In General, What Can You Do to Prepare Yourself for the Bar Exam?

We asked attorneys and other legal professionals throughout the country what law students can do to prepare themselves for the Bar Exam. These experts provided several useful tips for law students to follow in order to conquer their Bar Exam. We hope law students find their advice helpful and are successful in passing their Bar Exam.

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I would say the best way to prepare to take the Bar exam is to practice daily affirmations and do the work! I personally knew that multiple choice was a weak area for me; so I knew I had to put in a lot more work than other folks. In addition to doing more multiple choice questions, I would always tell myself ‘I did my best.’ Constant affirmation of the work you have put in and knowing you have done your best were my keys to success.

-Ciara Vesey, Esq., M.P.A.
Twitter: @CiciLaw
www.linkedin.com/in/cvesey

Test, test, and test.

-Anonymous

The best way to prepare for the bar exam is to pace yourself, keep it simple, and develop a study strategy that plays to your strengths. Don’t waste too much time on very complex issues and stick to the basics that make up 80% of the test.

-Inna Kraner, Esq.
Managing Editor
The Expert Institute
www.TheExpertInstitute.com

Studying for and passing the bar exam is one of the most important steps to becoming a lawyer. It is often stressful, time consuming, and challenging. However, by properly preparing you can give yourself the best chance possible to pass the test on the first attempt.
First, give yourself ample time to study. Many law students feel a great amount of relief after their 3L year ends, typically in late April or early May. However, the journey is not yet complete. While it can be appropriate to relax for a few days, it can be useful to transition almost immediately into studying. This helps keep the bar taker focused on the goal, passing the exam. Too long of a break after a 3L year can make it more difficult to get back into a comfortable studying mode and can decrease the amount of time the student has to prepare.

Second, take a bar prep course. While bar prep courses can be very expensive, it is well worth the investment. That is how students should look at the course, as an investment. By paying for a bar prep course you increase your chances of becoming a lawyer faster. If you fail the bar exam the first time, while not the end of the world, you could be delayed in getting a job - which would ultimately cost you far more money than the few thousand it costs to take the bar exam.

Third, talk to people from your own school who have taken the test before. By talking to people who took the bar exam from your own school in the past, it can help identify areas of study that might need special attention. Not every school focuses on the same subjects with the same amount of rigor. Some schools or professors might prepare you better for contract law than tort law. As such, it is helpful to speak with people that went through the same program as you did. These people can help identify the areas of the bar exam that might be more challenging to you and need extra preparation.

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Four, live a healthy lifestyle. Sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, and lack of exercise can all decrease your studying and test taking performance. As such, when studying for the bar exam, try to maintain the healthy lifestyle you had before bar exam preparation.

Five, do what makes you feel comfortable. If you graduated law school you have what it takes to pass the bar exam. Now you just need to spend a few more months preparing. However, everyone does not prepare the same way - some people prefer the outlined materials, some prefer group discussions, and some enjoy the live lectures. After three years of law school you should realize how you study the best. Stick to that, as it is not time for drastic life changes.

-Jamie Hopkins, Assistant Professor of Taxation | Academics
The American College
TheAmericanCollege.edu

Whenever I’ve been asked about preparing for the Bar exam, I respond by saying that they need to treat it like a job - put in your 8-9 hours a day (built-in coffee breaks and a lunch break) and concentrate during those hours. When you’re done, go home, relax, spend time with family and friends. On the weekends, put in a few hours each day, but spend time away from the books too. The summer after graduating from law school is likely to be the last time that you will have three months off. So study hard, but make it a point to enjoy that time too.

-Alex K. Ross, Esq.
Levy Sonet & Siegel, LLP

I am not an attorney, but I treat law school students for test anxiety with therapeutic hypnosis. I would advise anyone sitting for it to Google a certified hypnotherapist in their area to prepare for the mental/emotional/psychological aspects of the marathon.

The main things we work on are:

1. Test taking strategies for the multi-state portion. (This seems to be most people’s Waterloo.)
2. Getting in touch for your reasons why you want to become an attorney. When you are really clear on the "why", the "how" seems to come.
3. Focusing on actually enjoying the challenge. May sound crazy, but most law schools negatively
'hypnotize' law students with all the failure statistics. I turn them around to focus on being in the success stats.

4. I also focus on healthy habits to have a stronger body-mind connection for this event...Bar takers are like athletes in training.

5. We also focus on gratitude. Not everyone comes this far. You are very lucky to have this opportunity to make your dreams come true.

-Nancy B. Irwin, PsyD, C.Ht.
Therapist/Clinical Hypnotist/
Speaker/Author
www.drnancyirwin.com

First and foremost, if you are not employed yet when studying for the Bar, utilize all of your available time! There are thousands of sample bar questions available for review.

Second, if you can financially, sign up and attend a live Bar review. BarBri was the original, but in recent years many compositors have entered the market, all with high success rates. The in-person class will force you to abide by a schedule in your studies. Remember, these guys teach people to ace their tests for a living, so if you are paying for the class, follow the courses outline completely. These course materials come with more sample questions than you will ever be able to do.

Finally, if you learn better from a book than from lectures, or if you must work during Bar studies, consider going on EBAY or another site and buying used BARBRI materials and PMBR materials. These come with audio CD’s, and are truly everything you need. I know of one individual who was living in Arkansas and studying for the Florida Bar exam. He bought the materials online, studied for and passed the Florida Bar, and then sold the materials again online for the same price he originally purchased the materials for.

Christian Denmon, Founding Partner
Denmon & Denmon A Personal Injury, Divorce, and Criminal Defense Law Firm
http://www.denmonlaw.com

There are several obvious things that you’ll hear from others:

First, the academic preparation: Take a bar review course. Even if it doesn’t really help, it keeps you focused on the types of questions you’ll face, and all your friends are taking it, so you’ll BELIEVE that you’re at a disadvantage if you don’t.

Second, the physical/logistical preparation: The obvious things, like a good night’s sleep, making sure you have 2 or more pens/pencils available during the test, not drinking excessive amounts of coffee/water that will make you need to take bathroom breaks, eating lightly before the morning sessions (if you can) and during lunch breaks, and so forth. But don’t go to extremes, as some people I know did, like booking a hotel room so you can stay near the exam site when it’s in your home town, in case the usual transportation systems aren’t working. They will be. (Obviously, if the exam is being administered 100 miles from where you live, then you should stay at a motel.) I’ll leave to others the issue of what kind(s) of food/vitamins to consume the day before and the days of the exam.

Third, and most important, the mental/psychological preparation, which consists of making yourself not worry so that (a) you can have a clear head and positive attitude during the exam; and (b) sleep well the nights before. I did this by thinking about my experiences working as a clerk at a law firm, and seeing all the really bad work done by other lawyers (our opponents, not the firm I was at). Knowing that those fools had passed the bar exam at some point reassured me that I could, too. That may sound arrogant or whatever, but it worked, so I highly recommend it. (If you didn’t clerk at a law firm, draw on some other examples, or your friends’ experiences, to achieve the same result.)

During the exam: Pay no attention to those around you. When I took the bar, there were several essay questions and we were given one sheet of lined paper (both sides) for each question. Having taken many essay exams in my time, I completely filled both sides of each sheet of paper about 2hours into the 3-hour
morning session, and having no desire to sit and re-read my work, or watch others write, I turned in my 8 sheets and left the room. (Which we were allowed to do.) Some of my friends were also in the room, and told me later that they thought I’d freaked out and given up. Needless to say, they were mistaken, but the point is that they shouldn’t have paid any attention to my early departure. Fortunately, I don’t think it affected any of their results.

One more thing: Remember that this is NOT like all or most of the other exams you’ve ever taken. It’s a pass-fail deal, so you’re not striving for an A or a B; all you’re looking for is the lowest passing grade in the state where you’re taking it.

-John O’Brien, attorney, Chicago Licensed in 1978, having passed the bar on the first try

I passed the July 2013 administration of the California bar exam on my first try, and I studied while my husband was working full time and I was taking care of our young child full time, as in, just a few hours each morning, during my son’s naps, and when I could grab an hour here or there. And I did not use a prep course. I knew what to do on exam day because I used The Goat’s Guide—see beagoat.com. The key is not to spend too much time learning every detail before starting to practice questions and essays. Practicing essays helps you learn the rules anyway. So I highly recommend everyone trying to pass any bar exam, not just California, forget BarBri and get The Goat’s Guide - it’s both a lot less expensive and more effective. And I’m not affiliated or anything. I’m just a happy California-licensed lawyer who’s really glad I used that method. (And this was my second bar exam, I was licensed in Illinois, where I went to law school, in 2010).

Sarah Kaplan Law Office, Green Business, Co-ops, and Social Enterprises
http://www.sarahkaplanlaw.com

'Dance with the one that brought you.’ For the most part, stick to the study techniques that got you through law school successfully. With that said, I strongly recommend a bar preparation course especially for graduates of law schools that taught more theory than practical law. Study hard, but pace yourself.

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-Clint Broden is a Federal & State Criminal Defense Attorney and Partner at Broden & Mickelsen in Dallas, Texas.
www.brodenmickelsen.com

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