

Absolutely Free Study Tips **for Prof. Keyser's Legal & Environmental History Classes**

Get interested! Legal history, environmental history, and in fact all aspects of history provide invaluable perspective on how the world—and individuals like yourself—became what they are today. Just like individuals or families, legal cultures and institutions have *pasts*. If you are familiar with your past, you can make better sense of your present.

The challenge: My classes are challenging because they cover a lot of history, including many specific laws, cases, or other kinds of concrete examples, and thus there are a lot of names, (approximate) dates, and facts to know. But one also needs ideas, i.e., the significance of the facts. So the best study tip of all is to connect these two: the ideas allow you to make sense of the information.

The Four Steps to Success. Most students need to spend at least two hours outside class for every hour in class, i.e., about six hours a week. Here are my suggestions for the best way to spend that time:

1. **READ** the assignments before class, but try to do so fairly quickly, without getting too bogged down in details. I usually assign readings for the whole week, and ideally you should read all of them before the first class of the week for which they are assigned. When you do not have enough time to do this, it is also OK to prioritize the readings based on the order in which they appear on the syllabus. Beyond this, it also usually makes sense to begin with the most general, secondary sources (i.e., textbooks and other texts written recently), and then proceed to more specific texts and to the primary sources (primary sources were written in the period being studied, including laws, court cases, etc.). Primary sources are usually assigned in smaller quantities, because they can be challenging to read, but they provide the essential evidence for historical analysis. I will often reserve class time towards the end of each week to discuss the primary sources.
2. **TAKE GOOD LECTURE NOTES:** To get the most out of lectures, you need to do the reading beforehand, so that you already have a sense of the topic, and have already come across some of the key names or new concepts, so that they will not slow you up too much in class. This should enable you to take careful, complete lecture notes, while still being able to think about the material at the same time. In this way, class time is actually your first review of the material! Remember to get down virtually everything that is said, NOT JUST WHAT'S IN THE BULLETS. Taking good lecture notes is an art: you need to listen carefully, leave yourself lots of space on the page, and write quickly. *Tip: leave 2-3 lines between each bullet, for filling in later (see step 3).
3. **STUDY ACTIVELY:** This is the most important step, though it necessarily builds on the previous two. Don't just read, WRITE: read over and fill-in or rewrite your lecture notes, preferably when class is still fresh in your mind. At this stage you should also review the reading assignments, paying more attention to what you now can identify as the most important sections. For most students it is also helpful to make flash cards for key people, laws, cases, events, or other specific things. You can identify the most important factual items by noting which ones receive the most attention in lecture or the readings. Generally an item is very

important if most or all of a slide in lecture is devoted to it, or if at least a page or two in the reading assignment is devoted to it.

4. **ASK QUESTIONS.** I can always answer questions in and after class, during my office hours, or by appointment. Please bring your lecture notes and any flash cards and outlines with you! I will be glad to advise you as to how to choose key facts, identify main ideas, make outlines, etc.

Study Tips for Exams. Following the above four steps as you go along will make it far easier to prepare for exams when you get closer to them. Cramming at the last minute can sometimes get you through, but it prevents you from performing at your real potential. Instead, having a reasonable grasp on the material before exam time rolls around allows you to focus on the specific preparations needed for exam questions. For essays for which you have the question or questions in advance, you should prepare an outline, and by the time of the exam have this outline committed to memory. When given a list of possible id questions, you should make flash cards for all of the items. Finally, for primary source analysis essays (usually only given on final exams), you should review any suggested primary sources.

1. **Synthetic Essays.** These essays ask you to synthesize some of the larger themes that have been covered in the class, usually by making some kind of judgment call about the values or debates that were taking place in the period covered. The essays need to be organized around a thesis, which is an assertive argument. They also need to analyze specific examples or evidence in each and every supporting paragraph, that is, throughout the essay except in the introduction and the conclusion. These are the same guidelines as for take-home essays (see the one-page basic essay guidelines on my website, under the Teaching tab), but of course for in-class writing you do not need to support your points with specific page-number citations.
2. **Short Answer/Identifications.** You should answer these questions using full sentences and writing about one or two paragraphs to both identify the item (who or what, when and where), and to explain its historical significance. In considering the latter, try to think of more than one reason or type of significance, e.g., by explaining at least two major historical themes that this item illustrates
3. **Primary Source Analysis Essays.** For this kind of essay (usually only on final exams), you will be presented with an excerpt of about a paragraph or two (up to one page) from one or two of the primary sources that have been assigned over the semester. The question will ask you to analyze the text or texts as historical documents. You should begin by identifying the type of document (law, constitution, judicial decision, legal treatise, etc.), the author or institution that produced it, and the purpose and audience for which it was produced. Second and most importantly, you should analyze the document in order to explain what it reveals about American history and the development of law in the period during which it was written. Third, you should try to point to some of the ways this document (or documents of this type) was influential in later American history (up to 1860), or how Americans drew on this document or others like it as they confronted similar issues later in history (up to 1860). Finally, if there are two different documents, you should organize your essay with a compare-and-contrast format.