

HOW TO APPROACH THE BPTC

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The BPTC is a difficult year. You might hear older barristers call it the ‘Bar vacation course’ (a pun on what used to be called the ‘Bar Vocational Course’ or ‘BVC’). The course has changed beyond all recognition from being a holiday, or even a light year. What makes it particularly hard is that it is difficult for all the wrong reasons. In your undergraduate degree you will have been set questions anyone can answer, but it takes real skill, imagination, or hard work to achieve a good mark. On the BPTC, you will have to navigate badly-phrased questions, multiple choice questions with more than one correct answer, and be given conflicting advice on an almost daily basis. Below are a set of candid tips – some perhaps too candid – to help you survive the most frustrating quasi-academic year of your life. The advice focuses on the Criminal and Civil Procedure Courses.

Buy the ‘red book’

A few weeks into the course people told me about this mysterious ‘red book’, aka *Criminal Litigation, Evidence and Sentencing* by Rory Clarke and Rosalind Earis. I was told it was a revision guide which handily condensed the whole ‘Crim Lit’ course into 176 pages. I was proud. I’d been given a copy of *Blackstone’s Criminal Practice* and was intent on using it all the way through; I had a degree for goodness sake! What did I want a revision guide for? Four months later I succumbed and realised that it was the book we should have been given in lieu of *Blackstone’s*. There are a few errors in it, and you’ll need to update it as you go, but it is a phenomenally useful map with which to see the wood without getting bogged down in the trees. Updating and annotating it will also give you the opportunity to cross-check from *Blackstone’s* and help memorise all the details. There is a similar product available for civil procedure, but you should make purchasing the red book your priority.

Ignore the White Book

You’ll also be furnished with a copy of the *White Book*, volumes I and II, incorporating various supplements throughout the year. It is an impressive practitioner text that somehow weighs so much you assume it has to be worth every ounce. It is, after all, the one that barristers themselves use. The reality is that at this stage you need to know about 1% of the commentary, and about 80% of the rules. My advice is to prioritise becoming familiar with the Civil Procedure Rules and Practice Directions themselves (available in a condensed form at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/courts/procedure-rules/civil/rules>). This is because many of the common ones you will need to know word-for-word come the exam. The rules are presented in the *White Book*, but can get lost among the reams of commentary. More detailed study should be done with a book such as Sime’s *A Practical Approach to Civil*

Procedure, which demonstrates how the vast network of rules, practice directions, and case law interrelate. But don’t lose sight of the fact that it’s 90% about the rules and practice directions themselves.

Don’t forget pro bono

With the volume of work on the BPTC, you could be forgiven for thinking that chambers would see participation in things like pro bono and mooting as an added bonus, not a prerequisite for pupillage applications. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Opportunities come thick and fast at the beginning of the year and dry up pretty quickly, so take them as soon as you know that they are right for you. That is, unless you already have pupillage sorted, in which case you can choose whether or not to do pro bono in the more literal translation of that expression.

As a rule of thumb, criminal sets are more keen on experience of ‘real-life’ advocacy, such as FRU, the School Exclusions Project, and Vocalise. Commercial sets tend to like mooting, and any continued involvement with your prior academic subject is a bonus for them too – a few friends turned their doctoral theses into books during the BPTC. Be wary of doing too many extra-curriculars though, as they can use up a lot more time than originally indicated. My advice would be to do just one or two law-related things in your ‘spare time’ to avoid burning out and falling behind on BPTC work.

Preparing for the exam

It might seem an odd time to be talking about the exams, but they come frighteningly soon. In fact, the big knowledge papers take place around late April, with assessments on average every 4–5 weeks throughout the year. Remember that you will get zero extra credit for having read an interesting article or book on your subject, or for reading cases in full. There is so much material to cover that you are far better off checking that you are totally solid on the basics.

Unlike academic courses where ‘question-spotting’ ranges from being tacitly accepted to positively encouraged, the official line in the BPTC is that you must cover everything on the syllabus. The exam will often test every corner of that knowledge. The silver lining to this is that there is a finite amount to learn. This information is then tested by means of multiple choice questions and ‘short answer questions’ (‘SAQs’). You have to get at least 60% on each of those sections in order to pass.

Too much clever thinking can actually lead the candidate astray; rumours still circulate of people who completed Masters courses in a subject that they later failed on the BPTC. The mantra ‘keep it simple, stupid’ (or ‘KISS’, for short) could usefully be written on the front of every exam paper. The words ‘don’t panic, we don’t know the answer to

some of these questions either’ could also be inscribed, partly for much-needed comic relief from the aridity of the course’s contents, but also to reflect the large variances in marks that take place after moderation. My advice for these situations is to try and work out what the paper was attempting to ask you, and answer it on the most basic level. In terms of committing the material to memory, everyone has different techniques. Because of the relatively large amount of ‘rote-learning’ of stock phrases, I found that recording my voice and going for walks with it on repeat was the most successful way of memorising the material, notwithstanding that it was slightly unpleasant listening to my own voice becoming gradually more and more tired and bored with additional claims under Part 20 or something equally thrilling. It also meant I got to wander around Russell Square rather than be stuck daydreaming out of a library window.

If you did the GDL, you will probably have also worked out that learning large amounts of material at a basic level means that taking volumes of notes is a bad idea. Use lecture slides, the red book, revision guides, and draw spider diagrams. If you start highlighting *A Practical Approach* for relevant material, you will find yourself highlighting more or less every line. You have been warned.

Dealing with frustration

The BPTC is horrible. Exam questions often don’t make sense, and no amount of preparation will be able to prepare you for the Ethics exam. It is very tempting to whinge to anyone and everyone about how negative your experience is. My advice – advice which I should have followed myself earlier on in the course – is to avoid whining as much as possible with your classmates. It may build some form of camaraderie, but it is far better at generating a negative atmosphere that makes every day an unpleasant drag. While that might sound like slightly hippyish advice, just going to court or doing mini-pupillages can remind you why you signed up to this in the first place. Make sure you take time out to do non-law things every day, even if it’s just going for coffee with a (preferably non-lawyer) friend. Finally, remember that, even if the Bar Course doesn’t work out, there are plenty more fulfilling careers out there. Your health is more important than passing a heap of exams and trying to nail pupillage all in one year. Just remember that when that Silk across from you in Hall laughs when you say you’re under pressure during the ‘Bar vacation year’, he probably has no idea what you’re going through. ■

THE PRO BONO

NATALIE BIRD

experience

When I started the BPTC last September, I was eager to throw myself into as many pro bono activities as I could manage. At university, I had helped coordinate the students’ pro bono society, but the services we were able to provide as undergraduates were limited. In contrast, this year I have undertaken pro bono work in a variety of forms. First, I acted as a duty adviser at Willesden County Court defending repossession claims, which was invaluable experience, as I have now already undertaken my first contested hearings against instructed counsel in front of district judges (and won!). I have also become FRU trained for employment law cases (though FRU cases remain thin on the ground due to the recent introduction of tribunal fees), and I have worked on a criminal appeal with the London Innocence Project.

I have assisted solicitors at a Bromley firm by building

asylum appeals, calculating PSLA quantum, and writing advices for prison law and human rights claims. Through ‘Vocalise’, an initiative started by Gray’s Inn students a few years ago [see page 26], I have been teaching debating in HMP Brixton, and I have debated against LSE and the University of South Carolina. I have also served as a mooting judge for ‘Big Voice London’: a group that has organised a mooting competition for sixth form students and law graduates, culminating in a final at the Supreme Court. My pro bono work has been extremely useful, allowing me to put the tools I have learned on the BPTC into practice and to help people who would otherwise go unrepresented; and it has been a talking point at all my pupillage interviews. I thoroughly recommend all BPTC students to get involved in pro bono work. My advice is not to worry about not having time for it, as you should be able to balance it with your BPTC schedule quite easily. ■