

Reviewing Law School Exams

A grade alone is very poor feedback. By making appointments with your professors and reviewing your exams, you can, however, learn a lot. Your goal in an exam review is to get as much helpful information as you can.

1. You can learn more about the nature of law school exams themselves and what professors are looking for. This will help you prepare for the next exam.
2. You can learn about your own strengths and weaknesses and use that information to build on your strengths and make effective changes to improve your weaknesses.

It is often helpful to look at an exam where you did relatively well in addition to one where you did relatively poorly. Email your professors and ask if you can set up a time to meet to review your exam.

These grades do not determine your future success in law school or as lawyers. They are a data point in time regarding how you did on one particular day during your first semester in law school. Keep reminding yourself of that!

Before the exam review: When you meet with a professor to review your exam, he or she may first give you an opportunity to review your exam silently on your own. During this review, use the *Exam Self-Assessment Handout from the Academic Success website to guide your reflection*. <https://law.rwu.edu/student-experience/academic-success/resources>

During the exam review: While some professors may provide feedback unprompted, others may wait for you to ask questions. In such a situation, I'd recommend you tell the professor you are seeking feedback to help you improve and ask them to help you assess your strengths and weakness on their exam. There are some suggested questions on the next page to help guide your conversation.

- One of the key skills all lawyers need is the ability *to seek and be receptive to feedback*¹. During an exam review where you did not perform up to your abilities, it is perfectly natural to feel embarrassed, anxious, discouraged, or even defensive about your performance. Be mindful that this exercise is for your benefit to help you improve in this professor's class (if you are still taking this professor) and in other

¹ 2016 study by the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System (AALS) assessing what skills, professional competencies, and characteristics help new lawyers succeed. Of 24,000 attorneys and judges interviewed nationally, 71.7% stated that new lawyers need *to seek and be receptive to feedback* on Day One of practice.

classes. As you learned when we discussed this past fall, successful students (and lawyers) focus on their learning, as opposed to their grades, seek feedback and make adjustments, instead of doing the same thing over and over, and they try to resolve confusion even if it's a struggle, instead of giving up. Be wary of the story that you are telling yourself about these grades.

It is also easy for both the student and the professor to become focused on the specific questions and the specific legal issues and rules those questions raised. While it can be helpful to understand the substantive answer the professor was looking for and where you did and did not provide that answer, you are trying to learn what you can from the exam to help you in different doctrinal courses. Be sure you and the professor are focusing on how you can translate that feedback into helping you improve in law school generally.

Below are some questions to consider asking when you review your exam with your professor.

1. Did I sometimes answer different questions other than the one(s) posed or fail to follow the instructions?
2. What percentage of the issues and sub-issues (approximately) did I spot? Three-fourth? Half? One-third?
3. What percentage would you expect a solidly prepared student to spot?
4. Did I organize my answers in a way that made it easy/hard to follow?
5. If my exam was hard to follow, what aspect of it made your reading of it most challenging?
 - My sentences
 - My paragraph organization
 - My inability to explain the law accurately
 - Something else?
6. What about my exam made it most difficult for you to give me points? More than one might apply.

- You couldn't understand it because my sentences did not clearly convey my thinking?
- I did not accurately and clearly explain the relevant rules?
- I used irrelevant rules?
- I did not answer the questions asked?
- I did not use the facts to explain my conclusions?
- I jump around from issue to issue and it was hard for you to see what I knew?
- Something else?

7. Where on this exam did I meet expectations? Is there an answer that was closer than others to providing the information that shows that I can think through a problem and explain that thinking effectively?

8. Will you share samples of the best written answers so that I can learn from seeing the differences between those exams and mine?

On the next page are some comments that your professor might use to describe your exam answer and some suggested follow-up questions that may help you learn how to improve from these exams.

Professor's comment	Possible Translation	Follow-up questions
<p>RWU Law Academic Success Program answers are Kathryn Thompson Your professor's conclusion is kthompson@rwu.edu</p>	<p>This can mean several different things including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stating only conclusions with little or no supporting rules, facts, or inferences 2. Failing to include the inferences (the "because" or the "why." 3. Including inferences but leaving out the material facts. 4. Failing to address all the elements of a cause of action when one element is not met or when a defense applies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you mean by that? • What was missing?
<p>Your answer was disorganized.</p>	<p>This may mean that you don't understand how to organize on an exam generally or that you didn't understand how the particular issue should be organized.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were all my answers disorganized or just some? • How should they have been organized and why?
<p>You failed to spot some issues.</p>	<p>Issue spotting is one of the more difficult skills tested on law school exams. Even the top student likely failed to spot some issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did a lot of students miss those issues? • Was that a main issue (a claim, cause of action, defense, exception, or transaction) or a sub- issue (an element, part of the rule, factor, aspect)?
<p>You seemed confused about or didn't seem to understand the rule(s).</p>	<p>This can mean your statement of the rule was incorrect or imprecise or that your analysis was flawed in a way that indicates you may not have understood what the rule means.</p>	<p>What should I have said or what does it mean? (Asking this question can help you assess whether you were actually confused or just did not convey your understanding clearly</p>

<p>You need help with your writing.</p>	<p>This often means your answer was disorganized. But it can also mean that your writing was difficult to follow because you were not stating your point clearly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What aspect of my writing needs help? Organization, clarity, grammar and punctuation?
<p>You failed to fully explain your analysis.</p>	<p>Again, this can mean several different things including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Failing to include the inferences (the "because" or the "why." 2. Including inferences but leaving out the material facts. 3. Failing to include helpful rule explanation, particularly for professors who are looking for you to include rules in your answer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you mean by that? • What was missing?