

HOW TO PREPARE FOR LAW SCHOOL

Roger Williams University School of Law
Prof. Kathryn Thompson
Director of Academic Success
June 12, 2020

Welcome! It's an exciting time for you and for us as we begin to prepare for this coming year. If, in addition to being excited about starting law school, you're also a bit stressed out about beginning law school, take comfort in the fact that you have lots of company. Every 1L you meet, whether they show it or not, will be feeling the same feelings you are. I felt the same way years ago, as did all of my classmates.

TOP FIVE LAW STUDENT WORRIES

The top five law student worries in my experience are usually:

- Not meeting expectations (your own and others).
- Socratic Method/getting called on in class.
- Not being able to keep up with the workload.
- Not understanding the material.
- Detrimental impact on non-law school life, especially relationships.

1. Failure/failing to meet personal expectations.

Maximize your opportunities to succeed at your highest potential—the most that any person can do.

- Work with me and the writing specialist to hone your skills. Attend the Enrichment Course on Fridays, our skills labs, and any online sessions offered.
- Attend your professors' office hours with questions about the topic. Visit your Legal Practice professor as often as possible with your drafts to ensure you're on the right track.
- Keep up with the work. Students cannot successfully cram in law school. Come see me if you need assistance finding more efficient ways to study.

2. Socratic Method/Getting Called On

First, you are not alone. All students are worried about getting called on during their first semester. Rest assured, however, that most professors do not use a purely Socratic Method, which is to ask questions of students without ever providing an answer or even guidance toward an answer. Most professors, if they use the Socratic Method, use a “softer” version of it than in years past. They will try to guide students who are off track or gently move onto another student. Be prepared for class as best you can and try to think of class discussion as a conversation between yourself and your professor.

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Second, the improvement in how you read cases and problem-solve at the beginning of law school and at the end of your first year is significant. Your professors know that you are novices. They are here to help you become better at reasoning and better problem-solvers. The dialogue in class is meant to help you accomplish those goals, not to humiliate or intimidate you.

3. Not Being Able to Keep Up with the Workload

- Choose to have the mindset that you are working a full-time job. Stay at the library or find some place to study that works for you each day after classes.
- Organize each day and each week with a written plan.
- Work with me and your professors on planning ahead and breaking larger tasks into smaller chunks.

4. Damage to Non-Law School Life, Especially Relationships

- Include your loved ones and friends in your preparations for law school. Let them know that even though you'll be very busy with law school, you will do everything you can to make time for them. Ask for their forgiveness ahead of time if you are less attentive over the next several months than they would like. Law school is time-consuming, but you can do it and your support network is an important part of helping you through this exciting, new experience.
- The "Companion Text" to Law School: Understanding and Surviving Life with a Law Student (2012). While dozens of books have been written to prepare students for law school, The "Companion Text" to Law School is the only book devoted to preparing students' loved ones.

5. Not understanding the material.

- A lot of students' "greatest fear" is "that I would be the only person to not understand the reading" and "that everyone will 'get it' and I won't." I'm happy to report this fear is overblown. Coming into law school, the law naturally seems inaccessible. As you become accustomed to reading and briefing cases and work to be more efficient, the material will become more accessible. In fact, I asked my husband (also a lawyer) yesterday morning what is the most important thing I can tell you all today, and he said, "It's not as horrible as they think it will be." ☺ I hope that helps a bit!

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Some Practical Tips

Pre-Arrival “To Do” List: The Intangibles

- **Be excited!** Approach it with enthusiasm, not dread (distinguishing dread from a healthy apprehension), and certainly not apathy—nothing would be worse than that.
- **Cultivate a Growth Mindset in yourself.** Research has shown conclusively that our intelligence is not fixed (even as adults). With effort and persistence, we can change our brains to become better and better at thinking the way our professors want us to think. Work with me if you become discouraged while you’re studying.
- **Get your life in order.**
 - Where will you live
 - Financial plans
 - Get to know the director of academic success and the writing specialist

The first year of law school is all-consuming. The work-load and volume of material you will be expected to master will be unlike anything you’ve ever encountered. To maximize your chances for success, you need to enter law school with your full focus on it.

- **Approach law school like a demanding, full-time job and not simply a continuation of college.**
 - Begin planning how you will manage your time before you get to law school. I can help you with this task and all of the books I recommend on the incoming students’ website address the unique challenges, including time management, faced by law students.
- **Define “success” for yourself.**
 - Define success for yourself. Literally. Put it in writing. Begin the sentence with “My definition of success in law school is ...” and complete the sentence. Or make a list if your idea of success includes several components. Putting it in writing will force you to think more concretely about what you really want and need out of law school. Revisit the definition as you progress through the first year. If you notice it changing, stop and consider why.

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Pre-Arrival “To Do” List: The Tangibles

- **Buy some books** (but not as many as everyone wants you to buy, at least not yet).
 1. All casebooks and books recommended by professor
 2. There are several good books for students to read before law school. Some are listed below. The first one, “1L of a Ride” (bolded below) is available for free in our library digital resources. You can find the link in the Admitted Students Website under Preparing for Law School.

1L of a Ride, Andrew McClurg

Succeeding in Law School, Herb Ramy

Strategies and Tactics for the First Year Law Student, Emanuel

A Thousand Days to the Bar, But the Practice of Law Begins Now, Dennis
Tonsing

3. **A Law dictionary.** I recommend **Black’s Law Dictionary**. At the beginning of law school you’ll be inundated with words and phrases that are foreign to you. Professors will expect you to look up all unfamiliar legal terms. An important part of the first year of law school is learning the language of the law.

4. **Study Aids:** Wait before buying these.

First, RWU Law Library has a free online library of many study aids in their digital resources materials (check with me or your professor regarding how best to use them).

Second, I also have a number of hard copies of study aids available in the Academic Success Program Learning Center (room 261 near the Bay View room) so that you can check books out that might be helpful to you.

Third, your professors may have some recommended aids that are consistent with the way they teach the course.

5. **Relax and enjoy!** Surprising as it may sound, one of the best ways to prepare for law school is to just kick back and enjoy your summer. Take a vacation. Exercise. Eat well. Enter law school rested and ready to go.