

FBL - Study Skills Showcase - 27 October 2022-

Part 1: Law study skills

ROB MOORE: Hello everyone and welcome back to Student Hub Live. You're here with Rob Moore in the study shack. And we're going to have a really exciting session today. We're going to talk about study skills and preparing your assignments. So hopefully, you're all engaging with the chat box. We're all getting some lovely messages already from you and hearing about you, where you're from, and what you're studying.

So a couple of things about engaging with Student Hub Live today. You'll have the widgets, those little interactive activities that you can take part in. So as we go through, we want you to join in with those, answer those questions, and let us know what you think. There will be the opportunity to answer the tickertape questions. So the tickers going across the bottom of the screen. And it gives you a chance to answer in the chat box. Some thoughts, some ideas about those questions.

Now the session is recorded. And you'll be able to access it afterwards, it will be available on YouTube. But we want to encourage you to avoid putting in personal information. So we don't want you to be able to be identified by the information you put in. Just remember that whatever you're sharing it is public information.

OK. So today we're joining members of staff from the law school and from the business school. So we're starting off with Atim from law. And in the chat box, you've got Marc, Liesl, and Catherine. And they're going to be answering your questions in the chat, giving you some hints and tips, and some useful links. Marc's going to be feeding in your comments as we go forwards. And then I'm going to have a chat with Sam.

So first of all, Marc who have we got on the chat and what's interesting about our members today, anybody stand out at the minute?

MARC SHUCKSMITH-WESLEY Well first of all, I just want to start with a bit of an overview of where people are coming from. So we've got Gregor from Edinburgh, saying it's a bit overcast and a little cool. Isn't that pretty much standard for Scotland in my experience? Then we've got Ronald's from Gillingham Kent, saying it's nice and sunny and 17 degrees. I wish it was like that out here. It's quite warm but it sounds more like close to Edinburgh in that sense then.

Cat's from Northamptonshire, same weather in the sense that it's brilliant for ducks over there. And then a bit further afield, we've got Geoffrey who's based in Indonesia. And then we've got Chosen from Iceland, and Juda from Spain. In relation to any kind of interesting comments, there's a couple interesting ones going on here. So we've got Catherine, who says she actually works at the OU, but she's also studying with us. So she's obviously, good luck to everyone both from a student and from a worktense as well. Laura's doing the Open degree. Mark is in his seventh year with the OU. And here it says that you started with an Open degree and switched to the Bachelors in Law and indicates how it's quite an emotional journey. But goes on to say that it's the best decision that they have ever made in this one.

Usan indicates that they're getting emotional watching the introductory video, which has been playing before we all jumped in on here. I'm not sure whether that's a usual response from there, but they go on to say how they really appreciate this feeling of connectedness knowing that they're part of something which is so big.

And Holly goes on to say that today in the skills she is hoping to learn how to cook. And I'm not sure if Rob or Sam or anyone else will be able to help with that one. Might be a little bit left of field for the discussion today, but we'll find out.

ROB MOORE: Well, we'll definitely be showing you how to make a good assignment and not a half baked one. So we will be covering some of those things. So on the screen in the next few moments you'll see multiple choice questions asking you about the most difficult thing about writing essays, and also about when was the last time you actually wrote an essay for your degree? Well, before your degree, I should say.

So introducing Sam. So hi, Sam. So Sam is one of our student experience managers. And her job is to make sure you all have a great time during your studies. She's a law tutor and a qualified solicitor, with a PhD in Maritime Law. She plays oboe and trumpet in a local orchestra. And I've got to be nice to her because she made her own long bow and joined an archery society. So I'll be very nice to you today, Sam.

SAM: Good. Thank you, Rob.

ROB MOORE: How are you feeling today Sam?

SAM: I'm good, thank you. I'm good. I'm showing my maritime credentials with the big ship behind me.

ROB MOORE: Excellent. So today we're going to be talking about different types of assignment, different types of question that you'll be asked when studying law. So those are essays, problem questions, and short answer questions. So hopefully, you're going to give our viewers some hints and tips on how to approach each of those different types of question. So should we start with essays? What are essay questions and how should they approach them?

SAM WOODS-PEEL: Thanks, Rob. Well an essay question is basically a longer piece of work. It's not meant to be short. It's a more in-depth piece of work that's supposed to showcase your knowledge and understanding of a particular subject. But the most important hint and tip that I can give you is to realise that it is not an invitation to tell your tutor everything you know about a topic.

There is a specific question that has been asked, and you need to address that specific question. If we wanted you to tell us everything you know, the question would be, tell us everything you know about tort law. But the questions are always more specific than that. So you really need to come to terms with what the question is asking you. That's a process called unpacking the question. And unpacking the question knowing what the question wants from you is probably more difficult than actually writing it once you know what the question is asking you.

Unpacking the question as a skill, is something that comes with practise. And you will find, particularly if you're in the early part of your degree, is that you will get things wrong. It's part of the learning process. If you completely misunderstand what the question is, that's fine. It's part of the learning process. You will get better at it the more you do. So don't worry too much, particularly in the early days, about oh my God. I don't understand the question. I don't know what to do. Accept that feeling will go away with practise and you will get much better at reading a question and going, oh yeah, I understand what that question is wanting from me. So unpacking the question is very important.

ROB MOORE: I'm sorry. I interrupted you know. I was just going to say, I assume it's the same as in business where we use that first module, that first course to really develop those skills. And the tutor's feedback is really focused on how to get the most out of the question, and how to bring it in. And slightly

leading question, do tutors in law point out where students have gone off track in the answers, and do they bring them back in?

SAM WOODS-PEEL: Yes, they will do. I mean, if you don't at some point in your degree get the comment, "That was irrelevant," then you're brilliant. Most people at some point in their degree will be told what you have written is irrelevant. What we mean is the question did not ask for that. It might be true, it might be a really good point, but it doesn't relate to the question set.

So that's a sign that you need to look at the question, look at what you wrote, and see if you can work out why it isn't relevant to the question that was actually set. And it's by putting those types of comments together that's actually really useful for practising the skill of unpacking. But you're right about level one law, like level one business, it's there to practise. That's why the pass mark is only 40% because we want you to practise. We accept that you will not get this right first time. You need a few goes at it. So that's why the marks, the pass mark is set so low.

ROB MOORE: And we don't expect them to be perfect straight away. We don't expect students to come in knowing this. We expect to help you get better at it. That's the skill of being a level one tutor. I like being at that level where students come in and they really don't know to start.

SAM WOODS-PEEL: No.

ROB MOORE: But by the end of level one, you'll definitely be on the right track.

SAM WOODS-PEEL: Yeah, it's a steep learning curve, level one, for all types of questions. Even something like an essay, which many people have done before, even if it was quite a long time ago at school.

ROB MOORE: So we've been asking some questions about essays, and I think we can have a quick look at your responses so far. So, on the widget, what have we got there? What's most difficult about essays? Being able to understand the question, 8%. Structuring your answer, that's come out as quite high. All of the above. Interestingly, all of the above is probably where we expected to start. But as you go through, you will definitely find that different aspects of essay writing will become more evident as you progress. As a tutor, I would probably say students understanding the question at the start is probably the thing I comment on most. And it's heartbreaking as a tutor to give somebody a low mark for an answer that is technically very good but not in the right focus. So essays is the first type of question.

So we're going to move on to the second type of question now, these problem questions or the IRAC questions. And there's another multiple choice question popped up on the screen for you to answer. So Sam, what are problem questions and how do they fit in to both the law degree and also in law practice?

SAM WOODS-PEEL: Well a problem question is where you move away from theoretical essay questions. A problem question gives you a factual scenario and invites you to apply your legal knowledge to it, in order to advise the people involved in the question, whether they have committed a criminal offence, whether they've been negligent in causing an accident, or whatever it is. You're normally advising somebody, somebody specific, as to whether or not they have broken the law in some way.

So it's practical application of knowledge to a factual scenario. They can be very detailed. An essay question is quite short because it's a couple of lines. Whereas a problem question, the question itself, is much, much longer because it's giving you the scenario. It's telling you who the people involved are. And it is that level of detail that can cause some of the complexity in answering it. It's long, it's complicated, it's really easy to get lost in the detail. And you need to find a way to structure your answer to split up the question into its constituent parts and deal with them separately.

And this is where IRAC comes in. So IRAC is issue, rule, application, conclusion. If a problem question has six issues within it, then you'll be doing six separate IRACs. Deal with one IRAC and then move on to the next one. Quite often students start another one, start another issue before they finish the previous one. And that's when you get muddled.

And if you get muddled in what you're writing your tutor is not going to be able to unpick it, and you won't get the marks you deserve. And it's not because you don't know how to apply law to fact, it's because you're not setting out in a real structured logical way your answer so that your tutor can understand it. So IRAC is a really important way of structuring your answer.

And I think there was a slide showing how IRAC works. So a single IRAC. You've got issue, rule, application, and conclusion. And one way to test whether or not you're doing it correctly because IRAC is something you won't have learned before. So it's confusing for students because they don't know if they're doing it right.

So what I would recommend is that you get four fluorescent pens, you allocate a colour to each element of IRAC. So on this example issue is green, rule is blue, application is yellow, and then the pink one is conclusion. And if you can identify the different elements of your IRAC answer in fluorescent pen, and then look at what you have fluoresced, what you want to see is this example here where the application section is the longest bit.

Applying law to fact, the yellow section, the application section, that is what gets the most marks. And it is that bit that students tend to forget to do. They're very good at identifying issues, they'll identify the relevant law or the rule, they'll come to a conclusion, but they miss out the application. And that is heartbreaking because you know they can do it, they come to the right conclusion. You know they can do it, but you need to explain how you've arrived at your conclusion.

And the best analogy I can give is it's like when you're doing maths at school, they don't just want the answer, they want you to show your working out, show how you have got there. And that's what the application section is. So make sure you put your application as to how you got to your conclusion, not just state your conclusion.

ROB MOORE: Where do you think people go wrong the most? So especially in that first year, so when they're answering these questions, what's the bit where they get the balance wrong? Is that a common thing or is it--

SAM WOODS-PEEL: Balance. Not doing application because it's so obvious. Sometimes people, I don't need to write that down. It's obvious. No, it's not obvious. You need to say it. So it's partly not doing enough application, not showing it. But the other thing is not identifying enough issues. Not separating it out into those individual elements. They will rarely be accept in very, very early level one questions, there will rarely be just one issue. There will normally be more than one, and you need to separate them out in order to make your application and logic a lot clearer to your tutor.

ROB MOORE: I'm just looking at a couple of the comments that are coming through. One of the students is asking, is a tutor-in-law when you're tutor's your uncle? So a tutor is a relative. And we've got a few students who are coming into W111 and they're looking at trying to get some hints and tips. So, coming over to Marc. Marc, what else are we hearing in the chat box? What are people saying at the moment? Are they picking up some tips?

MARC SHUCKSMITH-WESLEY: So yeah, there's quite a few things being discussed in here at the moment. Initially, I just want to say and welcome those from outside law as well. We've got a good

number of business students, there's one on here from philosophy, Carol. And also I want to welcome Matthew who's joining from Toronto. It must be quite early over there at the moment.

And then the first question that we had was, when was the last time that we wrote an essay? And some individuals here are really in the deep end because you've got 40 years ago from Beverley. You've got Natasha who never apparently. Hetta was 20. Mark, again 30 years. But then on the other side of the spectrum, you've got Jude who came straight from school. So there's a wide spectrum of experiences there, and kind of engage with the subject in the last few years.

From a general tip sense, one thing I wanted to engage with is something which I know myself, I sort of struggled with as an undergraduate student, is actually engaging with feedback from a tutor. Sometimes it's hard to engage with that feedback because it can be quite critical of your work. We've all been there and Holly mentioned in the chat box as well, that it can be heartbreaking to receive feedback, especially if it's rather heavily critical. If you've not got the grade you were hoping for and that sort of thing.

But do you know what, engage with it. Try and use it best you can because it's going to help you next time. Yeah, it's tough and it's challenging to read, but the best thing to do is to read it, try and take it on board, and try and almost look past that part of yourself which is hurt by it. Like I said, I know it's hard. But as Holly said, it's best to try and get past that.

Tips that we've had from a number of students. So Mark, for instance, said that, yeah you're going to get things wrong but just try and take it on board. So that's what I've said. Rosemary indicated that just attending tutorials you'll pick things up from your tutor, from other students. So they are in the third year and they found them invaluable. Catherine, again, going on to say that feedback from your tutor will help you learn and progress. And so yeah, just try engage with feedback as much as possible. And don't be afraid of it, ultimately.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. I've got to agree with the thing about feedback. And bear in mind that your tutor's job is to help you to get the best outcome you can get. We're not there just to be negative, we're there to give you constructive feedback. And if you get some feedback you don't understand, ask about it. We write it for you to use it. So we've had a question come through, Sam, is IRAC just a law thing or can it be applied in other areas do you think?

SAM WOODS-PEEL: You should be able to apply it in other areas. It comes from law degrees, but if you're doing accountancy you've got accountancy rules and regulations, and you might end up with a situation where you're auditing a company and you have to apply the accounting regulations to how they're doing their accounts. So yes absolutely, you need to have something to apply though. So there has to be some rules or regulations and businesses I'm sure are full of rules and regulations, as well. So yeah, absolutely you can apply it.

You might need to explain to your tutor what IRAC is. When you're doing IRAC you don't write the word IRAC in the answer. But you can use the technique, identify the issue, state what the rule is, work through the application of the rule to the facts, and then come to a conclusion. So you're not mentioning IRAC, you're just using it as a tool to structure an answer.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. Very similar, so those of you who are regulars on our workshops, it's a similar approach to peeing on your work. Which if you don't know what I'm on about, come and join the live workshops. So we've got another multiple choice question popping up now. So this is asking you what type of questions you prefer. And then the ticker tape, this is specifically aimed at those of you who

understand a bit about the legal system. What do you think is the most important part of the English legal system? So give us your comments in the chat and we'll pick those up in a few moments.

And we're going to move on to the last question. So this is probably the type of question I remember from my school days, Sam, the short answer question. So how is this different, and this is me showing my age, how is this different from when I did my O-levels?

SAM WOODS-PEEL: The short answer to that, it's not. The short answer question is what it appears to be. It's an answer that is short. And where students go wrong is that they try and treat it like an essay. A short answer question, you'll be given a word count guide of 100, maybe 200, maybe 300 words. This is not very much. You can't write an essay, so don't do an introduction or a conclusion to a short answer question. Simply get on and answer the question.

The other thing about short answer questions is, will know more than you have words to express. And that's deliberate. We do it a lot in law because we need you to be concise and brief in how you write your advice to clients. Clients do not want a 5,000 page essay in answer to their question. They want a short answer. And so we give you fewer words than there is material, and that forces you to pick out the main points that answer the question set.

So that's why students can sometimes struggle with them. They try to write too much. And they fill up the word count with stuff that is less important than some of the things that they've left out. So identify the main answers, write those down, if you've got words left over, stick some more in. But make sure you cover the main points, and don't do an introduction to a short answer question.

ROB MOORE: Excellent. So believe it or not we're nearly out of time. So we're to go back to Marc quickly just to get some answers to some feedback on the short answer questions, any final comments. So Marc, what's been posted in the last few minutes?

MARC SHUCKSMITH-WESLEY: So we've got here, we've got Ronald who actually enjoys essay questions. And so and Alex stated my option wasn't up there, the essay questions. I'm sure that is on there as an option to pick. But surprisingly, I think it looks like the students overall prefer short answers, which I wasn't expecting that one. I thought that problem questions would be probably up there as being the preferred choice of assignment question.

I just want to echo what Sam indicated in relation to short answers. They are really challenging. I remember myself as a student really took and thinking, how do I do this? What's the purpose of this? For me, actually getting involved in mooting was one of those areas of study which really helped me just take that step and understand what to do in a short answer. Because it's effectively that skeleton argument. That efficient use of words where you've only got a brief paragraph in relation to what you want to write. And I just always reminded myself is if I was someone on the other side of a lawyer and they gave me six pages of information when all I needed was a paragraph, I wouldn't be able to extract that information from it, I probably wouldn't even read it, and I wouldn't be happy with my lawyer. So yeah, short answers is it's a good skill to get to grips with. So yeah, like I said, I'm quite surprised that 32% of students at the moment are indicating that it's their preferred choice.

ROB MOORE: Absolutely. And Alex is with us. Alex is one of our regulars in our workshop. And his comment was, his option wasn't on the list. He likes the easy questions. So well, the simple answer to that Alex is, they're all easy if you've done the work and you know the answer.

So thank you for your time today. Thank you, Marc for taking us through that. Thank you Catherine and Liesl on the chat. And Sam, thanks for joining us again today and taking us through those discussions on the different types of questions. We're going to have a short break.

SAM WOODS-PEEL: My pleasure.

ROB MOORE: And-- I'm sorry. And when we come back after the break, we're going to be talking with Claire and Alan about some of the skills that we really want to see you using in business. So go and grab a quick glass of water and we'll see you back here in a few minutes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]