

Chicago-Kent College of Law
Academic Support Program



**Learning from Experience:
How to Interpret
Your Exam Results and
Plan Ahead**

I. REVIEWING YOUR EXAM ANSWER AND THE QUESTION

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REVIEWING YOUR EXAM ANSWER AND THE QUESTION

Before you meet with a professor to do a formal exam review, request to see a copy of the exam. Doing your own exam assessment, will help you prepare your thoughts prior to meeting with the professor. Also, you will be amazed by what you notice about the exam question and your answer when you can look at it without the stress and time pressure of an exam period. While doing your own assessment of the exam, consider the following questions.

Did I know the specific legal rules to properly answer the questions?

- Was I blindsided on occasion?
- Did I correctly anticipate what the professor would ask on the exam and which areas of law would be covered?

Did I answer the question asked by following the call of the question?

- Did I end up answering a question not asked or forget a part of the call of the question?
- Did I organize my answer based upon what was asked in the call of the question?

Did I break down discrete issues into separate paragraphs, preferably with clear headings and/or topic sentences using the key buzzwords?

- Did I make the format of my answer reader-friendly?
- Did I write my answer in one large paragraph?
- Was my analysis organized or haphazard?
- Did I write my answers as fragmented one-liners (the scatter-shot approach)?
- What ways could the answer have been better organized?

Did I allocate my limited time with care?

- Are the essays lopsided – did I get carried away with one question and offer only sketchy treatments on the others? If so, why?
- Did I spend too much time reading and rereading questions?
- When I outlined answers before writing, were my outlines too detailed or so vague that they were not helpful in constructing essays?
- Did I recount the facts of the question? (Note: It is important to *use* the relevant facts in the analysis, but it is wasteful and not necessary to simply re-tell the facts.)

Did I explain each step of my legal analysis?

- Did I make unwarranted assumptions in order to reach my conclusions?
- Did I reach an “answer” without careful rule application (close attention to the fact pattern) and analysis?
- Did I make up facts not included in the given fact pattern?

Did I remember to address the aspects that I know interest this professor: policy, key cases, counter argument, etc.?

MEETING WITH THE PROFESSOR

Tips for Having a Productive Exam Review

1. Be very clear about the professor's requirements. Some professors have structured dates and times when they will hold exam reviews with students. If you are unsure of a professor's availability, send him or her an email.
2. Attend the exam review even if it is not obligatory – and take notes. No one gets a perfect score on a law school exam and there is always room for improvement, even if you are happy with your grades.
3. To the extent possible, have carefully reviewed your exam before the meeting.
4. Come to the meeting with only one thing in mind: learning from past experience and gaining from professional reaction to your product. Don't expect that this meeting will lead to a grade change.
5. Embarrassment, excuses, hostility, chagrin may be present in varying degrees, but they have no useful role at this meeting.
6. Above all, take an active role at this meeting; do not expect a packaged answer from the professor, pinpointing your precise strengths and weaknesses. The following questions, if you ask them consistently, can identify trends in your exam-taking :
 - Did I spot the most important issues?
 - Did I miss important issues entirely?
 - Did I display the rule/test/framework/standard properly and clearly?
 - Did I adequately explain exceptions and/or counter arguments?
(Remember: you don't have to spot *all* sub-issues to do well!)
 - Did I specifically address the call of the question or did my answer stray?
 - Was my handwriting legible?
 - DID I THOROUGHLY DEVELOP THE ANALYSIS/APPLICATION?
 - Did I explore the facts of the question thoroughly in light of the legal principles and issues that I identified?
 - Did I merely reach for an "answer" that seemed pretty obvious (conclusory analysis)?
 - What aspects of my exam were strong?
 - Did I show sensitivity to policy considerations and other underlying issues?
 - Do you have any other suggestions on how I can improve my exam performance? (Use this only as a final question!)

PERSONAL RETROSPECTION AND INTROSPECTION

Before you get too deep into the semester, it is time to do a personal inventory. If you are unhappy with your grades, think about the way you studied and prepared for exams in the fall. You can evaluate your study plans and exam taking habits using the following questions.

Outlines:

- ✓ Were there holes in my outline?
- ✓ Did I make my own outline or rely on old/commercial/committee-built outlines? (a key part of learning is processing the material yourself)
- ✓ Is the format of my outline useful? If I have not done so, maybe I should experiment with a flowchart (useful in, e.g., Civil Procedure, some aspects of Property)
- ✓ Was key information readily accessible in my outline or was there too much unneeded detail?
- ✓ Did I make my outline at the last minute or have it prepared by the end of Reading Period?
- ✓ Did the outline give me a sense of how everything fit into the big picture or did it seem fragmented?
- ✓ Did the outline track the syllabus?
- ✓ Did the outline properly highlight key buzzwords/principles?
- ✓ In an open outline exam, was the format quickly usable?

Study:

- ✓ Were there important principles/standards that I really should have memorized?
- ✓ Should I have spent more time with old exams?
- ✓ Did I allow enough time after completing the outline to refine and study it?
- ✓ Did I dip into the material periodically on a regular exam study schedule or did I try to cram right before the exam?
- ✓ Did I take up the professor's offer to read a practice essay?
- ✓ Have I really identified the way I learn best or have I merely taken the lead from the way others study?
- ✓ How do I retain material most effectively: Reading? (augment your study with hornbooks, study guides) Listening? Talking? (work with a study group or a study partner) Writing? (refine your outline regularly, brief cases) Pictures? (consider flowcharting) Should I experiment a bit?

Taking the Exam:

- ✓ Did I have sufficient sleep the night before the exam or did I rely on Starbucks?
- ✓ Did I make a time plan, given the relative weights of the questions, and stick to it?
- ✓ Did I build in a bit of elbow room to go back and re-read the answer?
- ✓ When I ran out of time, did I find a way to get in some key points by jotting down a quick outline at the end of the answer?
- ✓ Did I process the question carefully, wringing out all possible issues and identifying counter analyses, glitches, exceptions? Or did I tend to spin my wheels, reading in a passive, time-consuming, unproductive way?
- ✓ Did I look at the “call” of the question repeatedly?
- ✓ Did I organize my answer in accordance with the “call”?
- ✓ Did I use the “open book” system sensibly or did I have a false sense of security in preparing for the exam? Did I use my materials to perform a “quick check” or waste a lot of time searching for things that I should have known?
- ✓ If I am absolutely honest, did the prospect of an open book and/or open notes exam mean that I did not study thoroughly?
- ✓ In a “closed- book” exam, did I memorize the key aspects of the syllabus and then reproduce this list at the starting bell as a handy checklist of potential issues? (spark sheet)
- ✓ Did I control panic when I saw others beginning to write? Or did I begin writing before I had adequately processed the question?
- ✓ Have I struck a good balance between excessively time-consuming outlining of a question and the temptation to jump right into the answer without considering organizational strategies?
- ✓ Did I successfully avoid indulging in post-mortems after the early exams?

MAKING A NEW PLAN

All law students need a study plan. The following suggestions are based upon common errors committed by first semester law students. Use these ideas in addition to the ones from your personal reflection on last semester to make a new plan for spring semester.

- Consider a more active approach to reading cases in preparation for class: you may try briefing them – useful if you learn by doing (writing).
- Schedule time on the weekend devoted to re-reading and processing the week's notes.
- Schedule time at the end of each syllabus section to pull it all together.
- Consider re-writing a first semester exam answer and submitting it to the professor for evaluation.
- Abandon excessive reliance on study guides that do the work for you.
- Make a weekly study calendar, trying to make use of blocks of time between classes.
- Vow to contact the TA or the professor if you need clarification. Keep in mind that your TA has regular office hours and, in most cases, has actually taken the professor for that class and has some important insights.
- Discuss with your TA any exam taking, outlining, studying, briefing problems that you are having – help with skills development is why the TA is available to you.
- Remember to have an early look at old exams and to ask the TA or the professor about particular exam styles and preferences.
- Think seriously about what time of day is optimum for your powers of concentration and be sure to take advantage of it.
- If you have not tried it, consider approaching someone you know and suggest that you either study together or form a small study group – on a trial basis.
- An important tip for the second semester 1Ls: The Appellate Brief will be assigned soon. Make a weekly plan for yourself in attacking this project or it will endanger your work in the other areas. It's a big project so make an early start. And a little caveat for free: putting together such a large brief involves a lot of last-minute formatting that cannot be done in a couple of hours.