



- Lee Burgess: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're talking about getting grades during these COVID times. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess, that's me. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience, so 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 career-related website [CareerDicta](#). Alison also runs [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on your favorite listening app. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the [contact form](#) on LawSchoolToolBox.com, and we'd love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.
- Alison Monahan: Welcome back. Well, this is the time of year, even in COVID times, that first-year law students are getting back their very first first-semester grades. And in the best of circumstances, this can be a kind of frustrating and sobering time, but right now, I think there're some additional challenges. So, today we're going to talk about how to deal with getting grades and how to set yourself up for success in this next semester.
- Lee Burgess: Oh yeah. Man, every year we kind of do this episode and it always gives me a little anxiety.
- Alison Monahan: I know, it just brings you right back to that moment, doesn't it – of getting your first grades.
- Lee Burgess: It does. And I think what a lot of people don't realize is that different schools release grades differently, there's not a real standard about this. So, some schools will hold all of them and release them in a bundle so you get the whole picture at once, but other schools do them in this painful dribble where you get one grade at a time. And so, if that first grade is bad, you are crushed; or if it's good, you can also be lulled into a false sense of security. It's very chaotic.
- Alison Monahan: It is, and I feel like half the time they'd release them in the middle of the night, so you see something on your phone when you rolled over at two in the morning – you have a new grade! And of course you're going to look at it, be up all night after that. Yeah, ours definitely dribbled in and it can be a pretty painful process. Some professors do not turn those in very early, so you may be waiting weeks to get your final grade.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think each school has all these requirements, but there are still professors who take a long time to get stuff graded. Now, in a professor's defense, having taught and had to grade just a small stack of exams, it is brutal to sit and grade them. I definitely don't want to discredit what the professors have to do. But on the other hand, this is their job, they have to get this stuff done.



- Alison Monahan: Right. My professor friends often say they don't get paid to teach, they get paid to grade.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. Grading is brutal.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, particularly I'm imagining just reading essay exam after essay exam after essay exam, and trying to fit those together in a way that's fair and curve them. It's not that easy, but it is their job so hopefully they get it done.
- Lee Burgess: It is their job, yeah. So, I think the thing you've got to do is remember that whenever you get your grades or however you get them, the key is that you really need to learn from them. So, even if you're happy or if you're sad, you need to do something with that information. And typically, the first thing you need to do is to try and follow up with your professors to get more information about what happened, even if it went well. I think this is an important exercise, even if it went well. Do you agree?
- Alison Monahan: I think it's always worth talking to your professors. I'm not sure I ever did about grades, to be honest, but I recommend it. And also, you've got to keep in mind too that you're looking at this as a whole and not as necessarily one bad exam, if one exam didn't go so well. You're looking at your entire GPA. So, however your grades are – if some of them are good, some of them are bad – I think it's always worth talking with your professors, because why not? They may give you some useful information, and really what you're looking for here, again, are those patterns. So, if all the professors you talk to are saying sort of similar things, then you can probably guess, "Hey, I'm getting feedback on being too conclusory. I need to figure out what that means and stop doing it." And again, if you have one professor who happens to be mean and says something you don't like, maybe that's an outlier. But if you talk to all of them, you'll have a better sense.
- Lee Burgess: That's a really good point. I also think, to add to the point of even why it's worthwhile if you did well, is if you did do really well in a class, it's possible that that could be a professor that you're going to go to for a letter of recommendation for something.
- Alison Monahan: Or to be TA or an RA or something like that.
- Lee Burgess: Right. And so, following up to still talk to them about your performance to remind them, because sometimes this is blind grading and they don't... And I think it's got to be even weirder for professors in the COVID area if they're doing virtual teaching, because they might recognize you from Zoom, but are they really... Like, what does the Zoom box mean? It's got to be hard to do that in the classroom. It's going to be even harder for them to remember you and your dynamic on an electronic class. So, I think trying to get a meeting with them and



even discuss good performance sets you up for them remembering you, so eventually they could write you a letter of recommendation if that's something you need in the future.

Alison Monahan: I think that's a great point. Even more than ever, if you're in a class of 100 people, I think it is worth it to reach out and just say, "Hey, I enjoyed the class, I'd appreciate any feedback. I know I did well, but there are always things we could improve." I think professors are really going to respect that.

Lee Burgess: I think that there are some challenges, and hopefully a lot of people listening have already been trying to follow up with their professors in this more virtual world. I think even if you're in a hybrid type classroom, I doubt they're doing in-person office hours.

Alison Monahan: That seems like a really bad idea.

Lee Burgess: It does. So, it's got to be hard to follow up with professors virtually. Some professors may not respond to emails quickly. This is the first time that they are giving feedback in this way, really, because this is such a new semester. The last semester was even strange because it was mid-semester. So, they're still trying to figure out what they feel comfortable with. And professors often times have their own very varying specific rules about, would they release an exam question, or could you only look at it in the room? Or would they even send you your responses? Because a lot of them are trying to protect what exams or practice questions are circulating out there in the world. So, you need to pull it out of them that you need some information, but they also are probably going to be figuring out what they even feel comfortable with.

Alison Monahan: Right. Yeah, I think it's definitely going to be a weirder situation than just popping by to someone's office hours and asking about your test. But that doesn't mean that you can't make it happen, I think you can just try. Hopefully your professor has set up some type of parameters like, "Hey, if anyone wants to talk to me, here's how I'm available." If not, just keep at it and try to meet with them. And I think try to actually speak with them, like phone or video chat, not just via email or chat or text or whatever. You want to be able to really dig in and follow up and ask questions: "What do you mean by that? Can you show me an example?", that kind of thing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, when you get into this meeting, no matter how hard you have to try to get it, you do kind of want to go in with I think a list of questions to ask. I always like to find that balance of what went well and what went wrong, because often times if you do get a copy of your exam, your exam will not have multitudes of comments that will make sense to you, because they are grading so quickly. So, I had one professor who would just do pluses and minuses – that's how he did his grading. So it was like if a section was good, it got a plus; if a section was bad or



it missed something, it just got a minus. And it all corresponded to his own grading scheme, but those comments didn't really mean much to me.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: So, you're not going to get back edited work, and I think that's important for students to understand. That's why meeting with your professors to interpret their comments is so important. I even got an exam once that had a sad face on the paper. Literally, she drew a sad face, my Torts professor.

Alison Monahan: And you're like, "Did your child do this, or this was a bad exam? Are you having a terrible day? Did something make you cry? Like, what's happening?"

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Or some of my friends once got an exam back that had a coffee ring on it. And then even one other friend got an exam when she flipped it over, it was the professor's holiday... I think it was not Thanksgiving, because that was before the exams.

Alison Monahan: Christmas.

Lee Burgess: It was their Christmas shopping list that they clearly had made on accident. So, these are humans, but you're not going to be able to just get that feedback and kind of walk away from it. That dialogue needs to happen. So, I always think going in with a number of questions, like what went right, what went wrong? And then thinking about the test, I think one of the things we're seeing with a lot of law students right now is most everybody is taking open book tests because they're virtual. And so, when that's the case, you want to remember that you had the law in front of you, so probably the issue is not going to be that you didn't know the law. The problem is likely going to be that you didn't know how to tie the law to the facts, or you didn't understand how the law was applied, or you had time management issues. But it's also good for you to start really thinking about the exam experience – what you can remember of it, if you haven't totally blocked it out – so you can go in with some very pointed questions.

The other thing I think is important to look for is, what type of questions did you struggle with? A lot of professors will have a section that's multiple choice, and if that was a problem, then you want to think, why did you have a problem with that multiple choice? And you can talk to the professor about that. They're probably not going to circulate multiple choice questions, so you can review them because they're very hard to write, and so they won't want to write a whole new set. But you can still have a dialogue about them and see how you did. Because remember, guys, this isn't just about future law school exams, these core 1L classes are what you're going to see on the bar, and multiple



choice is also on the bar. You want to start identifying these weak areas so you can work on them for the next two and a half years.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. You do not want to be one of those people at the end who are studying for the bar and saying, "Well, I didn't do so well first year, and multiple choice has always been a big problem for me." That's not a great way to go into bar prep. Yeah, and I think in terms of prepping for this meeting, one of the things too you want to make sure that you've done is if your professor has given you any information – if they've given you a sample answer, if they've given you a grading rubric or anything like that – make sure you've tried to work through that. Because just going in and saying, "What did I do well on?" – if I'm a professor my next question to you is, "Well, did you look at what I sent you? Did you compare your work to it? Are we starting from scratch? Or are we on the same page?"

Lee Burgess: I think that's a good point. And having been in the position of having office hours, I also would totally reward students who had put in a little effort before coming to meet with me.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: So, any effort: "Yeah, I reviewed what you sent. I've been thinking about the exam. I really feel like this is where I went wrong, do you agree?" Anything that shows that you've put in a little effort and a little thought is going to be rewarded, because then you're like, "Oh, they're really trying to make the most out of their time with me, so I'm going to really go the extra mile." Which is very different than, "So, how'd I do?"

Alison Monahan: It's like, "Well, you've got your grade and you've got the sample answer, and you've got your answer. So, how do you think you did?"

Lee Burgess: Right, exactly.

Alison Monahan: It's not going to really engender a whole lot of empathetic support for your position.

Lee Burgess: No.

Alison Monahan: Versus, "Oh, I know I did okay grade-wise, and I've looked at the sample answer, and it seems like this part of my question was the big issue. Do you agree with that? What do you think happened in this piece? Was it that I didn't understand the law? Because I felt like I understood it, but maybe I structured it differently than you wanted it. Or do you think that I missed some issues?", blah, blah, blah. Then you can have a real conversation.



- Lee Burgess: Yeah. And professors can be very insightful – not all of them, but some of them are. I definitely know students who ended up being diagnosed with learning differences or ADHD or things like that, and some of that came out of the 1L professors reading their exam answers and making suggestions that they go get tested. I think that you want to be open to what the professors are saying, because they have read, especially if they're fairly experienced, a lot of student answers, and they're going to be able to say, "This seems like an outlier, it seems like something else was going on here." And I don't think you should feel bad about getting that feedback; I think you want to try and take in what they're telling you, because they do have expertise and they've seen a lot of student work over the years. It's not a bad thing if they're trying to share that perspective with you; they're just trying to help you be more successful in the future.
- Alison Monahan: Right. I do think that it's something worth listening to, particularly if someone says, "Well, your performance on the exam was not what I was expecting based on your performance in class. There seems to be some type of disconnect. Have you considered that maybe this could be going on or that could be going on?" Obviously, they're not doctors, they're not telling you this is the problem, but I do think it's worth at least considering strongly.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, and having read a number of exam answers over the years, you can start to see patterns when folks do struggle, often with attention deficit issues, because answers maybe are just linear, or they're bouncing around, or you start to hear time management issues. There are some commonalities. So, people who have seen a lot of exam answers can give you some feedback on that. Even if they give you that suggestion, that just means researching a little more, talking to disability services, making the best of the information that you have. And it's very important not to shut down about that, because if something like that does come out in law school – which is totally normal, a lot of people get these diagnoses in law school – you want to investigate that because it will level the playing field for you, and that's going to help you be more successful. It's not like cheating; it's actually leveling the playing field. We have a great [podcast episode](#) on that, and that to me has really shifted even my mindset about how I see students reaching out for help for accommodations.
- Alison Monahan: Right. And again, if you do have any suspicion this could be an issue for you, dealing with it early in law school is going to make it so much easier to get the accommodations that you need later on for the bar, because basically, if you haven't done it in law school or before then, they're really unlikely to give you those accommodations suddenly for the bar exam. So, if you think there are any sort of executive functioning type of things going on, I think it's worth digging into at this point, just to kind of smooth that pathway for all these things going forward.



- Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think the same goes for testing anxiety. If you really felt paralyzed by the exams in the exam scenario – looking into that now, going and talking to student health services, trying to get more information about how to manage that. It's interesting, I've really heard mixed reviews about whether these online exams are more stressful for some students. Some people say it's more stressful, some people find it much less stressful.
- Alison Monahan: Right. Yeah, I think there's something about being in your environment, at least you control the environment, you don't have to interact with other people, you're not sitting in a room with 100 people listening to the click-clack of all of their laptops, which could be very stress-inducing. So, I think for some people there are a lot of upsides. But even that being said, the reality is if your entire grade or most of your grade is on this one exam that's going to happen in a few hours, I don't think most people are going to be super relaxed going into that.
- Lee Burgess: No, no, especially when you're used to just a different exam model that you've had for most of your educational career. It's very different. Okay, so what if you have a professor that delays, that's hard to meet with...
- Alison Monahan: Or they were visiting and now they've gone back to their other school, that kind of thing.
- Lee Burgess: Right. You just can't get access, and you want to start making your plan for the next semester. Alison, what are some of the things that students can do, even while they're waiting for feedback?
- Alison Monahan: Well, I think, thinking realistically about how the first semester went. Now that you have a little bit of distance from it, really thinking about, "Okay, did I start outlining, making study aides early enough? Did I do enough practice? Did I get feedback? Was I prepping for class? Was I getting enough out of class? How were my class notes? Were they useful?" Now you can kind of look back and say, "Oh gosh, those notes I took over the whole course of the semester were totally pointless. I didn't use them at all, they weren't helpful." Well, that's a place where you can make an intervention, basically, and say, "Okay, what are some other techniques I might try?" And go out and look for those, or talk to your professor, or talk to academic support, talk to a tutor. Read our website, we have a lot of information about stuff like this. But really think, "Okay, now that I can see that these notes were not helpful, what would have been more helpful and how could I get to that point?" I think you can do that kind of intervention with anything that you needed to do in terms of your exam prep or a class prep or anything like that.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah. And if you didn't try a few different models of briefing, class notes – the beginning of the semester is by far the best time to try. You're usually not reading the most material at the beginning of the semester, and you still are



pretty far out from spending any time outlining or exam prep, things like that. That's the time you want to experiment. So, if there was something that you wanted to try but you didn't try the last semester – do it early, even if you're still waiting for your grades.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think supplements can be a good example of that. If you got to the end and you realized, "Wow, maybe I should have been using a supplement all along" – should you be using an [Examples & Explanations](#), something like that to get practice? There are lots and lots and lots of options out there, and I think this is a great opportunity to really evaluate what worked, what didn't work. To some extent, you could do that based on your grades. If you got wildly disparate grades, why did that happen? Try to do more of what you did well and less of what didn't go so well.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I also think that one of the things people have to keep in mind is, even if you did well, you still need to evaluate what could up your game, because everyone is going to try harder – almost everyone. But almost everyone is going to try harder second semester, so you can't get complacent. You need to make sure that you remain competitive. So, you need to still learn from the experience, even if you did well, to make sure that you are still doing well the next semester.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think one thing too on that topic – I think it can be really demoralizing for people and a lot of people can really take their grades very personally. And frankly, that goes whether they were good or not so good. Some people do randomly pretty well on certain tests, and then they're like, "Wow, I'm so great at this. I'm an amazing law student, I'm so good, nothing could ever knock me down." Well, that's not really true. And then other people get grades that they're disappointed with, which is a very common scenario, because most people are disappointed because they haven't been graded really on a curve before, and then they start to internalize, "Oh, there's just nothing I can do about this. I guess I'm just not a very good law student." And I don't think any of that is helpful. I think you need to look at these, to the extent you can, as pieces of information, but not reflections on your value as a human being, or even as a law student.

Lee Burgess: Right, 100%. And this is a good time to revisit the idea of the [growth mindset](#)...

Alison Monahan: Right.

Lee Burgess: ...and what you're going to do with this feedback, because I think everybody's a bit more tender and a bit more sensitive during COVID times. So, really being kind to yourself while sitting with this feedback, but not letting it derail you, is really important. I feel like we're all easily derailed, given the current state of the world.



Alison Monahan: Well, that makes sense. We just don't have the normal level of social support and general life support that we would have. Think of all the things that you might have done if you were disappointed with your grades: "Oh, I'll go to a cafe and order my favorite drink and sit there for a few hours and read a novel", "I'll go out and do something with some people", "I'll go to a movie." You can't do any of those things anymore.

Lee Burgess: No, I know. I went to so many movies my first year of law school. That was one of our favorite... A couple of my law school friends, we went to a lot of movies. That's kind of what we did. Okay, another thing that I wanted to bring up, which is something that our team has actually been talking about, is we have gotten some feedback from students who are in the virtual law school space, that they're kind of missing out on the idea of camaraderie and community of the law school experience. And so, we as a team have been brainstorming different ways that students can feel more engaged. But if this is you and you feel like, "I did this to meet people, to make friends, to be part of this community, and there's no community because we're on Zoom" – I think you might want to spend a little time thinking about how you could start to build relationships. And hopefully, fingers crossed, toes crossed, maybe fall of 2021 things will be better. One of the things that we've talked about amongst our team to give suggestions to students is trying to still join clubs or affinity groups, to try and connect with other students.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think it's a cliché to say, "Well, if you want to meet people, find people who are interested in the same things you're interested in." But I do think that is pretty much how most people meet people. Whatever it is, and some of this can be low commitment, unless you want it to be more commitment. So I think just join a bunch of clubs that you have some minor interest in and see what they're doing, and are people organizing talks or all sorts of different things; maybe there are Slack groups. It's not going to be exactly the same, but you may be able to get mentors and things like that and feel more connected that way. Yeah, I think, thinking about things that you are interested in in the law school experience are great places to start, because they're all trying to maintain that connection, even though it's different.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I think Slack groups or WhatsApp group messages are really great ways to do this. I think getting out of email just makes communication feel so much more natural. I can't even imagine over the years how many Slack messages you and I have sent to each other.

Alison Monahan: Oh yeah. It's insane.

Lee Burgess: It's like an ongoing conversation. It's insane. But even my college roommates, we have a group WhatsApp chat box that we use probably on a daily basis on



my phone. I do think that there are different ways to feel connected, especially if you are Zoomed out, which I think is happening to a lot of folks. But don't feel like there's only one way to connect with people. Be a little creative, and I think it can help you get where you need to be.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think I like Slack groups that are more like... For example, the co-working space we used to belong to before they shut, but they had a Slack group and it had different channels. And so, you could just pop in and pop out if you're like "Oh, I've got 10 minutes to kill. Let me see what people are talking about." They had one for entrepreneurs, and they had one for stuff in the neighborhood – that's actually how I got connected with an in-person volunteer organization that I worked with. I was just randomly popping in and being like, "Oh, that looks interesting. I missed this meeting where they came and presented, but here it is, right here. I'll go check it out." That kind of low commitment I think can actually make you feel a lot more connected.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. I've also created Slack groups for all sorts of different groups. I have a mom group and we run a Slack channel. But it is nice because you can pop in, you can pop out, you could have recommendations. If you and a few of your friends like to cook, you can have recipes, or whatever it might be – political stuff, it doesn't matter.

Alison Monahan: We were trading cinnamon bun recipes this morning on our local one.

Lee Burgess: Yes, I saw that, which was really helpful because cinnamon bun making is on my list of things to do this week.

Alison Monahan: Hey, there you go. You've got multiple people now you can reach out to for tips.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So, getting a little creative. I don't know how everybody's feeling about the COVID continuing pandemic and all of the fatigue, but for me personally, I am really seeing this as like, I see a light at the end of the tunnel, we're just not sure how close the light is. So, we're just trying to make the best of this situation, but it will end. And so, some of this stuff is just to make the best of the situation we're in, but the end is coming. We just don't exactly know how long it's going to be.

Alison Monahan: Right. So yeah, I think if you can think of it as something you need to do for a few more months, it might make it more bearable than something you need to do for your entire rest of your law school experience. I think it's easy to get into that mindset too, of like, "This is going to be what law school is like for the whole time I'm here." And it's like, actually, that's probably pretty unlikely. Things are probably going to be getting better in the relatively near future, so you just have to get through these few months. I think anything outdoors is pretty much on the table at this point. Obviously, it's easier if you live in Florida



or something and you can put on a mask, go take a walk with your friend, play some tennis or something. But even places that are cold. New York City was beautiful to walk around in the winter. If it snowed, everybody would go outside. So, as long as you have the appropriate clothing, going sledding can be a great thing to do.

- Lee Burgess: Yep. It's very hard, but it's important for all of us to focus on, I think, what we can do instead of what we can't do.
- Alison Monahan: Absolutely. I think that if we learned nothing else from the last nine plus months, it's that.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, and there are a lot of things we can do, even if it's not what we want to do.
- Alison Monahan: Right. It may not be our ideal scenario, but you can probably think of something that might improve your scenario just a little bit for this one day. And if you do that every day, then at the end of the week or the month, you're like, "Oh, that was a pretty good week. That was a pretty okay month. Oh, okay."
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, and this isn't forever. I think you're right, Alison, it's not the rest of your law school career. I read an article with Dr. Fauci last week that said Q3-Q4, 2021. So, we don't know exactly when things are going to get better, but we are marching towards that. And that's just the next semester after this one for a lot of law students.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, you basically just have to get through this semester.
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, so just hang in there. And just make sure that you're still studying and working towards your academic goals, so when the world is able to open up more and you're interviewing for jobs and you're doing networking and all that stuff, you have good academic credentials, which will make things a lot easier.
- Alison Monahan: And pretty soon, this will actually be in the rear view mirror and you'll be like, "Yeah, 1L was really weird. It was completely virtual, it was hard to meet my classmates, but then things got better and here I am now."
- Lee Burgess: Yeah, exactly. Alright, well, any final thoughts?
- Alison Monahan: I think just hang in there. And this is always a difficult transition for people, I think people are typically seeing grades they have never seen before, unless they were in the hard sciences. And that is difficult. Suddenly you are not necessarily the very top of the class, and that can be a sobering realization. But just understand a lot of people have experienced that before and survived to tell the tale, and try to approach it with the best possible attitude and thinking



of this as really a learning experience, which it is. And you'll come out on at the other end, hopefully a stronger person who is able to deal with situations where things maybe didn't go your way.

Lee Burgess: Yep, I think that's a really good point. The only thing I would add is just remember that if you are flummoxed by what to do next, there are resources. Your school likely has an academic support office that you might be able to talk to outside of just the professors that you had. Of course, this is exactly what our tutors do on our team. But there are resources, so don't feel like even in this virtual world that you have to deal with this stuff on your own. You can get help.

Alison Monahan: Right, and I think you should get help. And if things didn't go so well, you do want to do something differently, because otherwise things will probably continue to not go so well, and that is not the situation that you want to be in.

Lee Burgess: Yep. Alright, well, with that, I think we're out of time. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app. We'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to myself 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!

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