Academic Tips

In their first weeks of law school, students often find that their reading is taking a long time, their briefs are not that helpful and that they are generally unsure of the general trajectory of their courses. Here are a few suggestions that will hopefully help you as you get started in your classes.

One additional thing – You may have classmates who talk rather loudly about all the work they are doing, how late they were in the library, how they have already started their outlines and any number of other things related to their classes. This is, of course, part of law school. However, remember, your focus should be on you and those learning strategies that are effective for you. This may take you some time – Do not be afraid to experiment. And be sure to use your resources – namely, your professors and, of course, Professor Natkin.

A few resources you may find helpful:

http://law.wlu.edu/academicsuccess/

http://law.wlu.edu/academicsuccess/page.asp?pageid=1646

Upcoming Academic Success Workshop schedule:

If there are topics that you would like Professor Natkin to cover in these workshops that are not listed below, please feel free to send her an email (natkinm@wlu.edu) or stop by her office – #427 on the 4th floor.

September 17 – Synthesizing Course Materials – Developing a Game Plan for the Semester

September 24 – Rule-Based Reasoning, Part 1

October 1 – Rule-Based Reasoning, Part 2

October 8 – (Open Topic)

October 15 – Reasoning by Analogy, Part 1

October 22 – Reasoning by Analogy, Part 2

October 29 – Reviewing Midterms and Writing Assignments to Improve Performance

November 6 – To Make an Outline, Flowchart, Flashcards, or Decision Tree – Pulling it Together for the Final Stretch
Scheduling

Time is your most precious resource in law school and having a daily schedule can help you use your time more efficiently. In addition, having a realistic plan for how you intend to use your time each day and every week (and accomplishing that plan), will provide you with valuable feedback and a sense of accomplishment – two things that can be hard to come by given the one-exam structure of many law school classes.

Remember – You are taking 17 credit hours of class. Assuming three (3) hours of work outside of class (this includes reading and review) for every hour in class, you have about 60-70 hours of work per week.

Every student works differently and different schedules work for different people. What is important is that you find a schedule that works for you.

Here are a few other tips as you think about how best to manage your time in the week's ahead:

To be effective, a schedule should be written down.

You have heard over and over that law school is like a job. As such, you should start and end each day at the same time – irrespective of your class schedule. For most students that means 8:00/9:00 am until 10:00/11:00 pm (with breaks for activities and meals, of course!).

To be truly helpful, your schedule should be more than a reflection of your academic obligations. It should include exercise, errands, any other tasks, meetings, deadlines, you have during the day/week.

Consider building in some flexible time. This is time that can be used for a variety of purposes – To catch up if you are behind, to take a break if you are on schedule, etc. Life happens when you are in law school, and, occasionally, you will get behind. Having a few flex blocks scattered throughout your schedule will give you a buffer if you happen to get sick or simply have a really busy week.

Consider reading two days ahead. This strategy does not work for everyone or in every class, and it requires that you do about thirty (30) minutes of pre-class review. However, the schedule below does create a nice window (Thursday and Friday) when you will not be reading for your classes and you can review.

Read Saturday for Monday
Read Sunday for Tuesday
Read Monday for Wednesday
Read Tuesday for Thursday
Read Wednesday for Friday

Not sure how to set up a schedule? Start with a time audit – For an entire week, keep a log of how you spend your time, and, at the end of the week, reflect upon the time you have spent and how you might work more efficiently.

Don’t be afraid to change your schedule if it is not working for you!

**Reading**

**A few reading strategies to consider:**

Remember, a task will conform to the amount of time you give it. Always read with a time budget. This way, you will have a definite start and stop time for reading your assignments.

Not sure how long your reading is taking you? Time yourself. Read five pages and note the amount of time it took you to read those five pages. Once you have this figure, simply multiply this amount of time by the relevant factor to determine the amount of time you should allot for an assignment in a particular class.

Make sure to time yourself in each class – Different students click with different materials, and you will likely find some reading easier than other reading. When doing your reading assignments, a good rule of thumb is to read the material you find most difficult when you are freshest.

Try to develop some ideas as to why your professor assigned a given case and why the textbook author decided to include the case at this point in the textbook. This is where your post-class review can be particularly helpful – The more ideas you have about a case before you read it the more engaged and active you will be as you read.

Read the last paragraph of the case first – This way you will know where the court is going.

Skim the case quickly, reading the first sentence of each paragraph. The first sentence is often the topic sentence for the paragraph and can give you a sense of the main points in the case.

Read each case twice – Once for a general overview and then a second time really focusing on those parts of the case where the court is making important points.
And remember – A case is simply a judicial *opinion*, and you should engage it as such, actively evaluating the author’s argument. Remember, law school requires that you be an active reader – It is up to you to construct the meaning, importance and relevance of each case, and, going one step further, how each case in a given topic relates to the other cases in that topic your professor has assigned, and how the topics relate to one another.

**Briefing**

Most first-year students find that their first stabs at briefing cases are not that helpful. Do not worry! This is all part of the process. The more classes you attend, the more you strengthen/develop your legal analysis muscles and the more you review after class, your case briefs will improve dramatically.

A few things to remember:

Case briefs are meant to be just that – brief. Many first-year students find that their case briefs are extremely long and, ultimately, unhelpful. Make sure you work to distill the case down to its most essential information.

Remember, a case brief is simply a learning tool designed to force you to identify the important aspects of a case. However, your case brief not a work of art – It is simply a starting point for your thoughts about a case. You will continue to mark up your case briefs during the course of the class discussion and potentially even in your post-class review, as you develop a deeper understanding of the material.

Be sure to write down any questions you have about a case, and try to go into class with some ideas as to why a case was assigned and where you think your professor will go with the day’s discussion. These practices along with briefing your cases will push you to actively engage with the classroom dialogue.