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Academic Skills Program

**How to Learn from Past Exams**

**STEP ONE: SELF-ASSESSMENT**

Use the following chart to help you compare your exam answer to a sample answer or exam memo. Three or more “no” responses in any of the below buckets indicates that you should consider changing your study habits to work on the appropriate skill. Contact your ASP fellow or Professor DiGennaro (ddigennaro@law.berkeley.edu) for help identifying and structuring new habits that will build this skill as you move through content for this semester.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Yes/No** | | **Skill Bucket** |
| **Knowledge Gaps** | | |
|  | | Did I describe the rule accurately? |
|  | | Did I understand the intricacies of each element of the rule? |
|  | | Did I address defenses? |
|  | | Did I apply the correct rule to the correct issue? |
|  | | Did I include irrelevant information in my argument (did I write a treatise about the law instead of arguing about the issue?) |
|  | | Did I address accurate policy considerations when discussing the application of each rule? |
|  | | Did I address the relevant sources of law (statute versus common law, state decision versus Supreme Court decision, any persuasive or binding restatements?)? |
| **TOTAL NO =** | | |
| **Analytical Gaps** | | |
|  | | Did I catch the majority of the issues in the issue spotter? |
|  | | Did I address counterarguments/defenses? |
|  | | Was I persuasive? |
|  | | Did I explain my inferences? |
|  | | Did I go through my analysis of the issues in the correct order? Was there a foundational determination that would alter the course of my analysis that I missed? |
|  | | Did I address any relevant policy considerations? |
|  | | Did I think about practical impacts of the issue spotter? |
|  | | Did I discuss all relevant issues of law (that is, did I not ignore any major areas of law I should have been cognizant of)? |
|  | | Did I support my argument with similar fact patterns or concepts from relevant cases/scholarly articles covered in class? |
| **TOTAL NO =** | | | |
|  | |  | |
| **Writing Gaps:** | | | |
|  | | Was my exam written clearly? | |
|  | | Could you follow my argument? | |
|  | | Was my writing persuasive? | |
|  | | Did I use headings/topic sentences/conclusions? | |
|  | | Did I use short sentences and short paragraphs? | |
|  | | Was I consistent in my argument/assertions? If not, did I explain the inconsistency? | |
|  | | Did I write to address the “call of the question”? | |
| **TOTAL NO =** | | | |

**STEP TWO: REQUEST A MEETING WITH YOUR PROFESSOR**

Please note that in large classes, your professor might not be able to meet with students individually to discuss exams. Professors may instead offer an exam memo or a lunchtime session to debrief the exam. You can, however, email your professors to ask whether they can meet with you. Be sure to note that you understand if they do not have the bandwidth to do so.

**Why meet with your professor?**

* Identify your strengths and weaknesses from the professor’s perspective, and improve them for your next exam.
* Understand how professors evaluate exams.
* Build relationship with professor for future mentorship.

**How should I prepare for the meeting?**

* Review your exam. See if a version with your professor’s comments is available in the law library. Otherwise, review your personal copy.
* Isolate a portion of the exam for your professor’s review. You’re unlikely to have time to review the entire exam. Otherwise, ask the professor to isolate a portion of the exam he/she feels is representative of your overall exam for you two to discuss.
  + Using the chart above, review your exam against a sample answer or exam memo.
  + Identify and write down any specific questions you have.
* Know what you want to get out of the meeting.
* Email the professor.
* Prior to the meeting:
  + Print two copies of the exam (for you and for your professor).
  + Have a list of concrete questions to ask and know why you are asking each question (*e.g.*, Question: Did I explain my inferences in the exam?” Why I’m asking that question: to understand whether the inferences I was trying to explain came through to the professor. If not, why they didn’t make sense?)

**How should I approach the discussion during the meeting?**

* Be calm, courteous, and grateful.
* Be clear that you are not there to dispute your grade.
* Rephrase what you are hearing from your professor in your own words to make sure you understand what they are saying.
* Repeatedly express your gratitude for their advice.
* If the feedback is easy to execute, ask if you can try again on a past exam to test whether your ability to implement the feedback correctly.

**What should I do after the meeting?**

* Try to implement the professor’s feedback using an old exam or by rewriting same question. Practicing the new approach right away will help you learn it and be able to repeat it later.
* Think about what you did and did not do during the prior semester.
* Determine what you can change this semester and write down a concrete plan.
* Consider reaching out to your ASP fellow or Professor DiGennaro (ddigennaro@law.berkeley.edu) if you are feeling adrift, stuck, or confused.