

CHAPTER 5 (ENGAGE WITH ENERGY):

Practice Exercises:

1. Name a time in your life when you felt your ability to learn was at a maximum:

Everyone's answer will be different, but should recount in an honest and insightful way a time in their life when they felt confident about their productivity. For me, for example, I felt very productive the first year I was a school counselor.

2. What was characteristic of your life at that time (in other words, what stands out in your mind as you think about that period of our life)?

Again, everyone's answers will be different and the benefit of answering is to begin to think about what characteristics you need in your life now to be productive. For me, I had a stable home life, good friends, a routine that was manageable, time to exercise and eat well, and a job I felt well prepared for the first year I was a school counselor.

3. What is your greatest study skill? How can that skill be used in the study of law?

People's answers will all vary on this question. Here are some examples: some students will cite their creativity, others their ability to pull things together at the last minute, others their work ethic, others their organizational skills. Each of these skills can be used effectively to excel at law – but almost all law students find they need to add new skills on to their old skills in order to excel (for example, if I am especially good at memorizing details quickly, I may find that I have to organize my time so that I memorize critical legal elements early enough in the semester to practice applying the law to fact scenarios on practice exams).

4. What is your greatest weakness in a learning environment? What can you do in the next week to minimize the impact of that weakness?

Students vary widely on their perceived weaknesses, but everyone has one (or several). Some common weaknesses are perfectionism, procrastination, preoccupation with details, aversion to details, a tendency to jump to conclusions, a tendency to avoid drawing inferences, etc. Some of the things students can do at almost any time to diminish the negative impact of their weaknesses include: talking with someone who does NOT have this weakness to learn how he/she avoids it; making a commitment to do less of the negative thing (e.g., make a commitment to make a deadline for one of your classes and meet it), etc.

The point of this question is that we all have management over our habits, and we can change them if we put our minds to it.

4. During what time of day do you have the most energy?

As we all know, some people are morning people, some people are afternoon or evening people, and some people are at their best late at night.

5. When your energy drops, what can you do to raise your energy that will not hurt your health in the long run?

Take a break, exercise, call a friend for a break, eat a healthy snack, take a walk, read a poem, dance, etc.

6. What type of exercise program can you participate in at least twice a week throughout this semester? Are you willing to commit to that exercise program? Why or why not?

Many universities have student recreation centers or private facilities nearby that will offer wellness counseling for students who have any trouble answering this question.

7. What teacher in your past contributed the most to your ability to think independently? What did that teacher do to encourage your independent thought?

Almost everyone who has pursued academics as far as law school has a special teacher who they credit with bringing their thinking up to new levels. Independent thought is part of critical thinking. If a student can't name a teacher, perhaps he or she can think of a mentor or a family member who has served that function. If the student has never been given permission to think independently, success in law school is going to be difficult and one-on-one counseling with your school's academic support professional would be a good idea.

Teachers encourage independent thought by listening non-judgmentally, criticizing shallow thinking, asking probing questions that go past recitation of information to the heart of the individual's own reactions, challenging a student to do his or her best. When I've asked this question, students often talk about their teacher's sense of humor and/or compassion.

8. Is reading an activity that you've enjoyed in the past? How might reading in law be different from other reading you've done?

Students who have not enjoyed reading in the past are likely to believe they won't enjoy legal reading. Students who have enjoyed reading in the past sometimes worry about giving up a joy they've had because reading is now becoming "work." Other students who have enjoyed reading in the past look forward to reading law and have chosen law as a career at least partially because they know it involves critical reading.

Reading in law differs markedly from almost all other disciplines (for example, requiring more ability to synthesize than reading in the hard sciences, more ability to attend to composite details than pleasure reading, etc.), but shares many things in common as well (esp. if the reading done in the past was high order critical reading).

9. What are your reasons for coming to law school? In what ways will earning a law degree be personally rewarding to you?

The purpose of this question is to get students to take ownership of their motivation for learning to read law well. Law school tends to become overwhelming to many students soon after the start of school, and having a reminder of why they're in this for the long haul is centering.