

Closed Captioning Ep 6. Understanding law school outlines.mp3

Carlos: Closed captioning for this episode is available thanks to the Office of Disability Service at the Syracuse University College of Law. Hello, everybody, and thank you for joining us today. My name is Carlos Negron. I am an academic success fellow and rising 2L. Here at the Syracuse University College of Law. I'm joined today by my friend and colleague Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Hi, I'm Elizabeth Boswell. I'm a rising 3L here at the College of Law, and I'm also an academic success fellow and we are here to talk to you today about outlining and law school.

Carlos: Yes, and this is something that is going to be important to your success in law school. So this might be one of those episode that you save or come back to during the semester. I suppose we should start with what is an outline. Elizabeth, let's start with you. What would you say is an outline?

Elizabeth: I think an outline is an overview of the entire course. So it's like one document with everything you've gotten from the course all in one place.

Carlos: That's a good characterization. I've always looked at an outline as a summary of the material I learned in, of course, and that's kind of the vision that I have when I'm writing them. I like to write it in a way that I organize all the information I have in my head from the class. And I had to be honest with you here, Elizabeth. I hate writing outlines.

Elizabeth: Why do you hate them?

Carlos: I hate them because they're so time intensive, and they kind of expose all of the times that I didn't take good enough notes in class or when I was distracted in class. I do love the end result. When I get to finish my outline, maybe do a little spell checking and restructuring. I love sitting and marveling at a whole semester's worth of work in

one document. That part I love. And that's kind of why we're talking about it today. Why are outlines so important? It's because they're going to be your main study tool going into exams? Elizabeth, do you think outlining is a good way to study?

Elizabeth: Oh, definitely. Outlining is the only thing I do to study. Like once we're done with classes, I don't go back to my books or my notes after the last day of class. So it's just me and my outline.

Carlos: And considering what a chore outlining is, a lot of people ask us, when is the best time to start outlining? Elizabeth, I know you and I have different approaches to that. Why don't you give us your take?

Elizabeth: So personally, I like to start outlining right after the first day or two of classes, which I know is in a super popular method. But like I said, I like to start outline early just to get a jumpstart on things because after a couple of weeks, it can be hard to catch up. And I just see it as another form of review, too. So.

Carlos: And if you asked 10 people, you'll get 10 different answers on this because it's very personal. Some people like to start right away because it makes it less daunting and it gives you more of an opportunity to condense later. And then there's people who wait all the way till the end of a course to begin an outline, which you know, is likely a bad strategy. But hey, everyone's different. I have some friends that similar to you, Elizabeth. They have designated outline days and every week come hell or high water. You're going to find them in the library at that time, outlining a week's worth of classes. I think that's a good strategy, but it requires a lot of discipline. My approach is very flexible. There are some classes where the units are very long, and I like to outline them as soon as I complete that unit to make sure I don't forget anything for criminal torts and common law. That's what I did. I made little outlines of each unit and then at the end of the course, I would revisit them and make a bigger master outline for other classes. I like to set designated days in my calendar, usually towards the middle of the course where I sit down and I make an outline of everything up to that point. Once the course is over, I return to my working outline and I finish it. Then I get started on condensing and once I can't condense anymore, I'm done. We're telling you all of this to remind you that

it varies person to person. What you're outlining strategy is and that you may have to experiment with different things until you find something that works for you. It might not be what works for your friend, but that doesn't matter. We all learn differently. Elizabeth, do you think you're outlining schedule helps you stay on track with the material?

Elizabeth: Yeah, definitely. So like, that's a big part of why I outline early, because it gives me another chance to review the material every week instead of just taking my notes in class and then like going home and not thinking about it until the next class or whatever. So like I said, it's another way of reviewing and making sure that I'm following the material and it helps me spot like, Oh, I didn't understand the stream of commerce or a specific personal jurisdiction. Maybe I should go to office hours or something. So it also helps me realize what I'm missing in my notes and what I need to focus more on.

Carlos: Do you ever bring your outline to class?

Elizabeth: I know, but like everything in law school, you just have to figure out what's best for you. Like I said, I never did that. I would just bring my notes that I took while reading, which I take notes in my book, so I would just bring my book. And that worked for me. But some people will outline ahead and bring their outline to class or something in between and, you know, more power to you. If that works for you, everyone's different.

Carlos: Which kind of brings us to our next topic, which is where do outlines come from? To me, outlines are a summation of three things. The notes you took from your reading, which likely includes some case briefs, the notes you took in class, and if you use commercial outlines and other supplemental information, anything you might have gotten from those sources. What about you, Elizabeth? Where does the information and your outlines come from?

Elizabeth: My outlines are pretty much my class notes and my reading notes, which would sometimes include briefs. I personally don't like using commercial outlines and supplements from outside of the class, but that's just me. Just because I feel like adding

to my outline from an external source throws off the structure of my outline. So that's why I don't like to use it.

Carlos: Ok. Interestingly enough, when I first sat down to make an outline, I struggled with trying to get the format down because I always saw an outline as that very rigid list with the Roman numerals, and I only use Microsoft Word to do it. All that costs me a lot of hours just struggling with the formatting. It wasn't until much later that I even allowed myself to do things outside of that bulleted list format without the timing. And later, I allowed myself to try to use other programs like Pages and Google Docs, and eventually I found a way to organize things effectively. Talking with your classmates and exchanging outlines is a good way to cut down on that or perfect your own structure. I'll never forget when my friends showed me that they color code some parts of their outline, like the rules they make them read, or if they have areas that they need help they they make them purple so that when they meet with their professors, they can go right to that area. Another thing that I like to do is structure is I like to create a table of content in my outline so that I can get to what I need quickly. How do you structure your outline to Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: It depends on which class I'm outlining for. Like some classes are very straightforward. I use like a Roman numeral one letter, a number one kind of method. Others I like to do mine maps for because it helps visualize how concepts are connected, especially when there are a lot of moving parts. I know some people like to flash card as a form of outlining which I've never personally done, but it's an option. So like I said, I usually either mine map or use like the straight up like Roman numeral type outlines.

Carlos: And for our listeners, because I know we're throwing a lot of foreign terms at you, we're going to include in the link here in our episode notes, Elizabeth outlines and my outlines. But a Maui map is just a visual representation of how different terms and rules interact with each other, like Elizabeth just told us. But it's a little bit more artsy than an outline, which is usually just a list. Elizabeth, I think you have a great mind map that you show me, and I think our listeners are going to really enjoy looking at that in our show notes. Another type of tool is what some students call an attack outline, and if we

haven't mentioned it already, the whole point of an outline is you're always condensing the information that you have learned and organizing it in a way that makes sense to you. After you finish your outline, you want to condense that outline in itself so that you can get it to probably down to one page, which is what we call an attack outline or an attack sheet. If I'm being honest, I rarely get it down to one page, condensing is not one of my strengths, but if you get a chance to look at Elizabeth's attack outline, which I think is really good, that'll help you get the idea. And even if you can't get it down enough to one page, just trying to make an attack outline can be useful because the whole act of creating the outline and condensing it, you're doing all that while you're waist deep in the material, and all of that is studying your reading and rereading, writing and rewriting. Elizabeth, we've already kind of hinted to the elephant in the room, which is commercial outlines. Most professors hate them. Many students use them. What are your thoughts?

Elizabeth: I think they can be a useful supplement. I wouldn't rely on them, though, like, I definitely do your own outline. And if you want to, you can look at a commercial outline to see if it may explain something better than you had it. But it's not the go to outline because the whole thing with the outlining process is that you learn as you make it. So if you get a commercial outline, you miss the whole learning process of building the outline.

Carlos: And for those of you that might not know, a commercial outline is an outline none of the class, but of the field of law. So, for example, the field of law of contracts, there'll be a commercial outline on that. Some companies, usually the three big ones Kaplan, Barberry and Themis, they're they're going to prepare commercial outlines for the one subjects, which are just summations of those fields of law. For example, the field of civil procedure. And they're going to offer those to you for free. But that outline, it's not specific to the contract law or the civil procedure law that your professor that your professor wants you to learn. Is it Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Well, like you said, it's more of an overview, whereas your professor chose the textbook they wanted to teach you from. They might have chosen certain topics within the area of, say, contracts or con law that they wanted to teach you. So a lot of

times commercial outlines will have materials that you didn't learn in class, so I would look out for that.

Carlos: And some textbook companies will even try to sell you outlines from the textbook that you're using for a class that your professor assigned for that class. And that can be tempting. It can be costly and tempting, but be careful with that because like Elizabeth just told us, each professor built his syllabus and organize his class based on what they want you to know about that field of law. The professor is the one creating and the one grading the exam, not the textbook company. Personally, I was very strict with my finances, so I rarely bought commercial outlines. But I am a big fan of the Emanuel series because they include a lot of posts and those I always purchased for the one outlines. There were some times that I used them to maybe double check my own outline to make sure that I didn't go too far off from what I was supposed to learn. And I think in that way they can be useful. But even that was rare. I remember personal jurisdiction for me was particularly difficult, and I use commercial outlines to double check my work there. What do you think about using commercial outlines as a way to organize your own outline? Did you ever do that, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: No, I didn't do that. Personally, I usually like to organize my outlines based on the organization the professor gives us in the syllabus. So like for civil procedure, we had main topics of like jurisdiction venue pleading and subcategories for each main topic, and I would pretty much model my outline after that just because that's how the professor wanted to present the material to us. It's the order they wanted us to see it in. And I think following the organizational structure the professor had in mind helps you succeed in the class.

Carlos: I think that's great advice and that's also my strategy. But I didn't really realize that until after my first semester. So I wish I would have met you before, and you could have told me that so I could have started that way. Let's talk about outline length. I always remember something that Director Curtis, the director of academic success, said to us, which is, I don't think a hundred page outline will be very helpful to your studying, but it's really easy to accidentally make a one hundred page outline. What advice do

you have for our listeners, Elizabeth? Because like I said before, I think you have really good lines in that they're really succinct and well-organized.

Elizabeth: So the way I usually do it, like I said, is I'll start outlining from the first week. So usually I'll add to my outline on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So Tuesday, I'll add like my Monday Tuesday stuff and then Thursday, my Wednesday Thursday stuff. And like I said, I do it every week. So like the second week of school, I'll revise stuff I put in for my first week, then my third week, I'll revise my first and second week. So every week I'm just looking at what I put in the weeks before and thinking, how can I make it shorter or more clear? So I just keep doing that and cutting it down, and it usually just ends up being a couple pages, so.

Carlos: And that's great advice because it might actually help anybody who accidentally makes long outlines. It's good if you're always perfecting it, you're always churning it down. If you've started with an outline that's a little bit longer than you want it, that's OK. You can keep cutting it down until you get to an outline that's manageable, one that will actually be useful.

Elizabeth: Yeah, definitely. And you don't want a super long outline, either, because if your outline is like 40 pages, you might as well just read your case, but you want a short outline. So I personally like to have my outlines no more than five pages. I know that's very short for short people. I would say, I guess anything more than like 10 or 15 pages is probably too long. And if you can't distill it down to less than that, then maybe examine how well you know the material because you might just have too much information on it.

Carlos: Yeah, yeah. And there's always room to improve. Like you will see that my outlines are usually very long and I use big headings. I include content tables. I get a little fancy with the font. And I think Elizabeth, part of being a law student, is accepting that it's OK to geek over outlines.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I definitely will geek out over my out, my own outline, so I definitely got that, OK?

Carlos: But there's there's times that you've got to step away from it. You've got to stop creating the outline and start studying from it because that's the whole point of it. The whole point is not to make the prettiest, most perfect, geeky outline. The whole point is to make an outline that you can use to study, which is why it's so important to keep that goal in mind. You need something that you can study from, and a 70 page outline is going to be a lot harder to study from. I can tell you from experience that I spent more time than I needed to just scrolling through outlines, but I do work on them and I get them down eventually. Usually I get them down right?

Elizabeth: And that's like I said, part of why I started outlining so early and adding to it every week. There are some people who wait to outline until the end and then like, there's two weeks of class left and they have like 14 weeks of material to outline. Yikes. Whereas for me, I only have a class or two to add to my outline so I can spend the rest of the reading period studying from it instead of trying to make an outline, then cut it down all the last minute.

Carlos: I mean, I'm definitely guilty of sometimes waiting too long to start an outline, but in my defense is because I never felt like I was done learning, and I wrongly believed that I had to be done learning to start the outline. The truth is, in law school and in law, you're going to have to be able to act when you don't have all the information, and it's a lot easier to finish an outline like Elizabeth just said with only one or two classes left. Then to start an outline when you're supposed to already be using it to study, it's going to make your life a lot more difficult. So accept now that there is just no perfect data outline, and sometimes you just have to act distilling the information. It takes time and like you just mentioned, working your way down to a three page outline, even that that takes time, that takes a lot of time. So you need to allow yourself enough time to do that. Elizabeth, I have a lot of colleagues that they tackle the outlines together, and I know there's three main ways to do that. What are they?

Elizabeth: So there's a group outlining then it's using other people's outlines to check yours. So it's not like group outlining where you guys get together to outline, but you exchange your own outlines and think, Oh, my friend had this and I forgot about it, I

should add that to mine or something like that, OK? And then third, there's people who divide their outlines and assign them out. So like if you have a study group for civil procedure, one person would be like, OK, I'll outline for personal jurisdiction, you'll outline for subject matter, et cetera. And I personally don't love that method.

Carlos: You don't like to divide and conquer approach from the paper chase.

Elizabeth: Not really, just like a big part of aligning. Like we said, as you learn, as you build it. So if you're just handed someone else's piece of the outline, you didn't learn anything about that part because someone did it for you. Yeah. And like, you can still study from it and it's distilled information, and that's great. But I think a big part of outlining isn't just getting distilled information, but it's about distilling the information for yourself.

Carlos: Yeah, I think so, too, and I feel a lot of people who are averse to outlining they really aren't they? Rather, they just struggled with outlining in the beginning. And then they're like, Oh, well, this is too hard or this is just not worth my time and this is law school. Nothing in this journey is meant to be easy, but it's all doable. We all struggled in the beginning, and eventually you just become good at it. You just find the outline strategy and outline schedule that works best for you. And one day it all just clicks. Don't expect that you're going to be an outline master from day one or even semester one. Elizabeth, to your point, I always made my own outline, and there's likely one or two exceptions to that claim, but mostly I did, but I also enjoyed trading outlines with my colleagues because, like you said, I like to check any things that I may have missed or any things that maybe they expressed in a better way, and it might be easier for me to understand and study. I never really outline together in a group, but I did have an amazing study group that we will wipe board classes together, and much of that material ended up in my outlines. I think the most important thing is that you try, you try to make an outline, right? It's going to be hard to learn the class without them.

Elizabeth: Definitely. So as long as you're doing something and trying to distill the material, somehow whatever method it is, as long as it works for you, that's great. You know, there's a lot of different ways to do it. You can use Microsoft Word or OneNote. I

know a lot of people use Google Docs just because it's accessible everywhere, and then you don't have to worry about your computer crashing and losing the material. Some people use pages the Apple equivalent word, and I guess you could outline by hand, which sounds kind of crazy, but I mean, whatever works for you.

Carlos: So yeah, that's a lot of work to do it by hand and a good point about backing up your outlines. I remember a friend of mine lost his outline when his computer crashed mid semester, and he was not happy at all.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I usually will email myself drafts of important documents like an OCR paper. I'll send myself each draft of it just so I have a copy somewhere else because I don't use a cloud. But to go to back to my point about handwriting outlines, I mean, I cannot write my mind map. So I guess it's not like such a crazy concept. But like I said, whatever works for you, I just I think it takes time to figure out what method you like best, because outlining is very personal and like, that's a big part of why professors have midterms your first year of law school so you can assess how you did and see if your methods actually worked for you. And if not, they give you a chance to reevaluate your techniques before your final exam.

Carlos: Yeah, and there's nothing wrong with that. I have a long collection of obsolete outlines, just outlines that I started and then I'm like, Oh, well, that's not really going to work for me, and I drop it and I'll start right over again. Sometimes I'll copy the information over, and sometimes I'll just rewrite everything. Usually, if I can salvage something so I don't do double work and be efficient with my time, but it's all part of my process of experimentation. And like I said earlier, Elizabeth and I, we're going to include some links below of our outlines, our mind maps and even some outline shelves that we thought would be a good way for you all to kind of get started with it.

Elizabeth: Right. And one last point to outlining. You may have some classmates or upperclassmen who say like they don't outline and maybe they don't. But because although outlining is the most common method for studying in law school, it's not the only one. But just because people say they don't outline doesn't mean they don't study. Yeah. Some people will whiteboard. Like Harlow said. Some people flash card. Some

people do a combination of different study techniques. But Carlos and I have found that outlining is a successful strategy for us. And I think most law students would agree with that. So.

Carlos: Oh yeah, I agree. Well, that's all the time we have for today. Hopefully, we've covered everything, but as always, Elizabeth and I are available to answer any other questions you may have. We hope to see you all around campus because we are very excited to meet you.

Elizabeth: Thank you for listening.