Top Tips for Surviving and Thriving in First-Year Law
Fasken Martineau takes great pride in the many education outreach programs we have developed over the years. Our Interview Workshop is presented annually at many of the Canadian law schools and our in-firm Summer Interview Workshop fills within minutes of activating the online registration system. We are always looking for new ways to provide information and insight to law students exploring career opportunities.

We are pleased to introduce our latest tool: “Top Tips for Surviving and Thriving in First-Year Law”. This resource was developed with the generous assistance of our Articling and Summer Students.

We are always happy to answer your questions. Please feel free to contact me or any of our students listed on our website at: fasken.com/en/students/tor/ourstudents.

Best wishes for continued success as you pursue your law career.

Sally Woods
Co-Chair, Student Committee (Toronto)  June 2016
Top Tips for Surviving and Thriving in First-Year Law

Every student pursuing a law degree has the potential to achieve academic success. However, there are some common mistakes that may have an impact on how well a student adapts to law school. While you may be familiar with the tips set out below from your undergraduate studies, they are likely to be even more important to your success in law school. We hope this booklet will assist you in navigating your way through first year and beyond.

1. Be Prepared to Work Hard

Law school is a professional program and the most successful students treat it as a full-time job. Some students have a difficult time adjusting to this concept. As a group of bright individuals, many first-year law students have never been required to put so much effort into achieving academic success. The sooner you establish regular working hours for yourself each day and become accustomed to the significant amount of time and effort needed to keep up with your studies, the better you will be able to cope with your course requirements. This will also help you transition into your role as a summer and/or articling student, where you will likely be required to put in longer hours.

2. Get Organized

“Procrastination is the thief of time.” A common mistake by students comes not from a lack of effort but from a lack of planning. Determine early on the amount of time that is required for you to keep up with course requirements and establish daily, weekly and semester-long schedules and follow them. Keeping up with your reading is key. As such, plan designated times to review the material for each class. This will allow you to follow along more effectively in class and more importantly, when you are in the midst of exams, you will be able to focus your energy on reviewing material rather than struggling to read a case for the first time. Starting early to develop a strategy on how to manage your time in an effective manner will pay off in the end. Developing time management skills at this early stage will also greatly assist you in transitioning into your role as a student/lawyer in the future.
Stick to your study plan. Whether it is sickness, personal issues, or an unexpected commitment to an extra-curricular activity, things happen that will impact your well-laid-out study schedule. Keep ahead of your readings and material review so that any unexpected disruption is not as problematic as it would be if you were behind in the first place.

Look for ways in which technology can streamline your study process. For example, take reading notes on a laptop in order to easily review them before class and take advantage of the search function to quickly check on cases and concepts during a lecture.

3. Invest in Yourself

Shortcuts in law school can be tempting. Case briefs, other students’ class notes and summaries from prior years are readily available. Many students use them and do very well. However, even the best notes and summaries can contain errors or omit crucial details that will leave you with only a partial understanding of the material. Also, keep in mind that things can change. New legislation or case law may affect the initial analysis. When you don’t invest the time to thoroughly engage with the material and take your own notes, you miss out on opportunities to think critically and grapple with challenging concepts. Ensure that you benefit from the depth of understanding that can only be achieved by actively engaging with the material. Have confidence in your own abilities.

4. Develop Good Reading Habits

Develop a strategy that allows for maximum retention when reading the course material.

Everyone learns differently so you may have to experiment to find what works for you. Most successful law students make notes while doing readings. These notes can then be used for study during exam time. A regular review of your reading notes throughout the semester helps to embed the concepts in your mind even before you begin to study for exams.

The level of detail put into the notes is a personal preference but be careful not to exclude facts or legal concepts hastily. Trim later as needed. You may not understand the importance of a point until after you finish your reading or after you attend the companion lecture.
Prepare questions that will deepen your understanding and help you work through complex issues, thereby engaging yourself actively with the material. Develop a method of flagging concepts that you don’t understand so that you can discuss them with your professors or classmates. Refer to your notes throughout the semester so that you spend time before exams reviewing material and concepts, rather than rushing to learn them for the first time.

5. Develop Good Writing Habits

Effective writing skills are essential not only in law school but throughout your career. These skills are honed and developed over time, but there are a number of strategies you can utilize in law school to get you started on the right track.

Before you begin to write anything, create an outline. Planning the structure of your written work contributes to a focused work product. This is important whether you are working on your response to an exam question or drafting a 35-page essay. Having a road map will keep you focused and your writing will be more succinct. This is another critical skill which you should work to develop before you begin your career.

Edit your work carefully and often. Some people find it helpful to print a hard copy and to write in corrections before altering the electronic version. Reading aloud may also help alert you to errors you may not otherwise notice. Give yourself a buffer before the deadline so that you can take a break and come back to your work with fresh eyes.
Try to be equally thorough in editing your legal citations. Get into the habit of properly formatting your citations from the start. Initially it can be a tedious process, but it will become second nature in time and you won’t have to struggle to break bad habits later in your career.

6. Reinventing the Wheel

Do not attempt to completely remodel study habits that have worked for you before in order to conform to methodologies used by other students. While your peers come from a wide variety of backgrounds with numerous skills which will enrich your law school experience, their study methods may not always work for you.

Watching your peers create the perfect summary to take into an exam may lead you to believe this is the best way to develop your knowledge of the material. While some students learn by making summaries, this method may not work for everyone.

Moreover, some students spend so much time structuring and formatting summaries that they sacrifice time that would be better spent reading and engaging with the material. Listen to advice but don’t forget what has worked for you in the past; after all, that’s what got you into law school in the first place.

Always be wary of advice that takes you away from reading and reviewing the course material. There is no substitute for actually knowing and understanding the law.

7. Prepare Early for Exams

Start preparing for your exams early in the semester. Include exam study time in your schedule and allow adequate time for each subject.

The quantity and scope of the material means exam preparation is a time-intensive process. By starting early and spreading review time out over the semester, you give yourself time to thoroughly familiarize yourself with the material. It also means you have time to identify the concepts that you don’t understand and proactively address the problem rather than frantically emailing your professor the night before the final.
Give yourself time to write as many practice exams as possible for each course, particularly if they are fairly recent exams and the same professor is teaching the course. Exams older than 5 years may not be as relevant. This is a great way to familiarize yourself with the material and to lay out a plan for how you will approach questions. This will also help you to become comfortable with the professor’s approach and exam structure.

8. Don’t Be Discouraged

Your marks from first term may not live up to your own expectations. It takes time to adjust to law school and develop habits that will enable you to perform well on your exams. Many students hit their stride later on and end up graduating at the top of the class. Furthermore, it is important to remember that there is a difference between knowing how to write an exam well and being prepared for a legal career.

While grades can certainly help to open doors for you in terms of a career path, you should also focus on learning as much as possible and building a solid foundation of knowledge with which you can begin your legal profession. This will take time but it will ultimately mean much more to you, and your employer, than an anomalous grade in first-year torts.

9. Keep an Open Mind

One of the great things about law school is that many courses have an unexpected depth and complexity which you may not have anticipated prior to enrollment. Keep an open mind and allow yourself to experiment with different areas of law rather than focusing on one discipline from an early stage.

In your earlier years, it is important that you take courses in core areas that you will use in everyday practice after you graduate. In your upper years, however, be sure to include topics in your course schedule that interest and excite you.

Students perform at their best when studying topics that they feel passionately about and enjoy reflecting upon outside of the classroom. This makes sense for your future law career as well. There is little point to investing such a significant amount of time and energy into building a career that doesn’t interest you.
As you progress through law school and eventually summer and article, you will find your interests will become more focused and your choices will be made based on your experiences.

Try to include at least one research and writing course in each of your second and third years of study. You will be required to conduct research and produce written work product during your articles so it is a good idea to sharpen these skills while at law school.

Also, be sure to look into credits you can obtain outside of class. There are a variety of opportunities in second and third year to obtain course credits through practical experience opportunities such as internships, mooting or by working for your law school’s legal clinic. These are great ways to complement your classroom learning.

10. Beyond the Classroom

Don’t lose sight of the fact that there is life outside the classroom. While grades are important, your legal education will enable you to build other skills which employers will be seeking. Involvement in extra-curricular activities will not only enrich your law school experience but will also enable you to develop other critical skills in the areas of leadership, inter-personal relationships, team-work and so much more.

Take the time to get involved in activities you feel passionate about. Volunteering provides not only an educational benefit but the chance to apply what you have learned in a practical setting. Extra-curricular activities will also help you learn how to prioritize your time. Try to focus on a select group of activities that are of interest to you rather than overloading yourself.

Participation outside the classroom can also be a great stress reliever. Find something that gives your brain a bit of a break and make time every week to blow off a little steam.

Make time for family and friends. Their support can be critical to giving you a sense of balance and an awareness of your priorities.
11. Networking/Communications

Law school offers countless opportunities to develop your networking skills long before the OCI process in second year commences. Push yourself out of your comfort zone and take advantage of these opportunities when presented. Reaching out to faculty members, attending speaker series events and firm tours and bonding with your peers will help refine your networking skills and assist you in making connections. This is a valuable skill which will serve you well in your career, both in your relationships with colleagues and with actual and potential clients as business development skills become more important to your success.

Be proactive in developing mentoring relationships, be it with professors, school administration, upper years or even at law firms with people you have met through firm tours, speaking programs, etc.

Do your best to answer or address emails promptly. You can get a lot of requests from the administration, professors, and classmates to register, sign up or help out with a variety of things. You may find an opportunity has been missed if you develop a habit of delaying your response to these communications. Again, this is also a good habit to develop early in order to hone your practice management skills.

Attend Career Days. They are a great introduction to firms/government agencies. For more on Career Days, see our Resume/Interview Preparation Guide at: fasken.com/files/upload/Resume_Interview_Tips.pdf

Be proactive in identifying resources that can help guide you through the law school experience and get into the habit of using these resources from the beginning. Don’t be afraid to admit you are confused and reach out to others for assistance.

The following are some key resources on campus that you may find helpful:

- Professors are happy when someone actually shows up for their office hours and are more than willing to answer questions.
- Librarians are tremendous assets in finding case law, legislation, textbooks and/or online resources.
- Academic Sessions offered by schools throughout the year assist students in preparing for exams and developing good habits such as time management.
• The Writing Centre provides that “second pair of eyes” and will also offer strategies to improve your writing skills.

• Classmates are excellent resources to brainstorm or debate issues with. In addition, many students find student-run study groups to be a helpful tool. There is also a benefit in reviewing practice exams with your peers to compare answers. Even if you have been used to working alone during your previous studies, you will likely benefit from discussions with classmates at law school – their point-of-view will at a minimum be thought-provoking and may provide you with a new insight into the issue. It is also a good idea to find a “note buddy” in each of your courses for when you miss a class or a point made during the lecture.

12. Take Care of Yourself

Take good care of your health, both mental and physical. If you find you are feeling stressed or anxious, do not suffer in silence. Speak with family and friends. Reach out to trusted advisors. Sometimes just talking the issues through can make a big difference.

No one delivers at peak performance when they are overworked or sleep-deprived. Your best results will come from applying a healthy and well-rested mind to your studies so that you are able to engage with and absorb the material in an efficient way.

Bonus Tips: Some Practical Strategies for Success

• Flag concepts in your notes that you don’t understand. This way, you can easily return to a difficult topic later. Ultimately, the goal is to address the problem in a prompt manner and return to your notes once you have a firmer grasp on the material.

• Take the time to work through problems. If a legal principle doesn’t make sense, spend time to identify and understand the problem. By working through a muddled point of law, you will end up with a richer understanding of the material. Furthermore, your answer will stand out on a final exam because you will be able to identify and deal with this problematic area of the law.
• Focus on the big picture. If you have trouble understanding a legal principle, it is often helpful to take a step back. Ask yourself what the principle is supposed to accomplish and consider the policy goals behind it. This should help lead you in the right direction.

• Exercise regularly. Take walks, do yoga, or take a class at the athletic centre. Exercise not only keeps your body in good health, it reduces stress and improves sleep too.

• Bring energy-boosting foods and a drink into your exam. Three hours can be a long time to go without refuelling, particularly while thinking under pressure. However, check ahead of time to confirm this is permitted.

• Eat regular meals instead of unhealthy snacks throughout the day. Law students spend so much time cramming information into their brains that eating can become an afterthought. Eating regular meals encourages a healthy rhythm to the day. Foods high in protein and complex carbohydrates will give you the energy you need.

• Take breaks during the exam period. Schedule time for activities you enjoy that will temporarily take your mind off your studies. If you follow a study schedule, you may even find that you can take some time off before that big exam and just quickly review your study notes the next day. You will be able to bring a well-rested and well-prepared mind, with a fresh outlook, to your exam.

• Enjoy the experience of law school. You will find it rewarding and enriching. You will make life-long friends and look back on this time with great affection.

Fasken Martineau wishes all current law students the best of luck. For information on specific offices, please review the student section of our website at the following link: fasken.com/en/lawstudents
Additional Resources


Law School Success, Bora Laskin Law Library
[library.law.utoronto.ca/research-guides/law-school-success](http://library.law.utoronto.ca/research-guides/law-school-success)

Coping with Stress at Law School, University of Toronto, Faculty of Law

Mental Health - Coping With Stress, Health Canada

Canadian Law School and Legal Education Forum
[lawstudents.ca](http://lawstudents.ca)

Law School Academic Support Blog
[lawprofessors.typepad.com/academic_support](http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/academic_support)

*Daniel Batista and Koker Christensen are partners with the Toronto Office of Fasken Martineau.*