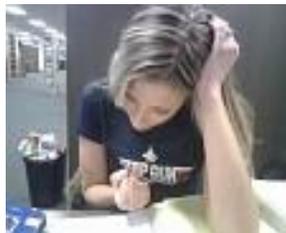




MSLAW Academic Support

10 Successful Strategies for Using IRAC on a Law School Essay Exam

1. DON'T fight the method of analysis that most professors want to see in your essays. It is best to state your issue first and then follow IRAC format to analyze and answer the issue. Having an essay answer that is clearly organized and follows IRAC can make it much easier for your professor to give you points—after all, if your issue, your rule statement, and your analysis and conclusion are all readily apparent to your professor, then he or she can more easily note that your essay contained all necessary information. Keep following the same format for all of your issues; you should end up with a series of “mini-IRAC’s” in an essay question, addressing each of your issues one by one. If there are multiple questions or multiple sub-parts to a question, then address each question and each sub-part of a question in the same order as they are presented on the professor’s exam.
2. DO read the exam multiple times to be sure you’ve spotted all relevant issues. I recommend that you read through the whole question first and circle or underline anything that looks like it could present an issue. Then, re-read the exam one sentence at a time and ensure you haven’t missed anything else. Some people will tell you to read the call of the question first (meaning, you scroll down to the bottom of the fact pattern and read the question, and then go back to the beginning and read through the rest of the facts.) This may help you if you’re faced with a specific question (such as, “What is the proper forum for the Plaintiff to bring her suit?”) because you’ll be able to read the facts with the question in mind, and therefore pay specific attention to any facts that bear on the question.



3. DO outline or otherwise organize your thoughts before you begin to write. You don't have to have a perfect outline; the idea is simply to write a "road-map" to your essay answer before you write, so that you can present a more readable and well-organized answer.
4. DO budget your time carefully on exams. As a rule of thumb, you might spend about a quarter of your time reading and outlining the question, with the rest of your time spent on writing and proofreading. So, on a 45-minute essay question, consider spending about ten minutes carefully reading and outlining.
5. DON'T regurgitate the facts. Your law professor wrote the facts and knows what they are; you needn't spend valuable time simply restating them. Instead, weave the relevant facts into your analysis by applying the rule of law to them. Sometimes, it can take students a while to "warm up" in their writing, and they may assume that they should get started by restating some of the facts. On a law school exam, you need to get right to the point: the issue you are addressing. Make it as easy as possible for your professors to give you points, and make your issue stand out from the beginning.
6. DO state the law clearly and correctly in your rule statement. Don't assume that your professor knows the law—of course, he or she does, but the point of an exam is to test YOUR knowledge of the law. Before you come to the exam, come up with a way to phrase your key rule statements and definitions (in Criminal Law, for example, you must memorize the elements of common law crimes; in Civil Procedure, the Federal Rules.) Whether you're using a definition that you got from your professor, the case book, or Black's Law Dictionary, you must have your definition down pat and be able to regurgitate it in writing. State the rule of law clearly, as if you were writing for someone who has no legal background. Also state the rules for any subliminal issues, as well as any variations or limitations on the rule that are relevant.
7. DON'T skimp on the most important part of your answer: your analysis, or application of law to facts. Compare and contrast; analogize where appropriate. Argue all sides where appropriate. Use deductive reasoning. And – much like you had to do in grade school math – show your work. The conclusion you reach isn't nearly as important as showing how you got there: through proper legal analysis.
8. DON'T tell the professor everything you learned in the class just because you came prepared to discuss it all. No essay question asks you to write down everything you've ever learned. (Example: "It is true that there is no question about consent by the Plaintiff to the Defendant's battery here, but if there were such an issue, then the Defendant may be able to use consent as a defense to battery. Consent is...") Focus your analysis only on what is relevant to the issues tested.
9. DON'T forget to answer the question. Note that it isn't always necessary to get to a hard and fast "yes" or "no" answer. Some professors prefer conclusive answers, while others want you to

consider different sides in depth; prepare not only for the class but also for the professor. One way to figure out what types of answers the professor is expecting is to pore over sample answers the professor wrote, look for patterns, and learn to mimic them in your writing: does the professor use a separate paragraph for each part of his or her analysis? Tend to begin with a conclusion? Look for patterns. Also pay attention to the types of questions the professor tends to ask in class: they are likely to mimic the questions the professor will focus on when it comes to exams, whether it's legal theory, practical issues, or limitations on the rule.

10. DO proofread your writing: as in any other form of writing, proper grammar, vocabulary usage, spelling, organization, and general flow and readability all count when it comes to law school exams. Whether consciously or subconsciously, professors grade on the basis of your writing, not just the substance of your essay—so, a well-written essay may net you more points even if you miss parts of the rule or reach the wrong conclusion.