

# TEXASLAW

Student Affairs Office

## Evaluating Your Exam Answers

One of the best methods for improvement of grades from Fall to Spring semester is to do a careful evaluation of your exam answers. Many times students want to just move on from Fall semester and start over in Spring; however, that avoidance won't change your performance. Telling yourself that you just need to "study more" also doesn't help. You need a specific plan of action. Use the strategies listed below to help you create that plan.

Step 1: Retrieve your exam answer. Contact your professor's assistant for instructions on how to get your answer.

Step 2: Read through the Exam Diagnostics (page 2).

Step 3: Read your answers and try to identify any problems. If you think it would be helpful, have another student read your essay for feedback. If your exam was multiple choice and essay, figure out which part you did better on.

Step 4: Make an appointment to confirm your diagnosis of your answer issues with your professor. Let your professor know why you're coming; attaching a scan of your answer to the email is helpful. Go in with specific questions and observations. Take notes during the meeting.

Step 5: The fastest way to improve your overall performance is to look for trends. Do this by meeting with at least two of your professors regarding your performance. Compare notes from the meetings and look for similar problem areas. Work on these problem areas first. Was it that you didn't state a concise rule? Didn't know the law well enough? Didn't explain your analysis? Were too conclusory?

When deciding which exams to review first, try to select exams where you thought your knowledge of the material was relatively solid.

Step 6: Once you have confirmed your problem(s), consult with Exam Diagnostics. Read through the suggested remedies and choose to do at least one. Make plans to incorporate the remedy into your study routine.

Step 7: Monitor your progress by working with your professors, taking practice exams, and if necessary, working with commercial materials.

Step 8: Above all, remember that you are not your grades.

# EXAM DIAGNOSTICS

First, meet with at least two of your professors from the Fall semester regarding your exam answers. Email to set up a time to meet, and let them know why you're coming in. If you've already picked up your answer, include a PDF of the answer with your email so your professor has time to review it before come in to see him/her.

These questions are examples of what you should ask. Do not treat this conversation with your professor as a list of questions to check off. Your meeting should be a discussion about the exam. Ask follow up questions. This list merely gives you a place to begin when meeting with your professors.

Remember that it's not only your meetings with professors that will help you diagnose problems with your answers. You also need to ask yourself questions. Review your answer. Look for whether you think you clearly stated rules, applied those rules to the determinative facts and came to a clear conclusion. Do this BEFORE your meeting with your professors. If you believe you did all of these things but your professor does not, you need to determine how to make your answers more clear.

Most importantly, you

## **Questions to ask yourself:**

1. Start by asking yourself all of the questions on the professor list below. Try to objectively analyze your own answer.
2. Did you finish all of the questions on the exam? Not did you write something, but did you devote the proper amount of time to each?
3. Were your outlines complete? Did you devote the time necessary to make your outline a learning tool, rather than focus on it as finished product?
4. Are your multiple choice exam grades generally the same as your essay exam grades? If not, which are higher?
5. Is your legal writing grade higher than your essay/multiple choice exam grades?
6. Did you devote the proper amount to time to doing practice exams?
7. Did you do better on open book or closed book exams? How can you modify your study strategies to better perform?

## **Questions to ask your professor:**

1. Did I spot all of the issues?
2. Did I discuss issues in a logical sequence?

3. Did I state the rule being applied to the issue?
4. Did I accurately state the rule? Did I know the law?
5. Did I state the relevant facts?
6. Did I argue, or explain, how the rule applies to the relevant facts?
7. Where appropriate, did I make a reasonable counter-argument? Did I miss counter-arguments?
8. Did I organize my exam answer so that it is easy to read and follow?
9. Did I spend too much (or not enough) time on any one question/issue on the exam?
10. Did I devote too much space to introductory or general observations that do not bear directly on the question?
11. Did I focus on the call of the question?
12. Did I state a clear conclusion?
13. In areas where it's clear that I know and understand the law, is the answer complete?
14. What would be your best suggestion for me to improve my performance?

## **What to do with the results of your meetings and self-examination:**

1. Did I spot all of the issues?

### Missed an issue:

- Did you know how the issue would appear in a fact pattern? If not:
  - When briefing, pay attention to fact patterns. Look for similarities.
  - Read practice exams/questions and outline for issues.
- Were you aggressive and systemic in looking for issues? If not:
  - When reading/briefing, pay attention to key action words associated with the issue.
  - Read practice exams/questions to get familiar with key action words associated with the issue.

2. Did I discuss the issues in a logical sequence?

### No logical flow and sequence of issues:

- Did you know, how and when, one issue would relate to another issue? If not:
  - When reading/briefing, pay attention to information on related issues.
  - When outlining, place information on related issues in the margins of your outline.
  - Before the exam, piece the “body of law” together.
  - Look for logical flow and sequencing of issues.
  - Read practice exams to note which issues frequently appear together.

3. Did I state the rule being applied to the issue?

No rule:

- Did you use IRAC or a version thereof? If not:
  - IRAC: Issue, Rule, Analysis, Conclusion
  - Remember that not all professors are fans of the formulaic IRAC format, but that you always need to state a clear rule.
  - Write practice exams. Review them and highlight the rule statements you use for each issue you discuss. Evaluate? Is it correct? Is it clear?

4. Did I accurately state the rule?

Inaccurate rule:

- Did you memorize and understand the rule? If not:
  - When reading/briefing, extract the rule.
  - In lecture, note how the professor states the rule and works with it.
  - When outlining, state the rule as you intend to use it on the exam, accurately and concisely.
  - Memorize rules – even if it’s an open book exam, you need to know rules well enough to work with them easily. And as you already know, you don’t have a lot of time during exams to be looking up information.

5. Did I state the relevant facts?

No facts:

- Facts should be included in an issue statement (if you’re using IRAC) AND should be discussed in the analysis section. Practice.

Cannot identify relevant facts:

- Did you know which facts were relevant to match with the rule? If not,
  - When reading/briefing, pay attention to the type of facts that are matched with the rule.
  - In lecture, listen to the type of facts the professor uses in varying the hypothetical. If changing certain facts changes the answer, those are relevant/determinative facts.
  - When outlining, list the types of facts that are relevant to the rule.

- Read practice exams/model answers and note the type of facts that are matched with the rule.

6. Did I argue, or explain, how the rule applies to the relevant facts?

No argument:

- Write practice exams and highlight where you make arguments. Evaluate whether you are just re-stating the facts from the question or actually using the facts and the rule to make an argument.

Inappropriate argument:

- Did you know how to make the argument that the relevant facts matched, or satisfied, the rule? If not,
  - When reading/briefing, pay attention to how the rule was applied to the relevant facts.
  - In lecture, pay attention to how the professor applied the rule to the relevant facts.
  - When outlining, pay attention to the different ways the courts have applied the rule to various fact situations.
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7. Where appropriate, did I make a reasonable counter-argument?

No counter-argument:

- Practice writing answers that argue both sides of an issue. Always look for holes in your own argument and address them.

Inappropriate counter-argument:

- Did you spend enough time to outline and visualize your answer before writing? If not,
  - When outlining, list the type of facts that are relevant to the counter-argument
- Did you know which facts were relevant to the counter argument? If not,
  - Same rules apply to determining relevant facts to a rule. When reading/briefing, in lecture, and when outlining, pay attention to how courts and your professor make counter arguments and which facts give rise to them.

8. Did I organize my exam answer so that it is easy to read and follow?

Poor format:

- Was your professor able to easily read your answer? If not,
  - Practice creating a mini-outline before actually writing your exam answer. Organize before you write.
  - Practice using headings and transition words.

9. Did I spend too much (or not enough) time on any one question or any one issue?

Improper time management:

- Did you answer all of the questions on the exam? If not,
  - Practice answering questions under the time limits given.
  - If a professor gives you point distributions on an exam (question 1 is worth 50 points, question 2 is 25, etc.) take the time to add up all points and distribute your time accordingly.
  - NOTE: **It is easier to LOSE points on a question by not spending enough time on it than it is to GAIN points by spending too much time on a question.** Remind yourself of this when you're tempted to keep writing on a question when your time for that question is up.

10. Did I devote too much space to introductory or general observations that do not bear directly on the question?

Restating the question:

- Did you spend a lot of time reviewing the given facts without using those facts in analysis? If so,
  - Practice answering questions. Review and highlight where you use facts from the question in application to a rule. If there's no rule/argument attached to fact statement, get rid of it.
  - The professor wrote the question. S/he doesn't want you rewrite the facts; your job is to use the facts needed to make a legal argument.

11. Did I focus on the call of the question?

Non-responsive answer:

- Did you understand the question? If not:
  - Practice reading exam questions.
  - Know who your professor is asking you to be. Know which law applies, and be sure to look for clues and buzzwords in the question that can help you figure out what your professor is asking.

Note that many of the strategies suggested require that you practice. Practice reading questions, practice outlining an answer, practice spotting issues, practice creating concise rule statements, etc. Remember that old exam questions are available at [https://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/past\\_exams/](https://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/past_exams/). For purposes of practice or becoming more familiar with how law school exam questions are asked in general, you do not need only use your professor's old exams. Of course, those are the exams you should focus on at the end of the semester and write full answers. However, over the course of semester, it can be helpful to look at topical exam questions to familiarize yourself with HOW these questions can be asked.

*Modified from [Evaluating and Diagnosing Student Performance](#), Jennifer Kamita and Marty Peters, LSAC Academic Assistance Training Workshop, University of Denver, June 13-16, 2012*