Hi, I’m Nicole Lefton. I’m Director of Academic Success and Bar Prep at Hofstra University’s Maurice A. Deane School of Law. In this podcast, I am going to give you ten tips to follow when writing an essay on a law school exam. Needless to say, every essay you write will be tailored to your reader, that is, the professor. But there are some common best practices you can follow and there are some common mistakes you can avoid.

First and foremost, make sure you answer the questions in the same order that they are laid out in the essay. Often, an essay will have multiple question prompts at the end—often numbered 1, 2, 3, etc. You might be tempted to answer, say, question three first—maybe because you find it more interesting, or maybe because you feel more comfortable with the answer. Don’t answer the questions out of order.

As with any writing—be it legal or otherwise—think about your reader! Here, your reader is a professor or a TA who is grading your essay along with many others. The grader is likely to be using some kind of grading rubric, checklist, or sample answer as they grade. This helps ensure that the grading is as uniform as possible. The grading rubric or other sheet likely covers the points in the same order as in the essay question. If you answer the questions in an order that’s different from the rubric, your answer won’t align with the rubric. While this isn’t fatal, it makes grading more difficult. Now, the grader has to jump around the page when grading your answer. That takes time and makes the professors’ job harder—and that can lead to a lower grade.

While we like to believe that grading is entirely objective, there is a subjectivity when grading essays. If the grader has to struggle to find the points you are making, your grade may be lower than a student who covers those same points as you did, but who covers them in a more logical order.

Second tip: It’s a good idea to ask your professor if they have any preferences regarding how you write an essay. For example, some professors prefer IRAC (that’s Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion) while others like CRAC (Conclusion, Rule, Application, Conclusion). Often, professors do not have a preference, but if you can find out this information beforehand, you can practice writing essays in the style that the professor prefers. And that can only help your grade.

Third tip: Make sure you number your answers when needed. And use the same type of numbering (Arabic, Roman numerals, or even letters) as appear in the question.Take the example I mentioned earlierwhen the question contained three question calls numbered 1, 2, 3. In that case, you’d want to number your answers 1, 2, 3. If the question had used, say, A, B, C, you should number your answer A, B, C.

Fourth tip: Consider using headers to break up issues—particularly in a question that has multiple issues or sub-issues within it. For example, if the question says “what crimes did Alex and Bo commit?” Your answer might be broken up into two sections, with headers such as “Alex’s Crimes” and “Bo’s Crimes.” Then, under each section, you may have numbered subsections that list the crimes. For example, if Alex committed arson and robbery, you might have subsections with short headers about arson and then robbery, respectively.

Fifth tip: Try to use shorter sentences when writing your essays. Once again, remember your reader! The professor or TA has a lot of essays to get through. That often means that the reader is reading fairly quickly. Short sentences are less likely to be convoluted and confusing to the reader. Plus, they are typically faster to read—probably because one typically does not have to go back to reread a shorter sentence as they might do with a longer, more confusing sentence.

Sixth tip: When writing, make sure you use the active voice rather than passive. This advice has to do with your verb construction. For example, “Jo kicked the ball” would be active, while “the ball was kicked by Jo” would be passive. The active voice is generally a clearer way to express yourself. While there may be an occasion when the passive voice is better, the active voice creates a more engaging and clearer read.

Seventh tip: Make sure you insert paragraph breaks throughout your essay answer. If you are reading a book, and the text is set in a dense block of text, you will arguably have trouble keeping your concentration as you read. While, if you were to take that same text and break it up into paragraphs, you would probably have an easier time remaining engaged in the material.

The same holds true for your essay answer. Breaking the answer into paragraphs helps your reader (that is, the professor or TA) remain focused and engaged. Plus, the paragraph breaks can create an organizational scheme that helps the reader navigate the answer. For example, you may break up the answer into four paragraphs: In the first one, you’d lay out your issue statement, or your conclusory statement, depending on which scheme you set up. In the second paragraph, you can spell out all the rules that you’re going to use. In the third paragraph, you apply facts to each of these rules or rule elements you set up in paragraph two. And in the fourth paragraph, you give a short conclusion. Feel free to combine or divide some of the paragraphs. The key is to create a document that isn’t too dense or hard to read.

Eighth tip: Don’t use a word that you are even remotely unfamiliar with. Law school language can be complicated and there’s a fair amount of Latin. While some terms are necessary in legal writing of any kind, it’s always best to steer clear of using any terms that you are unsure of. Better to say the answer in your own words than risk using a word incorrectly.

Ninth tip: Along the same point, make sure you recite the rules as accurately as possible. It’s fine to restate rules in your own language—that helps ensure that you know what the rules mean. But be careful, if you restate the rule, that you don’t inadvertently change the meaning. Even a minor change can change the meaning of a rule and lead to problems in your essay. For example, changing a “must” to a “may” changes the obligation from a requirement to an election.

And finally, the tenth tip: When laying out your analysis—that is, applying the facts to the rules—you want to use the word “because” as often as possible. The word “because” creates a logical connection from the rule to the facts you’ve laid out to your conclusion. Simply laying out the rules and reaching a conclusion is called a “conclusory” answer, and professors hate it. They want to see you use facts to reach the conclusions. But simply presenting the rules and facts without connecting the two, to lead to the conclusion, is also problematic. That’s why you need the “because”—it helps connect the rules and facts, and it shows how this analysis leads to the conclusion.

We’re at the end of our podcast. I hope you found this information helpful! While this list is not exhaustive, it’s a great start.

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