

Why Study Groups Are Not For Studying¹

Study groups are one of the most misunderstood aspects of law school life. In fact, the term "study group" is something of a misnomer. I prefer to call them "review groups." Review groups are most effective when all of the members have studied on their own and then come together to test each other's knowledge. To help you decide whether or not to join a review group, here is a list of the questions - and their answers - most commonly asked by first-year law students.

Do I have to be in a review group?

While most first-year students do join a review group, they are not for everyone. To determine if a review group is for you, make an honest assessment of how effectively you work in a group setting. And remember, an ability to work in a group setting is very different from an ability to socialize in a group setting. If you are unsure about whether or not to join a review group, you can always join one and then later leave if you are not finding it helpful. If you do leave, however, be fair to the other members of the group who may have come to rely on your advice and expertise.

Will I do most of my studying with the members of my review group?

The answer to this question is a categorical "No." Most students are surprised to hear that they should not study extensively with their review group, but there are some extremely good reasons why you should not. First, studying is both time consuming and stress producing. To succeed in law school, students must study at least 4-5 hours a day exclusive of class time. There are not many people with whom you can work closely for 4-5 hours a day, 6-7 days a week without driving each other crazy! In addition, it is very difficult for several people regularly to find large blocks of time where their schedules coincide. Second, people study in very different ways. Some prefer to study during the day, while others are night owls who do not begin studying until after 10:00 p.m. Some students need absolute silence, while others cannot imagine studying without their favorite music blaring. And, smokers and anti-smokers should never try to study together. Finally, there is a strong tendency among all of us to procrastinate when we are in a group setting. Study time can quickly become a social hour, particularly when a lengthy and complicated case needs to be read for the next day's class. So, you will get a lot more done, and in turn perform better on your exams, if you study on your own.

So, if we are not studying, what are we doing?

Use your review group time to test each other's knowledge. For example, students should study on their own Sunday through Friday and then get together with their review group on Saturday. Students should then test each other on how well they understood the week's topics. An easy way to do this is to have members take turns teaching the group the material covered during the preceding week's classes. If you understand a topic well

¹ These materials were created by Professor Herbert N. Ramo

enough to teach it to others, then you know it well enough to perform well on an exam. Also, members of the group should feel free to correct the "teacher" when they disagree. If you are the "teacher," do not be upset when others correct you. A mistake corrected during a review session is one less mistake on an examination. Another easy way to test each other is through the use of hypotheticals. You can use hypotheticals from class, from outside study aids, or from practice exams.

How many people should be in a review group?

There are no hard and fast rules, but a group of more than three-four people tends to become unwieldy. As a group grows larger, scheduling becomes more difficult and the chance that any two members just won't get along increases dramatically.

How do I choose members?

Be sure to choose people that you like well enough to work with on a regular basis. It is a good idea, however, to avoid working with your best friends. When working with good friends, the temptation to socialize is too great.

Where should we meet?

Meet in a location with few distractions, and avoid places, like your school's library, where group discussions might disturb others. Empty classrooms can work well, and have the added benefit of chalkboards where complicated issues can be diagrammed out. Also, check with your library to see if they have study rooms that can be reserved on a weekly basis.

When should I join a review group?

Give yourself at least two weeks to get into the flow of your classes and to firm up your study schedule before joining a review group. About a month into classes is a good time to start seeking out other like-minded students with whom to work on a regular basis.

Should members of review group share their outlines?

Sharing outlines is a terrible idea for a very simple reason. Creating an outline forces you to turn the seeming chaos of individual classes into an ordered and logical explanation of how various areas of the law operate. A large part of the learning process takes place as you are creating an outline, and you will not understand your courses nearly as well if you rely on someone else's understanding of them. For the same reason, avoid the temptation of "assigning" one class to each member of your review group. Students who fall into this trap may end up with an "A" in the course they were assigned, but the remainder of their transcript will be covered with "Cs" and "Ds."