

Countdown to Exams

In the meantime, no point griping about what should be. Let's get you ready to play the hand that will be dealt to you. Here are some tips for final exam prep:

Plot an organized study schedule and follow it.

Nowhere are effective time-management skills more important than during exam prep. You need to map out a schedule that allows you to arrive at each and every exam fully prepared. Usually (but not always), you'll be afforded at least a few days to study prior to the commencement of exams. This breathing space is called "reading week" or "dead week" ("dead" as in no classes), although it's not always a full week. Some schools don't afford any break between the end of classes and the start of exams. If you're at such a school, you'll need to begin your final exam preparation while classes are still in session.

Don't make the mistake—which many students do—of using all your free days during the reading week studying for the first exam. You need to spread your pre-exam study days among your different courses to account for the fact that some of your exams will be stacked back to back, with perhaps only one free day between them. One benefit of being a 1L is that law schools intentionally schedule first-year exams with at least one free day between exams. In your second and third years, you might have exams on consecutive days or even on the same day.

Begin by plotting all of your reading week and exam period days on a calendar grid so you'll be able to assess your available time from a big-picture point of view. You'll probably find that you need to begin studying for some of your later exams first. Below is a sample prep grid for a twelve-day combined reading week and exam period:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
Study Civ. Pro.	Study Contracts	Study Torts	Study Torts	Torts Exam 9:00 am	Study Civ. Pro.
				Study Civ. Pro.	

Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12
Civ. Pro Exam 9:00 am	Study Property	Study Property	Property Exam 9:00 am	Study Contracts	Contracts Exam 9:00 am
Break			Study Contracts		

Note how I front-loaded the studying for the Civil Procedure and Contracts exams because of the one-day gap between those exams and the immediately preceding exams. This allowed me to allot a minimum of two full days to each exam. I built in a break after the Civil Procedure exam to take the afternoon and evening off to relax and recharge brain cells. Because of the gap in the preparation for Civil Procedure and Contracts, I included an extra half-day of study for those exams on the same day of the previous exams, but if you feel adequately prepared, you might want to consider taking breaks on all exam days. That's what I did back in law school.

Divide your study time relatively equally among courses that weigh equally in credit hours. Sure, Property may seem harder than Torts, but if both courses are worth four credit hours, it makes sense to devote roughly equal study time to them. You're not competing against the course. You're only competing against your classmates. A *B* in Torts is worth the same as a *B* in Property. You also have no way of knowing how tough the exam or the grading will be in a particular course. Torts might seem easier than Property, but the exam could be harder. Similarly, your Torts prof might be a more rigorous grader than your Property prof.

Seeing the above grid should help drive home my point about most exam preparation being accomplished during the semester through consistent class preparation, note-taking, outlining, and periodic review. Two days per exam is barely enough time to review and absorb your notes and outlines. It definitely is not enough time to begin learning the material for the first time.

Within each study day on your grid, break your tasks down more specifically. For example, a "Study Torts" day might be broken down more specifically as follows:

Study Torts

1. Read case briefs once.
2. Read outline twice.
3. Review Torts flashcards with study group.

4. Work through one practice intentional torts and one negligence essay question.

There is no single correct way to allot your study time. I asked one of my research assistants, ranked number one in her class, to summarize her exam prep schedule from the first semester. Here's what she wrote:

I started about a month before the first exam and made a study schedule very similar to the one you included. I alternated one subject per day and studied anywhere from fifteen minutes to two hours depending on how much time I had. My studying consisted of reading over my class notes, rereading cases and other reading assignments, and doing practice questions. I looked at old exams, did problems in the textbooks, and did CALI exercises online. About a week before finals I increased my studying to two subjects per day (still alternating to give each equal weight). When dead week and exams started I upped my study time to about three hours per subject a day.

I continued to study two subjects per day except for the day before an exam, when I studied only the subject that was tested the next day. I always took the evening of an exam off and did something else (like go out with non-law school friends or watch a movie). Starting so early really helped to decrease my stress level when exams rolled around. Since I had so much of my exam prep already done, I had a lot more free time and was able to stay rested.

While there are differences in the details, notice the common thread in our approaches: *thoughtful advance organization and time distribution*.

Work through practice exams.

One of the best exam preparation strategies is working through practice exams. If you were training to be a motorcycle mechanic, you wouldn't just study books on how to do it. You'd get your hands dirty disassembling and reassembling motorcycle engines. It's like that with every skill in life. People training to be pilots don't just read books about it before climbing into the cockpit of a Boeing 747. They study, practice with flight simulators, and start with smaller air-

craft. Since most law school courses don't offer this kind of practice, you have to do it on your own.

Students spend so much time memorizing the law and too little time studying and practicing the *process* of law school exam-taking. Many students know all the law there is to know, but still don't perform well on exams because they never learned how to take a law school exam. The best way to get a handle on that process is through practice exams.

Working through practice exams advances several goals. First and perhaps foremost, it helps you know what to expect, increasing your comfort zone. You don't want to show up for your first law school exams not having any clue what they're going to look like. Doing practice exams also helps train you to spot issues, the all-critical threshold step to good exam performance. If you can't spot the issues, you obviously have no chance of analyzing them. Third, if you're working through old exams from your professors, you will get a feel for what to expect from that particular professor, since professors usually are consistent in their approach to fashioning exams.

You might even get lucky enough to stumble on a question that turns up on the real exam. Many professors recycle exams over the years. While most don't release exams they have any intention of recycling, a few do. I remember getting together with a group of classmates to go over old exams in preparation for my Civil Procedure exam the following day. We started later than I wanted and I've already told you I wasn't much of a group studier, so I barely glanced at the exams before calling it a night and going home to bed. As soon as the exam was distributed the next day, I wished I had stayed longer. The essay question was the *exact same question* I laid eyes on the night before.

Many of the law school study aids listed in Appendix A contain practice essay questions. These can be very helpful, but the best approach is to work with original source material: exams prepared by your professors. It's true that substantial similarity exists in law school exam structure and content. A typical law school essay question consists of a narrative in which various actors engage in conduct that raises issues relevant to the subject matter. Nevertheless, despite marked similarity in approach, professors have their own styles for writing exams. Returning to the analogy

above, if you were training to be a Kawasaki motorcycle mechanic, you'd be better off practicing on Kawasakis than on Suzukis even though substantial similarities exist between the two brands.

Most law professors make copies of old exams available to students, usually by placing them on reserve in the library. Don't hesitate to ask about their availability at the library reserve desk or to ask your professors directly. Unfortunately, unlike the study aids, most of these sample exams will not include answers, although some might.

Especially in your first semester, it's wise to actually "take" at least a couple of practice exams in a mock-testing situation. Treat it like the real deal. If possible, use the same rooms where the real exams will be held. Time yourself. Try to replicate the entire experience. Remember: familiarity reduces stress. I don't recommend writing lengthy answers to *every* old exam because such a time-demanding approach will detract from your other exam preparation, *but do read* all sample exams made available by your professors to practice your issue-spotting skills. Each first-year course raises a limited number of issues suitable for essay testing, so you're likely to come across some of the same issues that will appear on the real exam even if they're packaged in different fact patterns.

If you're working through old exams from the same professors, consider asking the professors if they would be willing to review or at least discuss your answers with you. Many professors will decline such requests because going over practice exam answers with individual students is both time-consuming and somewhat unfair to other students. But some profs are willing to do it if asked.

If you're into group studying at all, reviewing practice exams can be a productive study group activity. A group of students is more likely to spot all the issues on a question than any individual student. Reviewing exams with a group can help you learn from your oversights. If someone points out an issue you missed, ask what portion of the question flagged the issue for him or her.

By all means, if your professors afford you opportunities to take one or more practice exams during the semester, which many professors do, take full advantage of them even if the exams are not graded. I distribute two practice essay

questions in Torts, one addressing intentional torts and one addressing the tort of negligence, along with a full model answer to each question. I've witnessed students go from writing *F* or *D* answers on the practice exams to *B* or *A* answers on the real exam because they learned from their mistakes. I've also watched way too many students unwisely squander the best opportunity they will have to learn how to take my exam by blowing off the practice exams because they're "too busy"—a classic case of penny-wise, pound-foolish. If a professor gives you a practice exam and answer, he's essentially telling you: "This is exactly how I want you to do it."

Get exam supplies in advance.

Acquire whatever supplies you might need for your exams well in advance. It will reduce your stress and allow you to avoid distractions from your exam focus. I vividly recall an adventure back in law school in which my law school pal, Terry Perkins, and I were driving frantically around Gainesville, Florida trying to find some exam bluebooks an hour before an exam started. The situation got so desperate we literally ended up driving on the sidewalk at one point to get around traffic. We made it to the exam on time, but just barely.

These days, most law schools provide essential exam-taking materials to students at the exam, such as bluebooks, pencils for filling out multiple-choice score sheets, and even scratch paper. But find out in advance to make sure. If you intend to write your exam by hand, buy non-fine point black pens, which will make your writing easier on the eyes. Don't use pencils or pens with weird-colored ink. Some things may look pretty in pink, but law school essay-exam answers are not one of them. (Yes, I've really had students write exams in pink ink.)

Other supplies you might want to consider bringing to the exam are: a watch for keeping track of time, an eraser, correction liquid (e.g., Wite-Out) or tape if you plan on writing by hand, appropriate snacks and drinks (not loud, crunchy ones), pain-reliever such as Ibuprofen (in case your stress causes a headache), and soft-foam earplugs. I used the latter in every law school exam and also for the bar exam. Available at any drug store, they're inexpensive, comfortable,

and do a good job filtering background noise. They helped me concentrate. As for drinks, be careful about consuming too many fluids during an exam because restroom breaks will cut into your exam time.

**If you're using a computer, register for and
download the required security
software in advance.**

Most law schools allow students to take their exams on computers and a vast majority of students do so. The benefits of using a computer on exams were discussed in Chapter 2. To prevent cheating, law schools subscribe to one of a variety of exam-security software applications, such as ExamSoft. Students taking their exams on computer are required to register for, download, and use the software during the exam. The software blocks access to computer files during the exam.

If you intend to use a computer, don't wait until the last minute to register for and download the software. Glitches can and do occur. If they do, you don't want to be worrying about having to resolve them right before an exam. This happened just recently. A student came to my office about forty-five minutes before her first law school exam was to begin. From our previous conversations, I knew she was already prone to stress and stress-related physical reactions. Flustered, she explained that she had just tried to download the exam security software, which had been available to students for at least a couple of weeks, and got an error message. Fixing it required a phone call from the law school's Information Technology (IT) guy to the president of the software company. They finally got it working—she hoped—as she raced off to the exam.

Install the software as soon as it becomes available and give it a practice run-through. At most schools, the IT staff will hold training sessions on the use of the software or otherwise make themselves available for technical assistance.

Rest and relax.

Even during exams, you need to allot yourself time to relax and recoup. This includes getting normal sleep every night (recommended eight hours) and also scheduling breaks during the exam period for relaxation. With regard to sleep, studies show that sleep-deprived students perform worse

than those with adequate sleep. (See Chapter 18 for more about maintaining health and well-being.) These same studies show that "pulling an all-nighter" not only is ineffective at bolstering exam performance, it can impair performance. Lack of sleep negatively affects attention, concentration, and memory. Cramming is a particularly bad strategy for law school success because of the huge amount of material. If you're at the point where you feel the need to desperately cram all night for an exam, it may already be too late.

The flipside is that if you've worked consistently and diligently throughout the semester, you shouldn't have to cram all night. With the vast majority of your preparation completed before the exam period arrives, you should have time to study for your exams in an organized fashion that allows you to hit the sack at a normal time. Again, that is the critical point to appreciate: the bulk of exam preparation occurs long before exams begin, starting with the first week of class. Your best overall strategy for arriving at exams fully prepared is to follow the CREDO habits (Consistent, Rigorous, Efficient, Diligent, Organized) in Chapter 10 from the beginning of the semester until the end. If you read every assignment, brief every case, attend and take good notes in every class, compose outlines for every course, and engage in periodic review, you'll be rounding third base headed for home when exam week arrives.