

Make a Smooth Transition to Law School

Stack the odds in your favor by making good choices

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Law students generally have been highly successful in their lives. Whether they have come from undergraduate or graduate education or from the working world, they have been rewarded for many achievements. However, law school is a different milieu with its own skill set for success. For a smooth transition, law students need to make changes in their approach and learn new study techniques.

What's the difference?

How is law school different from prior learning experiences? Law students are often shocked by the overwhelming amount of reading for each class, the different class format, the vagueness of the law, the one-exam grading, and the amount of work required.

Reading appellate cases is unlike reading textbooks in other disciplines. There are usually no helpful headings and subheadings. Most editors provide little preview or summary material. The specialized legal vocabulary means initial dependence on a legal dictionary. Questions at the end of cases often focus on aspects that the new law student overlooked. The comments and notes may cause confusion rather than clarification because they delineate exceptions or updates rather than explanation of the case.

The Socratic Method used in many law classes causes a disconnect from prior learning experiences. A student might do well in reciting the facts, issue, holding, and so on. However, once the professor begins asking questions and spinning off hypothetical situations, many students find the experience uncomfortable.

For some students, the ambiguity of the law is disconcerting. They expected the law to have right answers. "It depends" becomes a frustration. The idea that one constantly deals with shades of grey perplexes those who came from majors or professions known for certainty.

Law school grades often depend on the final exams without prior feedback on performance. Law students may assume wrongly that they will succeed by merely memorizing the law and knowing cases by heart. However, success on final exams depends on applying the law to new fact scenarios, arguing both sides for new facts, and analogizing or distinguishing the caselaw with the new facts.

Finally, most law students have managed to get all A or B grades in the past with little study time. Law school, however, requires dedication far beyond their past courses. The previous technique of cramming is ineffective because of the overwhelming amount of material.

Build a Weekly Schedule

By setting a schedule to manage your time, you'll be less likely to procrastinate. And your downtime will be scheduled by default. Build the schedule in the following order.

- Start with regular commitment (classes, group sessions, meals, sleep, exercise).
- Add reading for class.
- Add briefing the cases.
- Add outlining new materials.
- Add outline review.
- Add working on memos, and other assignments.
- Add doing practice questions.
- Add other mandatory items.

Mindset matters in success

Ruth McKinney, clinical professor and director of the Writing and Learning Resources Center at the University of North Carolina School of Law, makes the following observation about your law school endeavor, “Law school takes a ton of energy. The wisest thing a student can do is to start law school rested, energized, and excited about the intellectual adventure and challenges ahead.”

In order to stay energized and excited in the months ahead, you will need to adopt three attitudes. These attitudes are essential to law school: doing your best each day, knowing yourself well, and remembering that you are the same special person you were before law school.

Your best effort is all that you can truly ask of yourself. No more and no less. If you have worked hard and tried to use your time wisely each day, then you have accomplished what you can realistically ask of yourself. You can then close your book, go to sleep, and get up the next day for another day of doing your best.

If you instead ask yourself to be perfect, you will be reaching for an impossible goal. Law students who search for perfection often do very poorly in law school. They become overwhelmed because they don't have time to be perfect on all tasks. Because the result will not be perfect, they often fail to start or complete work in a timely fashion. And they become miserable because they're no longer able to stay on the pedestal of perfection that they demand.

By being well grounded in who you are and what's important to you, you will be able to step back and evaluate your new experiences with more confidence. Natt Gantt, associate professor and associate dean for student affairs at Regent University School of Law, summarizes it well, “Students can improve their transition to law school by reflecting before they matriculate on their priorities in life and on their strengths and weaknesses. Coming to law school with a keen self-awareness enables entering law students to adapt well to the pressures and challenges many students experience during their first year.”

It is easy in law school to lose your perspective on both life and yourself. You entered law school with myriad talents and traits that make you a very special person. You entered with personal

values, goals, and dreams. All of those will still be part of you no matter what law school is like for you.

Do not lose your self-confidence because law school is a different world. Remember that you are more than a set of grades. You will navigate law school, and you will come out the other end of the experience with new knowledge and skills. But, most important, you will still be the same special person that started law school.

A balanced lifestyle

Do your best by working very diligently to learn your new discipline. But you need to avoid being consumed by law school.

A law student could easily spend 24 hours a day 7 days a week studying and still not understand everything or read everything about a topic. Too many law students make life choices that are counterproductive. They get too little sleep. They subsist on junk food. They abandon exercise.

These law students assume that putting in more hours of work and denying themselves a life outside law school will get them better grades. In their pasts, difficult challenges were overcome by just working harder. However, in law school, having more hours in the day is usually not the answer.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, the best way to succeed in law school is to have balance in life. Sleep at least seven hours a night so your brain cells can process and retain more information. You'll be more productive as a result of the extra sleep. Eat three balanced meals a day rather than depending on junk food and skipped meals. Your body needs healthy foods to function properly. And exercise 30–45 minutes three times a week to release stress, sleep better, and stay healthy.

Do not forget to schedule relaxation time and spend time with family and friends. Go to the movies. Go out for a relaxed dinner. Play with your children. Take your dog for a run. Take a healthy break from the law school routine during part of your weekend.

Do not let your relationships with nonlaw students languish. You will keep your perspective and remember who you were before law school by keeping such relationships strong whether in person or by phone.

Make friends while you are in law school. If necessary, make a pact that you will not talk about the law and law school when you take study breaks. Choose these friends wisely and cherish them. These law school friends will be your friends in practice as well.

Dan Weddle, director of academic support and clinical professor at University of Missouri—Kansas City School of Law, provides some good advice, “Remember that at the end of your career, you will get a party and a gold watch if you are lucky, and then everyone will return to work; but you will go home to the people who love you. So starting today, make sure that every day of your life you are attending to those people who will be with you not only throughout your career, but long after you file your last brief.”

Good time management

Law students who don't succeed in law school are often poor managers of their time and expert procrastinators. Most of these students never had to study much in undergraduate or graduate courses to get As. Consequently, they entered law school with few good study habits.

A typical full-time law student needs to spend 50–55 hours per week to complete all the law school tasks. This time commitment allows for the following regular weekly tasks: reading and briefing cases, outlining, reviewing before class, reviewing class notes after class, working practice questions, completing papers or other assignments, and reviewing for final exams.

Research shows that we forget 80 percent of what we learn within two weeks if we don't review regularly. By distributing learning throughout the semester rather than cramming, a law student avoids inefficient relearning of material. Achieving good grades becomes much easier when learning is “front-loaded” this way. And it greatly reduces stress at the end of the semester.

Lay out a weekly time management schedule. First, include any regular commitments: classes, weekly group review sessions offered by your law school, study group/partner time, meals, sleep, exercise, and other weekly personal activities.

Add regular times when you will read for each class. (Time yourself reading five pages for a course, then estimate the time needed for a typical assignment by multiplying your five-page time by the number of pages.) Include some extra time in the class block on your schedule for briefing the cases.

Include a regular block of time each week when you will outline new material for a course. Include a regular block of time each week when you will review your outline for each course. Add hours each week to work on memos or other assignments. In addition, include time to do practice questions.

By having a regular routine for each course and each course task, you'll be more likely to stay on top of your work. You also will not forget any tasks. And you'll be able to enjoy your relaxation time because you will not have to feel guilty because of uncompleted work.

The better your time management is, the less you will be tempted to procrastinate. If you have time scheduled for a task but don't need it (for example, you don't want to read too far ahead when your professor gets behind in class), then you can just substitute another task in that time slot.

Skills not shortcuts

Shortcuts are ways to avoid doing your work. Efficient and effective study strategies are ways to get the most out of your learning in the least amount of time.

Research shows that we learn at a deeper level when we process information ourselves. We retain the information more easily. We can apply the information more adeptly. And we increase our learning skills in the process.

One shortcut is relying on canned briefs instead of reading and briefing cases for each class. Students who use this shortcut are able to parrot back the facts, issue, court reasoning, and holding. However, they've avoided learning the skill of extrapolating essential information from a case for which there is no canned brief. By learning techniques to read and brief efficiently and effectively, these same law students could have gained the skill while saving time and effort.

Law students who depend on other students' course outlines are also taking shortcuts. They won't know the material at the same depth as if they had personally struggled with the information to make their own outlines. They may be able to recite the information perfectly, but that skill is different from being able to deal with the nuances of the law from personal understanding when applying it to new fact scenarios.

In order to learn how to study efficiently and effectively, attend any group sessions on study strategies that are offered by the academic support office at your law school. Consider making an appointment to talk with the academic support professionals at your school if you need individualized assistance. **Personal aspects**

You may already know of personal factors that you need to weigh in your approach to law school. Or new factors may occur that will need to be weighed while you're in law school. Here are some aspects to consider.

- Significant others and children. If you live with someone, have children, or both, then communications and cooperation will be essential. Discuss study time, physical space for studying, flexibility in chores or commitments, financial impacts, and other aspects.
- Disabilities affecting your learning. Some law students with disabilities may have compensated easily in prior academics with few or no accommodations. In law school, there is often a much heavier workload and a course grade is typically based on one final exam. Talk with the student disability services at your law school if you have a documented disability for which you could receive reasonable accommodations.
- Family, medical, or personal problems. Because of the immense amount of work and the one-grade policy for most courses, any problems outside law school can quickly affect your focus on your law studies. Discuss your situation with the deans at your law school so that you know any options that may assist you.

You were admitted to law school because of your academic record. Law school is a very different learning environment. Use the many resources at your law school to learn effective and efficient study strategies so that you can reach your full potential for success.

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