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The Seven Deadly (1L) Sins

By Ira L. Shafiroff

With the academic year underway, first-year law school students need to be aware of the “seven deadly sins,” critical missteps to avoid lest they derail or even wreck their budding legal careers.

1. Replicating College

In college, perhaps cutting classes, cramming for exams and partying often did not adversely affect grades. That *modus operandi* is destructive in law school, however. The volume and complexity of material requires 1Ls to treat their studies like a full-time job, showing up daily with a clear head to do a solid day’s work. Yes, legends abound of some savant who never went to class and aced the course. Even if true (a big if), most of us are not savants.

Successful students, whether or not they were serious in college, get quite serious in law school.

2. Memorizing Rules

Rote memorization of facts and formulae serves students well from grammar school through college. Nevertheless, such “learning” has no place in law school. It is true that 1Ls have to memorize legal principles, rules and elements, but only in a loose manner of speaking. Understanding doctrine, its rationale and use, and knowing how various principles work together, is what is critical. Mastery by active learning, by being fully engaged in one’s studies and not succumbing to outside distractions (canceling that Instagram account is a good idea), is what hardwires the subject matter in the brain, allowing memorization to follow naturally and effortlessly.

Learn comprehensively and dump the flash cards.

3. Not Thinking

If understanding and engagement, not rote memorization, are the keys



New York Times

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to success, how does a 1L go about understanding and engaging the material? The answer is simple: by thinking.

Law is all about thinking. That is how we lawyers earn our money. We think of strategies to achieve our clients’ goals, and then we ponder the tactics to implement those strategies. Consequently, any 1L who briefs a case or outlines a course mechanically by just cutting and pasting as though still in high school is not thinking. Whatever the task, first-year students need to read quietly and truly internalize the material.

Go to a tranquil place, turn off the phone and ... think.

4. Failing to Embrace Ambiguity

College represents certainty. Non-science majors give back to the professor exactly what the professor gave to the class, while science majors solve for x . Learning and examinations are black and white, right or wrong. It is all so cozy.

Law school learning and essay examinations, the traditional mode of testing, are different. Maybe Abel owns Blackacre, but it is possible that Baker does. Then again, perhaps Olivia never even transferred Blackacre. The ultimate answer is unimportant; the reasoning

is. This can take some getting used to, but 1Ls must get comfortable working with gray. Gray is the lawyer’s reality.

Multiple-choice tests that imitate the Multistate Bar Exam were a rarity a generation ago but are now common on most first-year law school examinations. The classroom experience is soaked in gray — then along comes MBE-style questions on the final exam, and professors expect *the* answer. Law school is not supposed to be that way, and it is not the way of the real world.

Nonetheless, purposeful ambiguity still largely pervades the learning and testing process and outstanding 1Ls actually learn to enjoy the many shades of law school gray.

5. Seeking Shortcuts

We all like the easy route. That is human nature. Nonetheless, shortcuts are not the proper approach to law school. What is a shortcut? Reading so-called canned briefs instead of the assigned cases is one. Skimming a professor’s model essay answer instead of writing an original one is another. There are many.

We hear that the way to Carnegie Hall is through practice, practice and more practice. No shortcuts for child prodigies. No shortcuts for 1Ls.

6. Not Getting Enough Sleep

Many students cut back on sleep to make more time for studying. Commendable but terrible. No one thinks clearly when sleep deprived (and remember, the essence of law school is thinking).

Several years ago, the *New York Times* ran a story of a retired CIA interrogator, who revealed that he never once so much as touched a terrorist to gain information. Rather, he would deprive him of sleep for a few days. That always worked.

How many hours of sleep does a 1L need? The same number as before law school.

Sleep well — and think clearly.

7. Violating Your School’s Honor Code

Nothing destroys a legal career faster than a law school transcript indicating an ethical lapse. An honor code violation will not only delay bar admission; it will also become a substantial barrier to subsequent employment. From the first day of law school, 1Ls need to act, not just with honor, but rather, with the “punctilio of an honor” (*Meinhard v. Salmon*, 249 N.Y. 458, 464 (1928)).

Channel John the Baptist.

Avoid these errors, and prepare for a great law school career.

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