The Study of Law

What is the first year of law school actually like?

First and foremost, legal education is primarily academic. Students devote most of their time to mastering the general concepts and principles which shape the law. This burden of learning rests squarely on the shoulders of the law student. In the process of meeting this challenge, you'll delve into old and new rulings, weigh conflicting theories of the law’s meaning, consider overruled opinions, scour legislative materials, and evaluate scholarly articles.

As a general rule, first year studies include civil procedure, constitutional law, contracts, criminal law, criminal procedure, legal method, legal writing and research, property, and torts. Most of these classes will be based on the Socratic-method (or “case method”) where professors ask students to summarize cases and defend different positions so as to clarify the underlying principles shaping the law’s application in different contexts. All students are expected to be prepared with briefs (in which pertinent facts are summarized, the primary legal questions involved in the court’s ruling are identified, and the major legal points considered by the court are outlined) and to accept the anxiety and frustration of learning with this method. There’s a good reason for using the Socratic method—it reveals both the complexity and ambiguity of legal rulings while sharpening students’ critical reasoning and improving argumentation skills. Such class organization rewards those who are prepared for the discussion with a deeper understanding of the issues and provides a sense of satisfaction which in turn sustains students in the midst of the rigorous academic process. Proper preparation isn’t only helpful, it’s required for success.

How do exams work in law school?

Most first year courses have one three- to four-hour cumulative exam at the end of the course of study for each of your classes. In order to succeed in these exams, students must compile course outlines throughout the fall and spring semesters. Continuous study and prioritizing your time are crucial. Case briefs and class notes have to be integrated into an organized whole so as to grasp the interconnections and the nuances of case law as it develops over time. Beware of relying only on commercially available course outlines—nothing substitutes for the learning process of synthesizing all of your relevant materials. Many law schools offer practice exams to help students prepare for the kinds of questions their finals will cover. Further, you have to find your stride, so to speak, before taking the exams to rise above the mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion of the work. I recommend consulting resources such as Bridging the Gap Between College and Law School: Strategies for Success and The Complete Law School Companion for more specific advice in navigating the transition to law school and succeeding in your studies. Cramming is no longer a viable option for students at this point in your academic life. Law school simply requires too many hours of work and thought.

It may seem like common sense, but many first year law students point to organization, time prioritization, and attention to detail as significant factors in successful test-taking. One former
student commented about the importance of trusting yourself and the hard work that got you into law school. While more challenging, a complete or extreme overhaul of study habits isn’t necessary for every student. Also, pay attention anytime a professor offers the expectations for a class and take advantage of their advice.

*Are all the exams in law school cumulative over the course of a year?*

Thankfully, for most students, the answer is *no*. In the second and third years, there’s generally only testing over one semester’s worth of material since students are encouraged at this time to take a variety of courses in hopes of gaining exposure to the breadth and depth of legal study.

*Should I try for a position at the legal clinic?*

The law school experience opens up in the second year by allowing time for part-time clerking jobs in the community or for preparation for full-time summer job interviews. Students also now have time to compete for positions at the legal clinic or on a school’s law journals. If you’re interested in these prestigious positions, you should be aware that there are significant case-load responsibilities at the clinic and generally a one or more publishable-paper requirement to hold a position on law review. Even though working in a clinic or on a law journal requires serious commitments of time and energy, there are definite benefits. Your research and writing skills improve and you gain experience working in a collaborative clinic or on a rigorous journal while setting yourselves apart from most other law school grads in the eyes of your legal employers.

*What’s involved in mock trial?*

Mock trial gives students the opportunity for direct advocacy experience while building relationships with judges and practicing attorneys. Teams simulate arguments before an appellate judge who reviews the decision of a lower court and listens to presentations of opposing counsel on both the fact and law at issue. Participants find the experience immensely valuable due to the case preparation experience and feedback received from the judges. Yet, like writing on a law review, mock trial demands a significant commitment of time and, during the competition period, three to four nights a week for up to a month is required for the winning teams which keep advancing.

*When does the on-campus recruiting season start?*

Law firms and other companies begin recruiting at law schools in the fall. To be prepared you need a polished résumé, professional attire, and enough fortitude to endure the rigorous series of 20-30 minute interviews with generally two representatives from each
company. It’s recommended that you target the employers you would feel comfortable working with so as not to drain yourself with interviews for firms which don’t match your interests. Consider what kind of law you want to practice, the advancement opportunities at the firm in that area in next two years, salary and bonus plans, physical facilities, the firm’s method of associate supervision and training, billable hour requirements, and how many associates earn partnership and how soon. Ultimately, you need to ask yourself if you’ll be happy working with the people at the firm. Keep in mind that those who take advantage of the opportunity to work as a summer-associate often land job offers from the firm at the end of the program. Another recruiting season, though more limited, begins in the spring for those who have not found desired positions and for firms with vacancies to fill.

**How do you recommend preparing for the bar exam after graduation?**

Unfortunately, there is no easy trick to passing. The best preparation is to direct some of your third year classes to the central subjects which will be on your local bar exam and to take the Bar Review Course after you graduate for the state in which you want to practice. Otherwise, there’s nothing but grinding preparation in the months before the test to gain admission to practice at your state’s bar. A valuable website for students taking the bar exam in Indiana can be found at Indiana Judicial Branch at Indiana.gov. Information on exam results from the previous year, directions for applying to the bar, and general information can all be found there.

**How do you deal with the extremes of stress which can come with such heavy workloads?**

Don’t underestimate the demands placed upon students by a very competitive environment compounded by long hours of secluded study and possible financial or employment concerns. All the factors can trigger emotional or stress related problems. Students must take care of themselves in order to avoid the dangers of mental and physical exhaustion. Pay close attention to the little things: get regular (if limited) sleep, eat nutritiously, exercise, and watch out for changes in sleep patterns or appetite, loss of concentration, and social withdrawal. Make sure to take advantage of whatever health services the law school offers, seek out on-campus support groups to find out how others are dealing with the stress, and remember that there’s a national crisis hotline for graduate students at (877) GRAD-HELP or at gradresources.org. Though perhaps the best medicine of all is to make sure that you have some fun in the process and continue to have a life outside of the books. Remember that many former and current students experienced varying degrees of anxiety, particularly in the first year, and to do so is normal and expected. Take advantage of peer networks of those around you who find themselves in similar situations.

The inevitable fact of law school is that the environment is stressful and extremely demanding. Because class standing does play a role in the future job market things are very competitive between students striving for the best grades. One advantage of building a network are the relationships that are formed that might help you get an interview or foot in the door down the road. The bottom line is that everyone will adopt their own style, and finding the right one for you is the important thing.