

Law School Exams

Law School Exams

A Guide to Better Grades

SECOND EDITION

Alex Schimel



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Foreword

Joanne Harvest Koren

When I started the Academic Achievement Program at the University of Miami School of Law in 1994, I knew that I wanted to design the Law School's pilot academic support program as one that uses upper level law students as Dean's Fellows (or "teaching assistants"). I thought that if I could find 12 upper-level students who were willing to do just as I thought and said, we could implement a successful program to serve the needs of our 1L students.

I soon learned how naïve I was in my thinking. After hiring 12 intelligent, dynamic, clever, and creative students as Dean's Fellows, I quickly realized that they often had different ideas about how things should be taught, planned, and done. Happily, I also discovered that this was a very good thing. I was willing and enthusiastic about incorporating those students' ideas into my own plans. As the program has grown and developed, I have depended on the student Dean's Fellows to help me create and shape that initial vision into the successful program it is today.

In the more than twenty years since I created the program, I have been extremely fortunate to hire, train, supervise, and work with hundreds of successful law students who choose to spend a great deal of their 2L and 3L years working with me in the Academic Achievement Program. Among those students, Alex Schimel stands out. He is a remarkably intelligent and creative young man who has innovative ideas and a talent for teaching. In addition, he has the unique ability to make his clever ideas and methods of teaching and learning seem quite straightforward and sensible.

I first met Alex when he was a 1L student. He sent me an email thanking me for presenting a program that he found very helpful. The program, called “1L Boot Camp” was presented the second week of classes and was facilitated by a 2L student Dean’s Fellow. I invited Alex to come to my office so we could discuss the program. Even as a 1L student, in the second week of class, Alex was insightful, thoughtful and analytical, and he saw things with a clear and discerning eye. It did not surprise me to learn that Alex finished his first year of law school at the top of his class.

In the fall of his second year, Alex began working with me as a Writing Dean’s Fellow in the Academic Achievement Program Writing Center. We spent many visits talking about student learning, teaching, exam writing, and law school in general. He had observed and participated in the process of “law school learning” and he had some well-developed and interesting ideas. Although (and perhaps because) Alex’s ideas sometimes differed from mine, I thoroughly appreciated his insight and vantage point. I was delighted when Alex offered to assume the role of Dean’s Fellow for the Academic Achievement Program’s Spring Exam Workshop series. In that role he would have the opportunity to work with fellow students who were trying to find ways to improve their academic experience and acclimation to law study. The weekly AAP Exam Workshop sessions are voluntary, but students are asked to commit to the eight weekly sessions.

In discussing the planning of those sessions with Alex, it became quite evident that he had a theory and program model for exam-taking success. Hundreds of students flocked to the weekly sessions that Alex taught. Sometimes there was “standing room only” in the classroom. Word got out around the law school, and in the two years Alex taught the Exam Workshop, several hundred students benefited from insight into Alex’s law school and exam-taking advice. Alex’s advice has become somewhat institutionalized here. In fact, around the University of Miami School of Law, current Dean’s Fellows and students call Alex’s “IRAHNC” method of exam writing the “Schimel Method.”

Alex is an excellent and effective teacher. He presents useful and valuable lessons in an entertaining and matter-of-fact way. In writing this book, Alex shares his insight and his methods with readers, who will, no doubt, enjoy an experience similar to those who had the benefit of Alex as a classroom teacher.

Readers of this book are in for a treat. The book offers sensible, practical, and comprehensive advice and strategies for students new to law school—and also to students who may have already completed the first or second year, and are seeking alternative strategies for greater competency and academic achievement.

There are many books available that offer new law students advice and strategies for success in law school. What makes this book so unique is the vantage point of its author: An intelligent, successful, recently graduated law student, writing a book for fellow law students. It offers realistic insights, sound advice, and tried and true strategies. The book is sensible, practical, comprehensive and ... funny! In reading the book, the reader hears Alex's voice. It sounds just like Alex does when he speaks. Any law student would be wise to listen.

Joanne Harvest Koren
Director, Academic Achievement Program
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Preface

Michael Serota

Nearly a decade has passed since Alex and I first became 1L study partners at the University of Miami School of Law. During that tumultuous year, we met frequently, devoting countless hours to learning the art of law school exam writing. Our brainstorming sessions, convened at various patio-tables-turned-war-rooms scattered around the University's bright and sunny campus, ultimately produced the test-taking skills and techniques at the heart of this book.

Application of those skills and techniques to our 1L exams ultimately propelled Alex and me to the top of our class. When the dust of the 2006–07 academic year settled, we were ranked as the top two students in our class of 400, with a near-perfect academic record between the two of us and a collection of awards to go along with it.

After that year, Alex and I went in different directions. Based on my 1L grades, I opted to transfer to the UC Berkeley School of Law, turning down offers of admission at other top-ranked institutions. Alex chose to stay at Miami Law, where he continued to fine-tune and build upon our methodological approach to exam writing. Alex also disseminated his insights liberally, offering free—and widely attended—exam-writing seminars during his 2L and 3L years.

Since completing law school, the paths Alex and I have taken have further diverged. Initially, Alex—who ultimately graduated

from Miami Law *Summa Cum Laude* and Order of the Coif—accepted a position with a top Miami law firm. While at the firm, Alex quickly discovered that his true love was not for drafting contracts, but rather for preparing law students to succeed. So with that personal insight, Alex decided to devote the scant spare time his demanding firm job allowed him to write a book on exam writing, with the hopes of turning his passion into a career.

Unsurprisingly, Alex succeeded! His book proposal quickly received an offer of publication from Carolina Academic Press. Soon thereafter, Alex transitioned to a position as the Associate Director of Miami Law's Academic Achievement Program. The First Edition of *Law School Exams: A Guide to Better Grades* has since gone on to become a top-selling and frequently utilized resource for law students around the country, while Alex continues to counsel law students at Miami Law on a daily basis. (Alex also teaches a critical bar prep course, and has presented at numerous national conferences on the subject of law school academic success and bar passage.)

Unlike Alex, I have not spent much time mulling over the nuances of law school exam writing since graduation. However, I have, on occasion, reflected upon the outsized role that doing well on law school exams can play in opening up future professional opportunities for recent law school graduates. After clerking for two federal judges and working at two different government agencies in Washington, D.C., I've seen time and time again the importance of good law school grades to getting your foot in the door of competitive entry-level positions.

None of which is to say that finding success as a young lawyer is contingent upon being a top law student: A good work ethic and sound strategizing can open up doors for any law school graduate, regardless of class rank. Even still, there's little question that, all else being equal, better law school grades make it that much easier to achieve your professional goals, at least during the early stages of one's career.

As a result, today's law student is confronted with a choice: Learn the art of law school exam writing now, or endure the additional burdens of navigating a competitive job market with sub-optimal grades later.

If you're the type of person willing to read the preface to a book on law school exam writing, you're probably also the type of person who's interested in the first option. So with that in mind, dive into the following materials, take Alex's suggestions to heart, and make them your own. Be confident in your training and preparation, and, perhaps most importantly, strive to make the law school exam a labor of love.

Michael Serota

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