



# MSLAW Academic Support

## The “DO’s and DON’Ts” of Success on Law School Essay Exams

### Study Tips:

**DO** study smart: the key to success in law school is to learn the law efficiently and effectively enough to retain what’s important, and then to be able to effectively apply it to the facts on your essay answers. In the week(s) leading up to exams, you should focus on reviewing the material that you’ve already read, culled, and outlined.

**DO** consider different study materials and techniques, but ultimately **DO** figure out what study methods work best for YOU. It doesn’t matter what methods worked well for your classmate, your study group partner, or the lawyer who lives down the street. We all learn differently. Whether you choose to study off of your outlines, make flash cards, or use flow charts or some other study method is up to you. In fact, you’ll probably find that you’ll have to experiment with several study tools and methods before you find the one that’s the right fit. Generally, involving as many senses as possible in the learning process enhances understanding and retention—for many students, it helps to “see it, hear it, say it, and write it.”



**DON’T** just prepare for the class; prepare for the professor. Different professors look for different things in an essay answer—most want to see that you’ve spotted every single issue; many test what they teach and stress; some professors want conclusive answers; others want to see in-depth analysis that accounts for every single alternative. Ask your professor what he or she looks for in an “A” answer, or look at practice exams and sample or model answers to see what seems to get points with the professor and what doesn’t. Law school is a good place to begin learning different focal points in your legal analysis and different ways to present your analysis to various people—after all, a good lawyer always knows his or her audience.

**DON’T** just focus on cases: study the black letter law (such as the elements of torts, definitions of crimes, or the Bill of Rights) for the exam. As you read cases, focus on culling the most important principles of law from each case. Ask: What does the case stand for? What does it teach? How would I likely see it used on an exam question?

**DON'T** leave all organization and preparation for the last minute. Simply keeping up with the reading throughout the semester isn't enough: you must be able to cull the black letter law you need to know on an exam and put it together in an organized format, whether you choose to use outlines, flow charts, flash cards, or some other method of organization and preparation.

**DO** visit the MSLAW Academic Support Office for additional study tips, resources, referrals and help with study plans during reading and exam weeks and throughout the semester.

### **Exam Tips:**

**DO** take practice exams, and make sure your test-taking conditions are as close as possible to the real deal. For example, if you are a night student and your exam will be given in the evening, then you should take your practice exams at the same time. Also, time yourself on practice exams to get accustomed to analyzing and writing under time constraints.

**DO** read the exam multiple times to be sure you've spotted all relevant issues. 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.

**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.

**DO** go into the exam with confidence: if you are unsure of yourself or your exam-taking skills, that uncertainty may show in your ability to answer the question. Approach the exam with a calm and confident mental state, and remember that all of your classmates are going through the same anxiety that you are. Some of this goes back to thorough preparation: the better you know your stuff, the more confident you will be on the day of the exam.

**DO** get a good night's sleep before the exam, and **DON'T** neglect mind, body and spirit during exam week.

## **Tips for Honing Your Analytical and Writing Skills:**

**DON'T** just regurgitate law and facts: good legal analysis requires you to apply the law to the facts. Your 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, though, you need to get right to the point: the issue you are addressing, your application of the law to the facts, and your conclusion on the issue. Use an organized method of analysis (whether IRAC or CRAC/TRAC) and stick to it throughout your essay answers for better flow, consistency and readability.

**DO** state the law clearly and correctly. 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 S.O.U.N.D. Bytes: key rule statements and definitions on the applicable principles of law. Apply the law to the facts, and don't forget any variations or limitations on the applicable principles of law that are relevant.

**DO** use precise legal terms and include the applicable "buzz words" that the professor is looking for. For example, if you're addressing a question about personal jurisdiction, then you should include the precise phrase "minimum contacts" in your analysis: your professor is likely looking for that precise statement, and including it in the same form as the professor expects it can make it easier for the professor to spot the statement and give you points for it.

**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, so don't include rule statements or analysis of issues that are not present in the fact pattern. (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 on the principles of law that are relevant to your issues only.

**DO** aim for short, punchy paragraphs over long and drawn-out analysis. Shorter paragraphs are easier to read and make the most important elements of your analysis – such as your issues and your precise legal terms – stand out, in turn making it easier for the professor to give you points for them. Remember the "6 C's" of a readable paragraph:

- Concision and clarity in expression
- Clear identification and statement of the issues
- Correct statement of the applicable principles of law, as well as any sub-rules, variations, or limitations that may apply to the facts
- Complete and thorough analysis of the law as applied to the relevant facts
- Clear and definite conclusion or thesis
- Correct language and solid writing style

**DO** spend some time thinking about what your professor is likely looking for in your analysis while you practice exam-taking. When practicing analysis, put yourself in the professor's shoes and read your writing as objectively as possible.

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