Virtual Office Hours: How to Improve Second Semester Grades

With Dawn Young, Director of Academic Skills, Adjunct Professor, and Writing Specialist at Chicago-Kent College of Law.
Agenda

1. Introduction - Why are you here?

2. Look Back to Move Forward
   a. Look Back at Last Semester’s Exam Performance
   b. Look Back at Last Semester’s Semester’s Learning

3. Develop an Action Plan
Introduction:

Why are you here today?
Introduction

- January - the time of year when most 1Ls have received their first semester grades

- Receiving your first set of law school grades may have elicited one or more reactions:
  - Excitement, relief
  - Confusion
  - Devastation
Introduction

- Fair to assume - most of you are used to some measure of academic success
- Your first semester grades may be a departure from what you’ve seen in prior years
- If you’re disappointed, your thoughts may start falling into a negative spiral:
  - I’m a lousy student. I’m going to fail out.
  - I don’t belong. I’m not smart enough.
  - I’m doomed to be a terrible lawyer. No one is ever going to hire me. I’m going to end up in a job that I’ll hate for the rest of my life.
Introduction

- If your mind starts “catastrophizing,” STOP this parade of horribles in its tracks!

- Catastrophizing = tendency to irrationally believe something is far worse than it actually is; creating worst-case scenarios

- How? 3 ways...
Introduction

First: Recognize that these feelings are *just thoughts*, not reality. Ask yourself:

- Is this catastrophic thought real right now?
- Am I *really* doomed to be a terrible lawyer?

Check the evidence - what evidence do you have for and against this thought?
Introduction

Second: Put it into perspective.

- You just started your law school journey.
- You’ve been thrown into a rigorous curriculum, a new style of writing, the Socratic Method.
- You’ve taken exams that were unlike anything you’ve ever experienced before.
- You’ve been up against a very tough grading curve where few A’s are given.
Introduction

Third: Take action.

- Take inventory of the positive.
  - When we catastrophize, we magnify the negative. Instead, take inventory of both negative and positive aspects of the situation. You’ll be able to get a more realistic evaluation of the facts.
- Focus your energies on what you can do now to move forward.
Introduction

- If you’ve made the decision to do what it takes to improve, understand you’ll have to:
  - devote time learning about what went wrong
  - develop a strategy
  - put in the extra effort

- Most importantly, you’ll have to be humble and honest with yourself
  - When we’re honest about setbacks → rich opportunities for growth!
Introduction

- Remember, disappointing grades are **not** an indication of poor ability or lack of intelligence.

- Instead, grades can give us information - our current approach isn’t working; it’s time to try something else.

- So, let’s unpack the ways you can learn from last semester, so you can **ATTACK** this semester!
Look Back to Move Forward:

Last semester’s exam performance
Review last semester’s exams

- Review your exam answers and obtain professor feedback - an incredibly effective learning tool

- Why is this so hard for some students to do?
  - Big scary professors!
  - Another reminder of lost-confidence, disappointing grades - avoiding negative feelings

- Remember: communicating with students is part of their job!
  - Students help professors become better teachers
  - They’re invested in their students’ success
Review last semester’s exams

So, here’s my recommendation, first:

- Ask for a copy of your graded exam answer; review carefully - paying attention to any comments

- If your professor provides it, ask for a sample model answer or grading rubric; review critically - comparing it against your exam answer to identify any differences
Review last semester’s exams

Second:

- Make an appointment with your professor to discuss your exam answers

- Prepare for that meeting to get the most of it
  - Make a list of questions/observations
  - Send them to your professor and attach a copy of your exam answer
Review last semester’s exams

Third:

- During the meeting, listen to your professor with an **open mind**
- Remember, the purpose of the exam review is not to make you feel bad, but to help you prepare for future exams
- Not the time to argue, complain, get defensive, or challenge your grade
  - Make sure your attitude is in the right place
- Great opportunity to get very specific feedback! Speaking about feedback...
About feedback

- Professors from University of Minnesota Law School conducted a study on 1Ls
- Certain sections of students given *individualized feedback on practice exams* in a course; other sections were not
- After controlling for factors (LSAT scores, undergrad GPA, etc.), what they found was remarkable...

- Experimental group outperformed the control group - saw their grades increase by ⅓ of a grade in **all of their classes** (every single one of their classes)

About feedback

- Feedback doesn’t come just from your professors; it can come from others, even from yourself.
- Reality - most will take the path of least resistance.
- Most won’t get any feedback at all:
  - Believe it’s a waste of time; would rather master the law.
- But, you can be different. You can take that additional step of mastering the law school exam.
- Be the one that: gets insights; understands this is a skill that can be developed.
Questions to ask yourself

- As you review last semester’s exams to diagnose problem areas, look for common patterns or trends.
- The following Qs can help reveal areas for improvement.

→ Did I spot all of the issues? Sub-issues?

→ Did I spend too much time on undisputed issues (instead of disputed issues)?
Questions to ask yourself

- Did I include all the applicable rules (all the elements)? Did I include any exceptions to the rules?
- Did I articulate the rules precisely and correctly?
- Did I include rules that are not relevant?
Questions to ask yourself

→Did I include conclusory statements (instead of providing supportive analysis)?

→Did I explain how the rule applies to the facts? Did I connect the facts to particular elements of the rules? (because)

→Did I include counter-arguments where appropriate? (however)

→Did I provide a complete analysis? Did I argue both sides of the issue?

→Did I address policy where appropriate?
Questions to ask yourself

→ Did I state which party is more likely to win and explain my reasoning?

→ Was I too inconclusive in my conclusion?

→ Was I too decisive in my conclusion?
Questions to ask yourself

- Did I spend too much time (or too little) time on a particular Q or issue? Did I allocate my time wisely?
- Did I answer the call of the Q? Did I understand the call of the Q?
- Did I organize my answer so that it was easy for my professor to read and follow?
- Was my writing free of grammatical, spelling errors?
Look Back to Move Forward:

Last semester’s learning
Reflect on last semester’s learning

- Once you’ve confirmed problem areas, it’s important to take some time to reflect on your last semester’s work.

- May be inclined to tell yourself: “I’ll just work harder next semester.” But, that’s not enough in law school - the reality is that everyone works hard.

- Instead, you’ll need to put forth the effort with strategy if you want to improve.
Reflect on last semester’s learning

- Take a hard and honest look at last semester’s study habits

- Reflect and take an inventory of your past learning
  - What did your study routine look like last semester?
  - What did you do day-to-day: before, during, and after class?

- Consider asking yourself the following questions:
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Managing time:
➔ Did you manage your time effectively?
➔ Did you start studying early in the semester or did you put it off?
➔ Did you outline as you go or did you wait until the end of the semester?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Preparing for class:
➔ Did you read your cases and assigned materials passively?
➔ Or did you read them actively with a critical eye?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

During class:
→ Were you engaged in class?
→ Did you participate in class discussion?
→ Did you take notes verbatim or did you take selective notes?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

After class:

→ Did you review your notes to fill any gaps to your outlines?

→ If you were confused in class, did you refine your understanding promptly (consult a study aid; ask professor, TA, study group)?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Studying with others:

➔ If you used a study group, was it productive? Was it a good use of your time?
➔ If not, will you reconsider that arrangement next semester?
➔ Do you think you’ll work more effectively alone or with a “study buddy”?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Using commercial study aids:
→ Did you use study aids as a crutch?
→ Or did you use them to help compare your grasp of the concepts?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Outlining:

➔ Was your outline riddled with case facts and unnecessary information? Did you include too much (everything and anything)?

➔ Or was it a customized, usable study tool to help you prepare for exams?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Talking with professors:

➔ Did you ask questions to clarify and solidify the material?
➔ Did you ask for helpful tips and information to prepare for exams?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Law school resources:

➔ Did you take advantage of ASP resources (workshops, review sessions, etc.)?
➔ Did you meet with TAs for study strategies and guidance?
➔ Did you talk to upper-level peers who were successful in past years?
Reflect on last semester’s learning

Testing yourself:

➔ Did you test your knowledge by working through hypos?
➔ Did you answer as many practice exam Qs you could find? (Be voracious!)

Note: Make this a regular habit! Get comfortable with it.
Develop an Action Plan
Develop an action plan

- After you’ve reviewed and reflected on last semester, create an action plan for this semester
- May look differently for each student depending on problem areas
- What remains true for all → importance of managing time
  - Your time and attention are valuable!
  - While we can’t stop time, we CAN take control of our schedules
Develop an action plan

I once asked a top student what strategies helped her succeed 1L year - “Treat law school like a job.”

- **What she did**: Got a good night’s sleep; woke up at a reasonable time; worked throughout the day; stopped studying at a certain time each night
- **What she did NOT do**: procrastinate, cram, pull all-nighters

- When in “work-mode” → study with deliberate, focused attention
- If you know you have an allotted amount of time for “work” each day, you have to make the most efficient and effective use of your time
Develop an action plan

So, what do successful students do? They:

- don’t just work harder and longer, they work *smarter*
- gain insight from professors and others
- attend review sessions
- ask questions
- test themselves frequently
- maximize their time
Last Words of Advice
Parting words

- If you still feel at a loss, get some help
- Contrary to popular belief, successful students didn’t complete law school entirely on their own; they got help
- And remember, one semester of bad grades doesn’t define you
- Not once did I have a client walk into my office requesting to see my 1L grades
- Please don’t waste your time + energy lamenting about last semester
- Instead, put all of that time + energy into something positive—like figuring out where you went wrong and what you can do this semester to improve!
Thank you!

Dawn Young
IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law
dyoung@kentlaw.iit.edu
312.906.5003