Important Study Aids for Law Students

Study aids are popular with law students for a variety of reasons. The primary reason is that study aids describe the law in a straightforward manner. A student who feels at sea about the substance of the law after reading cases and discussing them in class may view the study aid as a life ring. Study aids often provide illustrative examples of various points of law and may include practice questions and answers with explanations. Additionally, after studying the law in class-sized pieces, study aids can help provide an overview so that you can see how all the pieces fit together. Finally, study aids may provide a different perspective on a subject, which can help you understand its many dimensions.

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Although study aids can be helpful, they also present certain dangers and should be used only as supplements to-and not as substitutes for-assigned readings and class discussions. Exclusive reliance on study aids will not prepare you for classes, exams, or the practice of law. In part, this is because study aids present an overly simplified view of the law. To provide a straightforward, concise description of the law, study aids necessarily omit a great deal of detail. When you read a case for class, on the other hand, you must focus on the particular facts of the case, the court's precise statement of the holding, and the nuances of the court's reasoning. Only in this way will you truly understand the case and be able to engage in meaningful class discussion. Your professors use assigned cases as mere points of beginning for their questions and hypotheticals. Simply knowing the holding in a case from a study aid will not prepare you for this type of discussion.

In addition to the potential problems presented by the substance of study aids, the process by which you learn from them can be detrimental. Study aids generally present a fully digested statement of the law, thereby eliminating the necessity for independently analyzing and organizing it. In contrast, law school courses are designed to teach analytic skills. Rather than merely memorizing rules that may change even before you graduate, the case method requires you to evaluate cases, organize them into a comprehensible body of law, and apply them to new situations. Some students fall into the trap of believing that they understand the law because they have read an entire study aid or that memorizing the rules in a study aid is sufficient exam preparation. The exam can be a rude awakening for them. To understand the law, you must do more than read an outline of it.

A final danger is that a study aid's perspective and focus often will differ from your professor's. A law school course can cover only a small portion of the law in the area, and the cases described in the study aid often will be different than the cases in your casebook. Moreover, every body of law is subject to different interpretations. Because your professor, rather than the study aid author, will be grading your exam, you must prepare for and attend class to make sure you know exactly what subjects may be covered on the exam and the approach that your professor has taken. Otherwise, you may find that you are marching to a different drummer than the rest of the class. To find a study aid that is most compatible with a class, ask your professor to recommend one. You should need no more than one.

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Despite the potential dangers described above, study aids can be useful supplements for your class and exam preparations. Study aids can reveal important aspects of a topic and can assist your exam preparation by refreshing your memory and by summarizing the topics you have studied. The best type of study aid to use for each course depends on the purposes for which you will be using it and on your individual learning style. Because you want to make the most of your study time and of your budget, consider the unique features of each of the following types of aids.

Hornbooks are the most thorough and scholarly type of study aid. They provide a detailed description of the law in a given subject matter area and include citations to all the leading cases, statutes, and other sources of law. Although hornbooks do not have the binding force of law, courts and lawyers often cite them as authority because they usually are written by an established scholar in the field and often are kept current by a pocket part or supplemental volume.

A hornbook is particularly helpful when you are beginning a research project or are confused about a particular topic. The hornbook will provide a thorough and synthesized discussion and analysis of the topic, including its historical development, current status, underlying policies, and potential future development. The hornbook also will cite other sources, such as law review articles and books, for additional discussions of the same topic. The horn-book's coverage is sufficiently detailed to provide a
precise view of the law, rather than the more generalized view provided by other types of study aids.

Because hornbooks provide in-depth discussions, they normally are longer and more detailed than other types of study aids. If you are looking for an overview of an entire body of law, rather than a discussion of a particular topic within that area, a less detailed type of study aid, such as a subject outline, may be more useful. Other types of study aids also may be more useful in the few days immediately before your exams, though a hornbook can be very helpful in outlining the course in preparation for the exam.

Cost is another consideration. Hornbooks normally are more expensive than other types of study aids, especially because hornbooks are hard-bound. Cost usually does not have to be an issue, however, because your law library's collection will include the best hornbooks. In fact, hornbooks often are kept on reserve in the library because such a great demand exists for their use. Moreover, a hornbook can be viewed as an investment for the future; unlike other types of study aids, you will use hornbooks in the practice of law, as well as in law school.

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