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More Than IRAC: Acronyms to Support the Writing Process

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Writing is a complex task. The writer is faced with a number of choices and considerations about content, organization, phrasing, and style. New writers, those who are still developing their writing skills, can find support, direction, and reassurance with acronyms, a type of mnemonic device, that are commonly used throughout education to facilitate learning.¹ An acronym is a word formed from the initial letter of a series of words² and identifies key information in a memorable manner to promote comprehension and recall.³ Math teachers often introduce the order of operations (e.g., add, subtract, multiple, divide, square) using PEDMAS (**P**arenthesis **E**xponents **D**ivision **M**ultiplication **A**ddition **S**ubtraction) while English Language Arts teachers regularly introduce coordinating conjunctions using FANBOYS (**F**or, **A**nd, **N**or, **B**ut, **O**r, **Y**et, **S**o).⁴ In the context of writing, acronyms can provide writers with reminders about content, suggestions about structure, and guidance on alterations.

1 See generally JOHN MITCHELL, 100 IDEAS FOR SECONDARY TEACHERS: REVISION 77 (2016) (“Acronyms, mnemonics, and acrostics are fabulous ways of training memory.”).

2 Although acronyms are examples of mnemonic devices, not all mnemonics are acronyms. Mnemonics may consist of multiple phrases or rhymes. For example, the mnemonic “every good boy deserves fudge” helps novice musicians learn the lines of the treble clef, while acronyms are abbreviations that form a new word such as IRAC. See generally ROD L. EVANS, EVERY GOOD BOY DESERVES FUDGE: THE BOOK OF MNEMONIC DEVICES: HOW TO REMEMBER ALL THE STUFF YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW (2007).

3 Cognitive science can provide guidance on how to promote student engagement, comprehension, and recall. E.g., Elizabeth Adamo Usman, *Making Legal Education Stick: Using Cognitive Science to Foster Long-Term Learning in the Legal Writing Classroom*, 29 GEO. J. L. ETHICS 355 (2016).

4 See generally ANDY GRIFFITH & MARK BURNS, OUTSTANDING TEACHING: ENGAGING LEARNING (2002); Adam L. Putnam, *Mnemonics in Education: Current Research and Applications*, 1 TRANSLATIONAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOL. SCI. 130, 130–13 (2015) (publication of American Psychological Association).

Professors who teach legal writing already recognize the value of acronyms as teaching tools.⁵ IRAC, or one of its variations, provides a common organizational paradigm for legal writers⁶ and serves as a reminder about the typical content of written legal analysis and the order in which that content is presented.

This essay shares four acronyms drawn from K-12 writing instruction⁷ that can also be implemented into the legal writing classroom to support the work of developing student legal writers.⁸ These acronyms can be presented during the initial weeks of instruction in any legal writing course. The acronyms can then be referenced throughout the course. While at first glance, these four acronyms may strike the law professor as redundant or inappropriate given the skill level and experience of law students, they do, however, offer two benefits.

First, these acronyms help law students navigate the transition to our specialized form of expression—legal writing. Students come to law school from various academic backgrounds, such as mathematics, philosophy, engineering, criminal justice, and

5 The transition to legal writing can be difficult for students of all ranges of writing experience. See generally Miriam E. Felsenburg & Laura P. Graham, *Beginning Legal Writers in Their Own Words: Why the First Weeks of Legal Writing Are So Tough and What We Can Do About It*, 16 LEGAL WRITING 223 (2010).

6 See, e.g., Laura P. Graham, *Why-RAC? Revising the Traditional Paradigm for Writing About Legal Analysis*, 63 U. KAN. L. REV. 681 (2015); Diane B. Kraft, *CREAC in the Real World*, 63 CLEV. ST. L. REV. 567 (2015); Terrill Pollman & Judith M. Stinson, *IRLAFARC! Surveying the Language of Legal Writing*, 56 ME. L. REV. 239 (2004); Tracy Turner, *Flexible IRAC: A Best Practices Guide*, 20 LEGAL WRITING 233 (2015).

7 Various instructional techniques and learning strategies developed for K-12 classrooms can be adapted to the law school classroom. See, e.g., Debra Moss Curtis, *Everything I Wanted to Know About Teaching Law School I Learned from Being a Kindergarten Teacher: Ethics in the Law School Classroom*, 2006 B.Y.U. EDUC. & L.J. 455; Jennifer L. Rosato, *All I Ever Needed to Know About Teaching Law School I Learned Teaching Kindergarten: Introducing Gaming Techniques into the Law School Classroom*, 45 J. LEGAL EDUC. 568 (1995).

8 Developing writers may especially find these four acronyms helpful, but these acronyms will also be of interest to writers of varying levels of experience and expertise.

“This essay shares four acronyms drawn from K-12 writing instruction that can also be implemented into the legal writing classroom”

English, and have a range of writing experiences and perspectives. Some law students may have not had formal writing instruction for years. For example, some may have earned AP credit in high school for college freshman composition and, therefore, not have taken any college level course that included writing instruction. Other students may have developed bad writing habits because their previous academic course work did not require them to create any significant writing projects. The acronyms discussed in this essay provide starting points for students who may lack confidence or experience with the writing process in general. Alternatively, even students with extensive writing experience may struggle to recognize how their strengths and weaknesses as writers relate to legal writing and therefore may benefit from these acronyms as well.

These acronyms also present law students with the opportunity to create connections between legal writing and their previous writing experiences. They can help law students recognize that the principles of good writing apply across all disciplines which, in turn, allows them to focus on translating their previous writing experiences to this new context. Dealing with a range of new law students with different writing experiences, the legal writing professor may struggle to provide a common base for classroom conversations and feedback.⁹ The acronyms discussed in this essay provide a common vocabulary students can reference during class, help them formulate questions to the professor during the writing process, and can help them better process feedback from the professor.

Second, these acronyms provide guidance on how to systematically approach a legal writing project, regardless of whether students received specific instruction about creating a particular project. Writing instruction, whether in K-12 or the professional school context, typically focuses more on the writing process than the final written

product.¹⁰ With the ever-increasing specialization of the law, it would be impossible for legal writing courses to anticipate and provide instruction on the creation of every possible document students will be expected to draft in practice. These flexible acronyms may provide guidance and confidence to students to help them navigate any project they may encounter in law school or in practice.

The following four acronyms correspond to the work a writer must complete during the five traditional stages of the drafting process. Accordingly, the professor can introduce them in class at each stage of the writing process. The five stages include: (1) prewriting, (2) writing, (3) revising, (4) editing, and (5) publishing. The first acronym below, **RAFT**, helps structure the prewriting stage, which is often a stage writers tend to skip. The second acronym, **MEAL**, supports the generation of text during the writing or drafting stage. The third acronym, **ARMS**, facilitates the revising stage by providing students with parameters that help them distinguish “revising” from “writing” and “editing.” The fourth acronym, **CUPS**, promotes student focus during the fourth stage of editing and further distinguishes “editing” from “revising.” All of these acronyms can be used to help students feel confident that they have reached the final stage of the writing process—publishing, also known as submission.

A. RAFT: A Systematic Inquiry to Support Prewriting

When approaching a new writing project, students are faced with a number of choices relating to content and presentation. The prewriting stage requires writers to brainstorm approaches, identify challenges, and recognize opportunities. To promote a methodical approach to the pre-writing stage, students can

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⁹ For strategies on how to share meaningful feedback by developing a shared vocabulary between teacher and students see Jessica Clark & Christy DeSanctis, *Toward a Unified Grading Vocabulary: Using Rubrics in Legal Writing Courses*, 63 J. LEGAL EDUC. 3 (2013).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Miriam E. Felsenburg & Laura P. Graham, *A Better Beginning: Why and How to Help Novice Legal Writers Build a Solid Foundation by Shifting Their Focus from Product to Process*, 24 REGENT UNIV. L. REV. 83 (2011).

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use the acronym **RAFT**.¹¹ The acronym stands for **R**ole, **A**udience, **F**ormat, and **T**opic.¹²

Role underscores a key initial consideration of every writing project. A writer must consider both what the writer’s role may be and what the role needs to be. For example, the writer should consider whether the writer is aiming to persuade, to inform, or do both. In the context of legal writing, the writer must also consider whether the writer is acting in the role of advocate, evaluator, advisor, or a combination thereof.

Audience, like role, is a key initial consideration of every writing project. First, the writer must identify all of the potential audiences including the primary audience, any potential secondary audience, and even the possibility of unintentional audiences. Once the audiences have been identified, the writer can then evaluate their experiences, knowledge, needs, and expectations. These considerations then inform the writer’s subsequent decisions about format, content, tone, voice, and stylistic conventions. For instance, when writing an advice letter to a client, the writer must take into account the client’s familiarity with the legal issue and knowledge about courses of action.

Format reminds the writer that legal documents must adhere to a number of formal conventions. The document may need to include the particular components or sections typical of that type, such as the need to include a table of authorities or a certificate of service in an appellate brief. Furthermore, the format choices a writer must assess when it comes to legal briefs must also adhere to court rules. However, writers should also leverage their formatting choices in a

manner that increases the readability of the text. For instance, the writer may consider the use of headings, the selection of font, typeface, and margins and line spacing. Format affects presentation, perception, and can help or hinder readability.

Topic concentrates the writer on determining what topics or content the writer should develop given the writer’s role, the potential audience(s), and the format. After determining what content the project requires, the writer can determine the depth of coverage necessary. Only after the writer has made these two decisions should the writer explain, expand, analyze, summarize, or streamline the content as appropriate. When writing a purchase & sale agreement, for example, the writer needs to identify what provisions must be included, such as a financing contingency, and then customize those provisions as appropriate for the particular transaction.

Thus, the acronym **RAFT** facilitates structured brainstorming and thoughtful development of all legal documents, whether office memoranda, client letters, or court filings. Consequently, when introducing a new document, **RAFT** provides student legal writers a solid starting point for approaching the assignment.

B. MEAL: A Blueprint to Build Complete, Cohesive, and Unified Paragraphs

When moving to stage two of any drafting project—the actual writing stage—writers acknowledge that strong paragraphs are essential to creating a strong text. Paragraphs must be complete, cohesive, and unified. The acronym **MEAL**¹³ stresses the key content and typical organization of a well-constructed paragraph the writer should be referencing often during this stage. **MEAL**, sometimes described as the **MEAL** plan, stands for **M**ain idea, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, and **L**ink.¹⁴

¹¹ See generally BEST PRACTICES IN LITERARY INSTRUCTION 355 (Lesley Mandell Morrow & Linda B. Gambrell eds., 4th ed. 2011). For research about the use of RAFT in a secondary English classroom, see, e.g., Cathy Smith Simon, *Using the RAFT Writing Strategy*, READWRITETHINK, <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-raft-writing-strategy-30625.html> (a web publication of the National Council of Teachers of English) (last visited May 8, 2020).

¹² Some writing instructors will use the strong RAFTS, which stands for **role**, **audience**, **format**, **topic**, and **strong verbs**. E.g., LORI JAMISON ROG & PAUL KROPP, THE WRITE GENRE: CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND MINI-LESSONS THAT PROMOTE WRITING WITH CLARITY, STYLE AND FLASHES OF BRILLIANCE 22 (2004).

¹³ Another helpful paragraph building acronym is **PEEL**. The acronym stands for **P**oint, **E**vidence/examples, **E**xplanation of examples/evidence, and **L**ink to the next paragraph.

¹⁴ For an examples of handouts explaining the **MEAL** plan, see, e.g., The KSU Writing Center, *Organizing Paragraphs with the MEAL Plan*, https://writingcenter.kennesaw.edu/resources/handouts_print/MEAL_PLAN%20Accessible.pdf (last visited May 8, 2020) and Thompson Writing Program: Duke University, *Paragraphing: The MEAL Plan*, <https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/meal-plan.original.pdf> (last visited May 8, 2020).

For example, the first sentence of each paragraph should showcase the paragraph's **main idea**. The pairing of "main" and "idea" reminds the writer that the paragraph's first sentence must highlight the value of the paragraph as relates to the document's overall purpose and audience. In other words, the writer must formulate a thesis sentence.

To support each paragraph's main idea, the writer must present **evidence** to the reader. In legal writing, that usually includes legal authorities, facts, policy considerations, statistics, or hypotheticals. The writer selects the appropriate evidence to ensure the main idea or thesis of the paragraph is supported.

MEAL also reminds the writer that a paragraph is not a mere compilation of evidence but must convey an **analysis** of the significance, meaning, and relevance of that evidence. The cited cases become curated illustrations of the reasoning of courts. Statutory terms are defined. Policy considerations are expanded upon. Hypotheticals are examined.

And finally, just as the first sentence of a paragraph should convey critical information to the reader about the content that follows, the last sentence should convey critical information as well. The last sentence should provide a **link** between the ideas advanced in one paragraph and those advanced in the next. By focusing on these links, the writer creates thoughtful, appropriate sequencing and establishes connections between these ideas that furthers the document's overall purpose.

It is important to note that this acronym should not be interpreted by students as mandating the length of paragraphs. Instead, the acronym is intended to facilitate the construction of strong paragraphs, regardless of length, that highlight the four components of a well-constructed one.¹⁵ **MEAL** reminds students of the power of the paragraph to bundle together like information, showcase the writer's analysis, and move the reader through the text toward a well-supported conclusion.

¹⁵ For an in-depth scholarly examination of paragraphs and paragraphing, see IAIN MCGEE, UNDERSTANDING THE PARAGRAPH AND PARAGRAPHING (2018).

C. ARMS: A Strategy for Purposeful Revision

All writers know the recursive writing process typically requires the creation of multiple drafts. Once the writer creates an initial draft, also described as a "sloppy copy," the writer must move to stage three where the revision process begins. Revision, also described as rewriting, can pose problems for developing writers. Novice writers may fall into the trap of manipulating the text rather than substantively enhancing or refining it.¹⁶ The acronym **ARMS** provides guidance for writers during the revision process. **ARMS** stands for **A**dd, **R**emove, **M**ove, and **S**ubstitute.¹⁷

When evaluating a draft during the revision process, the writer should consider whether **adding** additional substantive content is necessary given the document's audience and purpose. In the context of legal writing, additional content may take the form of a new case illustration in the rule explanation or another analogy in the rule application section of IRAC. The focus on adding relevant substantive content also prompts the writer to consider including additional sentences in the thesis, linking sentences, or transitions that also enhance the draft.

While some content should be added during this phrase, the writer also needs to consider whether other information should be **removed**. For example, a writer may decide to cull tangential policy consideration from the rule explanation section or eliminate a contrived factual inference from the rule application section. The writer may consider whether to delete marginal arguments or over-reaching counterarguments. The "R" reminds the writer that extraneous or duplicative information distracts the reader and therefore detracts from the document's overall purpose.

Next, **move** acknowledges the sequence of information in an initial draft may be geared

¹⁶ The **ARMS** acronym can also provide guidance to students during an in-class peer review exercise. For information about using peer review and peer editing in the classroom, see Cassandra L. Hill, *Peer Editing: A Comprehensive Pedagogical Approach to Maximize Assessment Opportunities, Integrate Collaborative Learning, and Achieve Desired Outcomes*, 11 NEV. L.J. 667 (2011).

¹⁷ Countless examples of creative posters and handouts for **ARMS** and **CUPS** may be found on Pinterest, for example, TpT Pins, PINTEREST, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/541206080192932274/> (last visited May 8, 2020).

“... just as the first sentence of a paragraph should convey critical information to the reader ... the last sentence should convey [it] as well.”

“The writer should be selecting each word for accuracy, precision, and proper connotation.”

more toward the writer’s preliminary thought process rather than the reader’s ultimate needs. For instance, the writer may realize that a thesis sentence is residing in the middle of a paragraph instead of being located at the beginning of the paragraph. The initial parsing of terms in a statute may have cropped up in the rule application rather than the rule section where the text belongs. Words, sentences, and paragraphs are rearranged to improve the meaning and flow of the text.

Like move, **substitute** focuses on strengthening the existing text. The writer may recognize the need to swap authorities to use the most relevant legal authority for the point being advanced. The writer may also choose to flip sentence constructions from passive voice to active voice. Perhaps the writer clarifies ambiguous pronouns like “it” and “they.” The writer should be selecting each word for accuracy, precision, and proper connotation. Whether constrained by a word limit or acknowledging a reader’s limited attention span, substitute strives to ensure each word contributes toward the document’s purpose.

The revising stage can be overwhelming for a developing student writer. Revising with purpose (and with the **ARMS** acronym) can help prevent students from making changes solely for the sake of making changes. Just because a text can be rewritten does not mean it should be. **ARMS** provides guidance on how to effectively approach revising and keep the revising stage distinct from both the writing stage and the editing stage.¹⁸ Using **ARMS** ensures students make changes to the text that are purposeful.

D. CUPS: A Framework to Facilitate Focused Fine-Tuning

The fourth stage of writing, also described as proofreading, ensures the writer produces a polished final work product. Proofreading is most efficient when the writer reviews the text with a focus on fine-tuning the details. Making appropriate corrections, therefore, should be the

writer’s focus during this stage. The acronym **CUPS** identifies proofreading pointers and facilitates student focus during the editing stage. **CUPS** stands for **C**itation, **U**sage, **P**unctuation, and **S**pelling.¹⁹

Proper **citation** format offers the writer the opportunity to foster the writer’s credibility with the audience by ensuring citation convention is followed. During the writing process, the details of legal citations, such as what words should be abbreviated and how reporters should be designated, can be neglected. By requiring students to focus on citation format during this stage, the writer confirms the accuracy of the citations in order to produce a polished, professional final work product.

Usage in this context refers to the proper conventions of grammar and style. When focusing on usage, the writer verifies subject-verb agreement throughout the text as well as accommodates the stylistic conventions particular to legal writing. The writer also evaluates the tone and voice as well during the proofreading stage.

Reviewing for proper **punctuation** separately allows the writer to focus on the wayward placement of apostrophes and the existence of comma splices. Correct punctuation enhances the meaning of the text while incorrectly placed punctuation can severely undermine the integrity of the document and the writer.

Spelling reminds the writer that spellcheck may not have been activated and, even if activated, does not necessarily identify all spelling issues. Not only may it not distinguish between words like “statue” and “statute,” spellcheck cannot verify the accurate spelling of the parties’ names and case names. Spelling mistakes distract readers and interfere with their engagement with the text.

Finally, the editing stage requires the writer to focus on the details of their draft. After developing and revising a text, a developing writer may have little energy left for editing. **CUPS** highlights key details the writer must review and correct during this final stage. Facilitating focused

¹⁸ See generally LES PARSON, REVISING & EDITING: USING MODELS AND CHECKLISTS TO PROMOTE SUCCESSFUL WRITING EXPERIENCES (2001).

¹⁹ See, e.g., ROG & KROPP, supra note 12, at 18, 24.

fine-tuning of their text helps students produce a more polished final written product.

Conclusion

Acronyms, like all mnemonic devices, facilitate learning. For a writer faced with a multiplicity of choices when it comes to substance, form, and technical issues, acronyms provide useful prompts and reminders. IRAC is widely recognized as an invaluable acronym for developing legal writers, but IRAC is not the only writing-related acronym that can support the legal writing process. The acronyms shared in this essay can be used to support the writing process from grade school writing instruction to law school legal writing courses. Whether these

acronyms are recalled by law students from their pre-law school writing instruction or they are being learned for the first time in a legal writing course, the students consistently find these acronyms valuable. Additionally, regular use of these acronyms supports the student's transition to the professional expectations of legal writing, may reinforce previous writing instruction, provides a common vocabulary between teacher and student, and increases student confidence. Long after the law school grades have been posted for a legal writing course, law students can and hopefully will remember and use these acronyms to support the writing process.

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