



THE ABCs OF LAW SCHOOL

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A University of Virginia Law School professor said to a graduating class, “Three years ago, when asked a legal question, you could answer, in all honesty, ‘I don’t know.’ Now you can say with great authority, ‘It depends.’” By the end of law school, all law students learn that is the one true answer to any legal question. However, before you get to “It depends,” you need to start with “I don’t know.”

When I first told friends and family, many of them attorneys, that I wanted to go law school, the most common reaction I got was, “*Why?!*” I was rather surprised by the similarity and vehemence of the responses; however, I simply assumed such reactions were part of cultural humor directed at the law and lawyers. After three years of law school, however, I would probably make the same exclamation to the would-be law student. Although the juris doctor degree opens many doors and allows for the exploration of many different areas outside the basic study of the law, as a recent law school graduate, I would caution the uninitiated that law school may be the hardest work they have ever done.

[‡]J.D., May 2010, Loyola University Chicago School of Law; Bachelor of Arts, 2007, Oakland University. I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional support and love during the past twenty years of school. In particular, I am eternally grateful for their support during the past three years of law school. I really believe that law school was as hard on them as it was on me. Also, I must thank all of my friends who not only provided encouragement, but much needed fun and humor during the past three years.

The first major hurdle to overcome is the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). This is a standardized exam that is purportedly designed to provide questions that make you “think like a lawyer.” There are three types of LSAT questions: there are reading comprehension questions, analytical reasoning questions and logical reasoning questions. In my opinion, the reading questions are the easiest because the exam provides text followed by questions. I personally found the logical reasoning questions second in level of difficulty. There is a short fact pattern followed by questions that are geared at examining a student’s ability to form or break down an argument. The third type of question is the analytical reasoning questions. Some people love these and, in fact, affectionately refer to them as “logic games.” To me, they were logic hell. Here is an example:

Exactly six trade representatives negotiate a treaty: Klosnik, Londi, Manley, Neri, Osata, Poirier. There are exactly six chairs evenly spaced around a circular table. The chairs are numbered 1 through 6, with successively numbered chairs next to each other and chair number 1 next to chair number 6. Each chair is occupied by exactly one of the representatives. The following conditions apply: Poirier sits immediately next to Neri. Londi sits immediately next to Manley, Neri, or both. Klosnik does not sit immediately next to Manley. If Osata sits immediately next to Poirier, Osata does not sit immediately next to Manley. If Londi sits immediately next to Poirier, which one of the following is a pair of representatives who must sit immediately next to each other?¹

I cannot even fathom how I would approach that question now. When you study for the exam, all study materials provide helpful hints and ways to visualize these questions, but no matter how much time I pored into studying for these questions, I could never understand how to find the correct answer.

¹ Sample Questions From the LSAT, accessed Oct. 22, 2010, <http://www.collegeofidaho.edu/academics/political/prelaw/queslsat.htm>.

The first time I took the exam I registered for an LSAT preparation class, which was helpful and gave me a study regimen. This was especially beneficial considering the course took place at the beginning of summer and the LSAT was in June. Unfortunately, I did not score as well as I had hoped the first time and registered for the following LSAT exam. The second time I studied, I simply bought a study aid from Borders. I studied every day for a few hours the preceding two to three weeks before the exam in October, trying to combine the study methods I learned from both preparation materials. I was able to raise my score by a couple of points, which was helpful, although I did not reach my goal score either time. Nonetheless, I do not believe my LSAT score hindered my acceptance at too many schools. Law school admission panels consider the LSAT score in conjunction with a prospective student's G.P.A., extracurricular activities and his or her personal statement.

After getting through the LSAT, the next step is to actually apply for law school. In order to do this, however, one must follow a specific regimen. Unlike applications for undergraduate institutions or other graduate programs, law school applications are almost entirely contained on a website entitled LSAC.org, which stands for the Law School Administration Council. As most, if not all law schools, use LSAC.org as their primary application method, applying to law school is a rather simple process. When you register for the website, you fill in all your general information and then the website will automatically fill in that information for you when you begin a new application.

The next major consideration is where you actually want to apply. There are 200 American Bar Association-approved law schools (and many other unaccredited institutions) in the United States alone, so choosing a select few can be a difficult and daunting task. My advisor told me to pick a school where I would potentially like to live and practice. I believe this is a very good piece of advice. Unless you end up at one of the top ten schools in the country, the contacts you acquire in law

school are largely useless outside of the state where you attend school.

Around April of my senior year at Oakland, I had three good options: John Marshall Law School in Chicago, Loyola University Chicago and Wayne State University. As I spent all of my life in Michigan—actually, I spent most of my life in Rochester, Michigan—I felt that I should experience a new place and new people. Also, many attorneys advised me that Michigan was not a wise choice in the long run; they explained that at the time there were few jobs available and that number would only continue to dwindle in the subsequent three years. Based on that, I decided that Chicago was my destination.

I first visited Loyola University at a preliminary orientation that allowed all newly admitted students to meet some of the faculty, current students and administration. When I began the process of applying to school, I was worried that all law school classes featured terrifying professors like *The Paper Chase's* Charles W. Kingfield, Jr. (played with brutal realism by John Houseman). However, the positive attitude of the students, the style of the professors and the availability of the administration surprised and encouraged me. When it was over, my mom looked at me and said, “I wish I had my checkbook with me—I’d write the check for them right now.” Loyola definitely seemed like the right fit for me.

I finished up my senior year at Oakland University, double majoring in Spanish and Latin American International Studies and in August of 2007, I packed my suitcases and moved to Chicago. My initial positive reaction was confirmed through all three years of law school: Loyola’s faculty, staff, and students were supportive, friendly and helpful. As I did not have time to look for an apartment or have any idea where I should live, I lived in the residence hall across the street from the law school. I was not sure I was going to enjoy living in student housing for another year, but within my first two days of living in Baumhart Hall I met three of my current closest friends. We all moved in a few days before orientation started so we had the opportunity to get to know each other outside of school.

Orientation started the following week and so began the next three years of my life. Prior to beginning school, we were instructed to read *A Civil Action*, which is a true story about a lawyer who is determined to help a community suffering from polluted land and water from nearby industry. Surprisingly, the book was not as inspiring to begin a three-year study of the law and my prospective career as I had anticipated. I expected an Erin Brokovich-style ending where the underdog plaintiffs receive a massively higher award than anticipated. However, in this case, the dire financial situation of the plaintiffs' firm forced the attorney into settling for a smaller settlement amount than originally hoped. Perhaps it was assigned to be instructional, since the book is quite accurate in its description of the litigation process and is easily comprehensible. Or, perhaps it was assigned to advise future attorneys to keep expectations of practicing the law realistic. Nonetheless, orientation consisted of a few different exercises to get us ready for our first classes in law school, book discussions and listening to current students' stories and advice. We were told that law school, while it does prepare us to become able and competent attorneys, is really more about learning to "think like a lawyer." You must learn that the law is no place to love or hate, and "thinking like a lawyer" involves a logical, analytical approach to solving a problem.

My first core courses in law school were conducted using the Socratic method in which the professors randomly select students to answer questions. Therefore, I spent much of my first semester trying to avoid eye contact with my professors. Everyone was terrified of looking like an idiot and you could almost hear an audible sigh of relief every time someone else was called on. Despite my terror at the time, looking back, I cannot even remember when I first got called on—so it must not have been a major law school rite of passage.

My very first subject in law school was civil procedure. Civil procedure is essentially the rules by which courts conduct civil, as opposed to criminal, trials. I feared and expected the professor to be intimidating; however, Dean Michael J. Kaufman

turned out to be one of the most supportive and helpful professors I have ever had. If a student answered incorrectly he would help guide the student in the correct direction. The next few weeks of school passed away quickly in a confused blur. By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, finals were practically upon us and we had to begin the dreaded process of outlining. In order to make sense of the massive amount of information we learned since late August, first year law students spend about three weeks condensing all of what they learned into a single course outline.

Studying for the first semester of law school finals is probably the most difficult, time-consuming and intimidating task a student will have to endure in law school. No one knows what to expect, how to study, or how to achieve the grades we were all accustomed to in college. Moreover, there is a competitive aspect. All law schools apply a curve. The law school curve allows only a set amount of students to get As, Bs, and so on down the line. Although most everybody was willing to help each other out with understanding the material, you still felt the pressure to do better than the person sitting next to you. Some schools go so far as to tell their entering students to look to the people sitting to their left and right because those people will not be there at graduation. Luckily, I did not receive that particular morsel of information but at some schools that is a reality.

The first exam for my entire first year class was civil procedure, although each professor structured the exam a little differently. Luckily, Dean Kaufman allowed us to take our exam open book and open note, it was very straightforward and gave me a little confidence boost for my two other finals to come. My second final was for a torts course (the study of negligent acts and intentional wrongs that result in harm). Although this was closed book, I felt I was ready for the final. However, when I got into the exam, I completely forgot one particular law so I had to make it up. I did not guess it correctly. Needless to say, I did not do well on that particular final. Although that grade was a blow to my self-esteem, it also showed me that if I could

guess at a rule and still manage to pass I could get through anything. My last final was in property law, which is the study of personal and real property—how to give, receive and convey it. This final was, luckily, uneventful. I had managed somehow to get through my first semester of my first year of law school.

During my second semester of my first year, the looming assignment required was to complete a brief and an oral argument for our legal writing class. Students conduct legal research on the issue presented, write a brief arguing one side or the other and then complete an oral argument before a panel of judges. The issue presented for our brief dealt with a fictional public school's acting principal who failed to respond when a parent volunteer claimed that another volunteer stumbled and possibly smelled of alcohol, and a student was subsequently injured. We were assigned to argue either side relating to whether the school was entitled to immunity because it was a municipality. After completing the brief, the oral arguments begin. Though I never previously had a problem with public speaking, the oral argument was a truly terrifying assignment. The judges are permitted, and in most cases, expected to interrupt you; get you off course; move you through your brief and argument at their pace; and you are expected to do exactly as they request.

The second semester of my first year was quite similar to the first, although I felt more confident during finals and had a better grasp on how to study, what to study and how much to study. At Loyola, the end of the first year also marks the time at which the students apply for moot court teams and apply for positions on law reviews. Moot court involves teams of usually two or three people preparing a brief, similar to what we completed in legal writing, on a particular issue of the law. There are moot court teams for literally every field of the law—constitutional law, family law, employment law, international law, allowing many students the opportunity to gain a good deal of knowledge in a field that may be of particular interest to them. Almost everyone in my first year class tried out for moot court because it involved submitting your brief and completing your

oral argument from legal writing; nothing new had to be prepared. However, I was not selected to join any of the teams.

The applications for the various law reviews at Loyola were a different process; most required you to prepare an application that included editing footnotes and preparing a short article with research provided by the various editorial boards. I applied for the *International Law Review* and I was selected to join the staff in my second year. Finally, our first year was over. After we finished our first year finals, tried out for moot court and applied for law reviews, the entire first-year class celebrated. If we could get through our first year—we could get through it all.

Although the first year of law school is intimidating and difficult, the second year is just as much work due to extracurricular activities. Just before and during the beginning of the second year of law school, on-campus interviews begin. This process is limited to a very select group of students, since some firms will only interview the top ten or fifteen percent of the previous first year class. Students sign up with firms from all across the country that come in for a day and conduct interviews to select their prospective summer associate classes for the upcoming year. Only a small number of people are eligible for many of these interviews and unfortunately, due to the economy, there are even fewer of these prestigious spots available because many firms simply cannot afford to take on summer associate classes.

As I explained above, second year law students are intensely busy. They still take a full-time class load, are on a moot court team and/or a law review, are possibly on the executive board of a student association, and are probably working for a law firm as a law clerk for the first time. During my second year, I was an Associate Editor for the *International Law Review*, was on the executive board of two student associations and had begun working at a small personal injury firm.

The first semester of my second year definitely passed by in a flash simply because I was so busy. I was determined to raise my G.P.A. during my second year but I did not plan my

schedule well and I had three finals three days in a row and a fourth the following week. Although I diligently studied for all my exams, simply having them so close together in one week was exhausting and I was mentally drained by the following week for my fourth final. When I got my grades back that semester, I discovered I did do marginally better than my first year but I did not raise my G.P.A. as much as I had hoped.

My second semester of my second year was probably my most difficult semester to get through. Not because I was more overworked, overstressed or taking more difficult classes than before, but because I was discouraged. I felt that it did not matter how much I studied, how much work I did or how much time I put in—I had a rather defeatist attitude at the time. In my opinion, the friends you make in law school are some of the closest you will have in your life because it is such an emotionally taxing experience and everyone is doing exactly the same thing you are. Luckily for me, my friends really helped me make it through that semester and by the end of the year, I did do better yet again. In addition, the editorial board for the *International Law Review* selected my article to be published and I finally felt that some of my hard work paid off. Also, at the end of that year the board selected me to be the Editor in Charge of Articles during my third year of law school. I was looking forward to my new position because it was one of the few areas in law school where I felt confident in my work.

There is a saying that all law students are familiar with—the first year they scare you to death, the second year they work you to death, the third year they bore you to death. This could not be more accurate. By the third year of law school, the students are so tired of law school it is difficult to get us to read, let alone show up to class. This is quite a big change from the first year when we studied for hours on end, briefed every assigned case, and took copious notes in every subject. Probably the most positive aspect about my last year of law school was that I finally felt like I was really getting grades I deserved and had worked for. Third year was mostly uneventful, although when people asked me what I wanted to do the next year and

where I wanted to work, I realized that the question was no longer posed for the future—the future was right around the corner.

At the end of May, graduation festivities began. The school had a graduation reception the day before Commencement and we had several speakers from the faculty and administration. They all gave wonderful and inspiring speeches but what was of particular note to me was that Dean Kaufman was our last speaker for the evening. He was my very first and very last professor.

Or so I thought. Two days after commencement, bar review began. There are a few different programs, but they are all similarly designed. They all involve intensive six to eight week classes taught by professors that are experts in the subject and they teach the students every subject tested on the bar exam. Unfortunately, these programs also manage to plunge everyone into deep bouts of guilt. Every second that you do not study convinces you that you will fail the bar exam. The two months spent waiting for our bar results were spent trying to find a job and trying to keep our nervousness at bay. However, on October 1, 2010, the results were released and, luckily, I found out I *passed!* Up to that point in my life, I can literally say I had never been so happy as when I read the words, “We are pleased to advise that you have passed the July 2010 Illinois bar examination.”

The past three years have been grueling, arduous and difficult; I have questioned whether or not I made the right decision; and have studied for what feels like years of my life. However, now that I am finishing up the last leg of the journey, I am looking forward to the next stage where I can apply what I learned and, I hope, make a difference. Although the job market right now is difficult for recent graduates, it forces us to take more risks, look for jobs off the beaten career path, and have a more flexible outlook for our future. With that in mind, if someone were to ask me, was it worth it? Do you regret it? Are you happy with your decision? Are you excited about the future? I now feel confident to answer, “It depends.”