



Lee Burgess: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking about doing the reading for your law school classes, 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. Today we are going to talk about doing the reading for your law school classes. In particular, we will discuss why doing the assigned reading is important and address some common questions we receive from students regarding reading cases for class. We will also give you some tips for reading and understanding cases.

Lee Burgess: Let's start with the elephant in the room: Why should you spend hours slogging through a difficult case when you can get all the important case information from an online resource in a fraction of the time? Given the mass availability of online case-reading shortcuts, isn't taking time to actually read assigned cases inefficient? How is this not a waste of precious study time that you could otherwise use to do something that you consider more productive, such as outlining or doing practice questions?

Lee Burgess: If these questions cross your mind as you sit down to start your class reading, you are not alone! In fact, the number of students who ask us whether it is worth their time to read the cases for class seems to increase every semester. And our tutors consistently find that a greater percentage of their students are regularly skipping class readings in favor of spending that study time elsewhere. These students are not necessarily lazy. Rather, many of them are hard-working students who are faced with a typical law school problem – you have way too much work to do and not enough time to do it. Under those circumstances, why spend hours reading a case when, (1) you can learn enough about the case to follow class from [Quimbee](#); (2) you know you will not be cold called to talk about the case during class; and (3) your professor's PowerPoint slides give you everything the professor wants you to know about that case? These are just some of the reasons that hard-working students may skip class readings when they are short on time. While this approach may seem like the "best option" in the moment, it is a terrible decision for your long-term success in law school and your legal career.



Today, we will talk about why.

Lee Burgess: To explain why reading cases for class is important, we must first address perspective. Law school is all-consuming. And while you are in law school, it is easy to make decisions based solely on one narrow goal – doing well in a particular class by doing well on that particular law school exam. From that perspective, skipping a reading in favor of outlining for the class may seem like a good decision. But let’s zoom out from the law school bubble and think about your real goals and reason for going to law school – you likely want to learn how to be a good lawyer. Or, at the very least, you want to gather legal knowledge and skills to help you in a particular career. With that goal in mind, skipping class readings during your first year of law school is a poor decision, because you are skipping the opportunity to develop the fundamental legal skills that you came to law school to obtain.

Lee Burgess: Let’s talk about some of these fundamental skills and why there is no better way to develop them than doing your reading for class. The first fundamental skill that you develop from reading cases is the ability to quickly read and understand cases. This may seem obvious – reading cases makes you better at reading cases. And you may be thinking, “So what? Why do I need to know how to quickly read and understand cases? Can’t I just find summaries of cases I need online?” No, you can’t. Remember, courts are constantly writing new legal opinions or cases. And, in practice, you must know how to find, understand, and use the most recent on-point precedent for the issue on which you are arguing. If this issue is outside the cannon of core law school subjects and cases, it may be difficult to find a reliable summary online. Even if you find a summary or a list of somewhat reliable bullet-points, like those generated by [Westlaw](#) or [Lexis](#), you cannot completely rely on those in practice. They are not always entirely accurate, and often fail to capture nuances in the rule that may be relevant for your case. In short, if you plan to practice any kind of litigation after law school, you must know how to quickly read and understand cases. In fact, that will likely be a major part of your job, especially as a new associate. Judges, partners, and senior associates will expect you to have this basic skill and are likely to get impatient with you if you do not. By the time that you graduate law school, you want reading cases to be second nature, something that you have done so often it is easy. The only way to get to that point is to practice reading cases. And your first-year reading assignments are the best opportunity to get that essential practice.

Lee Burgess: What if you do not want to be a litigator? Is learning to read cases still important for your legal career? Absolutely. Lawyers who practice outside of litigation, as well as anyone working in law-adjacent or JD-preferred jobs, will



likely benefit from the reading comprehension skills you develop reading case law. You have likely noticed by now, reading a case is very different than most other reading you did before law school. Legal writing has a distinct vocabulary, style, and tone. It is also very formulaic – regardless of whether you are reading a case or another legal document, such as a contract or a will, there are specific pieces that are put together in a particular order that will be common to every document of that kind. Lawyers outside of litigation must still understand how to quickly read and understand formulaic legal documents. Again, reading cases during your first year of law school is the best opportunity to develop this skill. Moreover, even if you practice law outside of litigation or work in a JD-preferred career, you will likely encounter case law from time to time. And you will benefit by being able to quickly read and understand the material.

Lee Burgess: Now that we have hopefully convinced you that knowing how to read cases is essential to your future career, let's zoom back in slightly. Specifically, let's talk about why reading cases during your first year of law school will also benefit you during the rest of law school. First, as a 2L and 3L, you may take classes that require you to read cases because you cannot find reliable summaries of the cases online. Additionally, even if you can find summaries of the cases, you will likely be missing nuances, which become more important as you advance in school and start making more complex legal arguments.

Lee Burgess: This brings us to our second fundamental legal skill that you learn from reading cases – how to write a well-reasoned legal analysis or argument. You may be thinking, "I don't need to read cases to learn how to write a legal analysis because I took LRW and did really well on my open memo." Of course, your LRW class is an opportunity to develop and practice your legal research, case reading, and writing skills. And we absolutely encourage you to take additional legal skills classes as you advance in law school. However, taking even two or three legal skills classes throughout law school is an inadequate substitute for consistently reading cases for class. You are likely to do two or three major writing assignments for each class. So, even if you take a legal skills class every year, that only gives you six to nine opportunities to practice writing complicated legal documents. That is not enough practice to sufficiently develop this skill.

Lee Burgess: So, where are you supposed to gain the rest of that fundamental legal writing knowledge? Reading cases for class. That's right – when you read a case, you absorb the components of a well-reasoned legal analysis through osmosis. The more cases you read, the easier it will be to recognize strong legal arguments and emulate those in your writing. You likely know by now that



being a strong legal writer is beneficial on law school exams, so reading cases for class will help your law school grades in the long run. More importantly, helping you develop strong writing skills is the other key way that reading for class will positively impact your legal career. Strong writing skills are paramount to most legal jobs. In litigation specifically, many important issues are decided by courts via written motions. This means that the only way you can advocate for your client is through your legal writing. Of course, judges often must in theory decide motions based on merits rather than the legal writing skills of the advocates. But being a strong legal writer certainly makes it more likely that you can convincingly present the merits of your case to the court. Alternatively, if a poor advocate fails to clearly articulate a party's best argument in writing, the court may miss that argument, making it less likely that party will win. In other words, while judges decide cases on the merits rather than the legal writing skills of the advocates, judges are also human. So, being a strong legal writer is always beneficial to your case.

Lee Burgess:

Even outside of litigation, strong writing skills will benefit you in any legal career. Many attorneys who are not drafting motions are drafting other legal documents, such as wills, contracts, or other business-related documents. While these attorneys may not be writing legal arguments, they will certainly benefit from the writing skills gained by reading cases. In particular, in addition to absorbing the components of a strong legal argument from reading cases, you are also practicing your ability to pay close attention to details in writing, such as word choice, phrasing, and format. Sloppily written legal documents can cause a lot of problems for a client in the future. So, non-litigating attorneys will certainly benefit from learning to pay meticulous attention to details when drafting legal documents. Moreover, most basically, email is now a primary form of business communication. This means that people with strong writing skills have a basic advantage in communicating with peers on a day-to-day basis. In other words, regardless of your career after law school, you will likely benefit from developing strong writing skills. So, do not miss the opportunity to absorb these skills through the exercise of reading cases.

Lee Burgess:

Now that we have hopefully convinced you that reading cases is worth your time, let's briefly discuss how much time that may be. Additionally, we will give you some tips for gradually cutting this time down and making your reading more manageable. When we tell students to read all of the cases assigned for each class, students sometimes respond with, "There is just not enough time to do that, because it takes me so long a read a single case." Unfortunately, some of these students conclude that they are too slow of a reader to ever be able to read cases for class, and give up before they give themselves a chance to get faster. Let's dispel a misconception right now –



you are not “too slow of a reader” to read cases simply because it takes you hours – sometimes two to three hours – to read one case. In fact, 10 pages per hour is a pretty quick pace at which to be reading cases, especially when you first start. Do not be surprised if at first it takes you double that amount of time or more.

Lee Burgess:

This brings us to our next question: “How could I possibly have time to read every case for every class if I have two classes per day and two to three cases per class? That’s over six hours of reading if I read quickly.” The hard truth is that doing all of your reading for class may be painfully time-consuming at first. But it will get easier. And today, we will leave you with some tips for managing your class reading assignments and quickly improving the speed at which you read cases. The first tip is to make the most of your study time. This means that you will use all of the time that you spend reading cases efficiently. There is no time for passively scanning your eyes over words on a page in law school. If you find yourself reading sentences without really understanding or processing the words you read, stop immediately and regroup. Make every minute you spend reading a case count by actively engaging with the material as you read it. This may mean following along with your finger or pencil over each word. It may even mean reading out loud for a paragraph or two to get yourself back on track – assuming you are in a location where you can do that without disturbing those around you. In other words, if you find your mind drifting off as you try to read a case, do whatever you can to bring it back and make the most out of every minute that you spend doing your reading. This will help you cut down on your reading time to the shortest amount possible.

Lee Burgess:

Our second tip is meant to help you improve your case reading speed, as well as use your time efficiently by staying actively engaged as you read – develop and implement a case-reading method or strategy. One method is to designate the different parts of the case as you read. For example, you could use four different colored highlighters to mark the key components of the case. Maybe you mark the facts with orange, the issue with yellow, the rule the court establishes with blue, and the court’s reasoning with pink. Alternatively, if you find the multi-colored method is too complicated, try quickly notating when you reach a different section of the case in the margins. Having a method for quickly breaking down the key components of the case will force your mind to stay engaged as you read the case. Additionally, if you continue to implement the same method for every case you read, you will eventually get faster. In fact, as you read more and more cases, you will start to notice patterns and repetition. Many legal opinions use the same basic structure, and there are standard legal arguments that are used in many different cases and contexts. Getting familiar with the



structure of cases and the standard legal types of legal arguments will help you read and understand cases quickly.

Lee Burgess:

With that, we have finished our discussion of reading for class. We hope that these tips will help you as you work through reading cases during law school. If you have any questions about any of the tips or strategies we discussed today, please reach out to us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com. We would love to help you find additional resources or put you in touch with one of our tutors. 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!

RESOURCES:

[Tutoring for Law School Success](#)

[Quimbee](#)

[Westlaw](#)

[LexisNexis](#)

[Podcast Episode 102: How to Read Cases and Prepare for Class in Law School](#)

[Podcast Episode 309: Tips for Reading a Case](#)

[Podcast Episode 396: Start Law School Right – Class Prep 101](#)

[Preparing for Class as a 1L](#)

[Ahead of the Curve: Reading Cases: From Syllabus to Exam – Prepare the Case for Class](#)