

How to succeed in law school: with a lot of trying
Tom Bode, Esq.

What is your purpose in law school? The answer to this question should guide how you spend your time as a law student. The sheer amount of opportunity for learning and schoolwork means that you will not be able to do it all – and if you can't do it all, you are better off choosing what you don't get to than letting chance determine what doesn't get done. For example, if you want to be a trial lawyer, your time may be better spent in mock trial than studying for Secured Transactions. The reverse is true if you want to work for a bank. Be strategic: consider how involvement in extracurricular activities takes away from study time. Allocate your efforts among work based on how that work will further your purpose in law school. (The writing sample in a job application is likely more important than any other assignment.) Most important of all, structure your time in law school to help you to succeed in your classes.

Most law students don't have a job lined up after graduation, so a main goal is to get one. Your GPA is the strongest signal to your employer of your value as an applicant. But it is not the only signal. Think about how a potential employer will perceive the various work that you do in school. A potential employer will see your resume, which may include your GPA and a short list of journals or other extracurricular activities. You will likely also submit a writing sample, letters of recommendation, and a transcript. Consider two writing assignments. On the one hand, a writing assignment for your legal writing class affects your grade in that class, which appears on your transcript and may marginally influence your GPA. On the other hand, the writing sample you submit in a job application will likely be read and evaluated by the exact person who can give you a job. If your writing sample has a major error or several smaller ones, it alone can ensure that you do not get the job. To me, that means that you should always expend at least as much effort, and probably more, on a writing sample submitted in a job application than on a writing assignment for a class. Apply this same logic to all the work that you do; you will find that the potential payback will vary widely. Just because a professor tells you to read something, doesn't mean that it's the best use of your time.

Getting a job also depends on networking. If you have a professor who thinks highly of you, a call from her can get you an interview or a job that will never be posted anywhere. Making connections with lawyers in the field of your interests – maybe through bar events, internships, summer jobs, or just cold calls – can help you get a job, an interview, or exposure. That is to say, sometimes it is worthwhile to trade off classwork for networking – it's possible for a student with a great GPA and no connections to be left out in the cold.

Notwithstanding all of that, grades are a primary indicator of your attractiveness to potential employers. Again, think strategically about structuring your law school experience to help maximize your GPA. What kind of classes do you do well in? You're probably more likely to do the reading and attend lecture if it's a subject you're interested in – that suggests that in choosing classes, you can influence your grade without studying. Consider the impact of taking a class with friends, or in the evening, or from a professor who you like. How does the schedule of a class align with your other obligations?

As for the techniques for studying in a law class, different approaches work well for different people. You may prefer to take notes on a computer or by hand, to outline or use notecards, to study with a partner or individually. Studying law is different in some respect from other topics. Your school will give you some instruction; you will have to try different methods and see how they work. Overall, no method or approach will make law school easy or quick. You will have to work long, hard hours and will not see your family and friends as much as you will like. Law school is three years that have an outsized impact on your career and life and you will invest a lot of time and effort. Do so strategically with an eye towards your overall goal and you will maximize your results.