

The Pre-Law Student:

How to Prepare for Law School

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
College of Law

Thinking About Law School?

Persons thinking about law school frequently ask what subjects they should take or what majors they should select in preparation for law school. In most circumstances you must have an undergraduate degree to be admitted to law school. However, law schools do not require any particular course of study or major as a prerequisite for admission. Whatever you pursue as an undergraduate, from liberal arts to business, from engineering to social science, from chemistry to physical education, from education to journalism, you will be eligible for law school. This means that it is never too late to choose law as a career. One of this country's greatest legal minds, Roscoe Pound, earned an advanced degree in Botany from the University of Nebraska before he decided to enter the law, and he subsequently became Dean of the University of Nebraska College of Law and then Dean of the Harvard Law School!

Nonetheless, there are things you can do to prepare yourself, not only for law school, but for the legal profession. First, let's examine the skills you will need to be a good law student and a good lawyer.

Three Basic Skills of a Lawyer

1. The Comprehension and Use of Language

Language is the lawyer's working tool. Lawyers spend their time drafting legal instruments such as contracts or statutes, engaging in oral and written arguments, and speaking to and on behalf of their clients. The lawyer, above all other things, must be able to communicate in a clear and concise manner. In law school, and as a lawyer, you will need to speak and write logically and persuasively.

If you are thinking about law school, you need to develop your ability to write. You must be able to write clearly and correctly. You must be able to write to explain, to inform, or to persuade. You must also learn to write quickly. Law school and legal practice will require you to write often and under rigid deadlines. You should take every opportunity to work on your writing skills.

Oral communication is also an important skill of a lawyer. The law student and the lawyer must be able to present their views and those of their client clearly, forcefully, and persuasively. You must learn to speak using proper English. All of us are sometimes lazy when we speak, and we often avoid complete sentences or use slang terms. The lawyer, however, will speak in formal settings where proper English is important for effective communication. This does not mean

your speech has to be stuffy or boring. But you want your law professor or the jury to concentrate on what you say and not be thinking about your poor grammar or slang expressions.

You must also get over the fear of public speaking or of expressing and defending your views in public. All of us get nervous before a speech, but the more we speak in public the easier it becomes. And the lawyer is often called upon to speak in public. Do not avoid occasions to speak before an audience; view them as opportunities for improving your oral skills.

2. Understanding Human Institutions and Human Nature

Lawyers do not work in isolation. The law regulates human activity and shapes human institutions. It can be a force for accomplishing much good, but it can also be a force for oppression. The lawyer must have a keen sense of human values and an understanding of human nature. The lawyer serves clients who are often caught up in difficult or emotional circumstances, and must often respond with compassion, sensitivity, and understanding. The lawyer is also often called upon to predict how individuals will respond to certain circumstances. Thus the lawyer must be prepared by both education and experience to understand how and why persons behave the way they do.

3. Creative and Analytical Thinking

Problem-solving is an important part of a lawyer's work, and the good lawyer is one who can do more than just advise the client whether a particular course of action is legal or illegal. The lawyer is often called upon to help accomplish the client's objectives within the limits of the law. This requires the skills of research, fact gathering, deductive and inductive reasoning, and critical analysis. You must also be able to distance yourself from the heat of an argument in order to bring reason to a dispute.

These skills are important for whatever career you might happen to pursue, but they are central to the role of a lawyer. Thus the answer to the question "How should I prepare myself for law school?" is easy; do what you have to do to acquire and refine these skills. But what does that mean in real terms? Let's examine what course of study or major you might pursue as an undergraduate student.

Undergraduate Courses & Majors

Again, law schools do not require any particular courses or majors as a prerequisite for admission. Studies show that there is no correlation between undergraduate major and success in law school. That means that a law school cannot predict that history majors will do better than chemical engineers or

that political science majors will do better than math majors. What law schools will look for is whether your course of study was a rigorous intellectual experience which demonstrates that you have the academic skills and the intelligence to pursue a legal education. There is no "edge" to be gained by selecting one major over another.

Some universities permit you to declare that you are a "pre-law" student. However, there is usually no pre-law major or prescribed course. Often students interested in law school will form a pre-law club and engage in activities related to law. This would be something to look into after you have decided where to go to undergraduate school. But do not be misled into thinking that these "pre-law" students are all enrolled in the same course of study. Pre-law students can be majoring in business, one of the arts or sciences, or any other major.

The best major or specialized course of study for you is the one in which you are most interested. Good grades are an important criteria for admission to law school and chances are you will do best in a field that you enjoy. Mastering any subject in depth is a useful experience. Although your choice of major will not give you an "edge", the design of your overall undergraduate experience is very important.

You should take courses that will help develop your communication and thinking skills. You can do this in any major by carefully selecting electives that are designed to teach you to better communicate your ideas. You should also seek out courses that require you to use your analytical and problem-solving skills. In any area of study there will be some professors who concentrate on teaching you the subject matter of the course and other professors who concentrate on making you think about the subject matter. You will learn through the grapevine or from your undergraduate advisor which instructors make you think, and you should take every opportunity to take their courses in whatever field.

You should also plan your overall curriculum so you receive a broad liberal education. As we said earlier, a lawyer must be able to appreciate human nature and human values. Therefore, whatever your major, you should take some courses in the humanities and social sciences. And you should sample a variety of different disciplines. If you do not know much about how businesses operate, you might take a survey course so you will better understand the background when you take business law courses in law school. You might take a survey course in political science to get a better idea of how our government is organized. You should be aware that our world is becoming smaller, and lawyers are increasingly working in an international setting. You should take courses in undergraduate school that will give you an international perspective. And, lawyers who are fluent in a foreign language will unquestionably have an advantage in the years ahead.

You are not required or expected to take law-related courses as an undergraduate. Some students take an undergraduate course in Business Law or Constitutional Law to see if they are really interested in legal material. This can be a sensible approach if you are in doubt. But, these courses are often taught much differently than the same courses are taught in law school. Here again you will not gain an "edge" once you get to law school. You should consider whether you want to duplicate courses offered in law school when there are so many other courses that could broaden your overall education.

There is no better advice than to work hard and get the best education you can. Train your mind for rigorous academic work. Keep a balance in your educational experiences and explore a variety of subject matters. And develop your communication and analytical skills.

What About Extracurricular Activities?

Lawyers, more than any other professionals, are called upon to render public service. A high percentage of public officials are lawyers, and you will often find lawyers engaged in activities on behalf of their churches, neighborhoods, and communities. Lawyers are looked to for organizational skills and for leadership. You can begin to develop these skills during your undergraduate experience by participating in extracurricular activities. Of course, you should not allow these activities to interfere with your academic work. You will know best how much you are able to accomplish.

Some Other Matters

Do not worry if you are uncertain about what you want to do for a career. You will have a variety of experiences as an undergraduate that will give you better information about your own talents and interests. And you have plenty of time to make up your mind about whether law is something you want to consider. There are some persons who tell us they have wanted to be lawyers since the age of 8! This is rare, and most students, even after they enter law school, remain uncertain about the exact nature of their future career. Indeed, historically about 15% to 20% of those persons who graduate from law school never practice law. They report to us that they find their legal education has helped them in their careers in business, journalism, teaching, or in a wide variety of other fields.

You do not have to be a backslapping extrovert to be a good lawyer. Many of the most able, successful attorneys are quiet, soft-spoken persons. In law school, and in the profession, your success will depend on your ability to reason, your skill in communication, your judgment, and your willingness to work hard on behalf of your clients.

The legal profession is an increasingly open field for members of racial minorities, and competition for qualified minority law graduates is very intense. Women have rapidly advanced in the practice of law, and currently over 40% of law students are women. Older persons seeking a second career are also increasingly common in law school.

What Should You Do Now?

To enter law school you will need to start the admissions process at least a year before you want to enroll. If you intend to enter law school immediately after undergraduate school, you should start the process near the end of your junior year. You must take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) which is a national standardized aptitude test given four times each year. We advise students to take the test either in the summer (usually June) after their junior year or the fall (usually October) of their senior year.

We hope you will consider the University of Nebraska College of Law as you apply to law schools. We are committed to providing a high-quality education at a reasonable cost. Faculty members here take great pride in their teaching and are actively engaged in innovative legal scholarship. We offer a varied curriculum with an excellent blend of theory and practice courses. With a student body of approximately 400 students, we offer a good student-faculty ratio and a welcoming community of faculty, staff and students. We hope you will explore what makes the University of Nebraska College of Law a special place.

If you have any additional questions about law school or the legal profession, please feel free to contact our Admissions Office. We will be happy to visit with you. You can also tour the College, visit a class and talk to law students and faculty about the law school. We would also be pleased to add you to our mailing list and send you our bulletin and information about events at the College for the pre-law student. Just contact us!

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