

The route to success

Mark Pawlowski provides some useful guidance on how to achieve success at law school



The first few weeks of law school are challenging for most students fresh from school or colleges. There is the inevitable challenge of locating lecture rooms, adapting to new styles of teaching and the expectations of tutors. There is also the awkwardness of meeting large numbers of new people and engaging in a variety of social events. Before a law student has time to adapt, they have to hit the ground running with large swathes of reading and class preparation. Much of this will be very unfamiliar. In writing this short piece, therefore, I decided to set out some helpful guidance on what the law student should aspire to in order to achieve success at law school.

Thinking ahead

A good opening strategy is to take your studies seriously and to plan ahead. In each law subject there exists, of course, no substitute for sound knowledge of the course material, so a student who hopes to do well must attend lectures and seminars regularly and read the recommended textbooks and source material. The serious student will plan their weekly timetable so as to make space for private study, reading (and actually absorbing) lecture and seminar notes. Above all, the good student demonstrates from an early stage a real commitment and enthusiasm to learning and understanding the law. This requires not only hard work and motivation, but also a disciplined approach to study throughout the academic year.

Planning well in advance so that revision topics cover material already learnt and understood in depth during the months prior to the examination will almost certainly guarantee good results. The serious student will appreciate the importance of looking at past exam papers at an early stage in order to 'get a feel' for the examiner's style and what depth of knowledge is expected.

Learning to apply the law

Acquiring knowledge and understanding the subject is only part of the process

of achieving success. To do well and to guarantee high grades, it is important to appreciate the importance of being able to apply legal knowledge to a given factual scenario and not just regurgitate sets of notes. Answers need to be clear and succinct, applying relevant case law and statute.

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Writing skills

The serious law student is aware of the importance of developing a crisp legal style of writing. Sentences need to be straightforward, succinct and to the point. Essays or legal advice need to be well-structured with an obvious beginning (introduction), middle and end (conclusion) so as to demonstrate lucid, sequential argument and an intelligent understanding of the legal issues involved. Above all, the good law student does not plagiarise chunks from the textbooks or online sources in order to save time and energy, but is able to express legal thought without recourse to such unhealthy practices. In any case, most law schools now use electronic systems to catch plagiarism on submitted coursework.

Contribution to the law school

The successful law student is aware that their contribution to the law school as a whole is just as important as attending formal classes and engaging in legal study. There are numerous outlets for students to benefit from mentoring and networking which help with career planning. For those who are interested in advocacy (regardless of whether they intend to practise at the Bar), participation in moots, mock trials, or client

counselling and pro bono schemes will be seen as essential.

The exam

The exam paper requires the student to answer a certain number of questions in a limited period of time. Invariably, there will be a mixture of problem and essay-type questions, depending on the nature of the course studied. The good law student will use any reading time (prior to the actual start of the exam) wisely by reading the whole paper, selecting questions and starting to plan answers.

It may sound obvious but, in the heat of the exam, students should be careful to check the instruction (does it say 'discuss' or 'compare and contrast?'), and to identify which areas of the syllabus are specifically covered by the question. Successful students do not stray outside the boundaries of the question. They answer the questions set knowing that irrelevant material will not generate marks. An awareness of what the examiner is looking for in a good answer is also key to success. To this end, it is important to master the art of 'examination technique' by identifying the fundamental issues in the opening paragraph and giving a clear conclusion at the end. In summary, the good student, having planned their answer carefully, is able to produce a well-written, structured and tidy exam script.

Conclusion

Unlike many other areas of university endeavour, successful study of law does not need to be entirely lonely. While a high level of study is needed, some of it can be done within study groups, and team work can be very valuable in mooting and other legal extra-curricular activities. This often means that law students commonly make life-long friends on their law courses who go on to become colleagues and rivals years later in the legal profession.

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