The BAR EXAM EXPERTS

It’s the biggest exam of your life. Might be nice to get advice from the experts. The National Jurist caught up with eight bar review instructors to get proven tips.

By Michelle Weyenberg

What if you could sit down with the pre-eminent experts on the bar exam and pick their brains on how to prepare and pass the biggest exam of your life?

Until recently, law schools largely left students alone to prepare for the biggest exam of their lives. That helped fuel an industry for bar review prep courses, which, in turn, gave rise to bar prep experts.

People like Rick Duffy, Jim Rigos and John Pieper have devoted their careers to helping law students prepare for and pass the bar exam. While all three have a depth of knowledge that has allowed them to easily pass the bar exam, their knowledge base extends beyond the black letter law.


Berman said a good teacher can clarify confusion and simplify complex concepts.

We identified the crème de la crème of these experts — a mix of veterans and more recent experts — and asked each for advice on how to prepare for and pass the bar exam. Here then are the bar exam experts sharing secrets to success.
RICK DUFFY
Co-founder, Themis Bar Review

Before co-founding Themis Bar Review in 2009, Rick Duffy was COO at Bar/Bri, the nation’s largest bar review company.

"I left because I thought that bar review courses had gotten far too expensive and wanted to create something with a reasonable price point," he said. "I felt the market needed a course designed from the ground up. At Themis, we started out in three states and now we’re in 27 states."

The cost for all jurisdictions is $1,595. Price is always going to be a factor for students when choosing a bar review course, Duffy said. And taking a course online is now a way of life.

"You want to consider whether or not your schedule is such that you can go to a classroom — or do you need more flexibility?"

When studying, Duffy suggests focusing on the big picture in each subject area and not the minutia.

"A mistake I think a lot of students make is learning everything about every subject," he said. "Treat studying as a job, and there are no shortcuts."

Duffy said it is also important to maintain a balance.

"While you’re studying, keep up your normal routines," he said. "If you work out every day, keep working out."

He also said students should take time off from their studies to avoid burnout.

“Go into the bar exam with confidence that you are going to succeed.”

The benefits of bar review
In this exclusive excerpt from her new book, “Pass the Bar Exam,” Sara Berman tells you what to expect from a bar review course

You need a reliable bar review to stay on track and to confidently trust the process. Especially toward the end of June, you may start dragging. You may get a couple of low scores on practice tests and, with the exam a month away, you may question your preparation. You want to avoid time spent doubting yourself (or your course), so you continue to focus on increasing your knowledge and improving your skills. So what will a bar review offer? A reliable bar review should do the following:

- Provide lectures that review each of the subjects tested on your bar exam
- Provide outlines that summarize the relevant law you need to know for each subject
- Help with skills training by providing essay, MBE, and performance-test workshops (if you have a PT in your jurisdiction)
- Flag heavily tested areas
- Highlight areas that differ or conflict in jurisdictions where you are expected to apply both state and federal rules
- Provide practice questions and sample or model answers to those questions
- Grade or critique practice exams. (Note: Even if your bar review critiques all of your practice exams, you should also do your own self-assessment. The time to learn most from taking a practice exam is just after completing it.)
- Answer questions if you don’t understand something. (But remember, the bar review cannot do the work for you. Your instructors are not taking your bar; you are. You need to know the rules and be able to apply them. So try hard to understand concepts before jumping to ask questions.)
- Provide a calendar to structure your eight-week countdown.

Bar review also helps identify what you do and do not need to know. The bar exam tests an enormous amount of material. In an ideal world, we would say to master everything before you go in. But a) the world is not ideal, and b) that would be waste of your time, energy, and brain “risk space.” A reputable bar review will flag what is heavily tested and what areas have historically never or rarely been tested. That doesn’t mean that a never-before-tested area cannot suddenly appear on your exam, but history repeats itself and so do bar examiners. One of the most helpful parts of being enrolled in a reputable bar review is getting sound advice on what should be covered only superficially. If at all, and what you should know in depth.

You may want or need to supplement your bar review, but you should never cut corners. (As a colleague often says, “Bar review is a floor, not a ceiling.” In other words, you can (and often should) do more than is on your bar review calendar, but without a very good reason, do not do less than what your bar review tells you to do.

This passage has been excerpted from the American Bar Association’s “Pass the Bar: A Practical Guide to Achieving Academic & Professional Goals” (ABA: 2013).
BarMax is a comprehensive bar exam review course, available on the iPad and iPhone.

“A myth about the bar exam is that it is more challenging than it actually is. I think that comes from the ways other companies are teaching it,” he said. “The bar exam is very straightforward.”

Ebadolahi said BarMax continues to add new features. Just last year, its app was redeveloped to include BarMax MPRE and the purchase of state courses.

“Make sure companies are using real questions from the exam,” Ebadolahi said. “And having personalized feedback is helpful.”

STEVE EMANUEL
Author

Steve Emanuel will celebrate his 40th year in the study aid business next year. The creator of “Emanuel Law Outlines” and other study aids, he started his career while still a student at Harvard Law School in 1974.

He and a lot of his classmates were confused about civil procedure, so he decided to write a study guide on it. His dad, who was in the printing business, printed a couple hundred copies, which Emanuel sold in the dining hall and to a few of the classmates in his section. The next year he wrote another study guide, and by the time he graduated, he had published three review outline books. He practiced law for a couple of years and worked on books during the weekends before devoting himself full time to study aids. He eventually sold his business to Wolters Kluwer but not before venturing into the bar review business.

He is the creator of Steve Emanuel’s Bootcamp for the MBE, a Multistate Bar Exam prep course available in online and print versions. Emanuel has taken bar exams that include the MBE five times in the last decade and passed every time.

“I am fascinated by the substance of law — the actual doctrines and the change in those doctrines,” Emanuel said. “It keeps on fascinating me. And I’m not even sure why. And every day, when I read the newspaper, I love seeing discussion... of
substantive legal issues in the news as a whole.”

Emanuel said it’s important to focus on the subtleties. The MBE examiners assume everyone knows the basics. They’re mainly testing the fine distinctions, so these are what you have to master, he said.

“Try to become an expert at pattern recognition,” he said.

You won’t have time to deeply analyze every fact pattern, he said. So you’ve got to develop a sense of commonly tested issues, and learn how the examiners like to test them. In other words, hone your high-speed pattern recognition skills.

He also said students should work hard to eliminate choices. When faced with a question in which you don’t know the answer, try to eliminate two wrong choices and don’t spend as much time agonizing over which of the remaining two is right. You typically need to get about two-thirds right overall, and running 50 percent correct on the ones where you’re pretty unsure isn’t too bad.

CHRIS FROMM
Executive director of education,
Kaplan Bar Review

“The bar is a test of what a first-year lawyer is going to need to know.”

Chris Fromm is a busy man, and it’s evident he loves his job. From hiring and training new lecturers for Kaplan Bar Review to his teaching at six law schools, Fromm said it’s important to stay current on the bar exam itself. He has passed the bar exam in six states.

“I get to talk to thousands of students during the prep process and shortly thereafter,” he said. “It helps me see what they are seeing and feeling.”

While instructing the live Kaplan Bar Review courses and recorded videos, he said he thinks about the audience in making the content as engaging as possible.

“Often times, students spend way too much time memorizing law,” he said. “Really it’s not about sitting down and memorizing the playbook as a quarterback. You need to get out into the field and practice. The sooner you get into the application, the more success you’re going to have in the bar.”

When choosing a bar review course, Fromm suggests students first review their study habits. If you’ve never taken an online course, will it be helpful to you? If you’re a part-time student, you know how to juggle work and study, so online might be good for you.

JOHN PIEPER
Founder, Pieper Bar Review

“Do not underestimate the bar exam.”

After graduating from law school, John Pieper began teaching law in Army intelligence. Since 1975, he has specialized in preparing students for the unique challenges of the New York Bar Exam and MBEs.

Pieper Bar Review has maintained its personalized approach and attention to each student’s needs. The only three lecturers for the entire course, John and his two sons, Troy and Damian, assume that their students are new to each subject, teaching each concept from the ground up. They pride themselves in teaching — rather than just reviewing — in a singular clear voice that cuts right to what their students need to know. They also teach bar exam-related courses at five New York law schools, in which they have established themselves as the experts in New York bar prep.

Candidates who have managed to succeed in law school by cramming often discover too late in the game that the bar exam is a different animal, said Pieper. It’s important to work hard from the start.

“Repetition is key,” he said.

Candidates are required to master, recall, explain and analyze in detail so much law, that for many there is no substitute for listening, processing, practicing and continually reviewing in order to succeed. This takes time, focus and stamina, Pieper said.

“Preparing for the exam is a marathon, not a sprint,” he said.

Pace yourself, he said. The road leading up to the exam is a long one. While it is essential that candidates clear their personal calendars and follow the schedule provided by their bar course, it is important to stay healthy by eating well and getting regular sleep.

HUGH REED
CEO, Reed Law Group

“What students need is a good mix of relevant materials.”

A retired Army colonel, Hugh Reed has more than 30 years of experience in preparing students for the bar exam. He uses mnemonics, checklists and other test preparation devices to simulate pressure-filled testing conditions.

Reed, a graduate of George Mason University School of Law, is the former director of Multistate Testing as well as editor-in-chief and director of various states’ bar reviews for Bar/Bri. He also has written and edited numerous books and outlines, including Gilbert Law Summaries and Legalines.

“If it is critical to document questions you’ve missed,” he said, “it’s like target practice; you can adjust and then aim.”

To stay current, the team at Reed Law Group takes the MBE bar exam every six months. He has successfully taken and passed it 25 times, Reed Bar Review offers online courses and one-on-one tutoring.

“The MBE and the Multistate Professional Responsibility Exam change constantly,” he said. “Up to 60 of the 200 questions on the MBE are repeat questions from past exams, as are approximately 15 of the 50 graded questions on the MPRE,” Reed said.

JIM RIGOS
Founder, Rigos Professional Education Programs

Jim Rigos, an attorney and CPA, has always enjoyed teaching. He got into the review business while in law school at
“Start early! Preview those subjects that you didn’t have in law school or otherwise want more foundation in before you begin your review course.”

Boston University School of Law, where he taught a CPA and bar review course.
In 1980, after moving back home to Seattle, he started Rigos Professional Education Programs. Live classes operate in Washington, Oregon and California.
But, while they still have a live class, a majority of students are doing it at home, Rigos said.
“Our course is for people on the go,” he said. “We’re trying to serve the students that don’t have the money to pay $3,000 a course, but realize they need something.”
The course is a compilation of live recordings and lectures that can be downloaded on the iPad. The company sells a full set of five-volume bar material on a stand-alone basis for less than $400. The writing program for essays and performance tasks is quite important, Rigos said, and candidates who do not address these skills may come up short, even if their MBE score is satisfactory.
“We think that the audio lectures combined with the outline is an effective way,” he said.

MARC ROSSEN
Director, Supreme Bar Review
A graduate of Cleveland State University — Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, Marc Rosen has personally coached thousands of bar applicants during the last 20 years. His family has been in the bar review business for 50 years; his father, Howard, began an Ohio course after graduating from law school in 1964.
Supreme Bar Review offers complete video lectures and outlines for all MBE subjects, as well as the MPRE, with materials that are meant to be convenient (video lectures, apps) and affordable.

“If you want to be successful on this exam, you need to focus the majority of your time and energy on bar preparation,” Rossen said. “If you are working, ask your boss for time off. Explain to your family and friends that you will be unavailable for the next few months. Your loved ones want you to succeed in your career and they will understand the sacrifices that you need to make.”
After creating a plan, Rossen advises, students should spend the bulk of their time taking practice tests.
“Practice testing will hone reasoning abilities while at the same time teaching you the black-letter law,” he said. “As a general rule, plan to spend as much time reviewing the practice questions as you spend doing them.”
Most students fail to spend enough time reviewing their practice tests, Rossen said.

“It is not enough to simply do practice questions each day. You need time to go over these questions and make sure that you understand why your answer is right or wrong.”

“Now is the time for complete honesty. If you have too many outside commitments, including work, family, social and community obligations, you need to find a way to defer as many of these activities as you can until after the bar exam.”

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