

Podcast: Basic exam technique and effective revision

This podcast is intended to help you to get the most out of your revision and to introduce you to, or maybe even reacquaint you with, basic exam technique which will help you to achieve a good mark in your exam.

Before saying something about basic exam technique though, it is worth pointing out what an examiner expects from you in relation to exam questions as this piece of information is helpful to keep in mind in both your revision and actual exam. Typically, your examiner expects that you will be able to demonstrate your knowledge of the basic principles and rules of contract law and rules to your examiner. Such demonstration requires you to display your knowledge to your examiner by using legal authorities, i.e. show an awareness of relevant legislation and or the case law, to support your arguments with these authorities and thereby explain the meaning of the basic rules and principles of contract law. It is a common pitfall that students assume knowledge on the part of their examiner; don't fall into this trap: remember it is your knowledge and understanding that is being assessed and you can only be marked for what is written down on your paper – your examiner cannot look into your head. - If you do the things mention before with a reasonable level of accuracy you should pass the exam. If you cannot do these things – or do them badly – you will struggle to pass.

Moving on now to basic exam technique:

Before you start, check that you know what you need to do, i.e. read the instructions on the cover sheet of your exam paper: how many questions from which parts of the exam paper do you need to answer and how much time do you have in which to do this? If the marks for each question are the same; you should spend an equal amount of time on each question.

Read the question carefully: what EXACTLY is it asking you to do?

Plan your answer for each question you are attempting: take a few minutes (roughly 3 to 5 minutes) to do this for each question in writing on a page in your answer booklet. In planning your answer, you should focus on how you will demonstrate your knowledge to the examiner and on how you will support your argument with authorities AND then on how you will answer the question itself.

Answer the correct number of questions: This might be an obvious point to make but you would be surprised to see how many students struggle to do this. This is a pity because it is a really important point. It means that if the exam paper requires you to answer four questions, then you MUST do so. Remember: four OK(ish) questions will more easily pass than 2 brilliant ones (or three quite good ones). Don't be tempted into thinking that missing out on a question because it is your weak area is a good idea – it is not and has caused many otherwise bright people to fail.

Write clearly: this is another obvious but nonetheless important point. Remember: If we cannot read it, how can we give you the marks you would have deserved given the content of your answer?

Don't worry about remembering all the details and name of any case: in an exam situation, it easily happens that you will suddenly not remember a name of a particular case or part thereof. Your examiners know this. Don't worry about the exact case citation, the citation of a case is usually not needed in a contract law exam. The name of the case or, at least, a bit of the name is usually good enough as long as your examiner can figure out which case you mean. If the name has entirely vanished from your mind, briefly set out the main facts, i.e.

“a man asked a firm of builders to build him a swimming pool that was 7' 6” deep in the deep end: the pool was properly built but was only circa 6' deep. The client sued the builders for the cost of rebuilding the pool to the contract specification”.

What is said about basic exam technique here also applies, to some extent, in relation to coursework: careful reading of the question and planning your answer are of paramount importance here too!

Finally, a few words about how to revise effectively:

As for the question of how to revise to achieve maximum success, the following tips are intended to help you to focus on what is relevant and not to fall into the trap of thinking that just having skim-read the contract law revision guide or, worse, merely the act of having bought it, will be enough in terms of revising the subject. Remember: the contract law revision guide is intended to act as an aide-mémoire and to guide you through the vast subject that is contract law by focussing on, and concisely summarising, those areas of contract law which are usually coming up in an exam. In other words, the focussed approach of this revision guide aims to help you to properly focus on what is important and what is not and thereby helps you to refresh and / or increase your understanding of the overall subject of contract law – if you keep in mind the following:

Don't just copy out what is in the revision guide. Don't just copy out your notes or your text book either. Either is pointless unless you have done the work in the first place as merely copying out will neither result in refreshing your knowledge / memory nor in enhancing your understanding.

You should also use your revision period to test your ability to do the things which your examiner requires of you in the exam as mentioned before. In this context, a good indication of the sorts of subject areas and questions which can come up can be gained from looking at the past exam papers and tutorial / seminar work.

It is generally also useful to set yourself a mock exam – even if only on one question at a time – this can be from a past paper, from a seminar / tutorial question or from the 'Putting it into practice' questions at the end of each chapter of the contract law revision guide.

Answer the question or questions in timed conditions and then go through your answer(s) and mark it (or them) using your notes and books.

If you are too busy to spend time on writing an entire question then test yourself by the writing of a plan for the question. This should take only 5 minutes per question and still gives you a chance to see if you can summon the relevant legal principles and cases to mind in timed conditions. If you cannot do this then more work is needed. In this context, it is worth pointing out that it does not matter if you have gone through a question once already, the skill you are trying to develop is to be able to answer quickly and accurately in timed conditions. The following checklist might help here:

- Can you explain and apply the relevant aspects of the basic legislation in a few sentences?
- Can you explain the facts of the main cases in 1 or 2 sentences and apply them to a different set of facts?
- Can you explain the legal principle which has been deduced from a case in one sentence?

If you can do these things – AND DO SO WITH SUPPORTING AUTHORITIES FROM CASE LAW AND STATUTE – you will have truly mastered the material and should do well in the exam.

If you can do enough of these things to answer the right number of questions you should still be able to do well in the exam.

In any case: you are **STRONGLY** advised to make use of your remaining time before the exams in making sure that you can do **ENOUGH** of the points made in this podcast to be confident of a pass.