

Preparing for and taking your law exams: Gary Slapper's top 10 tips

Revision for law examinations, and the taking of those examinations, is a notoriously difficult challenge. For success, a very rigorous approach to that challenge is required. Consider this short extract from Peter Cook as his character EL Wisty explains why he forsook a legal career in favour of one as a miner:

“Yes, I er . . . I could ‘ave been a judge, but I never ‘ad the knackin’. I never ‘ad the knackin’ for the judgin’. I didn’t ‘ave sufficient to get through the rigorous judgin’ exams. They’re very rigorous the judgin’ exams; they’re noted for their rigour. People come staggering out saying ‘My God, what a rigorous exam’. But I managed to become a miner instead; a coal miner. I managed to get through the mining exams, they’re not very rigorous. They only ask you one question, they say ‘who are you?’ and I got 75% on that so I was made to feel persona grata.”

Now in a minute I’m going to offer ten tips about how best to approach law revision, and the techniques of examination. But before I do that it’s worth a little disclaimer to the effect that ultimately whatever works best for you is the best way to proceed. So, while for some people having the smallest particle of dust on the desk or asymmetrically arranged furniture is a terrible burden, others can quite happily work and revise in the midst of a chaotic mess. Some people find when they’re absorbing material that they do that more comfortably by reading a great deal at a time and afterwards writing notes, whilst others prefer to write notes while they go along and so forth. So it’s worth remembering that you should never be engaging in a technique that feels uncomfortable as a method of revision. But when you’re planning how to proceed it’s worth of course taking into account what the accumulated experience of many others over different generations doing a similar thing has been.

Tip 1: The examination details

You shouldn’t proceed to revise until you have made absolutely sure about exactly what exams you’re taking, when those exams are, how long they last, how many questions you’re expected to answer in every paper and whether you’re expected to confirm to a particular rubric (like for example having to only answer two questions from section A in an exam and two questions from section B). And all those details of course you should carefully log in a diary or on a wall calendar or an electronic calendar; something which enables you to have an oversight of the exact time remaining between where you are and when those exams are and to notice at a glance what work you have planned between when you look and when you sit the examinations.

Tip 2: Planning a timetable

Taking into account the number of subjects in which you’ll be examined, say four, you should divide the time available to you between now and your examinations roughly equally to match those four subjects. You should exercise maximum self-discipline to stick to the time that you’ve allocated to yourself to revise on the timetable. Counterbalancing any thoughts that you might have to go out on some wild binge or excursion in the middle of your revision programme should be a picture of yourself turning over the examination paper when the invigilator says ‘you may begin writing’ and finding in front of you the very topic that you

would have revised had you not gone on this wild binge or excursion. What you do after the examinations, of course, is entirely a matter for you!

Tip 3: The allocation of subjects over your exam revision period

If you have, say, 28 days between now and your first examination, and you're studying four subjects, Contract, Tort, Criminal Law and European Law, then you will be looking to revise for roughly seven days for each of those subjects. It may be that you want to adjust those proportions a little according to your strengths or weaknesses among those subjects.

Some people who do very well in exams prefer to study any given subject, like Tort or Criminal Law, for several days in a row and some prefer to interleave study of one area with that of another legal subject. By interleave, I mean studying on alternating days. It's even possible to study the same subject on one morning and the following afternoon with other subjects in-between without becoming too confused. But to alternate between subjects on a tighter timeframe than that is very often quite confusing. One technique of giving a good structure to a revision programme is to divide every day into three parts; the morning, the afternoon and the evening, and to be always working for at least two of the three parts of each day. Well, certainly in the final run down to important exams.

Tip 4: Law revision and lifestyle

If you look at the people who do very well in law exams you will find that all human life is there represented; every conceivable lifestyle. So included in that corpus of people would be those who are very physically fit and do a great deal of exercise, alongside people who don't fit either of those criteria. The group would include people who work late into the night and get up late, and people who go to bed early and get up early or late. So there are no things that you can predict with absolute certainty about performance in law exams based on lifestyle. There are one or two things which are obvious probably for most people, and that's that if during the revision period your body is the receptacle for an excess of alcohol, drinks that 'give you wings', caffeine pills and painkillers you are statistically less likely to do well in the examinations than are those who do not relax with immoderate vigour during the revision period.

Tip 5: From overview to detailed study

It should be underlined that the revision process is just that; you need to *re*-vise, to re-look over study materials which you've looked at and studied earlier in the year. It is not a good policy to be reading for the first time during the revision period themes and topics that you have not studied before.

Law is of course a voluminous subject and it can be quite imposing for many people when they come to revise to be facing a five-, six-, or seven-hundred word text saturated in data and complex theory. It is therefore usually better to start with any subject, or topic within a subject, by looking at it expressed in its most simple form: by the shortest book that you can get, or the shortest version of lecture notes that you have. Once you've appreciated the general contours of the subject and its essential ingredients you can proceed to read again over the area but this time in more detail.

Tip 6: From bulk to bullet points

Many people have found it a very useful revision technique to gradually reduce, in particular stages, a large area of law to a few small digestible points or key words. For example, using the notes that you've made during the year, and the cases and statutes and articles that you've read, aim to produce a draft which digests in as comprehensive a way as you can (mindful of course of the calendar and the clock) all the points on the relevant topics. So let's say it is within Criminal Law: Homicide. These draft revision *notes* should be just that: notes. They should not be an attempt to cover every detail – you'd just be writing out the raw materials again – but they should be enough to use as an *aide-mémoire* in order to tell the story, if you like, to someone else. More of that anon.

When you have successfully digested, into a draft revision set of notes like that, all of the materials that you regard as being relevant to that topic it can be helpful to do the same process again but this time with a view to making it even shorter, to transferring the thoughts that you have articulated in your draft notes into even briefer points that could be fitted onto a blank postcard. This way you have therefore twenty key points about the entire law of Homicide which you could then use in the same way, as an *aide-mémoire* to be able to recount, looking at these trigger words, all of the important features of that topic.

Tip 7: Learning the cards

If you have reduced the entirety of a topic to ten or twenty key words or phrases that you can put on a card you should then aim to learn by heart what those ten or twenty key trigger name points are under each heading. And when I say key names I don't mean case names – although sometimes quite an important part of law will be designated by one particular case. I have in mind subtitles, that is subheadings of parts of your course. Take Criminal Law as an example and the topic of Offences against property other than theft. So this is a topic area. You might have reduced your draft notes onto cards simply with bullet points or little headings that say:

Deception offences
Obtaining property by deception
Obtaining a money transfer by deception
Obtaining a pecuniary advantage
Obtaining services by deception
Evasion of liability by deception
Making off without payment.

The capital letters of each of those if you embolden them will be D, O, O, O, O, E, M so this complex area of property law in crime can be reduced to the mnemonic 'doom' or a word that looks or sounds a bit like that. And because of its hilarious appropriateness this will be something that's possibly easy to remember. And so on.

Tip 8: The objective of total recall

You should be revising, learning this material and using these mnemonics to allow you to recount the whole area from memory without notes and just by using your memorised lists.

Tip 9: Reciting topics out loud as proof that you have comprehended them and retained memory of them

When you think you've done all your revision, you should, by any legal means, persuade a friend, acquaintance or family member to listen while you, without the use of notes, recount to them in a structured way all of the key points of every topic you have revised. If you falter in your explanation of any of these topics, or fall silent because your memory has failed you, you will know that you need to go back and revise that topic again until you are able successfully to teach a stranger to the subject about that topic.

Remember, not everyone finds law as exceedingly interesting and captivating a subject as you do. So if you can't get a friend, family member or acquaintance to listen you should still do the exercise but address the wall, the ceiling or a piece of furniture. The feedback you get from this will probably be less animated than you would have got from a person but it doesn't matter because you'll know if you have to stop because you can't explain something. And you'll know then that you have to go back and revise that area again.

Tip 10: Planning and timing

Finally, some brief points about taking the exam. Always plan your answers. Never move into a prose answer or an answer to a problem-based question without having carefully, and as quickly as you can in the circumstances, planned out the structure of your answer. And once you have planned it, stick as closely as you can to this structure.

Never get carried away in enthusiasm and overrun the time that you've allocated for any one of your questions. In a three hour examination requiring four answers it is in almost all cases much better to write four 45-minute answers than to write one exceptionally long and detailed answer for an hour and a half or 50 or 60 minutes followed by three answers that are inadequate because they've been composed in significantly under the 45 minutes you had allocated. If you have written a good answer to the first question that you tackle in an examination and you've been doing this for 45 minutes and you've been notionally awarded let's say twenty out of twenty-five marks by the examiner it's much more difficult to get that mark of twenty to rise to twenty-one, twenty-two or twenty-three by what you write after 45 minutes than it is to gain significantly more marks if you move on to the second question. In the same amount of time you may be able to achieve, let's say the first ten or twelve marks in the next essay or problem answer question. So you should complete the first question in a self-disciplined way on time and move on – as you should throughout your four answers – punctually to attend to the next matter.

Well those are my tips. I hope you do very well in the exams and that whatever legal path you take you end up in a better position than that occupied by the judge who tangled with the great lawyer FE Smith, who later became Lord Birkenhead. The judge said, 'I have read your Case Mr Smith, and I am no wiser now than when I started'. To which FE Smith replied curtly, 'Possibly not my Lord, but far better informed'.