

# HEALTH PROFESSIONS AND PRELAW CENTER

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## THE PRELAW CURRICULUM

**A DEAN'S ADVICE** by Gordon Schaber of the University of The Pacific School of Law

"As dean of a law school, I am frequently asked by prospective law students, 'What courses should I take in college?' Here, in informal fashion, is my answer."

In preparing for law school, the future law student needs to develop proficiency in three areas: (1) effectiveness in comprehension and use of language, (2) in depth understanding of human motivations and values, and (3) mature power in thinking.

### LANGUAGE

Language is the most important working tool used by the lawyer. In the drafting of legal instruments the precise meaning of words must be clearly and effectively communicated. In both oral argument and written briefs, the attorney must be able to comprehend the language of others - to grasp the exact meaning of factual statements and legal provisions. To this end, pre-law students should take courses that will give them extensive practice in:

**1. Expression**--vocabulary, familiarity with modern usage, grammatical correctness, organized presentation, conciseness and clarity of statement in writing and speaking.

**Comprehension**--concentration and effective recollection in reading and listening; perception of meaning conveyed by words.

Both expression and comprehension also require developed sensitivity to:

**Fluidity of language**--varying meaning of words in different times and contexts, shades of meaning, interpretive problems, hazards in use of ambiguous terms.

**Deceptiveness of language**--emotionally charged words, catch phrases, hidden meanings of words, empty generalizations.

**2. Creative power in thinking**--Perhaps the most valuable asset of a lawyer is his power to think clearly, carefully, and independently. A large part of the work the law-trained [person] is called upon to do calls for problem-solving and sound judgment. He will be asked to give advice concerning an almost infinite number of relationships. The power to think creatively will often merge with critical understanding of human institutions and values, with the latter serving as the necessary threshold to creative power. Creative power in thinking requires the development of skill in research, use of facts, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, reasoning by analogy, critical analysis, and the systematic formulation of principles and concepts.

The courses you study in undergraduate college should assist you in achieving these three goals. Choose your major in a field you like, and then choose electives in other fields that will round out your education. You will take some of the electives because of the subject matter. You will pick others because of the intellectual training--this course or this professor develops your mind. At times the professor is more important than the course; a course in geology under Professor X, for example, may teach you more about critical thinking than a course in logic under Professor Y. The goal is to obtain a good, solid education. There are three courses that I think are important as electives, although other law professors may not necessarily agree. A general course or two in economics will be helpful, since so much of law now deals with economic matters. A course in English history (1066 to the time of the American Revolution, with emphasis on the earlier centuries) will be helpful if it deals, not with wars and the cutting off of heads, but with the development of constitutional government, the courts, and the problems of society, since much of our law is rooted in that period. The third course is in accounting, and it is recommended for the person

who plans to enter general practice, corporate law, or tax law. A lawyer does not need to be able to keep a set of books, but it is important that he is able to understand a ledger sheet. So, a general course that teaches you the principles of accounting will be useful in law school and in practice. If I were to suggest a fourth course, it would be logic, a course which, with the proper instructor, can be interesting and beneficial.

If you major in a science, mathematics, or engineering, it is especially important that you take electives in the arts and the humanities, and you should read on your own interesting books in these areas. Read about man's history, American history, world problems, our political structure. Read good novels (old and new), poetry, (pick out a good poet for yourself and read him [that poet=s works] through and then over again), and essays (Emerson, Ruskin, Thoreau, Chesterton...). A lawyer should be a well-rounded person.

Do not take law courses offered at the undergraduate level. There is nothing wrong with these courses as such but you do not need them for law school, and taking them prevents your taking a good non-law course. You should take courses in college that are not available in law school. (I am speaking of such courses as constitutional law and business law. Courses in political theory, government, and the like are useful to the law student, and there is no reason not to take these if you so desire.)

Learn to write! Many students do not do as well as they should in law school because they cannot express themselves correctly and clearly. Develop your ability to write a good clear sentence. Then try write a short essay that explains and reasons to a point or conclusion. This is vital.

I strongly suggest that you get in the habit of reading one of the great newspapers regularly--such as *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, including the book review section and the financial pages. *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL* is a fine paper for law students. The weekly news magazine of your choice (*NEWSWEEK*, *TIME*, etc.) is worthwhile. And I hope you will read regularly a variety of magazines. *FORTUNE* has fine articles for the law student. *HARPER'S MAGAZINE*, *THE ATLANTIC*, *THE NATION*, *NEW REPUBLIC*, and other non-entertainment periodicals are worth exploring.

Your professors can make suggestions. One caution: If you find yourself enjoying one too much, because it supports your own predilections, switch around a bit; read the other side.

In the area of extra-curricular activities, you will be guided by what you like and by how much time you have. Don't neglect your studies. Debating is an excellent activity, as is dramatics. Both provide training in speaking and in poise. School newspapers, yearbooks and magazines can help you improve your writing. Discussion groups and clubs are worthwhile. A sensible participation in extra-curricular activities may be more important than your studies in developing your personality and in finding yourself.

Don't worry about the kind of law you want to specialize in. All law students take the same courses in their freshman year, and largely in the second year. You can decide whether to be a corporate, labor, or criminal lawyer in your second and third years in law school. One exception: If you plan to be a patent lawyer, you should major in engineering or a science.

One last word. You do not have to be a back-slapping extrovert to be a good lawyer. Many of the most able, successful attorneys are quiet, soft-spoken people. Brains, training, the ability to communicate, and hard work are what count. A lawyer is essentially a combination of scholar and man of affairs. In law school, your success will largely depend on your ability to reason, your skill in writing, and your general background and training from high school and college--plus hard work.

Whatever you do in college do it well!!!

Good luck!!

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