How to Study for the Bar Exam

There was a student at my alma mater, who was notorious for sitting in the lunchroom all day, playing bridge. He would also sit all evening in the pub, playing bridge. And he would play bridge all weekend in the student lounge. No one recalls ever seeing him in class, but we all remember that he “aced” exams and made law review. Everyone knows a student like that. Now is the time to forget about ‘em!

Click Here to Find Law Student Jobs on LawCrossing

Some people can pass exams with minimal study, especially when the exam involves a single subject area. Few people can cram for the bar exam and pass it. There is too much information to absorb in too little time.

Most people must utilize a planned study procedure for the bar exam because of the amount of information to learn and retain, and because of the uniqueness of the exam itself (consisting, as it does, of structurally different components, covering multiple subjects and lasting anywhere from two to four days). The task of learning so much, so quickly, and the importance of passing, makes a successful study strategy a must.

Having created the most exquisite schedules, you may think that you are ready to get to work. Think, again. There are certain basic principles to understand before you begin.

Quality Time and Space

When is the best time of day for you to study? Where? How long does that time last, and what follows it? Consider Sean’s story.

Sean X. Sean is a management consultant, who tells a story of a corporate CEO with whom he regularly met. This CEO, according to Sean, would eventually rise from his chair during the course of a meeting, shake Sean’s hand and politely dismiss him. After this happened several times, Sean finally asked the CEO how he knew when it was time to quit without looking at his watch, “Simple,” the CEO is alleged to have told him. “I know I have a 90-minute attention span. When my mind starts to wander, I know your time is up.”

Knowing your attention span is as important and basic as knowing your telephone number, social security number or ATM PIN number.

Once you know how much time you can sit still and concentrate on a matter, you can work within it or stretch it. Similarly, knowing the best, worst and middling times for you, through each day, and building these time-blocks into your schedule—fitting the hardest, easiest and most routine tasks into the times where they fit best—is a key part of any successful plan.

If you need more study time, extend your day by starting earlier or ending later. But know where your quality work time naturally falls, and how long it is. That is the time for your most important, difficult and rewarding work. Guard those time blocks as if they were gold, and let the rest of your day fall into place around them.

In addition to knowing your quality time, you must also create a physical space which helps you to concentrate. Some people study best in solitude. Some people study best with music. You must determine,
based upon what you now know of the exam and yourself, what will work best for you. You may need to create quality space, a place of your own, your office of the moment, your bar exam study corner. Create such space at home and away from home and protect it against interruptions.

For instance,

Eliminate telephone interruptions. Switch on your answering machine. (Buy one now if you don't already have one). Ask yourself, "what emergency will arise in three hours that will require my attention?" Unless you are also a surgeon with a skill few others have; or need to obtain a stay of execution for a client on "Death Row", the answer is “few.”

Click Here to Find Summer Associate Jobs on LawCrossing

Pre-arrange reliable child care. Have your providers lined up. Place their names and telephone numbers on your schedule. Make sure your provider has your household list of emergency telephone numbers and knows where you are. Promise children some time together for an adventure after you have finished the day’s study.

Study in a library. If you do not have "quality space" at home, use a public library. For a small fee, you may be able to use the library of a nearby law school. Check with your bar review course, with lawyers, or bar associations for quality space locations.

Study Groups

Study groups tend to proliferate in law school. A variation of that model, which is more suitable for bar exam preparation, is a "study buddy." Find one or two people who you like, trust, respect and arrange to study with them once a week. These buddies are valuable resources. If you have difficulty understanding a lecturer, others can fill in the blanks. If a class is missed, you can borrow a member's notes. But don't abuse it. This is not college!

Use each other to tackle problems, work out uncertainties, share apprehensions and provide aid and comfort. You and your study buddy should separately complete essay questions under simulated conditions (that means timing yourselves) and then objectively review, assess and comment on each other's answers. Listen and incorporate the feedback. It can improve your answers.

Helpful Study Hints

Study in 3-hour blocks. The individual session of most bar exams takes around three hours. Each of your study sessions should be as long as an exam session so that you get used to concentrating for that length of time. Don't set up distractions. Have everything you need at hand before you start work; books, old exams, pads, pencils, pens, coffee.

Take notes. Buy the lined paper used in law school. You remember it. The margin is almost in the middle of the page. To the right of the margin, make notes of materials read; to the left write lecture notes.

Concentrate. Concentrate on what you are reading. If our mind wanders, get up, stretch, walk around, sit back down, then return to work by rereading the material you just glossed over.

Repeat. Read and take notes on the materials for the day's lecture. Listen to the lecture. Take notes. Answer an essay question on the same subject matter. Reread your answer. Compare it to the sample answer. Take an MBE/multiple choice test on the same topic. Review the topic. Do an outline.

Outline. It's much better to learn the materials, where possible. The extent to which you make this information a part of your permanent knowledge, the easier it will be to recall it. An outline contains your understanding of an area of the law. After reviewing an area, Labor Law, for example, it is best to close your books and write down everything you know about the subject, then return to the books to fill in missing information.

When I think back on my own bar preparation strategy, it seems surprisingly simple. I awoke every morning at 5:00 a.m. I'm a morning person. I would jog to the tennis courts and practice against a wall for 30 minutes. I would jog back by 6:00, at which time my family would be up and getting ready for work. I would interact with them until they left by 8:20. By 9:00, I was ready to review my notes of the lecture from the night before. From 9:00-9:50, I would take a practice essay question in that subject area and review my answer using the model until 10:00. From 10:00-12 noon, I would review that subject area.
From 12:00-1:00 p.m., I would eat lunch, watch T.V. and make or receive telephone calls (I told friends and family to call during this hour). From 1:00-3:00 p.m., I read and made notes from the materials to be covered in that evening's lecture. I would then get ready to take the 4:20 bus to the train and would do multiple-choice questions en route. After I'd order my pumpernickel bagel with cream cheese, and extra light coffee, I'd take my seat (in the rear left of the hall), usually with my study buddy, Wes S., for the 6 o'clock lecture.

Travelling home at 11:00 p.m. allowed me time to think about the trip I had planned to take after the exam and the great cases I would litigate once admitted. Saturdays were my days for slippage and family matters. I was, after all, the maid of honor in my sister’s upcoming wedding. I’d go to church on Sundays and then meet Wes to take practice exam questions, review each other's work and then goof-off.

Simplicity is the key to a successful study regimen. Keep it simple. Keep it tight. And above all, keep to it.

**Click Here to View the 2015 LawCrossing Salary Survey of Lawyer Salaries in the Best Law Firms**

**CLICK HERE TO SEARCH JOBS IN OTHER STATES!**