Advice for new law students

By Birju Kotecha and Helen Rutherford

Heading to law school? Congratulations! You are about to embark on a course that will challenge, inspire, and stimulate. Studying law will be exciting and possibly frustrating in equal measure—it will push you out of your comfort zone—and that’s a good thing, but be it your social conscience, career prospects, or curiosity, don’t forget why you were first attracted by the law. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic this year will be like no other, however your university will have a programme to enable you to study law via a mixture of teaching approaches. How ever you study, law will open the door to new opportunities and skills.

We know that amid the pandemic many of you will feel concerned about how you will be taught. It is likely the first term or semester will be mainly (or wholly) online. Some adjustment from the norm is inevitable but there will still be lectures, tutorials and plenty to read, debate and discuss. With that in mind, here is some general advice to help you navigate your first year.

**Be organised**

Be prepared for a breathless first month. In between meeting new people and settling in, you are likely to be inundated with emails about inductions, registration and events, both virtual and perhaps in-person. Then, before you know it, your studies will have begun, and deadlines will be on the horizon. Get organised. Manage your time. Whether you prefer writing or typing, try to find a workspace free of distractions. Write your own timetable to balance your studies with other commitments. If you are relying on video technology for classes, give it a trial run. Above all, find a routine. Some online sessions will be timetabled, and some will be recorded so set a schedule that works for you.

**Don’t be discouraged**

Every now and then expect to feel lost. Whether scratching your head about easements or promissory estoppel—at times you may feel you are 'not getting it.' That’s entirely normal and you won’t be the only one. Remember your A-levels were once a step up from your GCSEs. Embrace the challenge and enjoy it. Studying law can feel like picking up a new language: buy a law dictionary and keep a record of the words you have looked up. Lectures are where your understanding about a topic begins rather than where it ends—they are designed to give you an overview and suggest routes for further research and reading. Work consistently rather than cram and ask your tutors for help; it’s what we are here for.

**Prepare and participate**

Preparation is vital. If confusion is the problem, then preparation is often the solution. Start early. There is no substitute for reading the case law and no amount of last-minute googling will compensate for reading the original. Many cases tell fascinating stories—some judges write more clearly than others—so never assume reading will be dry and hard-going. Ask for support from your peers (they are not your rivals); consider creating a virtual reading group so you can study together. The hours may often be long, but the satisfaction of being on top of your work lasts much longer. If you are in an online seminar, take part and don’t be afraid to ask questions. Use the chat function and post a question on a discussion board; your tutors will appreciate your effort and curiosity. Your tutors love students who ask tricky questions and we love to discuss our pet areas of research—honest.

You can learn a great deal about the law and hone your legal skills away from formal teaching. Why not try mooting (a mock court hearing) or participate in a mock trial; getting ready for a moot or mock trial allows you to improve your research and public speaking skills. Perhaps join a debating society. It may seem daunting at first, but it can be fun, so give it a go. You can also make a difference by joining committees and organising events in your law school.
Read, research, write and reference

Start with textbooks. And then branch out—follow the footnotes and carry out your own research using library catalogues and databases. You will develop your independent research skills throughout the course. You will learn to use a range of sources. You will become familiar with databases such Lexis/Nexis and Westlaw so make sure you get the most out of them; sign up for a training session or speak to one of their student representatives (or become one). Your lecture notes are a good start but reproducing them in essays is unlikely to get you good marks. You will learn to analyse, evaluate and avoid fence-sitting. Structure your ideas and read your work aloud to make sure it makes sense. Don’t over-complicate things and don’t try to ‘sound like a lawyer’. Write clearly and simply. Keep your university referencing guide handy (you will soon know what that is): footnotes are easy to get right with practice. Start as you mean to go on—if you get stuck there will be help available in the library—ask!

The big picture

You won’t just learn the law; you will learn what the law is about—its potential, its flaws and why it exists. Speak up and don’t be afraid to criticise. For many of you, law school will be when you develop your political views and your perspective on the world. All law is political, and perhaps more so than ever before, our legal system frequently makes front-page news.

For instance, Former Justice of the Supreme Court Lord Sumption has been a vocal critic of the Government’s Covid-19 lockdown measures, going as far as to describe some of the early movement restrictions as like living in a ‘police state’. A little earlier still, the looming prospect of Brexit inspired Gina Miller to take on the Government in two notable cases that reached the UK Supreme Court. The Government lost, twice. Some critics now argue that judges have increased their power and are making decisions that ought to be left to those who are elected, a debate that is considered in Joshua Rozenberg’s latest and very accessible book: Enemies of the People? How Judges Shape Society (2020).

Read the newspapers, watch the news, listen to legal podcasts (ask your tutor for recommendations) and discuss the latest developments with your friends. You will begin to see law in a new light.

Legal careers

It is not easy to become a lawyer—it is competitive. Even in your first two years, you will find yourself in a whirlwind of careers talks, application forms and vacation scheme deadlines. As difficult as it may be, particularly during the pandemic, try to network; you could set up a LinkedIn account and see if you can get early work experience. Universities have lots of careers support and you can seek guidance from day one. Recently many lawyers have hosted online webinars dispensing career advice. See if you can find mailing lists to join so you can find out about such sessions in the future. If you can get involved with a free legal advice clinic then do so. If you are a member of a society, then join the committee and take on the responsibility for something. Start to build your CV. But if you can’t take part in these events—don’t worry—skills picked up in part time jobs or volunteer roles will all be helpful for your CV. You can ask your tutors for advice too.

Of course, a law degree doesn’t confine you to seeking a career in law. Up to 50% of law graduates enter non-legal careers where your skills are valued: management, consultancy, civil service, academia, banking, policing and many more. Work on getting a good degree. Find out what you excel at and if you choose a different path, don’t look back.

Self-doubt is normal

Finally, BE POSITIVE. Self-doubt is completely normal, but too much of it can overwhelm. Confident or loud students are those with a bit more self-belief and are unafraid of taking a risk (often they are simply hiding it well). That doesn’t always make them more able. If you are tempted by an opportunity then ask, what have you got to lose? Don’t let a fear of failure put you off. Law requires your arguments to be challenged and tested. You will learn the most when you learn from your mistakes.

All your lecturers were new starters once (including us). Do your best and if you are struggling, please ask for help and use the support your university will provide. Tell us about your triumphs too. Make the most of your time at Law School and don’t forget to enjoy it. Good Luck!