Don't Panic! Ten Tips for Surviving the Bar Exam

The Bar Exam is the last in a long line of hurdles you face when trying to become a licensed attorney — and it tends to be the one that trips the most people up. If you’re planning on facing an upcoming Bar Exam, prepare yourself by following these tips.

You’ve taken the LSATs, gotten accepted to law school, worked through three years of grueling courses, and you finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Except for one large hurdle that threatens to obliterate all illumination: The Bar Exam. That’s right. The unfortunate cost of admission to practicing law is getting through the Bar Exam—two grueling eight hour days of multiple choice and essay questions.

Difficult as it is, there are several steps you can take to improve your perspective about taking the Bar Exam, and your chances of passing it. We’ve interviewed many who have taken and passed the Bar, as well as several Bar review course providers, and decanted their cumulative wisdom into ten worthwhile tips. Using these tips won’t guarantee you’ll pass the Bar, but they will improve your chances when the big day comes.

1. Don’t panic!

That’s the advice of Steve Levin, Senior Editor for Bar/Bri, one of the nation’s largest bar review courses. Mr. Levin should know. He’s taken and passed the exam in eight states. “First, I think students need to put it in perspective,” Levin suggests. Regarding the Multistate Exam, that part of the exam given in every jurisdiction, he says it’s “an extremely difficult exam, but remember that you can miss 70 questions out of the 200 and still pass.”

To someone who’s passed the exam eight times that might sound consoling. Others might not be comforted.

But almost everyone else with whom we spoke agreed: don’t panic. Calm people make the best decisions. And in the planning and study you do to prepare yourself, you want to exercise the best judgment you can muster.


It sounds obvious, but it is actually important for several reasons. We are designed to do some of our best thinking and reasoning when calm and focused. “People who have difficulty with reading, writing and comprehension, regardless of their age, may not be exhibiting a learning disability, but rather the observable symptoms of its underlying cause - STRESS,” notes Carol Sutchliffe, an educational and emotional stress consultant. While her work involves school children, her observation is also applicable to law students preparing for the Bar exam. Anything that detracts from your ability to focus and attend—particularly feelings of fear and anxiety—degrades your ability to learn.

If you can reduce or eliminate the amount of stress in your life, you’ll find yourself in a much better position to not only study for the exam, but take it.

With regard to managing stress, remember two things: everyone’s different, and there are good and bad ways to manage it.

“I exercised a lot,” comments Chris Johnson, a Legal Consultant who passed the Bar in 1996. “I ran and lifted weights, did karate, water skied, snow skied, cycled, and did everything and anything so I didn’t have to think about the Bar Exam.”

Johnson’s exercise regimen sounds extreme, but it’s a much better choice for dealing with stress than some of the alternatives. Other healthy methods for reducing stress include meditation, yoga, walking, and reading (at least reading things that have nothing to do with the law). Whatever works for you, plan on spending part of each day in pursuit of minimizing your stress.

3. Understand the test.

Knowing what you’re getting into can help you prepare. At least two months prior to taking the exam, and definitely before you start studying for the test, get an idea of what’s involved. The more you know about exam content, structure, and the method used to deliver it, the better prepared you’ll be to study for and take it.
The basics for all jurisdictions are largely the same. The exam is administered by the state’s Bar Association. You **must acquire a Juris Doctorate** prior to taking the Bar. In almost all states, that JD must be acquired from an accredited institution. Almost all states also use a two-day format for the exam, incorporating the nationally administered Multistate Bar exam (given on a Wednesday) into their own local exam. The Multistate is a six-hour, 200-question multiple choice test. State-specific law is tested on the day before or the day after (Tuesday or Thursday), almost always in an essay format, usually involving sixteen questions. And finally, in most jurisdictions, the exam is offered only twice annually, in February and July.

Apart from the preceding basics, you can get a much deeper understanding of both the Multistate, and the state’s exam by attending a regular bar review course. There are plenty of Multistate and regular bar review courses offered. Your law school can help you locate one.

### 4. Plan.

Most people take a bar review course and use it for their study foundation. Bar review courses also provide numerous practice exams. Among the people we interviewed, only one did not take a bar review course and passed. Ron Solynjets, who passed the Bar in 1981, suggests you should "remain calm, plan well ahead, and allocate a set number of hours each day for studying well ahead of the Bar Exam. And then stick to that schedule," he concludes.

The three cornerstones of planning should be content, process and time. Understanding the exam’s content was discussed under tip three. Once you have a thorough understanding of both tests’ content and how they’re conveyed, you’re ready to plan your study process.

If, after your course review, you think the Multistate Exam is going to be the most difficult, you could skew your study process to spend more time studying for that exam. But be careful. "Most students worry more about the multiple choice [Multistate],” comments Steve Levin. "They get to studying for the essays at the end. A more balanced approach is better," Levin suggests. Though he also advises students to "allocate your time based on relative importance.”

Once your understanding of content has led to a plan of attack, figure out how much you want to spend each day. Most students start studying for the Bar Exam six to eight weeks prior to the event. And most study at least five to eight hours a day, six days a week.

### Sidebar - The Tips

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3. Understand the test.
4. Plan.
5. Find your best study venue.
6. Take a Bar review course and treat it like a job.
7. Study.
8. Take practice tests.
9. The day before the test, relax.
10. Assume you did as well as everyone else and forget about it.

Regardless of the content, process and duration of your study, make sure you create a plan and stick to it.

### 5. Find your best study venue.

Once you have a study plan, consider the study venue that will help you thrive. Not everyone studies best in a law library.

"In studying for the bar," comments Dan Smith "I would walk in circles around my friend’s house reading
from my notes trying to memorize them….hour after hour.’’ Lisa Lunde, a licensed attorney who passed the bar in 1996 suggests studying “in a place where you’re most relaxed. I never studied in the library. I studied by a lake. I would actually go to the lake, walk around it, and then I’d study.’’

You know yourself. August Wilson, a Pulitzer Prize winning play write, did some of his best work in cafes. Wherever you feel most comfortable and focused, try to use the location to enhance your quality of study. Often your choice of location and its ability to place you in the ‘correct frame of mind,’ can spell the difference between spending minutes or hours to absorb difficult materials. Place does matter.

6. Take a bar review course and treat it like a job.

Every lawyer we spoke with strongly suggested enrolling in a bar review course. Ron Solyntjes, the one attorney who did not take a course and passed, had access to the course materials from a previous review course, and used them. "The reason people take bar review courses is because they prefer a scheduled classroom environment,” comments Solyntjes.

Everyone with whom we spoke also strongly urged taking two months off prior to the bar review and devoting at least six to eight hours per day to bar review study. Most bar review courses are for three hours every evening. For most, that means three hours of classroom study, another three hours to absorb the materials covered, and maybe another one or two hours for study follow-up, practice tests, and in related pursuits.

Give yourself the necessary time to succeed. If you spend eight hours a day studying for the Bar Exam, it definitely precludes a full-time job. And if while you’re not studying, you’re doing whatever you can to reduce stress (exercise, yoga, meditation, etc.), it doesn’t leave much time in the day for even a part-time job. Your job, our interviewees agreed, should be studying for the exam.

Unfortunately, not everyone can afford to quit working while they prepare for the exam. Those who have no other alternative should try to squeeze as much free time out of their days as possible. Take vacation days, leaves of absence, or short sabbaticals. The more time you have for clear, focused study, the better you’ll perform.

7. Study.

So obvious it barely deserves a mention, but there are still some who believe they can breeze through the exam with little or no study. Dan Smith, a Legal Specialist who passed the Bar in the ‘90s, remembers finding a fellow student weeping in the library stacks just days prior to the exam. Why? The weeping individual informed him that he hadn’t studied for the Bar AT ALL and that he was doomed to fail. He was right.

Walking into the Bar review without devoting considerable effort to studying is like entering battle without a weapon. These days, the only people who pass the Bar exam are those who create a long, thorough, time-consuming study plan and stick to it.

8. Take practice tests.

All bar review courses assign some time to practice exams. Practice exams are useful for three basic reasons: process, pace, and feedback.

The bar review courses can teach you some excellent techniques for taking the exams in your state. When working through the difficult Multistate Exam, technique can spell the difference between getting bogged down in the detail of a question, and leaving yourself with enough time to finish and review what you’ve done.

"We want people to understand the rules that apply to each choice,” comments Mike Lowthorp, Director of Operations for Beat the Bar.com, a Multistate Review course. Their test review process takes you through each question and dissects each answer. “You’re learning four rules per question instead of one. It reduces frustration, anxiety and adrenalin-three issues that hinder people’s ability to learn and retain information.”

Knowing how these exams are structured and delivered can also give you a sense of the required pace. Once you know the Multistate Exam is 200 questions over six hours you know you have 108 seconds per question. If you’ve taken enough practice exams, you don’t need to clock watch. You’ll develop the internal clock that monitors your own pace.

But perhaps most important, practice exams provide feedback. If you do well on a particular essay question,
or a series of multiple choice covering a particular subject, you probably know that subject well and can focus your study in other areas. If you do badly, you can re-cover what you thought you already knew.

9. The day before the test, relax.

Surprisingly, most of the exam participants with whom we spoke suggested resting the day before an exam. It’s almost like running a marathon race. Runners layoff the day before a race. They relax and carbo-load. Those taking the Bar exam should consider the same routine.

“I think relaxation is the key the night before,” comments Lisa Lunde. Others pointed out that if you didn’t feel prepared by the night before the exam, an extra few hours of study weren’t going to help you.

10. Assume you did as well as everyone else and forget about it.

Finally, the Bar exam has arrived, you’ve taken both the Multistate and the State-specific essay questions, and you’re done. What’s the most prevalent feeling among those who have finished the Bar exam?

I didn’t pass.

“Almost everybody feels that way,” says Steve Levin. But the truth is ’You still pass when you miss lots and lots of questions. It’s natural to feel bad, but there’s no way of knowing how well you did, so at that point, just assume you did as well as everyone else and forget about it.”

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