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Writing Workflows

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



Lawyers do many things, but one of the most common is writing. In this post, I'll talk about some of the best practices for turning abstract ideas into a concrete and well-organized vision.

Short-form writing

Ideas often come to me while I am out and about. If I'm in a spot where it would be appropriate to speak out loud, I try to capture them by using the Siri or Google dictation feature on my smartphone.

For those of you who tried dictation several years ago and got frustrated with the results, I urge you to try it again. Improvements in transcription have made dictation more efficient and user-friendly across all platforms. I use it for most texts, emails, reminders, and short notes.

If you use dictation more broadly and the native dictation apps don't do a good enough job, you may want to try a "Dragon Anywhere" subscription.

At times, I know exactly what I plan to do when I'm writing. I know whether it will be a reminder, a note, a text, or an email. In other instances, I won't know what I want to do until I've finished transcribing it. For instance, when I start out dictating a text message and then realize it should be sent as an email. In those situations, I have a very useful iOS app called Drafts, which allows me to quickly write something and then easily move it to another application. Microsoft's OneNote app is not as seamless, but for people who don't work in iOS, OneNote may be the next best thing.

In the past, I have used Evernote to capture ideas, but these days I am more likely to use the native notes app on my smartphone because the sync and formatting options have improved dramatically.

Long-form writing

For five or six years now, I have been a fan of a talented private practice lawyer and geek named David Sparks (MacSparky.com). He suggested a workflow for longform writing projects that I find very useful.

In brief, I use a mindmap tool (either iThoughts HD or MindNode) to brainstorm the various topics that should be covered, and then export it as an OPML (Outline Processor Markup Language) file to use in an outlining app where I can linearly organize and flesh out those topics. To create the end product, I export it into either a word processing or a presentation app.

I find this method useful not only for ensuring that I cover relevant topics, but also for overcoming periodic writer's block. Something about the mindmapping process seems to engage a part of the brain that expands your creativity. I also think this method better taps into the strong points of both my left and right cortexes.

I have found several other tools that are useful for long-form writing. Both Scrivener (Mac, Windows, and iOS) and Ulysses (Mac and iOS only) are useful, full-featured writing apps created for long-form writing projects. They provide support for working on multiple writing projects, collecting research, outlining, chapter management, syncing, and exporting.

My current favorite is Scrivener. It is the older of the two and like many of the best apps, it was created by someone who wanted to solve their own problem. For anyone who spends a lot of time on long-form writing, I highly recommend it. The developer just released a version for iOS that is terrific on iPad, and it of course syncs to your various devices.

Collaborative writing (in real-time)

One of the most touted new features for modern writing apps is the ability to collaborate over the internet in real time.

I'm honestly not sure how important this feature is for most corporate lawyers. Most of us aren't used to collaborating in real-time on a writing project because until recently, we never had the ability to collaborate at a distance.

I would bet that this change has the most tangible effect on litigation, where many people have historically had to work together to prepare good pleadings or briefs on a very tight schedule. When I worked in litigation, I would have loved the ability to collaborate with outside counsel and clients on writing a draft in real-time. I'm curious about where this will go in the years to come.

As always, if you have any questions or comments (or are interested in writing a guest column), please let me know.

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