Hi, I’m Nicole Lefton, Director of Academic Success and Bar Prep at Hofstra’s Maurice A. Deane School of Law. In this podcast, I am going to talk about the benefits of using the IRAC structure when outlining your answer to a law school exam essay.

Needless to say, every essay answer you write will be tailored to your reader—that is, your professor. So, if your professor would prefer a different answer structure, you should defer to the professor.

I can’t tell you how many students have said to me that they have found a better way to organize their essay analyses than to use IRAC, that is, Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion. Students will praise the other methods, such as CRAC (Conclusion, Rule, Application, Conclusion), CIRAC (Conclusion, Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion), or CREAC (Conclusion, Rule, Explanation, Application, Conclusion) as so much better than IRAC. I hate to burst their bubble, but the basic IRAC structure around all of these variations is the key to success. And to a large degree, the differences between their methods and IRAC are really negligible.

That’s why I advise my students to follow IRAC when formulating their arguments. Using IRAC as your basic template when outlining your answer forces you to think about the key parts to a legal analysis in a clear and comprehensive order. And how you eventually write your answer—when you turn your outline into the actual answer—can be based on that IRAC outline. When converting the outline to your answer, whether it starts with an issue statement (that is, an I in IRAC), or with a conclusion (that is, a C in CRAC), or even giving a conclusion followed by an issue statement (that’s a CIRAC), the process of getting there is really the same. The key is to set up the building blocks to your analysis—and the IRAC structure helps you do just that!

To better understand why IRAC is a great way to set up the outline of your analysis, let’s think about the most important piece of any analysis: the Rule Application section. Most legal arguments you will face in law school and in practice can be answered in the affirmative or the negative. One side might claim the defendant is guilty while the other side argues the defendant is innocent. A plaintiff’s attorney may demand that their client is entitled to damages, while the defendant’s counsel makes just as persuasive an argument as to why damages are not justified.

So the lesson here is that, as you learn to think like a lawyer, the conclusion is the least important part of the thought process—in common law, there is often no right or wrong answer, but shades of gray. Anyone can make a blanket statement that a party is guilty or innocent. Anyone can refer to a particular rule and claim it applies without presenting evidence to back it up. However, neither of these strategies leads to a persuasive legal analysis that might result in a win for your client. The key to a successful analysis—and a winning argument—is the analysis, and that is laid out in the RA portion (that is, Rule, Application) portion of your essay answer.

Before we dissect the RA portion of the analysis a bit more, let’s go back and talk about why it’s a good idea to start your outline process with the I, that is, the issue. You might have a professor who prefers you start with a conclusion (that’s CRAC), or, you might be asked to write an answer in a persuasive tone—when you’re required to advocate for a particular position. That kind of essay answer would require a strong conclusory sentence to start—again, you would formulate using CRAC. However, in either of these situations, it’s still a good idea to start the outline of your answer with an IRAC structure, first laying out the true issue you plan to analyze. After all, if you don’t adequately spot and clearly describe the issue, it’s virtually impossible to give a thorough and accurate analysis.

If you have a choice in the essay answer format—that is, your professor doesn’t care if you write your essay answer in IRAC or, say, CRAC—consider this reason for starting with an issue statement: what if you are wrong? Remember, the Rule and Analysis are the most important part of your legal analysis, and your essay answer in law school. Getting the right answer without showing the work is not enough. As with a math problem in middle school, your professor wants you to show your work. But if you zig left when you should have zagged right in your analysis—perhaps by using the rules correctly but making a mistake when applying the facts to them—you may arrive at the wrong answer. That means your conclusion is wrong, but the analysis shows that you really understand the rules. While you want to get to the right answer, getting the wrong answer but laying out your analysis clearly shouldn’t have too big an impact on your grade.

However, if you’ve started your analysis with that wrong conclusion, you’ve shown the reader (that is, your professor) from the start that you are moving towards a wrong answer. Remember, there is a degree of subjectivity to essay grading, even when the professor uses a detailed grading rubric. And think about how this can impact the grading of your essay. It’s one thing to get through your analysis and then see that you made an error; it’s another thing to know from the start that you are going to get to the wrong place.

Now, let’s talk a bit more about the Rule Application section. We call this RA or REA—it’s really semantics. You want to make sure you use the tools at your disposal to answer the issue or the question. The best way to do this is to lay out these tools to start, by describing the relevant rules and the rule elements, and then, diving into the rules within those elements. You may also want to include rules you need for your counterargument here, such as a rule regarding a defense or an exception to the rules that you’ve listed. Or you may choose to save those counterargument rules for later in your analysis. Neither approach is wrong.

Next, apply the facts given to the rules and the rule elements you’ve listed. Here, you may want to add information from the cases you read to add clarity to your analysis—you can do this by referring to facts in these cases that show similarities or distinctions from the facts you have at hand in the essay. Or, you may want to refer to information in the court’s reasoning in a particular case to help explain how a particular rule should be applied. Regardless of whether you refer to this as REA or RA or RE, again, it’s really all the same: you’ve laid out the rules as your tools and provided a clear and comprehensive analysis by applying relevant facts to those rules.

We’re at the end of our podcast. I hope you found this information helpful. Best of luck on all your law school essays.

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