

Chapter 1

Exploring the Realities of Law School

In This Chapter

- ▶ Describing the law school experience
- ▶ Considering whether you're ready for law school
- ▶ Developing the law school mind-set
- ▶ Getting an overview of the law school years
- ▶ Mapping out your law school life

Never before has a time been more popular for being a law student! Law school applications are up significantly, and law school seems to be the “in” thing to do across the country, regardless of whether you're a graduating college senior or a middle-aged career-changer. If you're looking to take that first step on the intellectual journey of a lifetime, now is prime time for doing it. At first, everything about law school can seem intimidating and intense, but rest assured that this chapter starts you out on the right path by offering an overview of the entire law school experience.

Demystifying the Law School Experience

Many prelaw students are confused about what law school entails, because they may not know anyone who's in or been through the experience (I surely didn't when I applied). So, in this section, I fill you in on exactly what you can expect as a new *1L* (first-year law student).

Preparing for three (or four) years of blood, sweat, and tears

No one denies that law school is a lot of work. You have three (or four, if you're a part-time or evening law student) years of challenging classes,

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approximately 100 pages of reading every night, and only one exam at the end of each class that determines your entire grade. On top of the academic load are time-consuming extracurricular activities, such as the law review or a law journal, moot court, and the myriad other organizations you can join (see Chapter 13 for complete details about law school extracurriculars).

And in your free time (who said anything about free time?), you'll be expected to send out résumés and cover letters while prospecting for your 1L and 2L summer jobs (see Chapter 14) and postgraduation permanent job (see Chapters 15, 16, and 17). Sound rough? It can be, but if you're up for it, law school can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life.

Dealing with the law school setup

If one term were to describe how the law school experience is set up, it's "high school." With all your classes in one building, assigned seats, suddenly having lockers again, and the amount of gossip that spreads like wildfire, I'd have to say that high school is definitely an apt description.

Your first-year law school class is divided into sections, and you attend all your classes as a 1L with the same people. That can become trying when you have several *gunners* (people who constantly raise their hands, usually just to hear themselves talk) in your class. In time, however, you may grow to appreciate the comforting feeling of seeing the same faces, especially when it comes time to speak in front of 100 of them!

Surviving the Socratic Method

One of the horror stories you've heard about law school is true: Professors really do call on you in front of the entire class. The intense questioning that professors direct toward students is referred to as the *Socratic Method*, because Socrates (that famous Greek philosopher dude way back when) apparently liked to elucidate the responses of his students by asking them more and more questions rather than by providing answers.

The very thought of the Socratic Method petrifies most prelaw students (it sure had me jittery), because they're so unaccustomed to the idea. No college class that I ever heard of (or took) requires you to engage in a one-on-one interrogation session with a professor and sometimes even while you're standing up. Fortunately, by the 2L and 3L years, many professors tend to ease off the Socratic Method; courses are often taught in lecture or discussion format (see Chapter 8 to find out why).

But the Socratic Method does require you to really know your material; otherwise, you'll be embarrassed in front of the class while stumbling around for even a hint of the right answer. It also requires you to think quickly and

challenge your previously held assumptions. Overall, I think the Socratic experience was a beneficial one for me. Although at the time it may have caused a few ulcers, in hindsight, it made me more comfortable about speaking in front of an audience (the class) and more appreciative of the verbal jockeying that lawyers do in the courtroom.

Thinking like a lawyer

The whole point of law school is training you in the fine art of problem solving and legal reasoning. Lawyers are said to look at problems differently than lay people. When lawyers hear someone talking about an incident, they listen for the ordering of facts and try to discern the precise issue without getting caught up in insignificant details.

The concept of *thinking like a lawyer* (see Chapter 8) is a subtle change that comes over you most likely at the end of your first semester or first year. Some law students swear that it's never happened to them, but your non-law school friends and family are likely to be the better judges of that. Listen closely to their comments after your first year. Do you find them saying things like, "You're so much more analytical or logical than you used to be"? Or, do you find yourself thinking about everyday situations like a banana peel lying on the floor of a supermarket just a little differently than you did before law school? If so, you'll know that thinking like a lawyer has begun to take hold.

Assessing Whether You Can Make It in Law School

At a minimum, you need to have a love for learning and a penchant for studying — plenty of studying — to succeed in law school. In addition, successful law students

- ✓ Manage their time effectively
- ✓ Don't succumb to procrastination
- ✓ Are strong writers (or willing to put in the time to improve)
- ✓ Get reading done in a timely manner
- ✓ Prepare for each day's class
- ✓ Juggle multiple tasks simultaneously
- ✓ Sometimes delay gratification (In other words, they put off going out for the evening to spend extra time getting their criminal law outline in better shape.)

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Similarly, they (meaning full-timers) can put in time on an extracurricular activity like moot court or a law journal (see Chapter 13) without sacrificing the quality of their schoolwork. Extracurricular activities like these aren't required, but come highly recommended because they're great preparation for legal jobs.

Going part time versus full time

If you need to work full time to support yourself, avoid excessive post-law school debt, or pay tuition, you can consider opting to go to law school in the evenings or part time during the day. Most part-time and evening programs run four years, instead of the traditional three.

Part-time law students face challenges that their full-time peers don't. Part-time students need to make sure they have enough time to handle the often-overwhelming responsibilities of school, full-time work, and household and family responsibilities. Often, they have their hands too full to participate in some of the traditional extracurricular activities, such as law reviews/law journals and moot court.

Evaluating your study skills

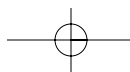
Law school, like most other graduate programs, requires you to really buckle down and study. But studying in law school doesn't mean the kind of last-minute studying that may have worked well for you in college. Studying for law school classes is more of a little-bit-each-day-of-the-semester sort of studying that keeps you up to speed (prevents you from falling behind) and that enables you to absorb as much information as possible.



If you don't already have these kinds of study skills, you need to gain them quickly before law school starts; otherwise, you'll find yourself struggling to keep up. See Chapter 9 for some hints on developing successful law school study skills.

Managing the pressure

Being completely stress-free in law school is next to impossible (but see Chapter 7 for tips on not "sweating the small stuff" too much). If you're not looking for a summer job, you're worrying about your note (student article) for the law journal or finishing up your corporations outline (see Chapter 9 for more about creating outlines). On top of that, the pressure of one exam (see Chapter 11) determining your entire grade can become unbearable toward the end of the semester, when the stress *really* piles on.



Gaining a good sense of time management before entering law school is your best protection against this disabling kind of stress, because the pressure is constant while you're in law school.

Considering Other Important Factors before Deciding on Law School

Enrolling in law school isn't something that you can do on a whim (or because you don't know what else to do with your college degree). You must take into account whether spending three (or four) years of your life (and a bunch of money) engaged in the study of a discipline that realistically may not land you the job of your dreams right off the bat is really worth it.



Doing your research as a prelaw student is key. Talk to as many people — law students, lawyers, and law professors — involved in the law as you can. Actually go to a law school or two and sit in on some classes. Do you like what you hear? Do some job shadowing and/or informational interviewing (see Chapters 15 and 16). Find out what your hosts like and dislike about law school or their careers. Only by being armed with as much information as possible will you be able to make a well-informed decision.

Taking a hard look at your financial situation

While attending law school, not only are you faced with around \$25,000 in tuition each year (depending on the school) but also with additional amounts for living expenses. You may even be faced with the costs (in time and effort and money) of moving to a new city, finding a new job for your spouse, or losing out on three years of traditional income.



Law school is certainly a financial sacrifice, but that sacrifice is mitigated when you're committed to taking advantage of the benefits of a legal education, including potential upward mobility, qualification for a broader range of jobs, and (sometimes) greater income.

Critiquing your reasons for becoming a lawyer

Because of the way many movies and TV shows portray lawyers, many people think all lawyers live glamorous, jet-setting lives. But the truth is that

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most lawyers fresh out of school earn what some people with bachelor's degrees make. The National Association for Law Placement (NALP) found that the median starting salary of J.D.s from the class of 2001 in legal jobs was \$55,000. Also remember to factor in lost earning potential during the three years of school (for full-time students) and tuition and living expenses.

In addition, keep in mind that gigantic, posh law firms aren't where the majority of U.S. lawyers find work. Instead, many lawyers are employed by firms with fewer than 10 attorneys, in solo practice, or with the government (see Chapter 15 for a rundown of all the settings in which you can practice law). And many prelaw students don't realize that large student loans often preclude new graduates from taking lower-paying jobs they'd really like, in favor of the ones that will help with loan repayment.

That's why you need to make sure that a sky-high salary isn't your only motivation for wanting to enter law school (of course, that salary may come eventually, after years in practice). Identify the other reasons, such as your love of advocacy, desire to truly help people, or interest in a particular practice area that are driving your decisions.



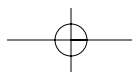
When you think about why you want to enter the law, base your reasoning on your observations of real lawyers engaged in their typical everyday low-profile work and not on high-profile cases that come around only once in a great while.

Identifying who's really behind your decision to go

The decision to attend law school needs to be yours, and yours alone. You don't need to give in because of a persuasive parent, because all your friends are doing it, or because it's a respectable profession in society's eyes. Instead, you must have your own reasons for pursuing a career in the law that have nothing to do with anyone else's opinions. All too many law students are unhappy in law school mostly because they went into it for the wrong reasons. Make sure you're not one of these people; otherwise, you're in for a long and depressing three (or four) years.

Glimpsing the Law School Experience Year by Year

Traditional law school is three years long (longer for part-timers), made up of the first, second, and third years, each with its own particular characteristics. However, the 1L curriculum is pretty much the same across the board at all law schools.



First year: They scare you to death

The notion of scaring you to death comes from an old law school saw based on the terror that grips many 1Ls regarding the sheer amount of work they need to do and the fear of being grilled in the Socratic Method. Getting used to the workload, the professors' interrogations, and the single-exam format takes some time and effort. See Chapter 5 for some great hints to help you ease into your first year.

Second year: They work you to death

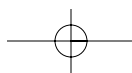
Your second year is often considered the hardest because you have many different commitments competing for your valuable time. You not only have your coursework to deal with, but you're also engaged in the long and involved process of finding a summer job in the legal profession (see Chapter 14). In addition, you'll probably be working on a law journal, law review, moot court, or other extracurricular involvements (see Chapter 13), which take up most of your spare time (part-timers may not have the time for extracurriculars).

Third year: They bore you to death

The third year is often the easiest, because by then you're an old-hand; you know what you need to do to get by, and you may not even care that much about hammering away at your studies when you already have a job offer in hand. More often, 3Ls are more occupied with their school-year part-time jobs at law firms or other legal organizations and job-hunting for postgraduation jobs than they are with doing the reading for class. With graduation (see Chapter 19) and the bar exam (see Chapter 18) right around the corner, they want to savor their last year of studenthood before moving out into the real world!

Charting the Law School Course

You pass through many milestones during law school, ranging from the first time you're called on in class to finding a summer job. Each one is important in your development as a future lawyer and each has its own triumphs and tribulations along the way.



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Choosing an area of practice

Some but not all law students choose an area of practice, such as tax, intellectual property, or corporate law, to informally specialize in during law school. This informal specialization means they take lots of courses in these areas, work summer or part-time jobs in these fields, and generally try to get as much experience as possible. The purpose of doing so is to figure out whether they'd enjoy actually specializing in that area in legal practice (see Chapter 16 for more information about various practice areas).

Law schools don't require any sort of formal specialization (you typically don't graduate with a J.D. in a specialty or "major" unless you're involved in a certificate program [see Chapter 3], which some schools offer), but if you know early on what you'd like to go into, building up a résumé in that area as soon as possible never hurts.

Landing a summer job

You'll have two summers in law school — your 1L summer and 2L summer. Of these two, the job that you find for your 2L summer is by far more important, because it's the job that sometimes leads to a permanent offer of employment (particularly at firms). See Chapter 14 for detailed information about the summer job search.

What you do during your 1L summer is not as important, but getting *some* experience in a volunteer position (often for course credit) with a court or nonprofit or governmental organization is common. Part-time students may have a difficult decision regarding whether to switch from their current full-time position to something else in order to get the necessary legal summer job experience.

Searching for a postgraduation job

Finding any type of job that fits your personality and tastes takes time, particularly in a tight legal job market. Although graduating 3Ls without a job offer in hand may feel a lot of stress, with the right attitude and a good dose of patience, job leads should soon start heading your way. In Chapter 15, I point you in the right direction toward job-searching success and let you in on a variety of job-search tips. In short, persistence and a willingness to tell everyone you meet that you're looking for work are keys to landing a great job, whether legal or nontraditional (see Chapter 17 for more on nontraditional jobs).

Passing the bar with flying colors

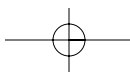
Becoming a practicing attorney means that you must take and pass the bar exam in the state where you want to practice law. The exam, which is offered in July and February, typically is a two-day affair and varies in difficulty from state to state. Generally, you study for the bar exam, beginning right after you graduate from law school until the day of the test. If you don't pass on the first try, it varies from state to state on how many additional times you can take the exam before that particular state disqualifies you. See Chapter 18 for a complete discussion of the bar exam.



The bar exam isn't something to stress out extensively about (I know, that's easier said than done). But the truth is that most students pass the first time. Taking a bar review course (see Chapter 18) and diligently studying its material can make a huge difference in your confidence levels come test time.

Graduating and preparing for your life as a lawyer

Even when you graduate, your work is far from over. In your job, you need to spend your first few years extensively learning the trade, putting in long hours, and attending continuing legal education seminars. Your life as a lawyer may not always be easy, but it usually is intellectually stimulating and very fulfilling!



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