Zero-L Course Syllabus

Zero-L is an online course specifically designed by Harvard Law School to introduce incoming law students to the American legal system, the vocabulary of law school, and what it means to be a law student in the U.S.

Self-paced, with engaging video lessons, vocabulary flashcards, and optional knowledge checks, the course is designed to ensure that all incoming students, whatever their backgrounds and previous areas of study, start with foundational knowledge that enables them to thrive at law school.

Course modules cover a range of topics, from the history of the U.S. Constitution, the separation of powers, to state vs. federal law and their associated court systems to the stages of litigation, and much more.

Zero-L also demystifies concepts like common law, rules and standards, slippery slope arguments, and legal interpretation.

This course is divided into seven modules, each exploring a different facet of law and the law school experience.

While HLS strives to keep the Zero-L Course Syllabus up to date, course content may be updated ahead of this document.

Introduction to Zero-L

A brief introduction to Zero-L's structure and goals.

Introduction to Law and the Court Systems

In the Introduction to Law and the Court Systems module, students will hear about some different views about what law is – what, if anything, distinguishes legal rules from other kinds of rules concerning how we are permitted or required to act? Students will also learn the basics of how the law is organized in the United States. Students will consider questions like: What is the relationship between law and morality? What are the major sources of law and what is the "order" or "hierarchy" of authority between those sources? How, in the U.S., do the federal and state court systems interact? How are the courts in each system organized? This module also introduces students to some of the basic skills used in "thinking like a lawyer."

Module Lessons

- ✓ Thinking Like a Lawyer
- ✓ Kinds of Law: Some Major Categories and Sources of Law
- ✓ What is Law? Distinguishing Legal from Other Kinds of Rules
- ✓ Federal vs. State Law and Order of Authorities
- ✓ The Federal Court System
- ✓ The State Court Systems

How to Read a Case and Understand Precedent

In the How to Read a Case and Understand Precedent module, students will learn some of the most basic and important skills for law school and law practice, including how to read and analyze a judicial opinion, and what it means for judicial decisions to serve as "precedents" – that is, as decisions that can bind judges in subsequent cases. American law schools are built around the "case method," especially in first-year classes, where the vast majority of the materials students will read are judicial opinions issued by courts on the occasion of deciding a particular case or lawsuit. The lessons in this module will guide students step-by-step through the reading of judicial opinions – discerning the most important facts, mastering the procedural history and posture in which the decision is being made, understanding the substance or "holding" of the

decision, distilling, debating, and critiquing the key reasoning behind the decision, and much more. Students are taught these lessons using using a real case that they may encounter in law school.

The lessons in this module will also help students identify common types of arguments that lawyers make within a precedent-based system of law, educate them on the role of *stare decisis*, and teach them about the binding effect or "weight" attached to different kinds of decisions by different courts.
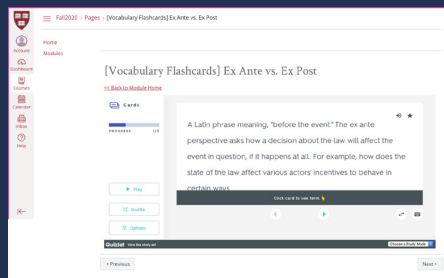
Module Lessons

✓ How to Read a Case
✓ Kinds of Common Law Arguments
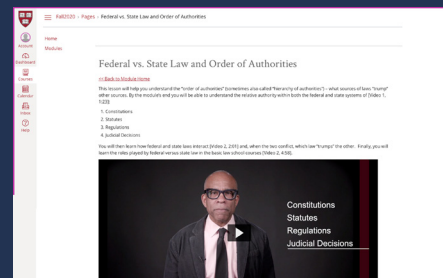✓ Precedent: What does the Decision Mean for Future Cases?

INSIDE ZERO-L

"Every pre-law student will benefit from a much more gentle on-ramp to law school."

— I. Glenn Cohen, James A. Attwood and Leslie Williams Professor of Law and Faculty Director for the Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology & Bioethics, Harvard Law School

Vocabulary flashcards for quick review

Videos featuring renowned faculty

Working with Statutes

By the end of the Working with Statutes module, students will know how to locate and read statutes. They will also be introduced to some of the techniques of interpretation used by courts in trying to determine what a statute means, and to debates among two broad interpretive approaches known, respectively, as "textualism" and "purposivism." Using the national lawmaking bodies of the U.S. – Congress and the President – as a model, students will also review the steps involved in how a bill becomes law.

Module Lessons

✔ How a Bill Becomes a Law
✔ How to Read a Statute: Introduction
✔ How to Read a Statute: Tools of Interpretation

A Preview of Your 1L Courses

The Preview of Your 1L Courses module will give students a sneak peek at some of the courses they will take in their first year of law school. By the end of the module, students will be equipped with a big-picture overview that will provide information about some of the topics they are likely to be reading about, and how the courses both differ from and relate to one another.
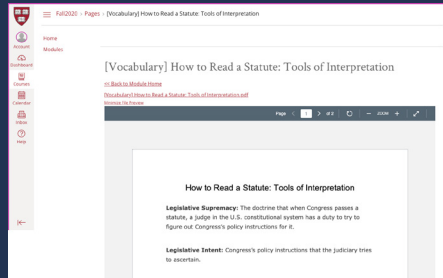
Module Lessons

✔ The Stages of Civil Litigation
✔ Introduction to Criminal Law
✔ Introduction to the Separation of Powers
✔ Introduction to the Administrative State
✔ An Historical Overview of the Constitution
✔ Introduction to Tort Law
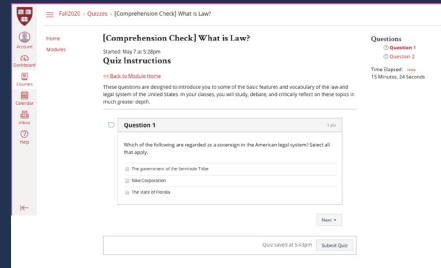✔ Introduction to Contract Law
✔ Introduction to Property Law

"Zero-L helps students build their understanding of American law and history—critical knowledge ahead of starting law school."

— Annette Gordon-Reed, Charles Warren Professor of American Legal History, Harvard Law School, and Professor of History, Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Downloadable vocabulary

Comprehension checks in every module

Introduction to the Legal Profession

In the Introduction to the Legal Profession module, students will get a sense of the opportunities and options that will be available to them after (and in some cases while) earning their law degree, as well as the skills they will use in day-to-day work as a lawyer. Consider this module a preview of some of the pathways that will open to students, and an introduction to some of the animating values behind our profession.

Module Lessons

✔ The Skills Involved in Giving Legal Advice
✔ Lawyers: Who Are They and What Do They Do?
✔ Kinds of Lawyering

Introduction to Legal Theory and Interdisciplinary Scholarship

The Introduction to Legal Theory and Interdisciplinary Scholarship module introduces students to some of the larger theoretical questions raised by law, questions which will often be lurking in the background – and sometimes will be at the center – of readings and classroom discussions. This introduction focuses on two distinctions that students are sure to encounter early on in the semester: the difference between "rules" and "standards" and the difference between ex ante and ex post perspectives in the law. It also introduces students to how ideas from economics frequently make their way into legal reasoning.

The rest of the lessons in this module, presented as "bonus" content, give students a peek inside the scholarly side of studying law. They focus on how legal scholarship connects the study of law to the methods of other disciplines – the world of "law and…" scholarship. These lessons are not essential content for the first few weeks of law school, but they will help round out students understanding of different ways of tackling legal questions and problems, and give them a sense of what some of their professors might be working on beyond the classroom.

Module Lessons

✓ Rules vs. Standards
✓ Ex Ante vs. Ex Post
✓ Using Economics to Analyze Legal Questions
✓ BONUS: "Law and…" Interviews

Test Drive: Applying What You've Learned

This capstone opportunity enables students to apply what they have learned in Zero-L in a final exercise that provides a perfect bridge to day one of class.

ZERO-L®
by HARVARD LAW SCHOOL