



The Guide to Academics

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Classes



The Small Group

All 1Ls take the same four classes in their first semester: **Contracts**, **Constitutional Law**, **Civil Procedure**, and **Torts**. You'll also take a one-credit **Introduction to Legal Analysis and Writing** for the first seven weeks of the semester. Your class schedule is assigned automatically, and you'll receive it at Registration during Orientation. You will not be able to enroll in other classes or clinics until the spring semester.

At Registration, you will also find out about your **small group**, the building block of your first-year experience at YLS. You'll take all four of your classes with the 15–17 other 1Ls in your small group, so expect to see a lot of them! Three of those classes will be in “sections” made up of several small groups, and one will be in a seminar-style setting with only your small group and your professor. Your small group could be in any of the four subjects, although Contracts and Constitutional Law are the most common small group classes.

Your small group will also have two **Coker Fellows**, who are 3L teaching assistants. Your Coker Fellows will serve as mentors and YLS guides, answering any questions you might have about studying, activities, class selection, and YLS generally. The Coker Fellows will teach a few sections in the second half of the semester and provide feedback on your brief. They'll also organize social events so you can get to know each other as a group.

The small group is a great way to get to know a diverse and interesting group of YLSers, but it's by no means the only way to do so. Throughout the semester, you'll have several get-togethers with your small group, from a meal at your professor's home to apple-picking in the idyllic Connecticut fall! While the small group system ends after the first semester, many small groups reunite at various points throughout your time at YLS, including for small group reunions.

“Cold-calling,” a staple of law school instruction, happens when a professor asks a student a series of questions in class without the student first volunteering. The “cold” part comes from the element of surprise. Many professors at YLS use a “warm” cold-calling system, in which students know in advance they might be called on that day. Other professors don’t cold-call at all.

One common cold-call system at YLS is the “on call” or “panel” system, where the professor assigns responsibility for a particular class session’s reading to a group of students, who must be present and ready to field questions. On days when you’re not on call, you can relax a bit, although it’s still a good idea to do the reading, show up, and take notes! Some professors organize their on-call panels alphabetically or by sections of the room, so that, for example, everyone whose last name begins with a letter from K to Z has to be prepared on Thursdays.

When professors do cold-call, their manner varies; some professors focus on the facts of the case and concrete questions, while others prefer to engage in a more abstract, policy or theory driven conversation. You’ll get a sense of what each professor is looking for early on in the semester.

A quick note: 1L Fall professors will typically tell you what kind of system they plan to use, but not always! Until your professor explains what their system will be, it pays to be prepared and ready to answer questions at each class meeting.

If you’ve ever watched *Legally Blonde* or *How to Get Away with Murder* (of course you have—probably why you decided to go to law school), you might picture cold-calling as an intimidating, high-drama event. While it certainly can be nerve-racking to have to answer on the spot in front of the whole class, most students find that cold-calling is really not a huge deal. Remember that most professors are not out to trick you—they’re out to engage you in the material. And, if they did trick you, chances are they tricked everyone else, too.

In some classes—particularly your small group—you might contribute to the conversation on a voluntary basis. Perhaps you’ll speak in almost every class meeting, or maybe only a few times per semester. Some people will speak more than others, and some may choose not to speak at all. Frequency is usually something students gauge based on how many students are in the room and how the professor conducts the class—you’ll be able to figure it out. Ultimately, it’s entirely your decision how and when to speak in class. But, we encourage you to push yourself. Try to speak in class at least a few times during the semester! More specifically, try to “take space, and make space,” to create an environment where all students can participate.

Adding your voice can enrich and round out class conversation—and it can prevent lectures from lapsing into monotony. Many people say that YLS’s greatest asset is its students, and we’ve really found that to be true. Each of your peers comes to class with a different perspective to throw into the mix—and you do, too. Don’t let the fear of being wrong or irrelevant deter you from speaking, and don’t feel like you have to preface your comments with apologetic remarks. **Trust that your experiences and perspectives are worthwhile.**

If you’re struggling to participate, choose a class or two that you’re particularly interested in and focus your energy on participating in those classes. Breaking the ice by speaking early can sometimes also be helpful. Finally, encourage your classmates by providing positive reinforcement. Telling someone that you appreciated their question or comment can go a long way toward building the confidence of a classmate who would otherwise not participate.

Remember, adding questions to the conversation can be as valuable as, if not more valuable than, making a comment. It’s almost guaranteed that your classmates are wondering the same thing, so don’t hesitate to ask!

Each of your professors should hold weekly office hours. Take advantage of these opportunities! We recommend that you try to go to each of your professors' office hours at least once during the semester. Professors often have different policies for office hours, so check your syllabus! However, many professors now use an online registration system that should also be on your class Canvas page: <https://officehours.law.yale.edu/Student/OfficeHours>.

A good approach is to start the conversation off with a question about an idea discussed in class, or to bring up something in the reading that you had a strong reaction to or wanted to learn more about. You could also ask about the professor's work—maybe they have a book on a subject or field of law that interests you. Once you have a few encounters of this “academic banter” variety, you'll start building a more personal connection that could lead to further mentorship or opportunities to work more closely with the faculty member.

Don't be discouraged if initially some of the faculty members seem awkward, stilted, or tough to build rapport with one-on-one. Some of them just take longer than others to connect with students. Of course, there are also faculty members who are easy to connect with—they're warm and friendly and proactively take an interest in getting to know their students, both intellectually and personally. You'll spot these members of the faculty immediately.

Preparing for Class



Most, if not all, of your first-semester classes will require a giant casebook. This will make books fairly expensive your first semester, but fear not: book costs generally taper off in later semesters, when you're taking fewer black-letter courses—one reason to sign up for small seminars! You should be able to get most of your books used, either from upper-level students or by ordering them online. Plus, there is a new group of 1Ls coming in to take those same four classes every year, so there's a good chance you'll be able to sell your books next fall. Many casebooks are also available to rent at the Yale Bookstore or online, where prices are usually cheaper.

A money-saving tip: textbooks sold to students in Connecticut are tax-exempt. To request a tax refund for tax applied to textbook purchases, visit: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?nodeId=201281600>

In your first semester, you generally get a steady amount of case reading each week. Case law reading is to regular reading as mountain climbing is to a Sunday stroll in Central Park, so don't worry if it takes you longer than you might expect, especially at first. By the end of the first semester, you will get the hang of how to quickly distill important information from cases.

Despite your best efforts, there will always be a few nights (or maybe more than a few nights) when you don't get through all your reading with the level of detail you wanted—or when you don't get to it at all. Luckily, generations of generous YLSers have donated their notes to the [YLW+ Outline Bank](#).

Outlines come in two formats: class outlines, which synthesize class readings and lecture notes, and exam outlines, which concisely summarize class notes and highlight important points for exam study. Choose an outline (e.g., “Witt – Torts Fall 2018”), then skim it before class, print out a copy, or pull it up on your laptop to look at in class—whatever works for you.

Don't worry about outlining every case or mastering a six-color highlighting system—unless, of course, that's what works for you. The beauty of first semester is that you have time to test out which method works best, whether it's taking class notes by hand or on your laptop, scrawling quick, subsequently indecipherable reading notes in the margins of your casebook, typing up a page of notes per reading assignment, highlighting, or using your book as a hard and expensive pillow for impromptu library naps. Some upper-level students suggest that students experiment by picking a different note-taking style to use consistently for each first-term class. One strategy works? Great, stick to it: you'll pass. Something doesn't work? Great, lesson learned—you'll still pass.

Keep in mind that the first semester at Yale is unlike any other. It's truly designed to be a practice semester. You will pass all four of your classes. Rumor has it that if professors try to fail a student (for things like not even showing up for the exam), the professors are the ones who get summoned to the Dean's Office to explain themselves. Enjoy this. Take the time to meet your classmates. Again, you will pass. If you must, take your Torts book to an outdoor café and pretend to read *Palsgraf* while drinking wine. We're not kidding: you will pass!

Exams



Before exams there is always a reading period, which lasts about one week but can be functionally longer if you don't have exams scheduled until later in the exam period. Check the [academic calendar](#) for a timeline of reading week and exams.

For 1L Fall, with the exception of small group classes, all students will take exams at the same time as one another **and in person**. The exam period will last about a week. In later semesters, some exams will be scheduled while others are self-scheduled, meaning you can elect to take them at any time during the exam period—although exams are trending towards in-person scheduled exams.

While we don't encourage anyone to go into an exam without having opened a book, remember that, for the first semester, 1L classes are graded only as Credit/Fail. . . and no one ever fails. This system is designed to relieve a lot of stress around the first term and exams. Instead of stressing about a grade, use your studying as a way to internalize the material, pull together themes of the class, take care of your health, and spend time with your friends. The Credit/Fail system is also a way to learn how to take law school exams, which are their own beast.

Upper-year students often advise 1Ls to **take at least one of their first-semester exams seriously to get a feel for what it's like to really prepare for a law school exam**. Many 1Ls opt to study their hardest for their small group exam because that professor knows them best. Performing well on an exam can be one way to deepen a relationship with a professor and showcase what you've learned. If your small group material (or professor) wasn't for you, though, don't worry—there are many other ways to get to know professors. You can participate in class, serve as a research assistant, or ask a professor to supervise a paper (these last two will likely come along later in your law school career). While you may choose to study hard for one or more of your finals, like we said, first semester is a grace period. So don't get too stressed about exams! At the end of the day, you and your classmates will all have the same grades to show for it.

Beyond 1L Fall



Sure, you know you have to make it through Civil Procedure and Contracts—but that's not why you came to law school, right? The academic picture gets much more exciting come spring, when you'll reap the benefits of Yale's decision to cram all of the required 1L courses into one semester. At some point you'll have to take Criminal Law and satisfy the legal ethics and professional skills requirements, but in the second semester, the world is your oyster!

Bidding for spring courses currently happens in early November. You'll get plenty of advice from YLW+, your fellow students, and the Office of Student Affairs on how to bid (and what to bid for) at that time. But if you're already antsy to find out what your options are, course listings for the spring are available online: courses.law.yale.edu. Without going into too much detail, the following pages cover a few terms that you might hear kicked around as you start to think about spring semester and beyond. You can also view the [YLW+ Course Bidding Guide](#).

Black Letters

These courses are the ones that would likely come to mind if you asked the average person about law school: Property, Evidence, Federal Income Taxation—the list goes on (and on, and on, and on). In black-letter courses, you'll learn the historical and current doctrine in a certain area of law. At YLS, black letters are usually relatively large lecture classes where your grade is determined, more or less exclusively, by your performance on an end-of-semester exam. You'll probably end up taking one to three of these every semester to build up a solid foundation of legal doctrine.

Seminars

These are smaller classes, usually 12–15 students, taught on various topics ranging from Constitutional Litigation to Police Reform to Law and Cognition. These classes are a great way to satisfy one of your writing requirements and get to know professors and your classmates in a more intimate setting.

Clinics

“Clinic” generally means any type of term-time experiential learning (for credit!)—and YLS has tons of options. Thanks to an unusually permissive Connecticut law, we're lucky to be able to get involved with clinics in the second semester of 1L year. In some clinics, you'll represent and work closely with clients—typically clinics housed in the Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization. Other clinics are more research and project based. To learn more about specific clinics, you should attend the clinic fair hosted every fall and see the clinic course guide that is sent out during course bidding.

The Curve: All classes with more than 15 students are subject to a curve such that no more than 40% of students can receive an H.



The Supervised Analytical Writing (SAW) and the Substantial Paper (SUB) are the two major research projects that each YLSer has to complete to graduate. You can write them in connection with a course or by doing independent, supervised research. As for the difference between the two—no one really seems to know what it is. The SAW is generally “bigger” than the SUB, but each professor’s requirements will vary.

There is no need to worry about these papers now or to complete one of them as a 1L. But, if you’re interested in publishing a paper, it can be great to start working on one before the end of 1L year. Visit the [Registrar page](#) for information about requirements and see the [YLW+ Guide for Writing Requirements](#) for tips on how to get started.

On a final note, YLS requires that all students finish either the SUB or the SAW before the start of 3L year. Also note that if you’re writing either paper in a class with more than 15 students, SUBs are still subject to the curve, but SAWs are exempt from it.

The first semester at YLS is an academic practice run. You should undoubtedly invest effort in your courses and start building relationships with your professors—after all, that’s why you’re here! But, know that the pressure’s off, and that the most important thing is to use 1L Fall to experiment and learn about yourself as a law student. Figure out which law school study strategies work for you, as they might be different from the ones you used in undergrad or grad school (trust us, law school is an entirely different beast).

Finally, the most important piece of advice: don’t be afraid to make yourself a little uncomfortable. For some of you, that might mean forcing yourself to go to office hours at least once for each of your professors, or setting a goal for how many times you will talk in class each week. For others, that might mean relaxing a teensy bit—say by staying out for one more round at the graduate student pub instead of finishing your reading (your friends are important, too—and you will pass Torts, we promise). The point is that although this first semester is a freebie, it’s also one-sixth of your time at YLS. Take advantage of it, and try to develop skills and relationships that will serve you well throughout the rest of your time at law school and beyond.