

Bar Prep Dos and Don'ts: 4 Worst Practices and 4 Best Practices for Bar Prep

Sometimes we do things out of habit. Sometimes we don't even think to ask ourselves whether the things we're doing are serving us in reaching our goal.

Auditing your current habits can help you notice. Noticing is the first step toward orienting your fundamental approach.

Take note of which of these "worst practices" and "best practices" describe you while preparing for the bar. A checklist is included at the end so you can audit yourself on an ongoing basis.

If you're just starting out, you'll already be ahead of the typical bar student before you even start by avoiding the common mistakes (don'ts) and striving for the big wins (dos).

 [4 Worst Practices \(Don'ts\)](#)

 [4 Best Practices \(Dos\)](#)

 [Audit Checklist](#)

DON'T...

1) GET TRAPPED IN THE MEMORIZATION SAFE SPACE.

If you're thinking "I need to know all the rules perfectly before I can solve problems!"

(Or relying on passive, exhausting "study" methods like watching lectures and pretending you won't forget 99% of them)...

You're procrastinating. You're memorizing out of fear.

This is common and normal. Sorry to say that the bar exam is scary. Accept and expect this.

Memorizing the rules (and issues!) is good, but don't fixate solely on it. Memorizing the law is just a cost of admission, minimum requirement, the beginning of your prep. It's busy work. **Knowing the law is different from knowing how to use the law.**

The catch is practical application—to try to use what you think you know now, rather than during the exam. (Keyword is "try." Frequency of recall and *attempts to recall* are the basis of memorization.)

Waiting until the big day to finally put it to practice will just turn it into a mock exam and you'll have to wait 9 more months to find out if you passed the next one. What will be born during that time other than anxiety and regrets?

2) FEEL GUILTY ABOUT PEEKING AT SAMPLE OR MODEL ANSWERS WHEN YOU NEED TO.

Say you're trying to answer a practice essay. First, arrive at a complete outline or answer with your best effort.

Maybe you got down a skeletal outline of the issues and rules. But maybe you have a feeling there's more to it than what you've written down. Maybe you have no idea where to even begin! That's OK (for now). Your best now is enough, even if your future best will be better.

At this point, you might try one of few things: (1) Go back to your outline to figure out the issue or rule. (2) Look at the model or sample answer. (3) Keep racking your brain to look for the light at the end of the tunnel, take a break, walk around, let it

“marinate” and come back to it later (reinventing the wheel, costing unnecessary time and mental work). (4) Ignore and move on.

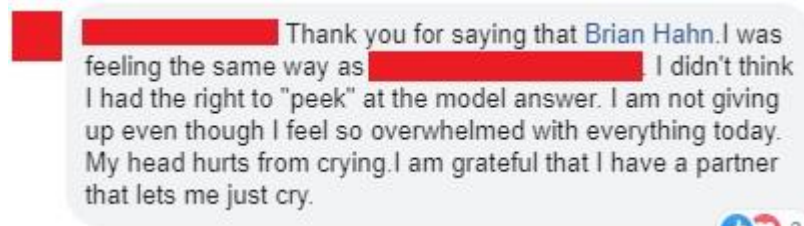
Avoid too much of (3) and any of (4). If you’re doing it open book, (1) is totally fine.

If your best attempt leaves you lost, (2) is also great. You can (and should) take a look at the solution, even if your best attempt is incomplete. You’ll see how the model answer or sample answer correctly laid out the issues and applied the rules. You’ll get a sense of what the examiners want from you.

[Find representative answers to past exam questions here.](#) If you have Barbri, I personally like their model essay answers because they break down all the relevant issues (important) and recite only the relevant rules without wasting time throwing in the entire outline (cough...Kaplan).

Study the delta between your answer or outline and the model answer. Use this as feedback. Experiencing moments of “aha” realizations is how you learn!

If you need permission, you have mine.



3) BE AFRAID TO REVISIT PROBLEMS.

You can't expect to completely understand every concept or how to approach particular issues by experiencing it once.

Prove your understanding by redoing an essay or MBE question at a later time. This could be immediately after, a few days later, a few weeks later.

Your job now is to focus on learning. Redoing questions is an underrated way to make sure you understand to the point you can come back two weeks or two months later and still get it right. You don't get stronger by lifting with bad form just to make the set. Squeeze your muscles; squeeze your brain.

You can redo PTs, but note that PTs (and to a lesser extent, essays and MBE questions) are better understood by seeing a variety of them. Prioritize exposing

yourself to different types of PT assignments. There are relatively few, so try to look at all past PTs available to you.

4) “JUST TRY HARDER” WHEN THINGS AREN’T WORKING.

If you aren’t getting the results you want, amplifying your efforts won’t help beyond a certain point.

I’m all for working hard if you aren’t doing so already. But say you’re spinning your wheels. Say your performance isn’t changing. It’s like singing off key. You can’t fix it by singing louder. In fact, singing louder actually makes it worse!

If a brute-force approach isn’t working, “I’ll just try harder” isn’t going to cut it. **To get better results, fundamentally change your approach.**

To that end, consider the following DOs. What good are don’ts without the dos?

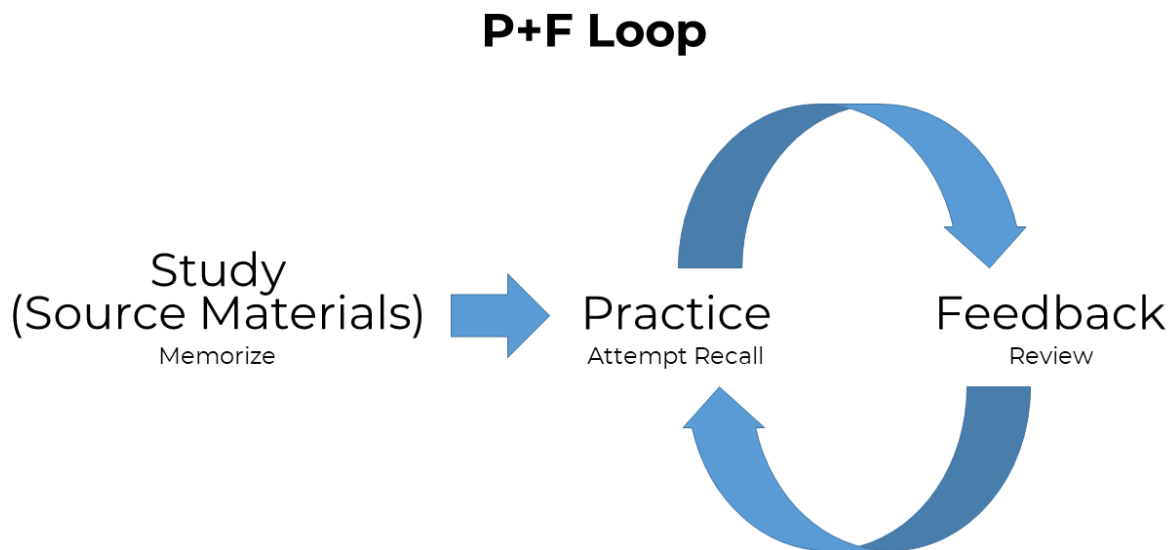
DO...

1) STUDY THE LAW (REVIEW OUTLINES), PRACTICE (SOLVE PROBLEMS), AND GET FEEDBACK (SELF-CRITIQUE).

Once you've overcome the quicksand trap of memorization, the obvious next step is to "practice practice practice," "do essays," "do thousands of MBE questions," etc.

But what does "practice practice practice" even mean?

There are three distinct parts to becoming able to answer questions competently on the bar. See the Practice + Feedback Loop:



www.MakeThisYourLastTime.com

Study: You can't practice without having a base level of familiarity of the issues and rules—not just rules but also the issues.

(Speaking of issues, issue identification is especially critical on essays. Try "[issue checking](#)" as a more reliable alternative to "issue spotting.")

So yes, preferably you want to review your outlines and other source materials (e.g., flashcards, lectures) and get a basic understanding first.

Practice: Practicing is like getting on the scale to measure yourself. Can you recall what you've memorized? Can you use what you've recalled? You're testing yourself. You don't get back on the scale without doing anything and expect the reading to change.

As a bonus, you tend to retain what you use and *attempt* to recall in practice.

Feedback is where you compare your work to a reference answer (a model, sample, or representative answer) or MBE answer explanations to confirm your understanding and fill in any gaps. This is also an opportunity to cross-reference and re-review the subject matter with your source materials.

This is where the learning happens—the part where you review your work to figure out what went right and wrong, more so than when you're doing the work itself.

So when you plan your study schedule, consider how much time you'll need to review your work. If you're practicing MBE questions, reviewing your work and the answer explanations should take you at least as long as doing the questions.

As a default, obtain feedback from reference answers or explanations. If you have a tutor, you can ask them for feedback also. But the most learning comes from your own attempts to figure it out (self-critique).

Make the corrections in your understanding of which issues and sub-issues are relevant to which facts, what the rules are, and how the rules are used. Embrace these opportunities to improve so that you can do the real thing as if it were just like practice.

So when they say "practice," it implies the things before (study) and after (feedback/review).

Set aside your fear or ego. Bar preparation is emotional preparation. [Get things wrong](#). It's OK to be embarrassed. Embarrassment is the best way to learn and carve the lesson into the grooves of your brain. You can avoid the ultimate embarrassment of not seeing your name on the pass list.

2) STAY CONSISTENT WITH YOUR PREPARATION.

Preparation will reduce anxiety because the things you practice will become second nature. Doing what you'll do on the exam will reveal your blind spots and tell you what you don't know.

The more you prepare and adjust your sails (like AI would), the more likely good things will happen.

[The tortoise beat the hare with consistency and persistence.](#) What you do every day matters more than what you do once in a while. Hoping to win the lottery is not a strategy. Hoping that the predictions are right this time is not a strategy.

No one is perfect (or even good) at predicting future outcomes consistently. But we can all be good at preparing.

If you've decided to take an exam that's many months away (6 or more), sure, no need to lock yourself in a cabin.

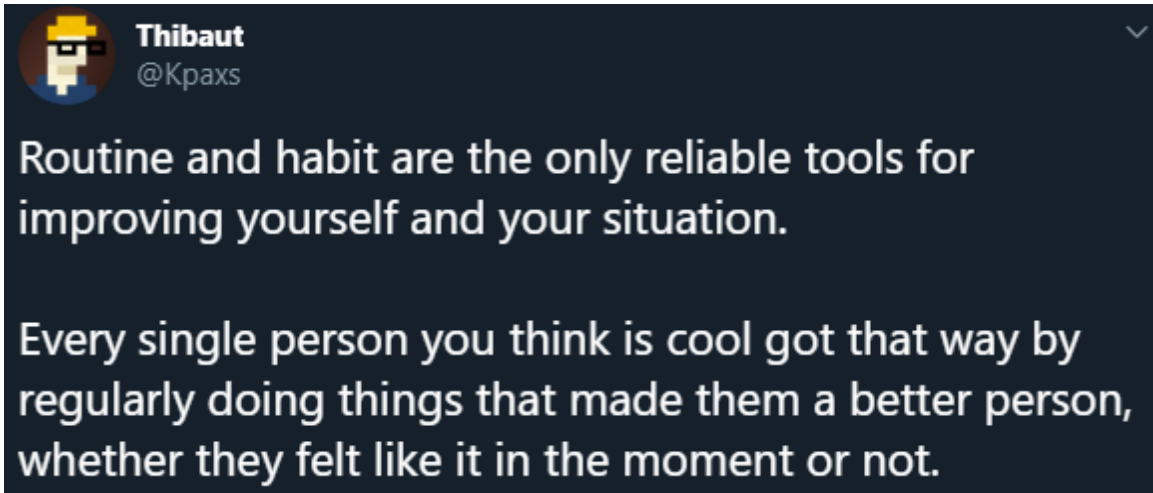
If you're taking one that's coming up within a few months, what you do during those the upcoming days will be instrumental to your success.

If you take a day or week off because you didn't feel like studying or you "deserve a break," what's to stop you from doing it again? After all, you already did it once. What's one more? It's the "what the hell" effect. This is a dangerous slippery slope and after-the-fact justification. The more you fall to temptation, the harder it is to recover.

(That's why I deceive myself by putting my favorite chocolate muffins back down at the grocery store. I also got a personal trainer for accountability because I can't trust myself not to slip eventually.)

I'm not saying every day needs to be a 12-hour marathon. Doing even one or two MBE questions can keep the momentum going. Momentum is far more reliable than one-off external motivation.

Habits are powerful, in either direction. You're programming yourself to do or avoid something. No wonder habit evidence is more powerful in court than character evidence!



So what do you do? Simply visit the world of bar preparation every day. Don't break the chain.

This doesn't mean you can't take days off or have fun, or have to put in hours every day, although most days you will. Some days you'll feel like having a day off. Sometimes you'll have to because of plans or duties. **But, if possible, put in at least a few minutes every day, even on days you can't spare time or don't feel like it.** After those few minutes, see if you still feel like continuing. If you do, keep going!

3) FINISH THE ESSAY, PERFORMANCE TEST, AND MBE SESSION.

This applies mostly to the exam itself but also if you're practicing with timed essays, PTs, or MBE sessions. Try to stick to a time budget, especially for PTs. My PT Toolkit emphasizes starting to write at the halfway mark no matter what because not finishing the PT is a common pitfall.

A paper that at least identifies all the relevant issues and at least attempts to address each of them is better than an incomplete paper that perfectly addresses a few issues.

For PTs, my general guideline is to use 40% of your time for outlining. Start writing no matter what when you've used 50% of the allotted time (see also the PT Toolkit). This way you won't get caught with a neat outline but 30 minutes left to hastily write something incomplete.

I mention the PT first because bar takers tend to neglect and forget about it.

For the essays, know how many minutes you get per essay (varies by jurisdiction). If there are a ton of issues and sub-issues, you may even want to allocate time for those issues when you outline your answer. On my second attempt at the CA Bar Exam, I had a racehorse essay that tested practically the entire Remedies subject where allocating time for each issue came in handy for staying on pace.

If it's looking like can't finish an essay or PT, start putting down issue headings. Include rules and a quick analysis for each issue heading. Incidentally, you can prevent running out of time if you've trained yourself to "cook" the essay (outline issues and rules within the first few minutes) and use the rest of the time to start writing early.

Another consideration if you have essays and a PT in the same afternoon session: Consider shifting time around so that you can finish everything if you know that you're weaker/stronger in one portion. For example, if you know you'll need extra time on the PT, steal 5-10 minutes per essay. Also consider doing the PT first if you know you can handle the essays later. This won't apply to remote exams where each session is scheduled.

For the MBE, you get 3 hours for the 100-question session. That's a pace of 34 questions per hour, 17 questions per half hour, and 9 questions per quarter hour. I'm rounding up to give you a conservative pace so you have a buffer for questions you want to come back to, to double check your bubbles, etc.

But if you have questions left with just a few minutes remaining, pick a letter and fill them in. I personally like the statistically likeliest "C" from my SAT days, but just pick a letter and run with it.

4) MANAGE YOUR PSYCHOLOGY FOR BAR PREP AND THE BAR EXAM.

“The mind is 50% of this exam. It has to be in the right frame. . . . The mind is powerful.”

“I think some of my failures were heavily based on my negative attitude and constant self-deprecation.”

“A person’s ability to handle the anxiety and stress of the exam is also huge. Even though I was a top student, I blanked during parts of the exam.”

I had appeared for and passed the July 2018 Cali Bar. Your emails were a source of strength and affirmed that many others were going through what I was. Your email especially in the days leading up to the exam were very helpful.

Per your previous email, half of bar prep involves preparing oneself mentally. Thank you for your emails and I hope many others benefit from them as well.

Regards
Aswini

These are words from actual bar takers.

You may face anxiety, frustration, exhaustion, stress, confusion, or overwhelm in bar preparation. It may not seem like a big deal to you. “This is normal,” you might think. You’ll just “deal with it.”

It is normal, but that doesn’t mean you need to suffer.

If you’re anxious or scared or worried all the time, you’re wasting limited brainpower on empty thoughts. It also has a physical effect on you.

Our actions are driven by our hearts... If you’ve ever been heartbroken or anxious about something, you know how it KILLS your motivation and how difficult it is to be productive.

It might not even be a stretch to say that your competition isn’t other bar takers—but rather your ability to handle the high-stakes nature of the bar exam, the knowledge you neglect to learn, your ego, your procrastination, your lack of motivation, and the constant battle with your willpower.

It's also true that you can't feel negative (fearful, overwhelmed, stressed) and positive (optimistic, clear, grateful) at the same time.

Therefore, what we need is to organize our emotions to favor the ones that benefit our goals and dreams.

Often times, more than the techniques and strategies, you benefit most from being in the right state of mind.

How? As discussed above, we don't need to brute force our way and just "try harder."

There are some base principles that you can apply to the negative emotions of bar prep and the bar exam.

- **"Flip the chessboard"**: Reframe your thoughts and words to turn a negative into a positive. It's about perspective. You can ALWAYS interpret an event into a useful positive. It's not a failure; it's a learning opportunity.
- **Actions before attitude**: You become calm and confident. You find clarity. You get used to the suck. All through action. For example, act calm to be calm. Overcome barriers and get better to become confident. Clarity comes from engagement. Motivation follows action. Confidence comes from competence.
- **Optimism**: We should assume that we'll recover from the recessions of our lives. Hardship will pass. Your biggest growth is ahead of you. Like the bamboo that grows all at once, your current efforts are not wasted.

I'm just scratching the surface here, but this will help you start. (BTW, I go into much more detail in my [Mental Engines](#) course, which teaches you the skill of managing your thoughts and organizing your emotions so you can be in the best mental state for bar prep and the bar exam.)

AUDIT CHECKLIST

Here's a checklist you can go through every so often to reflect on your how you're tackling bar preparation. I suggest a weekly audit.

DON'T		DO	
	Don't get trapped in the memorization safe space.		Study the law, practice, and get feedback via self-critique (Practice + Feedback Loop).
	Don't feel guilty about peeking at sample/model answers when you need to.		Stay consistent with your preparation.
	Don't be afraid to revisit problems.		Finish the essay, PT, and MBE session.
	Don't "just try harder" when things aren't working.		Manage your psychology for the bar by organizing your emotions and overcoming your mental barriers.