A Quick Guide to Outlining

❑ **What** is an Outline?

In short, an outline is a summary of a topic of law; it is an organized collection of brief legal principles. There is no "right" way to outline: you may well find yourself employing different outlining approaches for different courses and types of exams, or even different subjects within a single course.

❑ **Why** should I Outline?

Not all law students make outlines for every course. Many second- and third-year law students adapt others' outlines or make do without one. You'll probably also discover that many of your classmates will not bother to make outlines or will do something short of creating an outline from scratch. What does this mean for you?

It means that an outline is not a prerequisite for passing a law school course; indeed, an outline is not a prerequisite for success on a law school exam. But if they are not required to pass for some students, why spend the time to make them at all?

Because many first-year law students find they are excellent learning tools. Preparing an outline forces the student to carefully review the material from the course. It can teach the first-year law student to think systematically about the subject, or rather, how to "think like a lawyer." Remember that you are being taught a whole new approach to problems. A student cannot learn this process by simply studying lecture notes or reading cases. It requires a devoted effort and an outline requires the student to make just such an effort.

The most important thing to realize about outlining is that there is nothing magical about it except the process of doing it. Its value is NOT in the product but in the production.

❑ What is the **best way** to Outline?

As noted above, there is no single best way to create an outline. This is primarily because outlines serve different purposes for different students. What works best for you may not work at all for a student with a different learning style.

The "best" outline is one that is user-friendly. A user-friendly outline is one that is easy to use by YOU: organize your outline in a way that YOU find most helpful.

❑   **When** should I begin to Outline?

There is a fine line between starting outlines too early in the semester and too late. The problem is that the line is different for different people. While that answer probably does not help much, you can gauge your speed by doing a "test run."

In the near future, clear out a few hours of time and attempt to outline a week's worth of material for each of your classes. You can extrapolate from this test run the amount of time it will take you to outline the entire course. While this is a rough estimate of the amount of time it will take, it is useful in determining when to begin outlining so that you finish with plenty of time to study from your outlines.

When scheduling, be realistic about the amount of time outlining will take. It does not do any good to prepare perfect outlines but leave yourself with no time to study them!! By late November, your outlines should be to a point where you can simultaneously complete them, study from them, and use them to write out answers to sample exam questions.

❑   Should I Outline with a **Group**?

It depends on what type of "group outlining" you are talking about: one where each member of the group prepares a part of the outline or one where the group prepares the whole outline together.

As for the former, two problems seem apparent. First, since the value of outlining comes largely from the process, you may not learn the part that you did not outline as well as those that you did. Second, you may not be able to know the quality of work that the other people in your study group put out.

As for the latter, it really depends on your personal learning style. Some people learn better in groups, though others flourish working alone. Preparing a group outline also has some drawbacks. While smaller groups (two to four) can be very efficient, larger groups tend to be unwieldy and can become bogged down by too many voices.