

Developing a Paper Proposal and Preparing to Write

Keep this list next to you as you develop your paper idea to help guide your research and writing process. LL.M. students should be sure to use this in combination with other guidance and resources on paper writing provided by the Graduate Program.

- **Pick a topic and approach.** Are you analyzing a legal problem? Making a policy proposal? Doing a case study? For an excellent overview of the kinds of projects you might want to undertake, see Martha Minow, *Archetypal Legal Scholarship: A Field Guide*, 63 *J. Legal Educ.* 65 (2013). Be sure you can articulate what question you plan to address and what significance it has for your readers.
- **Make a research plan.** Start with secondary sources (treatises, law review articles) to orient yourself to the topic and then move to primary sources (rules, statutes, case law, proposed legislation). Talk to one of the reference librarians in Langdell who can help you conduct a pre-emption check to confirm that others have not already written on the specific topic you propose. Understand the landscape of work on your chosen topic before you focus in on your own contribution.
- **Consider your methodology.** Will your research consist of work other than document review? If so, what will it entail and why is that method necessary? If you hope to conduct research involving human subjects, including interviews, surveys, or obtaining information by other means, it may require review by the Harvard Committee on the Use of Human Subjects.
- **Narrow down your topic to a one-page précis / research proposal** that explains the topic, your intervention into the conversation about that topic, and your methodological approach. You should be able to articulate your tentative thesis in a couple of sentences. Send that précis to your advisor and solicit feedback.
- **Set a schedule for your research and writing**, bearing in mind any relevant deadlines and considerations. Note that winter term papers are generally due in April; you are not expected to complete all of your research and writing in January. Be sure to think about the scope and feasibility of your project, especially if you believe part of the work must be done off-campus during winter term.
- **Define your terms.** One of the easiest ways for a paper to become confusing or sloppy is to use terms slightly differently in different sections of the analysis. Tell your reader what you mean and stick to it.
- **Be thorough and careful in citation.** You owe it to your reader to show the sources on which your analysis is based, and you owe it to the authors of those sources to give them credit. If you plan to use citation system other than the Blue Book, be sure to secure your supervisor's approval.
- **Start outlining and writing before you're convinced that your research is complete.** The process of writing will illuminate what you have yet to discover and focus your later research.
- **Make an outline.** What do you want to say? What support do you need for your analysis? What background information and context does your reader need to understand your points?
- **In your first draft, write for yourself.** Explain the problem, and answer it in the way that is helpful to you. As you do so, you'll see what more work you need to do in research and thinking. Think about plausible counterarguments and address them.
- **Start revising.** *You should spend more time revising than you do on research and drafting.* Figure out how to shape what you've told yourself into a structure that will be helpful to a reader unfamiliar with your topic.
- **Walk away from the paper** for a day (or at the very least, a few hours) and come back to it with fresh eyes. Does it still make sense? What questions would a reader unfamiliar with the topic have? Answer those questions.