



Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we are talking about asking for help in law school and your job or internship. 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 or rating 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 to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're talking about asking for help in the right way. And we're going to talk about asking for help both in school and outside of school. So Lee, why is this so important? Why do people need to ask for help? No one likes to ask for help generally, right?

Lee Burgess: No. Especially type A people really hate asking for help. But it is very important, especially at this point in your legal career, because you are learning something new, so you're going to need help. In fact, it is assumed that you're not going to know everything the first few times you do it, and that's okay. But people, whether they be professors, or your supervisor at your new job, are not mind readers and they cannot always identify when you're struggling. So you're seldom going to be penalized for asking for help, but you can be penalized for not asking for help and then having poor outcomes. That will typically drive either your professor or your boss crazy.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely.

Lee Burgess: Crazy, crazy.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, if you think about your professor or if you come in at the end of the semester, or even next semester after you get your grade and you want to argue your grade and you're like, "Well, you should have known that I didn't know what I was doing, and I wasn't understanding anything." They're going to be kind of like, "Why is that my problem? You never told me about that. You never come to office hours. You never asked for help. I'm sorry that you had that experience, but that's on you." Versus if you're going and asking for help early, professors are going to be really likely to help you, because they aren't super busy. So, if you're confused about a topic when you cover it, don't wait until reading week to go and talk with your professor about that topic. Go ahead and talk to them in the beginning of the semester, and throughout the semester. You should be going to office hours every couple of weeks, probably; maybe sending an occasional email, because the professors are more likely to help people who are consistently doing the work and getting those questions



answered as they arise. So, even if it's the same question you might ask them at the beginning of the semester or at the end of the semester, they're going to have more time and energy to help you towards the beginning. Or particularly, if you've been engaged the whole semester, and they kind of understand your thought process and what you know or don't know, all of those kinds of things.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I think academic support at your school, even TAs are the same. If you roll in a week before the end of the semester and you're like, "I'm panicked about my exams" – they're going to be like, "Okay, I have one 30-minute meeting, because my meeting slots are all filled with students who I've been working with throughout the semester. And I'm not going to be able to do much for you in 30 minutes." And that might frustrate you, but that's just...

Alison Monahan: Right. Or you go to your TA.

Lee Burgess: Right. You go to the TA, it's the same thing. TAs, it can be even worse because they're students studying for their own finals. So they don't have a lot of time at the end of the semester to help you either.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. No, for sure. I was a TA and by the end of the semester, you're like, "Okay, cool. Here's some stuff for you, I've got to go study for my own exams. I can't hand hold you at this point." It was the people who I actually built relationships throughout the semester and asked those questions early. They were the ones who got the benefit of my attention, because I had more time then.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So, I think it's helpful sometimes to play out what this sounds like. Let's say you're in your Contracts class and you have covered promissory estoppel, and you're confused. So your first thought is to go to the professor. And then you might be thinking about how you should ask the professor for help. I would recommend not going to the professor and saying, "I don't understand promissory estoppel", full stop. Because the professor has already taught you promissory estoppel once in class, or at least thinks they have. Now, maybe they did a bad job – totally possible. But they think they've already taught it once. So then they're like, "Okay, you don't understand anything about promissory estoppel? Were you on the Internet shopping for shoes? Were you chatting, texting? Were you not taking notes? Did you not read the cases?" You're really putting the onus on the prof to reteach the stuff they've already taught once. That doesn't make you look very good, and it's probably going to piss the prof off.

Alison Monahan: Right. And it's also just where do they even start? Like, "I don't understand topic X." It's like, "Okay, you mean you don't know what those words mean? What are we talking about here?"



Lee Burgess: Right, exactly. It is actually easy to frame it in a way that it's much easier for the prof to want to help you. So, before you go to the prof, you are scratching your head after class and you're like, "I don't really understand promissory estoppel." So maybe you try and outline that section of the class. And then you try and highlight what part of promissory estoppel you don't understand. Maybe you have an Examples & Explanations, and you do a small hypo on promissory estoppel, but you don't understand the outcome of the hypo. Well, that's also going to point you to the part of that law you don't understand. So you can then take your outline and the hypo to office hours and say, "Hey, professor, I've tried to outline promissory estoppel. Here's what I have. And I've also done this hypo on it, and I don't understand this part of the outcome. I'm confused. Can we talk through it?" And most professors will gleefully say, "Of course." Because you've already done the heavy lifting. They know that you've wrestled with the material, that's what they like to do. They like to help you solve the problems. I've had so many conversations with professors over the years where they're just like, "I don't know why students won't come talk to me. I don't know why they won't ask me these questions and wrestle with the material. I'm very bored in my office hours. But then they're all complaining they don't understand what's going on."

Alison Monahan: Exactly. So you have to do some of the work if you're going to get the benefit of your professor helping you.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So I think this same idea applies to jobs, except the stakes can often feel a little higher in a job. So whether it is an internship or an externship or your first job, it is important to think about when to ask for help. I think when you're thinking about a job situation, the first opportunity to ask thoughtful questions is usually when you're getting an assignment. So, what will feel very familiar to those of you that may have worked in a law office so far, is you're going to be called in to talk to somebody. Or maybe in COVID times, you're talking to somebody on the phone. And they're going to give you an assignment, and you're hopefully going to have a legal pad where you're writing down your assignment and taking notes. And at that moment, you're going to want to ask as many clarifying questions as you can, to make sure you fully understand the parameters of the assignment.

Alison Monahan: I think that's a great idea. Let's talk a little bit about what those clarifying questions might look like, because you don't want to just be asking a whole bunch of random questions. But there are certain things that for almost any assignment you get in a law situation, you're going to need to know. So things like, "Let me just clarify, which jurisdiction are we in? Are we looking for state cases or are we looking for federal cases?" And maybe you don't have to ask that directly, but you at least need to know where is this case? Because there's nothing more frustrating, I will say, as a person who has given assignments to more junior people, where I give them an assignment and I tell them, "We're in



federal court in New York" or whatever – in the Southern District of New York. And then they come back with a bunch of state cases from New York and I'm like, "You just wasted your time, my time, and the client's time. Thank you for nothing. Go away."

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Also, I think sometimes when you're talking about subject matter, it's not just even the jurisdiction, but it could be about a case related to something you've never heard of. When I was a first year associate, I worked on some litigation around welding rods. And I can honestly say I had no idea what a welding rod was, at all. During my first meeting, I still remember sitting in there and the guy...

Alison Monahan: I would have no idea.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, no idea. And I remember taking all these notes and then he thoughtfully said, "Do you know what a welding rod is?" And then I made some sort of smart alec-y comment about it, which he did not think was funny, and then explained what a welding rod was. I was like, "Note to self: My humor, not appreciated." Like, "Whoops!" Anywho.

Alison Monahan: It's like, "Actually, I'm just guessing you don't know what I'm talking about. So stop joking."

Lee Burgess: "Stop joking." His time was very valuable. He didn't really want to listen to my humor. But if he hadn't have taken that time to explain to me what the case was about, it would have made my assignment a lot more difficult. So, if you're litigating issues, and even fact patterns that you just don't really know what's going on, you need to make sure you understand what the facts mean, what the terminology is, or you go look it up. Because, really, welding rods could have sounded like a lot of things. And I will just tell everyone, in case you do welding rod litigation at some point, the welding rod is the thing that people melt when they weld things together. It's like when you see the bumpy stuff in the middle.

Alison Monahan: I would not have guessed that, necessarily.

Lee Burgess: Yes. And so, if you do not use adequate ventilation, there is some toxic stuff that comes out of that. And so, it's very important to be safe when you are welding. But that is what a welding rod was. I didn't know about that. I didn't know. So it was important to really understand the facts of what we were talking about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I had a case once on voltage regulators on chips. Not something I knew much about at the time, but I learned a lot about it. So you're going to get thrown into these situations where there's no reason that you would know what a welding rod is, or I would know anything about voltage regulators. And someone who is good at giving assignments will hopefully give you enough



context that you have some idea of what's going on. But if not, it's absolutely fair to say, "Hey, could you just give me the two-minute big picture on what this case is about?" And they may just assume, because they're so steeped in this case that they maybe have been working on for years, that of course it's obvious what all this is about. But I think just having that context of, "Alright, so basically, here's who we're representing, here's what they've been accused of doing, and here's why we think they're not guilty" or whatever. Or not liable, hopefully, unless you're in criminal court. But basically just even that brief overview so you have context. And like, "Okay, let me just clarify. We're in the Southern District. Okay, great, we need federal cases. Alright, cool." Sometimes you can ask about who these people are briefly and how they fit into it. One of the things people might be asked to do as young lawyers is stuff like reading depositions or summarizing depositions, all those types of things. It's like, "Who are these people? How do they fit in?" Just a little bit of background can help a lot.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And then it's really important that you understand the objective of the assignment. Is this something quick and dirty, or is this something that could eventually get filed somewhere? Is this part of a brief? Is this background research? When the welding rod litigation went to trial, I was part of the in-office trial team. So I was basically told to sit at my desk and wait for emails. This is basically what my job was. And then there were a few of us.

Alison Monahan: Basically, "We need you to research this immediately."

Lee Burgess: Immediately. It would be like, "We are in a recess for an hour for lunch, and I need an answer by the end of lunch." And then all of us would research and then write a paragraph, and email back to the trial team. Part of my understanding was it didn't need to be perfect... My research didn't need to be perfect, but it just needed to be clear, concise, answer the question, drop it in an email, send it off. No Bluebook checking, nothing like that. Cite to the case, send it off. And that's very different than you are researching an objective memo, so they can write a client letter later. It's very important to understand what the output is, because it's also going to involve how much time you're likely allowed to spend on an assignment. And how much time you spend on something, especially if it's billable, is very important.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think the timing aspect is so critical. In the example you gave, if you gave the most perfect answer in the world, but you gave it four hours later, it wasn't really useful by the end of that lunch break. So, understanding what you're trying to do is super critical. I think another key piece is really understanding how you can get help if you need help later. So who can help you, and are there resources you can use? For example, if you're a very young lawyer, you may not know about Hornbooks. And I remember when I was working as a 1L, someone gave me one of those quick and dirty assignments. They needed an answer in



like an hour. And I guess I had the deer in the headlights look, looking at him when he was telling me this, and he sort of said at one point, "You do know about Corbin on contracts?" And I kind of looked at him blankly. And he was just like, "Oh, they don't teach you anything in law school. Let me take you and show you this book." And literally, he took me to the library and showed me this book. And he was like, "All the answers are in this book. Just pull it from the library shelf and the answer I'm asking you will be in there. Find it and send it back to me in the next hour." And I was like, "What, they just tell you the answers?" He was like, "Yeah. Yeah, this is how lawyers actually do work." And I think we'd never learned about that. They don't want you to know that the answers are just right there. But the reality is for literally, basically every legal topic, there is a Hornbook. Like Prosser on torts, I forgot the guy who's on patents. There's the patent guy. And lawyers use these things.

Lee Burgess: There's a criminal law one.

Alison Monahan: And there will be a resource like that.

Lee Burgess: Oftentimes too, in your firm, depending on how big the firm is or how big the team is, there may be individuals who are kind of designated to help you. So, you might be able to have a mentor that you follow up with, or even some firms have law librarians. Sometimes even your administrative assistant or the paralegals might be able to point you in a direction, because they've done a lot of work over the years on different assignments and teams. But doing a little legwork on your own to try and solve some of your own problems or get your own questions answered, is a good thing. The other thing that you want to think about is, have I been given the answer to this question already? So, you're new, you probably went to some trainings, you were giving training materials. It is possible that the answer is already at your fingertips, you just have to go look for it. So before you go start asking folks to step away from their billable work to answer your questions, make sure you review any information that's been given to you. Do they have templates? Do they have directions of where to find things on a shared drive? Whatever it might be, there may already be some clues of where you can go find things. It doesn't look great to complain about not knowing something when you attended a training on it. That's not a great look.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. No, that's definitely true. And I think people get very upset when they have carefully prepared things for you and try to give you training materials, and then it's clear that you haven't read them or haven't paid attention to them or haven't internalized them, because people actually worked on this. So I think it's one thing to say, "Hey, I remember in that training, we talked about this thing and I can't remember exactly how I access it. Could you help me access that?" That's a fine question. If you go in and say, "We never learned anything about recording our time" – it's probably not true. You probably did. And you probably should have some sort of documentation on that, and you probably should try



to find it. And again, a lot of this is in the way you phrase it. So, "I know that I need to be recording my time and I know we did a training on this. For some reason, I've just totally spaced on it. Can you send me a resource to help me get in the right direction?" That's a different question than, "I don't know what to do with my time." Or even better – my friend who was a recruiter once had a summer associate come in and basically drop their expense report on her desk and be like, "Oh, these are my expenses." And she was like, "Great, what do you want me to do about it? We gave you stuff. This is not my problem. Why would I deal with your expenses? This is not something I deal with." So, kind of understanding who's in charge of things and what people can help you with, I think is really a critical skill set, so that you don't make everyone really annoyed with you.

Lee Burgess: I think the timekeeping is also a great... Time is due at the end of the month and if you aren't sure how to track your time, don't talk to somebody on the 31st of the month.

Alison Monahan: Well, you should be doing that all along too. People get very persnickety about that too.

Lee Burgess: Well, I know, but if you aren't sure you're doing it right, you've got to talk to somebody.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I was just going to say, I think that's one of those things that law firms particularly, but really any legal employer gets pretty persnickety about, because time is money. And the sooner people internalize that, the better. And timekeeping is one of those things that people will get upset about. I think sometimes people think things like timekeeping don't really matter, but that is one of those things you want to ask your questions on early and make sure you know what you're doing. Maybe a secretary or someone who's been assigned to you can help you with that, because that's one of those things a partner you're working for will actually get upset about. And that's not a position you want to be in for getting yelled at for something silly that you easily could have corrected.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. One of my own personal pet peeves that I'll just share is waiting until the end of a project or a process to ask for help. I don't like fire drills that aren't true fire drills.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: And the thing is, when I worked for other people, fire drills used to drive me crazy when they were avoidable, because I think there are plenty of fire drills that are unavoidable. So when people work for me, or if I'm on a team with folks, I want to know about a problem as soon as it arises, so it doesn't become



a fire drill. And I think that this is something that a lot of Type A perfectionists struggle with, because it seems like a failure to go to a supervisor or go to a team member and say, "I'm struggling. I've tried and I'm struggling." But I actually am going to get much more frustrated if you are struggling and things are going poorly, and then it ends up making more work in the end for somebody else.

Alison Monahan: Right, because that's when a real disaster happens. And also, I think it can make you... I don't want to say clairvoyant looking, but at least make you look like you're paying attention to say, "Hey, I'm starting to notice that there could be a problem arising, and I wanted to get your take on what to do with it." Versus, "Oh, I'm seeing a problem and I'm not doing anything about it, because I hope the problem will go away and resolve itself. And now it's two weeks later and it has ballooned into a giant problem because no one dealt with it and no one knew to deal with it, because I didn't say anything." That's just not a great look, because now you have the conflagration of the fire drill, and not just the tiny little one that you could have just sprayed out.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And even sometimes you could be angsty and stressed about the fact that things are difficult, but it's not as big of a deal; your anxiety around it is making it so much worse. I remember my first summer I worked for the U.S. Attorney's Office in the criminal division. And this attorney gave me an assignment, and I couldn't find any answer. It was like I was digging, I was reading, there was no answer. And after a day or two, before the assignment was due, I went to the attorney and popped my head in and said, "Do you have a minute to talk to me about this assignment?" And she was like, "Sure." And I said, "Okay, so I'll be honest, I don't think there's a direct answer to your question. I found all of this stuff." And I just kind of gave a CliffsNotes version. And she's like, "Yeah, I didn't think there was an answer." She's like, "That's why I just wanted you to see if there was one." And I was like, "Oh, okay." But I was really upset, because I thought I was failing because I couldn't find the answer, where I didn't really understand that I was just kind of doing this digging assignment for fun, and trying to see if there was an answer when she didn't think there was one. And so by talking to her, I kind of re-evaluated what I was doing, and then was able to abandon work that wasn't going anywhere. But she didn't get upset at me, because my non-answer was actually an okay answer.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I had an exactly similar situation when I was working after my 1L summer, where they gave me a similar thing which was a complete wild goose chase, and I chased it down for days. I was like banging my head against the wall. And finally I went back to the person who gave it to me, and I was like, "I really just cannot find anything on this." And he was like, "Yeah, that's pretty much what I expected. The partner keeps telling me there should be something, but I didn't really think was and I didn't want to spend time on it. So yeah, thanks."



Lee Burgess: I know.

Alison Monahan: And I realized that that's the kind of assignment that sometimes they give to summer associates.

Lee Burgess: Yep, so true. I think the last piece of this part of asking for help, whether it be to a mentor, to even a law librarian, or to your supervisor, is to think about the way that you're framing your struggles. I think that, as we said before, you want to make sure that you've done some legwork, so you've attempted to answer your own question. And I think when you go to a supervisor and say, "I'm having some struggles", I think it's important to say, "Here's what I've done. I've done X, Y, Z, and I'm still struggling with A, B, C. And I hope that you could help me with E, F, G." Just like what we were talking about with professors, that's going to show that you've done some legwork and heavy lifting. You've tried to solve the problem yourself, and then you're asking for their assistance in a very specific way. That makes you look great, to be honest. Everyone's like, "I'm so glad you..." Your response is going to likely be like, "I'm glad you came to me. Let's work on solving this issue so we can keep you moving forward." But the flip side is, sometimes folks will come to a supervisor and say, "I'm struggling with A, B, C, because you didn't give me what I needed." And that's not going to go over well.

Alison Monahan: No, it's not.

Lee Burgess: It's not. Especially if they have given you what you needed, but you just didn't realize it. Because maybe you just jumped to the conclusion that you didn't have what you needed, and that's just not going to come out well. Even, to be honest, if they didn't give you what you needed, you still don't want to frame it that way, because it's just going to make people angry and defensive.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, which is generally not what you want to do. And I think, like we said, you probably do have a lot of resources. You see this a lot with citations and things like that, where it's just like, you have people you can call for this. Do you not remember that you have your Westlaw rep or what? I'm like, "I'm sure that they've given it to you on 18 different cards." Just call those people and let them solve your problem. That's what they do.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So, it's really a lot about doing some heavy lifting on your own, but also think about how you're framing your problems for your supervisor. I have really never gotten frustrated with anyone who's worked for me by them just being green and needing support, and coming to me for support. That is not like... I like to do that. I like mentoring and training people. That's one of the reasons I own a company where I manage other people like that. But I don't like unnecessary fire drills, and I don't like people to recognize what they've already had kind of from me. And this happened when I was working too. I didn't like it



when summer associates acted like my assignment was bad or that I was the reason they couldn't finish it on time or whatever. That's not my problem. And so, you really just want to think about how you frame these conversations with your supervisors, so it can be productive. And just make sure that you're not throwing up your hands and saying, "Well, I just don't have what I need to be successful, and that's on you." Because even if that's true, it's not going to look great on your annual review.

Alison Monahan: Right. Nobody likes a whiner, basically.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. So if you come and say... Let's say you don't have what you need – totally possible – but you enter the meeting with, "I have done all of these things and I can't find what I need." Then also the supervisor doesn't have to say, "Well, did you do this, this, and this, and this?" It shows them that you've hustled. And I think once somebody knows that you've put in the work, everybody's going to be a lot more available to give you help. And that's what we were talking about going back to the professors. It's important to basically show the professor that you've done some heavy lifting, that you've done the work, and they're going to want to help you. And the job is just not that different. So, it's important to frame these conversations before you go have them, even if they're over email. You can just go in with your plan of what you're going to say and how you're going to ask for help, and it's really likely it's going to go a lot better.

Alison Monahan: True. I would even ask people to send me their search queries if they told me they couldn't find things. I'm like, if they couldn't do that, then I'm like, "What have you been doing?"

Lee Burgess: Yeah. It's true.

Alison Monahan: I need to see what you actually did to help you.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Most supervisors do not expect you to be perfect in the beginning. Hopefully all supervisors. But in the beginning of your career, you're going to need help. Just make sure that you're asking for help in a constructive way and that you're not creating fire drills. For other busy lawyers, you just want to make sure that you can go to them and say, "Hey, I need some help. When do you have the opportunity to help me?" And then most good supervisors or mentors are going to sit down and set aside some time to help you. But just remember to be respectful of everybody's time and to try and solve your own problems when possible. And then when you go with the real problems that you need help with, then everybody's going to be really ready to help you.

Alison Monahan: Definitely. Well, with that, we are unfortunately 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 would really appreciate it.



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