



The War on IRAC: Winning the Battle Against Your Final Exams

[by Jeremy Blachman]

The enemy is largely unknown. It lurks in the minds of your professors throughout the semester but is never fully revealed until it's too late. You find yourself trapped in a classroom with no way out (except if you leave an ID card with the proctors, you may visit the bathroom, one at a time, as long as you're quiet) and just a few hours to attack before it's all over. You trained for this moment, but did you train hard enough? Did you train smart enough? Will your training pay off, or will forces beyond your control (like your professor's insistence on assigning grades based completely on hair color) make victory impossible? It is hard to know.

From the moment we arrive on campus, people tell us the key to our exams is remembering "IRAC" - Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion. It sounds simple. But it makes no sense. It's like saying the key to making Beef Wellington is to follow the recipe. Well, of course. But what's the recipe? Obviously you need to find the issues on the exam, apply the law, and draw a conclusion, but that doesn't help much when you're staring at a hypothetical asking which state has jurisdiction if you park your car in Vermont, it rolls down the hill to New Hampshire, hits the governor of Pennsylvania, who goes to a hospital in Missouri, gets treated by a doctor from Oregon, and on the way home gets flattened by a steamroller en route from New York to California, driven by a girl named Virginia who comes from Wisconsin and is wearing a Minnesota Twins hat.

You can't rely solely on IRAC. You need to find your own weapons of mass destruction to defeat the enemy, while steering clear of the terror threats that you may encounter along the way.

Terror Threat #1: Study Groups

Sure, a study group sounds helpful, doesn't it? A bunch of you get together and split up the class into chunks, and each of you takes a piece, learns it really well, and teaches everyone else about it? Makes sense, right? Well, maybe. The problem with study groups is that law students are generally insane. Unless you find people whom you like spending time with, who you think are pretty smart, who learn the same way you do, and

who won't turn each meeting into a gossip session about who's sleeping in class, who's sleeping with the professor, and who's sleeping with a life-size cardboard cutout of Justin Timberlake, it won't do much good.

There will be some especially eager students who will seek to form study groups right away, before there's even anything to study. They may solicit applications. You want to steer clear of anything that looks like this:

"Thank you for applying to be a member of my study group. I appreciate the interest. Please fill out the following form with care and place in my mailbox along with a copy of your undergraduate transcript and resume. Your submission will be carefully considered, and you will hear from me within 48 hours.

NAME:

LSAT SCORE:

1. How many days of class have you missed? (Please enclose documentation to verify. Acceptable documentation includes: your original handwritten notes from class, a signed slip from the professor, or a laboratory report from DNA testing done on your assigned seat to ascertain whether or not it was used by you during each class session.)
2. What other commitments do you have between now and the exam? (Please be specific, i.e., if you tend to use the bathroom once a day, generally at around six in the evening, please block off ten minutes; if you plan on sleeping, please indicate the appropriate 90 minute block. Ninety minutes is the

maximum time allowed nightly for sleep in order to participate in my study group.

3. What materials can you offer to the group above and beyond your class notes (which are an obvious prerequisite) and the class outline you will create as per #7 on the application, infra?

4. The study group will spend the next two weeks in a secure location that CANNOT ACCOMMODATE food or beverage. Will that be a problem?

5. Practice exams are imperative for study group success. I currently have the complete set of law school exams given at the top 50 schools from 1934 until the present, except for Washington & Lee University's 1956 set. Will you be able to secure a copy of that set of exams, or, if not, would you be willing to contribute your share to the fund I've established to track the exams down and recover them (estimated cost per person is \$500)?

6. Someone in class sneezed last Tuesday. Were you that person? If so, please stop filling out this application, and DO NOT put a copy in my mailbox. I do not want your germs.

7. Please enclose your course outline (minimum 100 pages)."

Terror Threat #2: Supplemental Study Guides

Study guides can be really helpful - except when they're not. It's easy to get caught up in making sure you have everything ever written about a particular subject - three treatises, an Emanuel's outline, Gilbert's, Casenotes, Civil Procedure for Dummies, Roadmaps, Mapquest, the Idiot's Guide to the Federal Rules of Evidence... in a Nutshell (oops!). It can be overkill. You can't even read that



much material, let alone study all of it. And those study guides are never tailored specifically toward your class. After all, different professors emphasize different things. My Torts professor, for example, loved to talk about his kids. And there was absolutely nothing about my Torts professor's daughter in any of the study guides I consulted. I checked the index. Plus, sometimes the study guides are so simplified that they might help if you're aiming to get a D in the class, but they're not going to help you get an A. Or even a B+.

My favorite supplemental study guide is Dr. Seuss's recently discovered unpublished manuscript, "Oh, The Law School Exams You'll Take." Check it out:

Issues here, issues there
Issues, issues everywhere
Issues hidden on the sheet
You won't find unless you cheat
Issues on the front and back
Issues that your outlines lack
Issues that you won't remember
Till you repeat this next September

I know the statute
Do you know it too?
Do you think it would pass a judicial review?
Do you think you can ponder the writer's intent?
What the senator wanted, what the congressman meant?
And the precedent cases he hoped that you'd find --
Even the ones that he didn't assign --
Do they cause any questions to pop in your head?
If you wrote the opinion what would you have said?
Would you remand the case or affirm it instead?

Look at the outline your classmate has made
Your two feeble note cards won't be of much aid
Should have been studying; curse the X-Box you played

But what does it matter, you'll get the same grade.

Weapon of Mass Destruction #1: Old Exams

To win the battle, not only must you avoid getting distracted by study groups and useless supplemental materials, you must also deploy your very own weapons of mass destruction to beat the enemy. It's easy to get caught up in studying your notes and making an outline and talking your classmates down from the window's ledge that you forget to take some practice tests. I've found practice exams to be the most useful tools when studying because professors, at least some of them, are human and like testing on certain issues more than others and asking certain types of questions that seem to come up on exam after exam. Only by working through the old exams can you figure that out.

Obviously, the best-case scenario is getting your hands on a bunch of your professor's past exams. (Well, that's not true: the actual best-case scenario is getting your hands on a copy of the answer key to the exam you're about to take.) Some schools have a database or a file drawer in the library where they store the exams. Sometimes you can just ask the professor. And even though they probably won't get lazy and repeat an exam question exactly (although I've heard stories), they'll probably repeat concepts, ideas, policy questions, turns of phrase, rambling and incoherent instructions. The more familiar you are with how your professor thinks, the better prepared you'll be. It can also help to grab a friend and work through the old exams together. That way you can both feel stupid when you don't know the answer. Or, in reality, reassure each other that the particular question you're getting stuck on is from a unit the professor didn't cover this year. Plus, two heads, except when trying to put on a sweater, are better than one.

Weapon of Mass Destruction #2: Calm Down

Just by not being insane, you'll have a leg up on your classmates. I've had exams at 8:30 in the morning where I've seen people drinking grande Starbucks Mocha Frappuccinos to load up on the caffeine. Even if there is a time of day when 1000 calories of milk, sugar, chocolate, and a thimbleful of coffee is an appropriate beverage, it's not 8:30 in the morning. I've heard people ponder the possibility of liquefying their lunch in a blender so they wouldn't have to stop to eat in the middle of an 8-hour take-home exam. I'm waiting for the bookstore to start carrying exam-ready catheters so people can just take care of everything without getting up from their seats.

It doesn't need to be so stressful. We've all taken exams before. If you know the material, you can do it. Get a good night's sleep. Don't try any new antihistamines the night before. Don't play with your roommate's shotgun. Don't remove the batteries from your alarm clock. Don't install reverse-antivirus software on your computer. Don't watch any show on UPN the night before the exam. (It'll lower your IQ.) Don't drink. Don't drink bleach. Don't swallow a bottle of laxatives. Don't finally take that pregnancy test you've been waiting all semester to take. It'll just worry you. Don't let a friend borrow your contact lenses.

And finally, remember that no matter what happens, it's only one grade, on one exam. You'll survive. Maybe you won't get that Supreme Court clerkship. But who wants to go bowling with Justice Breyer anyway? And when the Court screws up another election some upcoming November no one will want to be associated with those Justices anyway. One final hint: the answer to question 3 is "The statute of limitations has not yet tolled." Good luck. You can win the war on IRAC -- and with barely any civilian casualties if you're lucky.