

## How to Write a Law School Outline

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***What is an Outline?*** An outline is a *roadmap* for the course created by the student that synthesizes a course's entire subject matter (including the legal principles, brief descriptions of cases, and brief public policy points) into a more logical and manageable order to aid in the student's preparation for final exams. The outline will be comprised of class notes and case briefs and other reading notes.

***Why is it important to create an Outline?*** A key benefit to the process of creating an outline is that it requires the student to spend time continuing to study the materials (thereby having the materials reinforced after each class session) and thinking about how the course materials fit into the larger picture. The goal is that, through creating an outline and thoroughly studying it, the student should have a better understanding of how the various pieces fit together.

### **How to Outline:**

**Step One (Create the Framework):** Start with your course syllabus to organize your outline (but tweak if necessary). Your professor likely made certain logical choices already when deciding how to structure the course material. The outline should be organized around concepts and rules rather than cases.

**Step Two (Incorporate Content):** Incorporate your class notes *and* reading notes into your outline.

- **Class Notes:** If the professor spends valuable time in class discussing a topic, the professor likely deems it important enough that it may be tested on the exam. Pay specific attention if the professor talks about certain public policy considerations that might be raised on the exam. The amount of space you give to a certain topic should roughly follow the amount of time that the professor spends discussing the topic.
- **Reading Notes:** Incorporate your reading notes to fill in the gaps. For cases, include only one or two points briefly summarizing the legal principle/rule with a quick note to remind you what the case is about. For example: • Commonwealth of Pennsylvania v. Leach (stalking case / vandalizing vehicle): "Course of conduct" established by proof of two related but separate events. Each time a stalker commits an act, as part of a course of conduct, the fear of bodily injury and ED increases.

**Step Three (Synthesize and Condense):** As you finish outlining each topic, re-read the section to synthesize the material, editing each section to remove wordy language and condense the outline. It may be helpful to keep one version of the lengthier outline and a separate version of the condensed outline.

**Step Four (Create a One-Pager):** Some students take the condensed outline and condense it even further, keeping the same general roadmap, to create a one- or two-page outline that briefly captures all of the concepts and legal principles.

***How long should an Outline be?*** An outline should be long enough to contain all of the necessary legal principles/relevant case summaries but short enough that you can read through and study it multiple times a day and commit most of the material to memory as you study it. The outline is supposed to be a *roadmap* of the course to help you in the preparation of final exams. A 100-page outline (even a 50-page outline) threatens to remove the value of your outline as a study guide.

***When should I Outline?*** It is never too early to begin outlining, although it is helpful to have some basic understanding of how the class materials and reading materials fit into the course. Once you finish a topic in the syllabus, you should have enough material to begin outlining that topic.

***Pro Tip:*** You should be maintaining your outline throughout the semester, rather than waiting until halfway or the end of the semester. Outlining throughout the semester (either after each class session or after a topic has been concluded) accomplishes two goals:

- (i) the class notes and reading notes will be reinforced in your memory as you force yourself to review the material and synthesize it into your outline; and
- (ii) you free up time to actually study your outline (instead of spending valuable time at the end of the semester scrambling to finish it) and, importantly, you free up time to take practice exams.



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