is so helpful. Knowing that I got work accomplished in the hour and a half that was already set aside for LS makes the assignment much less daunting. Having*

more than one lab on each assignment was also a key benefit because the professor was available at different points of my writing. (i.e. at the beginning when it was just an outline, then again after I had developed more).

Especially noteworthy feedback on the benefits of the virtual class sessions included the following:

- *Working with my fellow students. While it was virtual, it was reassuring to know that my classmates and I were working on the memos together.*

Feedback on the negatives of the Writing Labs included the following:

- *Re-focusing after a 5-10 minute break.*
- *The precise moment of the break assigned by someone else. I prefer me to be the person who decides when to take the break.*
- *People whispering or talking, sometimes it became distracting and counter-productive in terms of the purposes of the writing lab. [in-person lab]*
- *Sometimes, I would not put myself in the best position to make the most out of writing lab.*
- *The dead silence. [in-person lab]*

Most importantly, approximately a third of respondents, both for in-person and virtual classes, indicated they had tried The Pomodoro Technique on their own. And all students who tried it outside of class said they found it useful. Feedback included the following:

- *It is helpful because it fits into my real life schedule. If I have an extra 30 minutes to crank out a paragraph or two on my memo, I can use it. If I decide to sit down for a larger chunk of time, the intervals help me to get up and come back after a short break without feeling overwhelmed. The broken up intervals led me to write with a different process, where I feel more comfortable jumping around to other paragraphs or ideas to keep my mind fresh.*
- *[I]t really helped keep me focused during the times I set!*
- *It is a lot easier for me to focus when I know that there will be a break soon. Timing myself allows me to ultimately be a more disciplined worker/writer.*
- *The structured time helped me focus and not overload.*
- *It makes me feel as though I have a purpose when I sit down rather than just working aimlessly until I finish an assignment.*

5. Additional Tips for Integrating Timed Writing Labs into the Classroom

While best practices for teaching The Pomodoro Technique remain a work-in-progress, I offer these tips for launching it in your class:

- Consider posting a PowerPoint or links to video tutorials about The Pomodoro Technique on the course webpage for students to refer to when trying the Technique outside of labs. There are many Pomodoro tutorials available on YouTube.
- If using the labs to facilitate the transition from outline to first draft, allow sufficient time between returning outline comments to students and the writing lab. Ask students to incorporate your comments and finish their outline prior to the session.
- Similarly, if using the labs for rewrite assignments, allow sufficient time between the return of first draft comments and the timed writing lab so that students will use the time to actually write rather than simply review your comments.
- Consider giving students discrete tasks at the start of the writing labs. While there is value in simply getting students writing, you can help them focus by breaking the writing process into narrow tasks. So, for example, you could dedicate a writing lab to writing the fact section of a memo, or to beginning to draft the first major rule section with case law fact explanation, and so on.
- Do not overestimate how much writing students can complete in each Pomodoro session. Progress may be quite slow for some; after all, they are just learning the Technique. It's probably best to not set any greater goal for the session than simply working according to the Pomodoro intervals. Even when assigning discrete tasks, you should not necessarily expect students to complete those tasks during the lab.

The Pomodoro Technique doesn't solve all time management issues. You'll inevitably have students who come to labs behind other students or otherwise unprepared to meet the day's lesson, as in any class. And you may need to remind students that the labs are just a fraction of the time they will spend writing the assignment. But The Pomodoro Technique is an effective way to model the importance of organization, focus, and planning to the writing process. And

you'll be introducing students to an invaluable tool that they can carry forward into their own practice, for legal writing and beyond.