



Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we are talking about exam preparation triage, as part of our "Quick Tips" series. 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.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back! This is Lee from the Law School Toolbox. Effectively preparing for your law school exams is paramount to doing well in law school. After all, in most law school classes, your score on the final exam is 90 to 100% of your grade in the class. That is why here at the Law School Toolbox, we encourage students to take law school exam preparation seriously from the beginning. And we offer a lot of tips about how to do this. For example, you should start preparing for law school exams early, create your own outlines, and take practice exams before you feel ready.

Lee Burgess: That being said, life goes on while you are in law school. And every reading week, students find themselves in exam preparation, worst case scenario circumstances. So today we are going to talk about what to do if that happens – specifically, what do you do if you are a few days away from exams and you are completely unprepared? It is important to remember that this is different than our usual exam preparation advice, and ideally, you will never have to use these tips. But if for whatever reason you find yourself in the reading week nightmare scenario, we are here to help you make the most of those precious days and hopefully get through exams in one piece.

Lee Burgess: The first thing to do in this situation may be one of the most difficult, but also the most important: Let it go. By that we mean, do not beat yourself up or spin down endless "Would have, could have, should have" rabbit holes about how you could have avoided this. We all make mistakes or have rotten luck at times. And regardless of how you got here, dwelling on that only wastes time. If you are able to accept the situation, forgive yourself (or fate) and move forward, you may be able to salvage your law school GPA. So, take heart and follow these tips. All is not lost quite yet. Now let's get to work.

Lee Burgess: The first thing that you should do is spend five to 10 minutes making a study schedule plan. Start with questions that will help you determine how to use your time most efficiently and effectively. For example, how many exams do



you have and how many days do you have before each exam? Are some of your classes weighed heavier into your GPA than others? And do you have a better grasp on some subjects than others? After you have answered these questions, prioritize and divide your remaining study time in the way that makes the most sense. In most cases, it will likely make sense to equally divide your time and prepare as much as possible for all of your exams.

Lee Burgess: For example, say you have three upcoming exams – Contracts, Torts, and Civ Pro – and that each class is worth three credits. Assume that you have three days until your Contracts exam, five days until your Torts exam, and seven days until your Civ Pro exam; and that you feel a little better about Torts than Contracts and Civ Pro. In this case you may decide to spend your time as follows: Day 1 – study Civ Pro; Day 2 – study Contracts; Day 3 – study Contracts; Day 4 – Contracts exam and study Torts; Day 5 – study Torts; Day 6 – Torts exam and study Civ Pro; Day 7 – study Civ Pro; Day 8 – Civ Pro exam.

Lee Burgess: On the other hand, if your three exams include a four-credit required course such as Property, and a two-credit seminar with a policy question-based exam, you will likely want to dedicate an additional day to the four-credit course and spend less time preparing for the two-credit policy question exam. Basically, use your judgment to prioritize and set a schedule that allows you to at least touch on each subject before your exams. Again, this should take five to 10 minutes. It's not meant to be a timewaster or a way to avoid getting started. Rather, quickly creating your study schedule will ensure that you effectively use your time and at least cover all of your subjects before each exam.

Lee Burgess: Now, once you have a schedule, it is time to gather materials. You do not have time to re-read your casebook or class notes, so resist the urge to touch those. And you do not have time to make your own outlines. Instead, you need to gather the following materials for each of your classes: one good commercial outline, one solid old outline for the class, and all the practice exams and answers that you can find for the class.

Lee Burgess: These materials are important, so let's talk about them in a little more detail, starting with material number one: a good commercial outline. By "good", we mean an outline from a reputable company that has been around for a while. In particular, try [Gilbert, Emanuel](#), or [Black Letter](#). Importantly, choose one of these or a single commercial outline from another reputable company. You do not have time to cross reference multiple commercial outlines for accuracy or consistency with your class. Take a quick look at Gilbert, Emanuel, and/or Black Letter, if they offer an outline in the right subject, and pick the one that appeals to you the most or seems most consistent with your class. If you are taking a more obscure class, this may be a good time to reach out to a TA or



upperclassmen for recommendations, assuming you can do this quickly and receive an immediate response. Regardless, choose one reputable commercial outline and go with it.

Lee Burgess: Next let's talk about the second material you will ideally gather for each class: a solid old outline for the class. Most law schools have an outline bank with student outlines from previous years. Assuming yours does, find an outline from a student who had your professor recently. Again, use your judgment regarding the quality of the outline. Think about an upperclassman you know did well in the course, or even ask your TA or upperclassmen for recommendations. Remember, you have the commercial outline for black letter rules, so if your law school doesn't have an outline bank or you don't have access to a good past outline from the class, don't stress. Just skip this step and use your syllabus to prioritize the rules in the commercial outline to fit your class. But if you have access to old outlines from the class, it may help jog your memory regarding topics on which your professor focused or things in the commercial outline that you did not cover, and therefore should not waste time studying.

Lee Burgess: Now let's talk about the third and possibly most important material you will gather for each class: practice questions and answers. Gather as many practice exams and answers for your class as you can find. Ideally, look for past exams from your professor or practice questions that your professor has posted. If you can't find anything from your professor – say your professor is new or never posts past exams (eyeroll!) – ask your TA or an upperclassman for a recommendation on where to look next. Maybe your professor took over for a professor who just retired and plans to model the exam after the retired professor's exams. In that case, the retired professor's past exams and practice questions would be your go-to source. As a last resort, look outside your law school, ideally with your TA or an upperclassman's guidance. There are several reputable supplements that contain practice problems, such as [Examples & Explanations](#) and [Acing Series](#). So, if you can't find any past exams or practice questions for your particular class, you can use practice questions from a commercial supplement as a fallback. In other words, even though practice questions from a commercial supplement may be very different from your actual exam, any practice questions from a reputable source are likely better than not practicing at all.

Lee Burgess: Alright, that wraps up step two: gather materials. Now let's talk about what to do with them. Your next task is to make a skinny outline for the class. By "skinny", we mean two pages max. Use your syllabus or the old outline from the class to list all of the major topics that you studied. Space the topics out over the two pages, leaving room under each topic. Next, use your materials to fill in the most basic legal rules for each topic. For example, if one topic is Contract



Formation, you might write underneath that "Mutual Assent" and "Consideration". After you fill in the basic legal rules for each topic, start filling in the legal rules for major subtopics. So, in the last example, you might write "Offer" and "Acceptance" under "Mutual Assent", and "Bargained-for Exchange" under "Consideration". Keep filling in subtopic rules until you run out of space on the two pages. The goal of this exercise is to get a grasp on most of the major topics that may show up on the exam by capturing them in a short outline. We recommend writing this by hand, which may help with retention, but you can use your computer to make your skinny outline if you prefer. Additionally, if you are allowed to bring materials you made with you into the exam, this skinny outline may be a useful quick reference guide.

Lee Burgess:

After you have your skinny outline, use your practice questions to guide your review. If you have past exams or practice questions from your class, read as many of them as possible, leaving only a few to take as actual practice exams. As you read them, make a list of every topic and subtopic that shows up on these exams. Use your materials and the practice question answers to add the rules for these topics and subtopics to your list. Then compare your list of topics and subtopics from the past exams and practice questions to your skinny outline and note anything that is missing in your outline. If there are topics or subtopics from the past exams or practice questions that you do not have in your outline, add them. In order to add these topics or subtopics, you may have to add one page to your skinny outline, but try to keep it under three pages.

Lee Burgess:

If you do not have any past exams or practice questions from your professor or this particular class, read practice questions and answers from your outside source. As with reading past exams from the class, it is important to make reading practice questions and answers an active learning process. You likely do not have time to write out answers to every practice question, but you can still use these questions to test your knowledge. Here is one way to do that: As you read the question prompt, notate what you think are the legally relevant facts, then try to spot the issue and rule that will apply. Test your knowledge of the rule by writing it out or saying it out loud. Next, quickly outline an analysis and conclusion or explain your conclusion to yourself as if you were telling a friend why your answer is correct. Do the same as you read the correct answer and compare it to yours. Specifically, underline or highlight the rule and use that to double-check your rule statement in your skinny outline. Next, note the facts that the correct answer pulls into its analysis, make sure that you spotted the correct issue, rule, legally relevant facts, and reached the right conclusion. If you didn't, evaluate why and make any notes or changes necessary to your skinny outline.



Lee Burgess: As you review past exams or practice questions, remember to leave time to complete at least one practice exam or practice question under timed exam conditions. Ideally, you will have time to complete two to three. But use your judgment to make sure that you see as many past exams or practice questions as possible. Taking a practice exam for a class in which you feel unprepared can be painful. Think sitting for three hours, trying to write a comprehensive answer when you don't know the rules. But the only way to figure out what you know and do not know is to take practice exams and compare your answers to the sample answers. Remember, no one has to see your practice exam answers besides you. And it is much better to write terrible answers before your exam, learn from your mistakes and write a better answer on exam day, than go through this painful experience in the exam room. When you are cramming for exams, taking one to two practice exams may be the difference between an average and a below average performance on exam day, so do not skip this step. Do as many practice exams as you can.

Lee Burgess: That brings us to exam day. Here are a few tips for getting through a law school exam after a few days of cramming. First, keep calm and breathe, even if the questions are terrifying. This is where taking practice exams will hopefully help you. As you take practice exams, practice grounding yourself by remembering the major topics and subtopics in your skinny outline, and trying to note facts that may be relevant to any of those topics or subtopics. Then use this process to avoid spinning into panic mode in the exam room. Hopefully this will help you take note of the issues and use those to start outlining your answer.

Lee Burgess: After you write a quick outline, start filling in the rules for each issue. Keep your answer simple by paying careful attention to IRAC. Depending on the class and professor, IRAC may not always be the best way to write a law school exam answer. However, it can be your best friend in this scenario. In particular, if you are able to identify all of the major issues, state the relevant rules, and use legally relevant facts in your analysis to support a reasonable conclusion, you will likely at least end up in the middle of the curve. Headings and short, clear sentences will also help you here. Focus on making your answer easy to read and grade. Remember, the goal is points, not necessarily creativity.

Lee Burgess: With that, we have wrapped up our discussion of what to do in a law school exam prep crisis. Hopefully, if you find yourself in this situation, these tips help you make it through your exams in the middle of the curve, or higher. After you recover from cramming and exams, take some time to plan for next semester. In particular, make a plan for not only starting the semester on the right foot, but also staying on track. Remember, accountability can be tricky when the finish line seems far away. So, think about tools that may help you avoid procrastination and start preparing for exams earlier, such as mini deadlines for



yourself, or check-ins with an accountability buddy. It is much better and easier to approach law school exam prep as a marathon and not a sprint. And the marathon approach is likely to yield better results. So, if you need help developing a plan and sticking to it, we are here. Please reach out to us via the [contact form](#) on LawSchoolToolBox.com, and we'd love to help you find additional resources regarding law school exam preparation, or motivation and accountability during the semester. We also have a team of excellent [law school tutors](#) who may be the key to staying accountable. Let us know how we can support you and help you make the most of the next semester.

Lee Burgess: And with that, 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](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](#)

[Gilbert Law Summaries](#)

[Emanuel Study Aid Series](#)

[Black Letter Outlines](#)

[Examples & Explanations](#)

[Acing Series](#)

[Podcast Episode 20: The Exam Countdown – One Month and Counting!](#)

[Podcast Episode 41: Avoiding Law School Exam Disasters](#)

[Podcast Episode 221: Our Top 5 Last-Minute Exam Tips](#)

[Triage Tips for Final Exams](#)

[Don't Panic! Last Minute Tips for Final Exams](#)