



Lee Burgess: Welcome to the Bar Exam Toolbox podcast. Today, we are sharing 10 mental resets to get you through the bar exam. Your Bar Exam Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan and Lee Burgess, that's me. We're here to demystify the bar exam experience, so you can study effectively, stay sane, and hopefully pass and move on with your life. We're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the career-related website [CareerDicta](#). Alison also runs [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on your favorite listening app, and check out our sister podcast, the [Law School Toolbox podcast](#). If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the [contact form](#) on BarExamToolbox.com, and we'd love to hear from you. And with that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back! The bar exam is a uniquely difficult test. Over the course of just a few days, you're expected to recall an enormous amount of information across multiple subjects, manage your time under extraordinary pressure, and communicate like a lawyer for hours on end. You spend months memorizing black-letter law, practicing essays, reviewing performance tests, and working through endless sets of MBE questions – all in the hope that when the exam day arrives, you'll be ready. And then on top of all of that, the exam starts playing mind games with you. It asks whether you can keep going after an essay that felt terrible, let go of the multiple-choice question you're convinced you got wrong, trust your preparation when you suddenly can't remember a rule you swore you knew yesterday, or stop your brain from convincing you that everyone else is more prepared than you.

Lee Burgess: In that way, the bar exam tests more than legal knowledge. It also tests your mental stamina and your ability to recover. The important thing to remember is that these moments aren't signs that something has gone catastrophically wrong. They're part of the experience. Nearly every bar applicant encounters moments of uncertainty, frustration, self-doubt, or panic during bar prep and on the exam day itself. The students who perform the best aren't necessarily the ones who never experience those moments. More often, they're the ones who recognize the spiral, interpret it, and get back to earning points.

Lee Burgess: Now, one of the best ways to prepare for those moments is to develop a few mental resets ahead of time – short, memorable phrases that can help you refocus when your thoughts start working against you. The key isn't coming up with them the night before the exam or in the middle of a difficult multiple-choice set. It's practicing them throughout your bar prep. After all, you've unfortunately probably already experienced many of these moments while



studying. Every time they happen is an opportunity to rehearse how you'll respond on exam day. The goal of these mental resets isn't to convince yourself that the bar exam is easy. It isn't. The goal is to give yourself a next step when your brain starts spiraling, a simple phrase that interrupts the panic, grounds you in what matters, and helps you return your attention to what earns points: the question in front of you.

Lee Burgess: So, when imposter syndrome shows up, here's your mantra: "I belong here." Maybe you're the first bar applicant in your family. Maybe you're balancing work and/or caregiving responsibilities while studying. Maybe you're older than many of the people taking the exam. Maybe you're retaking the exam, sometimes even for the third or fourth time. Or maybe you simply look around the room and convince yourself that everyone else seems calmer, smarter, or better prepared than you. But none of those observations tell you who is going to pass the bar exam. You earned your law degree, you earned your seat in that testing room. You belong there just as much as everyone else. Every time comparison starts to creep in, come back to that simple reminder: "I belong here."

Lee Burgess: Now, when you [can't remember everything on an essay question](#), here's your mantra: "Just get the points you can." Almost every bar applicant has at least one moment during the essay portion of the exam when they recognize the topic but can't quite remember the rule, the issue, or where the analysis is supposed to go. It can be tempting to panic or convince yourself that you've already blown the essay, but one forgotten rule doesn't make or break your score. Instead, shift your focus from the points you might lose to the points that are still available. State the rule you do remember. If you can't remember it exactly, then make your best educated guess. Let the facts guide you. Ask yourself what facts seem legally significant, and generalize those observations into a reasonable rule statement. Then do what earns the most points on almost every essay: apply the facts carefully, explain your reasoning, and reach a conclusion.

Lee Burgess: Now remember, you're rarely graded on one rule in isolation. Even if one issue feels shaky, there are likely other issues on that same essay where you know the law better and can earn those points with more confidence. So don't let one forgotten rule distract you from demonstrating everything else you know. Sometimes getting the points you can means building the best rule statement you can from the facts. Sometimes it means recognizing that you've already earned plenty of points elsewhere and just moving on.



- Lee Burgess: Next, when you're frozen in front of a blank essay, here's your mantra: "Permission to write ugly." Many students freeze, because they're trying to produce a perfect essay or performance test response under impossible circumstances. They want every rule statement to be flawless, every heading to be perfectly organized, and every sentence to sound polished. But that is not what the bar exam is asking you to do. Your job isn't to write the perfect essay; it's to earn as many points as you can in the time you've been given. Do your best with what you know, but keep moving. Your analysis is almost always more important than perfect wording, and it's certainly more important than perfect grammar. Give yourself permission to write a little ugly. Your grader cares more that you spotted the issue and applied the law than whether your prose was elegant.
- Lee Burgess: Next up, when a [multiple-choice question feels impossible](#), here's your mantra: "Choose, commit, and move on." Every administration contains questions that feel impossible. Some are designed that way. Your job isn't to answer every question with complete confidence. Your job is to maximize points over the course of all of the questions. Don't let one difficult question steal time from five questions you might actually know. Make the best choice you can, commit to it, and keep moving. Sometimes the highest-scoring decision isn't finding the perfect answer, but protecting your time and mental energy for the rest of the exam.
- Lee Burgess: Next up, when you start second-guessing your multiple-choice answer, here's your mantra: "Change your answer for a reason, not a feeling." This is different from simply encountering a difficult question. Here, you've already answered it, but now you're talking yourself out of your own reasoning. Sometimes changing an answer is absolutely the right decision, but it should only happen because you've identified a specific legal reason your first answer was wrong, not because the question made you uncomfortable or panic started to creep in. Anxiety isn't evidence. If you have a clear reason to change your answer, then do it. Otherwise, trust the analysis that got you there in the first place.
- Lee Burgess: Next up, when thoughts about a [disappointing practice score](#) creep into your mind, here's your mantra: "That was practice, and this is performance." It's surprisingly common for students to remember a discouraging practice multiple-choice set or essay while they're sitting for the actual bar exam. Suddenly, that score starts to feel like a prediction, but it isn't. Practice exists to expose weaknesses, build skills, and help you improve. Today's exam is a brand-new opportunity. Every question you've answered and every mistake you've made has prepared you for this moment. That was practice, but this is



performance. So stay in the exam you're taking, not the one that you've already finished.

Lee Burgess: Next up, when [the facts start pulling you toward an answer](#), here's your mantra: "Let the law guide the facts." One of the hardest parts of the bar exam is that not every fact is there to point you towards the correct answer. Some facts are legally insignificant; others are included to tempt you towards the wrong rule, trigger an emotional reaction, or make one answer choice seem more intuitive than it actually is. The exam is testing whether you can separate the facts that matter from the facts that don't. So when you catch yourself thinking, "That has to be battery" or, "There's no way that's enough consideration", pause and ask yourself a different question: What does the law actually require? Start with the legal rule and its elements. Then return to the facts and ask which ones satisfy or fail to satisfy those elements. If you're relying on the fact because it aligns with the governing law – great. But if you're relying on it simply because it feels persuasive or points towards an answer intuitively, then take another look. The facts are essential, but they don't determine the answer on their own. The law tells you which facts matter, so the law guides the facts, not the other way around.

Lee Burgess: Next up, when you're overwhelmed by everything the question seems to be asking, here's your mantra: "Trust the task." Whether you're writing an essay or a performance test, it's easy to convince yourself that you're missing something. You start chasing every possible issue, overcomplicating your organization, or trying to anticipate what the graders really want. When that happens, you come back to the task. On an essay, read the call of the question again. It often tells you exactly which issues to analyze and what type of conclusions the graders want you to reach. On a performance test, return to any task memo. It tells you what you're writing, who your audience is, and how your response should be organized. The exam is usually giving you more direction than you think. When you start feeling overwhelmed, resist the urge to overthink. Trust the task. Let it guide your organization, your analysis, and your writing. More often than not, the roadmap is already there.

Lee Burgess: Next up, when you become convinced you're failing, here's your mantra: "Feelings aren't facts." One difficult essay, one frustrating multiple-choice set, one overwhelming afternoon – those experiences have an incredible ability to convince capable students that they're failing. Notice the difference between saying, "I'm failing" and, "I feel like I'm failing." One is a conclusion, the other is an emotion. Recognize the feeling without letting it become your reality. Then gently bring your attention back to the only thing you can control – the question in front of you.



Lee Burgess: And to finish up, when you want to give up, here's your mantra: Write your own. This is the only mantra on the list that I don't think anyone else can give you. There will probably be a day during bar prep or a moment during the bar exam when you're exhausted, discouraged, and wondering why you're putting yourself through all of this. That's exactly why I encourage students to decide on one personal mantra before they need it. Maybe it's, "I'm here for my future." Maybe it's, "I'm here for my family." Maybe it's, "I'm here to fight for justice." Maybe it's, "I'm here for the clients who will someday need me." Or maybe it's simply, "I've wanted this for too long to quit now." Whatever your reason is, write it down today, not on the day you're tempted to walk away. The best time to decide why you'll keep going isn't when you're standing in the middle of despair; it's before you get there. Because bar prep isn't just about learning the law, but about learning how you'll respond when things get hard.

Lee Burgess: So, practice the rules, practice your essays, practice your timing, but don't forget to practice your recovery too. By the time exam day arrives, I hope these phrases are habits you've rehearsed so many times that when doubt inevitably appears, your response is already waiting for it. I also hope they're phrases you genuinely believe. "I belong here" isn't wishful thinking. You do belong there. "Get the points that are available" reflects how the bar exam is actually graded. "Permission to write ugly" is a reminder that imperfect work earns far more points than a blank page. The strongest mantras aren't empty affirmations. They're simple truths you can return to when stress makes them hard to remember. The bar exam will test your legal knowledge and ability to apply facts to it. It will also test your ability to trust yourself, recover from setbacks, and keep moving forward. Preparing for both may be one of the best things you can do before exam day.

Lee Burgess: If you enjoyed this episode of the Bar Exam Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app. We'd really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you're still in law school, you might also like to check out our popular Law School Toolbox podcast as well. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to myself or Alison at lee@barexamtoolbox.com or alison@barexamtoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website [contact form](https://www.barexamtoolbox.com/contact) at BarExamToolbox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!



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[Help! My Bar Exam Practice Scores Are Going Down!](#)

[Tips for Taking the MBE from Someone Who Struggles with Multiple Choice](#)

[Podcast Episode 139: How to Issue Spot an Exam Question \(w/Live Example\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 196: Quick Tips – What to Do If You Forget the Law on Exam Day](#)