Create Study Outlines to Master the Bar Exam

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Bar prep outlines help you understand the broad structure of a legal subject. They are your resource for organizing information, making studying specific concepts more digestible and easy to apply—and giving you the peace-of-mind confidence you need for the bar exam.

Like any resource, however, it's important you know how to use your outlines. And, if you're serious about building yourself a rock-solid foundation of knowledge, you should seriously consider building your own.

Getting Started With Bar Exam Outlines

If you're preparing for the bar exam, chances are you're feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sheer bulk of information to be memorized and applied. The time-crunch factor is also an issue. Giving yourself too little time, or wasting the time you have, risks being unprepared come the big day. You want to make the most of your study time. This means working efficiently—doing the things that will allow you to retain the most information possible.

Chances are you already have a number of outlines covering a range of legal subjects, from your law school classes, prep classes, or other resources you've sought in preparation for the exam. And, if you're looking for some, Stanford University has a great resource page with downloadable outlines. You can also check with individual state bar associations and your local libraries for outlines that apply to nationwide, multistate tests and state-specific subject areas.

While standard outlines cover a broad range of information, they can be generic and impersonal, making them difficult to memorize. Below, we'll look at the benefit to creating your own outlines for better retention and relevance to your needs.

Custom Outlines = Custom Learning

When writing outlines in your own words (i.e. not copying text verbatim), your brain must internalize and process the information, which encourages comprehension. The act of writing also allows you to represent your new-found knowledge in a way that makes the most sense to you—which will also likely be the easiest to remember.

A key strategy for writing your outlines is to consolidate as much information as possible to the fewest pages. Write down only the key elements you must know. If your outline is 30 pages long, try to get it to less than 10. This forces you to be highly selective in the what information to record. In addition to improving comprehension, it requires evaluating information—which helps clarify relationships and hierarchies in your learning.

As you work to represent your exam resources, you'll also be able to focus your energies where you need them most. If there's an area where you don't have much experience or knowledge, spending the time to make yourself the best outline possible will help you identify what you need to learn.

An outline will be your mental resource for everything you need to know concerning a particular legal subject. The more work you can put into structuring the information beforehand, the easier it will be to apply when it comes to exam time.

Once you have your outline, refer it to others to make sure you've captured everything. And, if you come across additional topics while working through study materials and practice questions, add them in. Treating your outline like a work in progress will ensure that it's as up to date as possible with everything you need to know.

Writing is Remembering

Consider re-writing your outline from memory leading up to the exam. This will give you a really good sense of where your knowledge gaps lie, and will also reinforce what you already know, making it easier to apply come exam time.

A couple of strategies that can make writing outlines more effective:

Condense your outlines with each re-write. With each revision, your brain will need to re-process—rather than just regurgitate—what it knows into a new format.
Write your outlines using pen and paper. Studies show that writing by hand increases knowledge retention. There are many reasons for this. Writing by hand is slower and forces you to be more selective in what you record. Handwriting also adds a sensorimotor element to study which can reinforce cognitive processing.

Your Roadmap to Success

Once you have your outlines, you'll also be better able to schedule your own study plan. You'll be able to break down subject areas and schedule them to specific time allotments leading up to the exam. When planning your schedule, make sure to give yourself some leeway time—for sickness, or in case you need to review certain concepts more than once.

When it comes to bar exam prep, you want to give it your best effort while making it as low-stress as possible. You've already made it this far in achieving your legal career. While the bar exam may seem a daunting hurdle, it's also an opportunity to develop and reinforce good work habits.

About Clio

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