



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're excited to have one of our tutors, Nicola Rossi, here with us to talk about what to do if you're not happy with your first semester grades. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically, I'm with 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. Together, we're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the career-related website [CareerDicta](#). I also run [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 always reach us via our [contact form](#) on LawSchoolToolBox.com, and we would love to hear from you. And with that, let's started.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're excited to have one of our tutors, Nicola Rossi, here with us to talk about what to do if you're not happy with your first semester grades. Welcome, Nicola.

Nicola Rossi: Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Alison Monahan: Oh, my pleasure, I'm so excited. Before we jump in, could you just give our listeners a bit of background on your career path, so they have a little bit of context here?

Nicola Rossi: Sure. So, I actually came to law school from a pretty non-traditional path. I was actually a theater major in undergrad and ended up in law school after I developed a vocal disorder during college. And so, I took some time off and had to regroup, and I think the thing that drew me to law was a similar thing that draws me to teaching, in that I really like working with people and I like their stories. I think that they're interesting, and the law is filled with interesting people and interesting stories to decipher. And so, after law school, I spent most of my career as a litigator, and also doing teaching along with that. And now I spend a lot of time tutoring both 1Ls students and bar exam students, and I really enjoy that work.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, let's kind of flashback. Do you have any specific memories of getting your first semester law school grades back?

Nicola Rossi: I don't know that I remember the exact moment I got my grades back, but I definitely remember being surprised.

Alison Monahan: In a good way or a bad way?

Nicola Rossi: A good way.

Alison Monahan: Nice.



- Nicola Rossi: For the most part. But I think for me was almost kind of beginner's luck, because I was just... I came into law school just thinking it was interesting, hoping to do okay, and sort of just doing my best. So I think the first semester – I've told some of my 1Ls this year – I think I figured out how to do law school actually my second year of law school. And my whole first year, I was kind of just winging it and trying to learn as much as I could. I was decently surprised by my first semester grades, but I feel like I still probably didn't really know what I was doing then.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I actually had a similar sort of experience, where I did quite well my first semester and I was also kind of shocked by it.
- Nicola Rossi: Right.
- Alison Monahan: Second semester was kind of a different story – I had kind of mental breakdown about the pressure and whatnot, and ended up clinically depressed and didn't do so well. But I think we probably are in sort of the minority here, of being pleasantly surprised. I think for most people, they're unpleasantly surprised. Lee definitely has a story about getting her Legal Writing grade back and being like, "Oh my, should I even be in law school? What am I doing here? This is not what I expected to see." So, I think a lot of this is about the curve, right? Everybody kind of hears about the curve going into law school, but it's not until you're really there and you're sitting with these grades and realizing depending on your school, something like a B minus might be the average grade. And people who go to law school haven't necessarily seen those types of grades, unless they took hard science classes as undergrads, because we just didn't have a curve, right?
- Nicola Rossi: Right, yeah.
- Alison Monahan: I'm guessing Theater probably was on a curved degree.
- Nicola Rossi: It was not, although I will say – and maybe this helped me in law school – my particular Theater program had the philosophy that they didn't give any As because there was no perfect actor. So I guess going into law school having come from that, I probably was a little bit better prepared. But I think you're absolutely right, Alison – I think so many people end up in law school... Normally, you're in law school because you did well in undergrad. These are all students who are used to getting all As in school, and then just as a practical point, everyone cannot get an A, and actually most people won't get As on their law school exams. And so, that can be sort of a shocking difference from a Political Science degree in undergrad or something like that.



Alison Monahan: Yeah. I was a Sociology undergrad, but I also was pre-med, so I kind of had both of those experiences of like, "Oh, I'm in Organic Chemistry, and this is a really competitive class and it's graded on a curve. And I didn't study, so I'm at the bottom of the curve."

Nicola Rossi: Right.

Alison Monahan: Versus my Sociology classes, where I could kind of roll in and be like, "Oh, easy A, no problem." So, I think people just have to be realistic. I know a lot of law students don't like math, but if you look at the actual math distribution of a curve, you may have 5% of people getting an actual A, and then some more get an A minus, and then... But there just aren't a lot of those grades to go around, and so I think you have to be realistic here.

Nicola Rossi: I agree. And I think I do remember the moment I realized exactly how many As there would be in every class. And I got the number of students in my section and was thinking about, if they have to curve it to a B minus and if somebody gets an A, somebody has to get a C. Just working out the math in my head and thinking, "Oh, okay, so two people are going to get As in this class."

Alison Monahan: Right. Exactly.

Nicola Rossi: And then you end up with a more realistic perspective, I think, on your expectations.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And everybody has their own goals, but I think being realistic about how well you did and didn't do is important, a) because it might make you feel better that if you're getting B pluses, that's actually probably pretty okay. But also, I think people do have to be realistic if they're getting really poor grades about what's going on here.

Nicola Rossi: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, say a student comes to you and they are not happy with their 1L first semester performance. What type of questions would you ask them to help them figure out how to improve things going forward? What do you think they need to be looking at?

Nicola Rossi: I think that's a great question. One of the things that I would ask them is what they did to prepare throughout the semester. And I think that some of the 1Ls I worked with, even just this first semester, they came and started studying for exams probably like a month before exams. They started doing practice problems then and applying the rules. And throughout the semester, they had thought that they were keeping up really well with their classes, they were doing all the reading and were like, "Oh, I'm doing great, I completely



understand everything." And then they start doing practice problems a couple of weeks before the exam and they're like, "Oh wait, I actually don't understand this at all. I need to go back and review this in more detail and learn the intricacies in this rule." And so, one of the things that I think to remember for second semester, if you aren't happy with your first semester grades, to think about what you did throughout the semester and think about that practical application of what you're learning sooner rather than later, because sometimes that's a really good way to tell if you're actually understanding things as well as you need to be, to do well on the exam.

Alison Monahan: I 100% agree. I think that's probably the single biggest thing that people do not do early enough, is actually try to apply this material and really drill down into, "Did I get all of the issues? Do I know these rules backwards and forwards?", all those kinds of things, absolutely. One thing we often suggest is that students try to talk with their professors about their exams. Do you have any advice on how to do this productively, because I know this is an area where people get really worked up sometimes about it?

Nicola Rossi: I think that is such a great suggestion, and I think the way to approach it is with a positive attitude and an open mind. I understand if this is an exam where you didn't do as well as you had hoped, that's sometimes easier said than done, students can get really nervous. I know I was always nervous in law school going to talk to my professors. Or if it's a class where you wish you had done better, sometimes you can be upset where you're a little bit bitter: "Why didn't I get a better grade on this exam?" But I think sort of stepping back and taking a deep breath and approaching it from a positive, "I'm open to learn" perspective. So, asking questions like, "What could I have done better? Do you have any recommendations for me on preparing for exams next semester, or preparing for class next semester that you think would help me improve my grade?" I think professors generally are going to be more receptive to those sorts of open-minded learning questions than questions that are just like, "Why didn't I do better on this exam?"

Alison Monahan: Right. Yeah, they're definitely not going to be interested in that. They're not interested in renegotiating your grade, or you think that maybe you said this and they thought you said that. That's not going to fly, I completely agree. I think you have to go in with the approach of, "I'm just trying to do better for the future. I'd love to get any feedback you have." I think if your professor has given you a sample answer, it needs to be very clear that you have looked at that sample answer and you really compared it with your work, and that you've done the work basically to say, "Hey, I looked at the sample answer and I'm curious about this or that" or, "The way that they did this, why would that be better?", any of these things. Your professors may be more or less willing to talk with you, but overall, I think you'll find at least one or two of your professors do want to try to help you do better and are willing to have that chat.



Nicola Rossi: Absolutely. I think the other thing to remember about professors is that they're required to grade on a curve. So, they can't make the exams easy, because if everyone spotted all of the issues they wanted you to spot on the exam, then it's absolutely impossible for them to grade it on the curve.

Alison Monahan: Right, it wouldn't even be fair. If everybody did really well, then the grades are arbitrary.

Nicola Rossi: Right. So, that's another thing to remember in going and talking to your professor – they probably made the exam difficult on purpose, and it's not because they want you to do poorly, it's because they have to grade it on a curve, they have to have a fair way to distinguish among answers. So, asking them what they were looking for in an excellent answer, and like you said, Alison, always reviewing any sample answers they gave or model answers before you go in, and then just getting their feedback on what they were looking for is a good way to approach it.

Alison Monahan: Definitely. And I think sometimes I had friends who were really active in class and the professor seemed to like them a lot, and then they bombed the exam, and it was this moment of, "Oh, should I ever talk to this person again?" But sometimes they did, and the professor was actually like, "I was really surprised by your exams answer. Don't take it personally. I still think that you are a smart person who did well in class, and if you ever want a recommendation, I'd be happy to do that", that type of thing. So, I think it is sometimes sort of emotional about all this stuff, but ideally you can kind of handle all of that on your own and be in a good place by the time that you actually try to talk productively with your professors.

Nicola Rossi: I think that's a really smart thing to point out – sometimes the best recommendations can come from a professor where you maybe didn't do as well as you had hoped first semester, but then if you have that professor again, you go back, you talk to them, you take their feedback and implement it on your next exam, and then show improvement throughout the next semester – sometimes those are some of the best letters of recommendation that you can get from a professor.

Alison Monahan: Right, because otherwise if, say you got the A plus in the class and the professor has never heard from you the whole semester, what do they put on that letter? "Well, as you can see from their transcript, they got the best grade in the class."

Nicola Rossi: Exactly, exactly.

Alison Monahan: Like, "Great, okay, I don't know this person at all. I had no idea what their name was, they just aced my exam for whatever reason." Professors are people, and



some of them have better people skills than others. But I think most of them, a lot of them at least, went into the teaching profession because they enjoy students and they do want to help you, so use that resource.

Nicola Rossi: Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Alright, let's shift gears a little bit. So, beyond academics, a lot of first semester 1Ls have issues outside of school – whether they got sick, they were distracted by life stuff. This type of stuff is really important to handle so that it doesn't derail your grades. Do you have any advice on how to get this life stuff in better order going forward?

Nicola Rossi: Oh gosh, that's a good question. I think the one thing that students can benefit from second semester of law school is having the experience of the first semester and really understanding practically how much of your time is going to be taken up by studying. Now you get a three-week break or several weeks break, depending on where you're in school, and you could take that time to plan out a schedule that's going to work for you well, both throughout the semester and then also during finals time. And I think it is really important to... Alison, you mentioned your second semester of law school having a nervous breakdown or something – I had similar experiences in law school, where I just found myself getting into this anxious sort of whirlwind throughout the semester during finals time. And so, I think planning your next semester and having outlets to channel some of those nerves and some of the stress, can be really helpful. I know exercise helped me a lot. I actually taught indoor cycle at the student rec center during my first year of law school.

Alison Monahan: Nice.

Nicola Rossi: And that was one of the best things I think I could have done, because two of my friends and I went there on... It was just like 45 minutes, Tuesday and Thursday morning, so it doesn't take a lot of time out of studying. But it was something where we were completely away from the law school for an hour of our day. And things like that can be a really important outlet to have. And so, if you don't have any of those things or you were missing those first semester, maybe that's something to think about during the break and to plan out for second semester and how you can better balance those things.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's a great point you made, that now you do have that experience, so you're not going into it the way you were first semester, of just blind hopefulness of like, "Oh, it'll all work out and I'm sure it'll be fine" or whatever. Now you can kind of look back and say, "Okay, looking at my first semester objectively, what did I do well? What did I not do so well? What are the things I want to change?" I also started taking exercise classes through the



university gym because they were cheap, and again, it made me actually go twice a week. My roommate and I signed up for belly dancing at one point.

Nicola Rossi: Oh, that's so fun.

Alison Monahan: Which was really fun. I was terrible at it, but it was really, really fun. And it was nice just to have something physical and a mental distraction, and we got really into it, actually. She end up getting videos of these twins from Egypt that we would do in the apartment.

Nicola Rossi: Oh, that's awesome. And having a buddy to do that with, it makes it all even better.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, totally. So yeah, I took all kinds of... I think second and third years I took up squash, and that was all law students and business students, so it might not have been the best break, but it was a really good physical activity and it was fun. Anything that's fun that will get you out of the library for an hour, I think it's just really important. Things like even eating well. How was your food consumption? Were you able to feed yourself something beyond pizza every day? All this stuff sounds kind of boring and grown up and adult, but these are things that I think are worth considering.

Nicola Rossi: I think that's absolutely right. And you make an excellent point – planning out, do you need to look into a meal prep service, or should you be doing meal prepping on Sunday nights or a grocery store run? Because it's important to fuel your body and your mind with things that are good for you and not just living on coffee and pastries from the coffee shop.

Alison Monahan: Right. I've definitely been there.

Nicola Rossi: Yeah. Exactly.

Alison Monahan: That doesn't end well usually. You can do that for about three days, and then you're going to crash.

Nicola Rossi: Right, right.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, my roommates and I got a CSA at one point, so we at least had fresh vegetables coming into the house regularly. And then we had to kind of sit down and say, "Okay, are we going to divide these up? Is somebody going to cook them? Who has time? Can somebody do something with these?" I ate a lot of parsnips that year, but it was good, I learned about rutabaga. New York City in the winter did not have a lot of selection in your CSA box, but hey, it was better than eating pizza.



- Nicola Rossi: Yes, absolutely. I did a lot of microwavable vegetables, like the ones that just kind of steam themselves in the microwave. Those were maybe not the most economical choice, but sometimes they were what I had time for, and then they were super easy. So, I think finding those things is important.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, now I'm a devotee of the Insta Pot for everything, like rice, beans. I got a cookbook, you can do a lot of stuff in the Insta Pot. So, something like that is easy. It sounds silly, but spending some time actually thinking through this, I think will probably improve your results in the end.
- Nicola Rossi: Absolutely.
- Alison Monahan: Well, another thing a lot of law students have trouble with is holding themselves accountable and staying on task to get things done efficiently. You've mentioned kind of a schedule, but do you have any specific tools or strategies that you like to suggest for trying to get better organized in that sense?
- Nicola Rossi: That's a really good question. I think that one of the things that helped me in law school was planning out the time that I was going to be working at the law library and treating it... I mentioned I had some years off between undergrad and law school, where I was working. And so, I approached law school more like a job, where I was there from eight to six, or I was there from sometimes eight to eight. But I approached it the way I would approach going into an office, where I'm there for the day, I do my work, and then when I'm finished, I went home. And some people work well in their apartments; I was not somebody who worked well in my apartment, I had to work at the law school. But just figuring out where you work most efficiently and will be the least distracted, I think is one good strategy. Another thing is to sort of plan when you're going to take breaks. It sounds almost like you're training a small child or a pet or something, but "Okay, when I finish my Con Law reading, I will get up and go get a tea." Just ways to keep yourself on track and keep yourself accomplishing tasks, and then taking set breaks in between your reading and your work so that you can feel like you're checking off boxes.
- Alison Monahan: No, I think that's great. One of the more popular posts I did on The Girl's Guide to Law School website a very long time ago was actually about a variation of this method called [The Circles Method](#).
- Nicola Rossi: Yes.
- Alison Monahan: Where basically you kind of lay out based on an hour – each circle is an hour. You lay this out, say, the night before or whatever it is for the week. And then the beauty of it is if you do, say, 45 minutes or 50 minutes straight on task, you





get to take the rest of the hour off and you get to color in that circle. It sounds kind of crazy, but for me, that was extremely motivating.

Nicola Rossi: No, I love that. I think so many people in law school are Type A personalities, and just the idea of coloring in a circle, or like I mentioned, checking off – that you get to check it off, "I did this!" Sometimes that can be incredibly motivating, I think that's great.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. When I was studying for exams, if I was starting to panic, I would go back and sometimes look at the past week of my circles and be like, "You know what? I studied for, it says right here, Torts. I colored that in, I'm good." I'm not even kidding.

Nicola Rossi: No, that's awesome. I think that's great.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think whatever works for you is what you should do, but you do need some type of strategies. And there are a lot of tools now people can use. Lee and I've talked about this a lot, but you need some sort of calendar, it should probably be digital. There are other tools like Trello and Asana, and there are lots and lots of things that you can use. I think you just need to pick one and do it, but you need something. And it can even be a paper planner, I used that for many years. You need something to keep track of everything, and also to track how you're doing. So, if you're setting up a great schedule, but then you're not getting stuff done and you're not hitting your deadlines, you're not getting things done on time, you kind of need to sit with why that is and figure this out.

Nicola Rossi: I think that's really smart. One other thing that popped into my mind as far as keeping yourself on track – I know some students who came back after working at a firm after their 1L summer, or 2L summer; they came back and they would actually track their time with timers, like you do in billing software, which that is something that for me, just throughout working, and I even used it when I was a law clerk and I didn't have to track my time, but I did it just because there's something about kind of like the circle when you start your hour or when you press that button to start the timer, it's like, "Oh, now I'm in. I'm in the work. I have to focus, and if I get up, I have to stop the timer." And so, just anything like that to sort of dictate the time that you're sitting there.

Alison Monahan: To keep you in your seat.

Nicola Rossi: Right. "I'm focusing for this time, and then I get a break." People have to find which method for them, but I think taking some time to figure that out is really important.

Alison Monahan: And I think tracking your time is really useful in the sense of also you can start to learn how long things really take you. So, if you have 30 pages of reading and it's



Con Law, how long is that going to take you? You probably need to sort of have that sense, or otherwise you're never going to be able to schedule any of this. And if things are taking you way, way, way, way, way longer than you think they should, then I think at that point, you've got to start to figure out who you can talk to about that to make sure that there's not something else going on here.

Nicola Rossi: Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Well, we're running a bit short on time, but before we wrap up, let's just talk about some resources that people might consider for getting help. So, we always suggest you go first to your school and see what you already have that are paying for. Do you have any thoughts around that?

Nicola Rossi: Absolutely. I think a lot of law schools have academic support. Also, your TAs can be an excellent resource, depending on... I know I had some great TAs when I was in law school. My law school, I actually started tutoring in law school. We had 3L students for certain 1L students through the Academic Support Program, and it was all voluntary, but students who wanted help with their second semester 1L year, could go and be assigned a student tutor. And not all schools have that or not all schools, the students will be eligible, but that's definitely something to check on first.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, definitely. I think, look at your academic support resources. If you did really poorly, they might come to you, but you can also go to them. Like we said earlier, talk to your professors. I think TAs are a great resource. If you had some other stuff going on, you might want to look at your school's Mental Health Services – that was definitely a place I showed up second semester and I was like, "I think I have a problem. Can you help me?" And I think starting therapy was actually one of the best life choices I ever made. So, I know places are super backed up right now, both in school and out of school, but if you do think that's something that you need to explore, I would just really encourage people to try to get that help because I know from personal experience it can be super helpful.

Nicola Rossi: I completely agree. I did the same thing during my second year of law school and did go to the school's Mental Health Services. And I remember sitting with a therapist and I was describing law school and why I was stressed and they were like, "Wow, that sounds really stressful." It was just like somebody pointing out to me that law school is a stressful experience and it was reasonable for me to be anxious about it. So helpful.

Alison Monahan: No, I agree completely. I was like, "Maybe I have these other issues from childhood and stuff, but also I have a lot going on, and it's a lot." And she's like, "No, it is a lot. You're dealing with a lot, of course you're stressed out." So, I think that can be really helpful. If you talk with some of your professors, they



might even suggest maybe you look into some sort of accommodations. I think that can be something to also consider that we haven't really touched on. Do you know that there are issues from earlier that you just decided that you weren't going to really get accommodations for, that you could, or is this something new? Some of these things pop up in law school because the demands are higher than a lot of people's previous experiences might have been. So, if you do think there are some things around that, that's definitely something worth looking into as well.

Nicola Rossi: Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: And finally, of course, if your school is not giving you what you need, you can always hire outside help, like a tutor. You can work with someone like Nicola, you might need an accountability or a life coach. I've worked with a life coach before, it was really helpful, kind of like structuring my days. But any of these things – just kind of think about what would be helpful and are there ways that you can get this help. And it doesn't mean that you need it forever, but you might just need somebody to come in and say, "Alright, let's look at your schedule, let's look at your tools, let's talk about how you can structure your time." All these kinds of executive functioning things. Or more substantive help can also be helpful, and how to do law school.

Nicola Rossi: I think that's absolutely right, Alison. Like I said, I think I figured out how to actually do the game of law school somewhere around first semester of my second year. Just also not getting discouraged, realizing there are all these resources out there, and understanding how to use those and that everyone in law school is on this same steep learning curve of figuring out how to do this.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I just do want to say if people are disappointed in their grades, this is not the end of your legal career, this does not mean you cannot be successful later in law school, as a lawyer, on the bar exam. Hopefully one day, if you got a first semester grade or two that you're not happy with, that will just be a story that you tell about how you overcame adversity and went on to succeed, because it definitely is not going to define your entire legal career, even though it might feel that way.

Nicola Rossi: I think that's exactly right, and a really good way to put things in perspective.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, any final thoughts you have before we wrap up?

Nicola Rossi: I think just reiterating what you said, that this is not the end of the world, and then everyone in law school is on this learning curve, and that this is a chance to sort of overcome adversity. It's going to be a great interview story, and so use it as that, and use the things that you learned first semester to do even better second semester.



Alison Monahan: I agree. I think you've just got to take this for what it was, really evaluate the situation, evaluate what led you to the point you're at. And then if you do want to make changes, go ahead and make those changes and hopefully set yourself up for success later.

Nicola Rossi: Absolutely.

Alison Monahan: Well, Nicola, thank you so much for joining us.

Nicola Rossi: Thank you, this is fun.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave review or 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 Lee or Alison at [lee@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:lee@lawschooltoolbox.com) or [alison@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto: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:**

[Tutoring for Law School Success](#)

[The Girl's Guide to Law School: Need to Get More Done in Law School? Try The Circles.](#)

[Podcast Episode 28: Dealing with Bad Law School Grades](#)

[Podcast Episode 79: Making the Most of Your Second Semester in Law School](#)

[Podcast Episode 128: Regrouping and Dealing with Grades Second Semester](#)