



Episode 106: Making Productive Use of Office Hours

Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox Podcast. Today, we're talking about going to office hours and why you should. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan, that's me, and Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. We're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the Catapult Career Conference. I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a review and rating [on iTunes](#) or your favorite app. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the [contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com](#) and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back. Today, we're talking about going to office hours, something lots of law students say they're going to do but few actually do. Alison, first off, why do you think people are hesitant to go to office hours?

Alison Monahan: I think the biggest reason is just simple intimidation. Let's face it, law school professors can seem extremely intimidating in class, where they're doing the Socratic method, they're in charge. You are simply the minions in their game. But, the reality is, oftentimes outside of class professors can be a lot nicer. Someone who seems super intimidating when they're in their professor persona, they might actually be very helpful when you go to talk to them in office hours. I can't guarantee that, but there's at least that possibility that they will be less intimidating.

Lee Burgess: I think that that's true, and it's a good practice for the rest of your legal career. Oftentimes, lawyers have one persona in the courtroom and one persona out. You can start to get used to that idea with professors who might be totally different in the office hours than they are in the classroom.

Alison Monahan: Most people who have clerked for judges, they have their in-courtroom persona and then they have their in-chambers persona. Those might be very, very different.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. I think a lot of students don't go because they don't know what to say and they're worried about looking stupid or that they don't ... asking the wrong questions, or things like that.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think sometimes people might have a bad experience, maybe, if they go once without a real plan for what they're going to talk about, because sometimes people can still be in that undergrad mindset of the professor is going to teach me everything. If I just show up to office hours, they'll explain it all to me. That's not really the way things work. I think it's natural to be a little

concerned that maybe you don't know what to talk about, but that just means you need to think about what to talk about before you show up to office hours.

What we mean by that is maybe you think about a certain hypo that your professor talked about that you have questions on, or an area of law that you've worked through where you understand 90% of it but 10% of it you don't understand. Those type of things are fantastic to bring to office hours. What you don't want to do is show up and say, "Well, I don't really understand personal jurisdiction. Can you explain it to me?"

Lee Burgess: That's not their job.

Alison Monahan: That's not going to go well.

Lee Burgess: No. I think another thing that law students also forget is there's a lot going on in class, and sometimes your questions won't get answered. If you have questions leftover from the reading or class that didn't get answered, office hours are a great time to take those questions to the professor and start a dialogue. The professors aren't going to be upset with you for still having questions. They're actually going to appreciate that you are there trying to get your questions answered.

I have sat with so many professors who teach doctrinal classes who are frustrated and sometimes a little sad that students don't come to their office hours.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think particularly at the beginning of the semester, oftentimes they're basically empty, which leaves the professor either thinking, "Okay, I've done an amazing job. No one has questions." Or, "Everyone hates me or they're afraid of me or they're lazy," or whatever. It's not a nice feeling, to have your office hours scheduled for three hours or whatever every week and then nobody shows up to it, and then you hand out the exam and you read them and you realize no one understood anything.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. Very few people are going to understand everything that's going on in class. Come up with a few questions. Show up and meet these people. You're paying a lot of money to get exposure to these professors.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. I think sometimes people also don't go because they think, "Oh, well it's just not going to be useful." How do you know that until you try it? Maybe it's not useful in some doctrinals, and it's because you amazingly understood all of the material the first time you saw it. But even then, there are other reasons to go. You might need this person to give you a reference at some point if you're going to apply for a job or a clerkship. You've got to start building these relationships early, because the earlier you do that the more time you have. These can end up being very important relationships. A lot of people are still in

contact with their 1L professors, and a lot of times those relationships really started when they went to office hours.

Lee Burgess: I think that that's really true. Professors will often talk in a more direct way in office hours. Don't come to your professor and say, "I don't understand personal jurisdiction." But if you come with very specific questions because you've been struggling with personal jurisdiction, the professor might appreciate your struggle and actually give you a lot more guidance than you could ever get in class.

Alison Monahan: For sure, because it's so much more personalized. If you show up with, "Okay, I've tried to put all this stuff together, but I still can't figure out how this one case fits into the big picture," more than likely your professor's going to take pity on you and just tell you. They might ask you questions to draw it out of you, but they're not going to let you leave having absolutely no idea how this case fits into the big picture.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. The reality is, if you show up and you're engaged and you have some sort of question to ask, it's probably going to go well.

Alison Monahan: Again, we can't guarantee that. You might have a professor who's not very nice. That does sometimes happen. But generally speaking, I think you're going to be pleasantly surprised if you show up. Oftentimes people think, "I just don't have time to go to office hours. I don't have time for this." Which sometimes is valid. Maybe you have to go pick up your children at school and the office hours are always at 5:00 P.M. We'll talk later about what you can do in those situations. But, I think this is typically a very, very solid use of time.

Lee Burgess: I think it is. At least, not every week, twice a month, once a month. Anything. Just try.

Alison Monahan: You don't have to be that person who's there sitting outside the door every single week at the exact time that your office hours open up. You don't have to be a total gunner about it. But, showing up on relatively regularly, several times a semester, to each of your professors, this does not take that much time.

Lee Burgess: No. Another reason why it's important to engage with these professors is these professors are the people who are writing and grading your exams. It's interesting to listen to them talk about what they get excited about, because that is likely going to be on your test. If you know that your professor may be teaching contracts but their passion project is privacy, then it might be, one, interesting to hear about that, but, two, give you some insight into the part of contract law that they find the most engaging, because maybe it links to whatever their true passion is.

Alison Monahan: Right. Exactly. Can you make a binding contract never to release a whatever, sex video that you've made with your partner, or something, if you're married to

them? I don't know. You could brainstorm. This person's writing your exam. They're grading your exam. I think you probably had this experience too. Sometime if you show up with a hypo that you have worked on, maybe that they gave you as a sample, they'll actually sit down with you and help you make your answer better, which, ding, ding, kind of valuable.

Lee Burgess: I think it is amazing sometimes the direct feedback a professor may feel like they can give in office hours, especially in these early days when no one's there. No one's in there. It's nice to catch up on e-mail, but I've had office hours and it's annoying when you're sitting there thinking that you're going to sit in rush hour traffic and nobody's showing up to your office.

Alison Monahan: It always made me sad. I've been a TA in various situations, and we always had office hours. It always made me sad when nobody showed up. I'm like, "You know, you people are paying a lot for this." It wasn't just law school, but whatever it was. I'm a person who's trained to help you. Why are you not here asking me to help you?

Lee Burgess: Exactly. You might as well take some practice, or I've had students who take part of their outline, take a little bit of practice, takes a hypo. The worst thing your professor will say is no, they're not going to give you feedback on that, but you still get credit for trying.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think one of the things that people can do to make office hours less intimidating and more useful is if you want to go over something. Say it's your outline or a section of your outline or a hypo. Whatever it is. You can do so thoughtfully. You might e-mail your professor in advance and say, "Hey. I'm planning on dropping by your office hours on Thursday." This is a Monday or Tuesday you're sending this e-mail. "I'm planning on dropping by your office on a Thursday. I'd really love it if you could help me out with this section of the law that I'm struggling with. Here is a flowchart that I've made, but there are a couple of questions I have on it. Is there any possibility I could talk to you about this?" You give them the opportunity to look over it in advance and don't just shove it at them in the office hours.

Lee Burgess: I think that that's a really good suggestion. Another option is, if you want to take a sample of some sort of writing for them to look at, I would highly recommend either sending it to them early. But some professors don't like using hypos out of supplements, so instead try and take one of the hypos they might have used in class. Sometimes professors I think more and more are distributing a hypo that you might discuss in class, or giving out some sort of sample prompts. Professors are doing more and more to try and be more engaging. Even if you never wrote out an answer in class, you can take that hypo and outline it or try and write it up.

Then you can go to the professor and say, "Hey. You had this hypo on standard of care, and I kind of mocked up an answer. Can we talk about it?" Professors

love to talk about their own hypos, because they know them incredibly well and are going to be much more available, likely to give you feedback. No one, even law professors, want to be put on the spot with some hypo they're not familiar with, by you showing it to them quickly and then asking them to parse it out, and then you're comparing their response to the response in the supplement. That's not going to go well.

Alison Monahan: No. Another thing sometimes students do is they may get obsessed about some particular area of the law that the professor's really not planning to cover, that they've read about in a supplement or wherever. They go in, asking a million questions about some case you're never going to actually read. Understandably your professor at some point is probably going to be like, "You know, this is sort of a waste of time and I'm not going to engage with this. There are probably other people who want to talk to me, or I could just be using my time more productively. Why don't you go away?"

Lee Burgess: I think that that's true. I've also had professors who have, for certain classes, have said things like, "Do not use supplements to practice." An example of this is in real property there's a section called Future Interests, which is incredibly frustrating for almost everybody. My real property professor basically said, "I teach future interests in a very specific way. You are welcome to bring me the hypos we discuss in class, and I'm happy to work through them. I would not recommend using supplement hypos, because they're going to talk about some stuff that we might not have time to talk about." People still would bring her supplement hypos to do these analyses.

I remember hearing her say, "I'm not spending time on this. This is not how you're going to be tested." She was annoyed by that. Don't do things, if your professor says to not bring certain things to office hours, please don't. They're not joking. It annoys them, and then it's not going to go well.

Alison Monahan: Right. They've thought about this. They've thought about how they want to teach this topic. If they have a very specific way of teaching it, your job is to understand how your professor is teaching you. Your job is not to understand some ideals platonic version of property law and future interests. That's totally irrelevant and a waste of time. You want to think about not putting your professor on the spot on something that they may not think is important, and making it easy for them to help you, because the easier it is for them to help you, the more help you're going to get.

Lee Burgess: Basically, you don't want to make the professor's job difficult. That's thumbs down. That's not going to go well.

Alison Monahan: You also don't want to leave a bad impression of you as an individual. You don't want to be that person that yelled at the professor in office hours for being an idiot, which does happen, or telling them they're wrong about a case, or

whatever. If you're going to do something like that, you need to do it very, very carefully.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. What about taking someone with you so you don't have to go it alone?

Alison Monahan: I think that's generally valid, particularly if somebody's not going to go otherwise. If you're so intimidated by the idea of going by yourself to office hours, but you have someone who's in your study group and you guys have worked on something together and you both still have questions, I think that's fine. What do you think?

Lee Burgess: I think it can be helpful. I wouldn't necessarily recommend going with maybe your entire study group. If there's six of you, and you're all crammed in the office hours, it might not be the right opportunity to get your individual questions answered. But I think sometimes professors like to have two or three people in there and kind of hold court, in a way. It can be a nice dynamic, especially if you and your friend maybe have prepared what questions you might have, and you can key off each other or split the time to make sure that you both get what you need. But if it's going to make it easier for you to go, I think you're much better off going with a buddy than not going at all.

Alison Monahan: Sometimes it gets a little awkward if there are three people from the class waiting and the professors just, "Oh, why don't you all come inside?" Then, I found at least, the conversations went in all weird directions and nobody really got their questions answered. I don't think that's necessarily ideal. I think it's totally fine if you're not finding it productive to say, "Hey, I've got another meeting. I'll come back next week." Whatever. You don't have to stay there if you're not finding it helpful.

Lee Burgess: I think that that's true. Like all things, whether it be your study group or office hours, you'll constantly have to evaluate whether or not you're getting something out of that time. If you go for a few weeks and you really find that this professor is not helpful, then I think it's fine to not go back for a while. But, you've got to try it out before you know.

Alison Monahan: Exactly. You can't make the excuse in advance that, "Well, I just know this professor's not going to be helpful," because you don't actually know that. Show up early in the semester when they're not busy, they're not stressed, take a specific question, ask them, see what they say. Then, objectively evaluate did this make sense to you? Because there are other ways that you can get in touch with your professors. What are some ways that we can interact with our professors if office hours just aren't feasible?

Lee Burgess: Some professors will let you e-mail them. That is one very passive way that you can try and interact with your professors. But you can also try and interact with them at other events around the school, speaking engagements. They might be faculty advisors of certain things. There are plenty of ways that you can get face

time with your professors that aren't necessarily office hours if you're trying to build a relationship.

Alison Monahan: I think that's right. Sometimes actually writing your question specifically in an e-mail can be very helpful, because it forces you to really try to narrow down what you understand, what you don't understand, how you're struggling, rather than just showing up and saying, "Well, I don't really understand how this case fits into everything." You're not going to send that in an e-mail to your professor. That would be ridiculous. It forces you to be a little more specific, be a little more focused, and hopefully you get a response that's useful.

A lot of classes now too have things like class bulletin boards, where there's a Slack channel or some sort of online thing. That can be a good way to get your questions answered. I think it's valid if, for some reason, your professor has office hours at a time you just absolutely cannot attend them for a valid reason, to ask them if they would possibly meet with you after a class for 15 minutes, or something, and plan that in advance, because it may just not work for you.

Lee Burgess: I think that that's fine, and especially if you are respectful and thoughtful in that e-mail, and say something like, "Professor So-and-So, I've been trying to work out coming to office hours, but because of the time I need to pick up my kids I'm never on campus at five o'clock. These are my questions. Is it possible if we could set up an appointment or I could meet with you after class?" That will probably get you a positive response.

Alison Monahan: Telling your professor that their office hours are at the wrong time of day, not so much the positive response is likely.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. Maybe they agree to answer your questions via e-mail. They might agree to talk to you on the phone. You can set up a time. They might agree that you can stop by for coffee or lunch or whatever. Most people are going to be relatively flexible if you're nice about it.

Alison Monahan: I think that that's really true. The other thing about emailing professors that is interesting is, this idea comes through a dialogue I was having with a Bar student about some multiple-choice help. Multiple choice is something that I think more and more professors are using, and students are trying to get more practice. But legal multiple choice can be a bit befuddling, because the law doesn't really lend itself to multiple choice when the answer is usually it depends or is arguable.

If you're doing multiple choice practice or if a professor has recommended a supplement or Bar questions that you could use for practice, if you are having trouble figuring out why you're getting wrong answers to certain questions. I good e-mail to the professor would be something like, "I have done this question. Here's the prompt and here are the answer choices. The correct answer is C, but I have the correct answer as A, and here's why." You write up a

little summary of your thought process, because to show the law that you were applying, what the issue was, almost like you were writing a little mini essay about it, and then ask if they can validate whether or not you were right. That I think a lot of professors would read through and say, "I see your point, but here's where you went wrong. This is why the answer is C." I think that that is a good idea. Thumbs up.

Some questions that I would not recommend is that you type in the multiple-choice question, you said, "Well, I picked A, the answer is C, and I don't know why." Because there the problem is they have no basis for understanding where it is that you personally are going wrong. There are probably 10 different reasons that B is not correct and C is correct, but they don't know which one of them is the wrong path that you personally have gone down.

Lee Burgess: Which is really challenging. The more information you can give the professor so they can answer your specific questions, the better. It just makes all the difference in the world.

Alison Monahan: Sometimes you might, in the process of writing up that explanation, you might actually come to understand why it is that you were incorrect.

Lee Burgess: It's a good exercise.

Alison Monahan: If you don't have that understanding, if there's not a moment of clarity where you go, "Oh, gosh. Right. Okay. This is it." Then you don't even send the e-mail. But at least it could be pointed out to you, "Oh, you thought this. You thought X, but it's actually Y." Then the next time you see a hypo that implicates X or Y, you think, "Oh, I used to think it was X, but now I know it's Y." For multiple choice, this is what happened to me when I was studying for the MBE on the Bar, was I had had this insane professor about the Fourth Amendment, who basically thought the police could and should do anything they wanted, and I missed, as a result, every search and seizure question that I took for weeks.

Until I finally retrained myself to say, "Okay. Well, my first reaction, because this is what I was taught, is the police can do whatever they want. However, I now know that is not true. So, let's think about which of these things they cannot do under the law." That's a useful thought process.

Lee Burgess: This intellectual exercise of putting together your thoughtful questions is really important and something that you can practice, because even when you start working, if you think professors don't have a lot of time to do in-depth working out of questions for you, you might be really shocked at how super insane lawyers really don't have a lot of time. When you want to ask a question of your supervising lawyer, it better be well thought out. It better have been tried to be answered. You better have your explanation of how you've already tried to answer it yourself, because their billable time is incredibly important. If you can lay it all out for them and they go, "That's your problem. That's where it went

wrong. Here's your solution." Then you leave with your answer, that's going to go well for you. If you go in and they feel like you're asking them to do your legal research, they're not going to be happy with that.

Alison Monahan: Exactly. A large part of the reason you go to office hours or that you do anything in law school is preparing you to be a lawyer. I think that's absolutely right. The highly-paid partner, if they can say, "Okay. Lee, I see where you're going with this. But, I happen to know that this is incorrect or this is not an argument we would want to make or this is not going to be a winning argument." Done. They just earned their \$995 an hour, because it took them two minutes to tell you, "Okay, don't waste three days doing this research. This is the direction we want to go in." Practicing getting to that point where people can help you like that is part of the reason to go to office hours.

Because, in the beginning, maybe you're tempted just to show up and be like, "I don't understand contracts." Your professors kind of look at you and be like, "Um, does this look like I am your freshman professor in college? I'm not going to tell you contracts. Are you joking? That's not my job." But if you go in with a specific question and something that you've thought about, and they can say, "Well, your problem is that you thought that the UCC applies here, in which case the result would be X. However, the UCC does not apply because of this, and therefore the answer is Y." That's extremely helpful.

Lee Burgess: This idea of really actively engaging in your own learning and fleshing things out so you can ask the appropriate questions will serve you well throughout life. Even in networking, which doesn't seem related to this at all, but it could be, which I can tie it back in a second. This idea that you have to make the ask so somebody can help you, you have to be very specific. We've talked about this in podcasts and [on the blog](#), that if you want someone to introduce you to somebody else, in that initial meeting you have to say, "It would be great if you could introduce me to this other person that I believe you know." Then the other person can say, "I would love to help you. I will do that."

Versus, just having this lunch and you're in the back of your mind thinking, "I wish they'd offer to introduce me to this other person." They're not mind readers. I think in office hours as well, your professor's not a mind reader. They don't know. The better you are at asking questions, or even asking them for help, because professors can be great networkers for you as well, it's just going to make them more engaged and know how they can help you. If you are looking for ...

For instance, one of my professors was a death penalty defense advocate. My friends who wanted to work in death penalty defense, you had to go to him. You couldn't just say, "I'm interested in death penalty defense." He'd be like, "Great. Take my class."

Alison Monahan: It would be like, "Thanks for sharing."

Lee Burgess: "Thanks for sharing." But if you said, "I am interested in death penalty defense. I know that your program works with this law center in Mississippi, and I would like the opportunity to intern there for the summer. Could you introduce me to folks or let me know if you know anything about the application process? I've already researched it." Yada yada. That is an ask that can be reciprocated with an answer. I think that professor's more likely to help you out.

Alison Monahan: For sure. I think that's something we haven't really touched on, is how helpful a lot of professors can be and are willing to be in the job hunt, whether it's a summer job or a clerkship or whatever it is. Lots of people know people. A lot of times, they're actually looking for their own research assistants and things. Again, they're not mind readers. If you're interested in being a research assistant, you can't just show up and demand to be hired. But certainly by the second or third or fourth time you've gone to office hours, particularly if it's midway through the second semester and you haven't gotten a job yet, you can start dropping some hints like, "Oh, do you think you're going to be hiring anyone this summer? Do you know any professors who are working in this area that might be hiring? I'm really interested in doing some research." Maybe it works out. Maybe it doesn't. But you don't know until you ask.

Lee Burgess: What about if you're considering transferring? How do you recommend that students talk to their professors about that in office hours? Because you're going to need letters of recommendations from professors.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. I think that's one where, A, you want to have already built that relationship and so they're invested in you as a person. At certain schools, if you did really, really well first semester, I don't think your professor's going to be totally shocked if you just sort of float the idea. First semester, professors, the only reason they would ever care is, "I want you to stay at this school." But I honestly don't think most of them really think that way. I think your first semester professor, if you ace their class and you decide you're going to apply to transfer, they're probably going to not be so surprised if you go in and you ask for a letter.

Lee Burgess: I think that's true. Most professors really just want you to be successful and happy. Hopefully that's how they've approached it, because they want to work in education. I think if you go in and you're honest about it, I think it's going to go well. But this might be an opportunity for you to practice a little bit of discretion, maybe try and set up an appointment, send a professor an e-mail to give them a heads up. Maybe not do it in public office hours, because you may not want to be rattling off about transferring in front of other classmates and talking about how well you've done. That's probably not going to go well. Not that necessarily most people would, but I think you can feel like that's the only time you have access to this professor and you have to talk about it then. It's probably not the best time to do it.

Alison Monahan: I think that's a good tip. If you have something more personal that you want to discuss with them, whether it's getting a job or transferring or anything outside of the academic scope, I think unless you're the only person there or the only person waiting, it's probably best to show up some other time.

Lee Burgess: I think that that's really true. What about TAs? I know that you and I were both TAs in law school. You mentioned you had office hours while you were a TA, right?

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I'm not actually sure if we had them in law school. We definitely had a TA session. I do recall at least a couple of times having voluntary times that people could come and talk to me. I think I might have just done that because I was so nice. But, a lot of times, your TA will hold office hours outside of session or they'll let you send them an e-mail or set up an appointment. I think particularly legal writing instructors are often doing stuff like this. They're not really TAs. But, any of these opportunities, you may as well take advantage of them. Why not?

Lee Burgess: I think that that's true. Even with TAs, I highly recommend that you don't leave your interaction until the end of the semester, because TAs are students and their end of the semester is also going to be incredibly busy. Asking them for favors at the end of the semester is probably not the best timing. But they're more likely to help you in the early side of the semester where they have a little more free time.

Alison Monahan: Right. I remember mid to end of the semester, I had a little session where I just said, "Hey. If you have any extra questions." I was a civ pro TA. "You can show up." Maybe six or eight people showed up. I had actually brought all of my old study aids that I had made for the course, and I was happily showing them all around. People were like, "Oh my god. Can I make copies of these?" I'm like, "Sure. Why not?" I don't care. It was a completely open session. It's not my fault if some people showed up and some people didn't.

Lee Burgess: You should just go to stuff. You can always respectfully leave if it's not helpful for you. But I think a lot of folks just decide that it's not going to be helpful so they don't go.

Alison Monahan: You just don't know what you're missing. I definitely sat in office hours where a professor has essentially told you something is or is not on the exam, and there were four or five people from the class there.

Lee Burgess: Lucky for them.

Alison Monahan: Those four or five people, we all had an advantage that other people didn't have, because we bothered to show up. A lot of life is like that. Did you bother to show up or did you not bother to show up?

Unfortunately with that we are out of time. Hopefully that was helpful and you will go to office hours. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox Podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating [on iTunes](#) or your favorite listening app, because we would really appreciate it, and be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. Typically, our new episodes are out on Monday. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at Lee@LawSchoolToolbox.com or Alison@LawSchoolToolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website [contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com](#). Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon.

Resources:

- [How to Get to Know Your Professors in Law School](#)
- [Office Hours – Should You Go?](#)
- [Tips for making the Most of Your Professor's Office Hours](#)
- [Video Quick Tip: Office Hours](#)
- [Avoiding Office Hours? Go, and Get Something Out of It](#)
- [Video Quick Tip: Finding Mentors and Sponsors](#)
- [Networking Strategies for a New World](#)