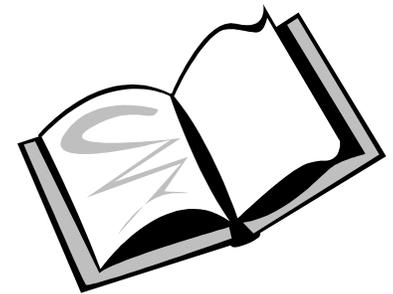


Tips on Getting the Most Out of Your Classes

For most students, the law school experience is different from, and much more demanding than, any previous academic experience. Professors no longer fill your head with everything you need to know and then expect you merely to regurgitate it on a final exam. The learning process is active and goes beyond what occurs in the classroom, and exams require the ability to spot issues and apply analyses. Reading the cases, attending class, taking notes, and reviewing the material is critical to success in law school. The class discussion should further your understanding of the subject matter, not cause greater confusion.

To get the most from each class and be the most prepared you can be for exams, consider what you need to do before, during, and after class.



Before Class

- Read all class assignments, including the footnotes and note cases. Consider reading each case twice, and create a brief during the second reading.
- Use a legal dictionary to define all words and phrases that you do not know. Keep a list of these words and definitions so that you can start incorporating them into your new legal vocabulary.
- Create briefs for every case.
- Think about what you are reading in the cases. The brief helps you identify key aspects of the cases and is invaluable if you are called on in class, but you also need to know how this case fits within the larger framework. Ask yourself these questions:
 1. Why did the court focus on certain facts in reaching a decision?
 2. Why did the court ignore other facts?
 3. What if certain facts were different? Would the outcome be the same?
 4. What, if any, policy considerations impacted the court's decision?
 5. Compare this case to the previous cases from the same section. How is this case different? Does this case change the established rule of law? Does this case create exceptions to the rule of law?

During Class



- Go to class. Research shows that regular class attendance is one of the most influential factors in predicting how well a student will perform in law school.
- Don't zone out or let yourself get distracted. Checking email, surfing the Web, or instant messaging causes most students to lose focus on the class discussion.
- Edit your brief based on the professor's comments (e.g., did you miss an important point, or misunderstand the holding?).
- Develop your own style for taking notes. Here are some suggestions:
 1. Avoid the temptation to become a stenographer. You don't have to transcribe everything that is said by the professor and your classmates. Listen attentively to the exchange, evaluate its relevance and importance, and then select what is essential and write it down.
 2. When taking notes on cases, make a system for highlighting the rules of law and their elements as articulated by the professor (e.g., use a highlighter, different color type, or make stars in the margins).
 3. Incorporating page references into your notes will make it easier to refer to the cases in the book when you study and review.
 4. Be especially careful to write down hypothetical problems and their answers. These often demonstrate the scope of the rule of law and limitations or exceptions to the rule; they also suggest likely exam problems.
 5. If the professor writes something on the chalkboard, you should write it down.
 6. Make notes on any social policy issues or the professor's opinions about how the courts or legislature could have handled something differently. These issues have a tendency to appear again on exams.
 7. If you are the type of student who finds note taking to be a distraction to following the class discussion, consider actively listening in class and then taking some time immediately following class to write down the important points and topics covered during the session.
 8. Consider the split page approach - brief on the left side, class notes on the right.
- Pay attention to reviews. Some professors begin or end the class with a summary that relates the individual cases to the general themes or topics covered in the class.
- If the professor calls on another student, listen actively to the exchange. Imagine that you are the student on the "hot seat" and think about how you would answer the questions posed.
- Participate in class. This is great practice for speaking in front of large groups and will also aid in your comprehension of subjects covered in class.



After class

- Review and supplement your notes and case briefs while your recollection of the class session is still fresh in your mind.
- If your understanding of the concepts is a little hazy, don't worry. Sometimes it can take multiple class sessions to develop a complete understanding of the area of law being discussed.
- Don't wait until the end of the semester to get help if there is something that you really don't understand. If you were confused during class, bring your questions to your professor at his or her office or to your teaching assistant.
- For any "holes" in your notes or confusing issues, discuss the issues with classmates or consult a hornbook on the topic. Hornbooks are written by experts in the field and provide you with written explanations of an area of law.
- If there is a conflict between what you thought was important and what your professor emphasized in class, figure out where your analysis was incorrect.
- Consider doing a weekly review or weekly summary for each class. This will help you develop an understanding of the "big picture," which is critical for success on an exam. Law school exams require students to read problems, spot the legal issues, articulate the rules of law, and apply the rules to the facts set out in the problem. Formulate your weekly reviews to help develop these skills:
 1. General Themes: How do the cases relate to each other? Do the cases represent a progression or evolution of the law? How are these cases alike? How are they different?
 2. Steps of Analysis: What legal tests might be applied for problems in this topic area? What are the elements to these tests? Is there a sequence of analysis that must be followed? Devise a fact pattern that illustrates this legal principle and analysis.
 3. Social Policy: What public policy considerations influence the court's decisions in this area?
- Form a study group or find a study buddy. Discussing class material and hypotheticals with other students helps test your understanding of the law and strengthens your critical thinking skills.
- If you add information to your notes after class, use a different color type or ink. This will help you separate your class notes from review information when you study later.
- Protect your briefs and notes - keep them together in a notebook or back up your computer files regularly.