

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT)

Podcast Transcript

Troy: Hello, I am Troy Riddle, and today we would like to provide information about the Law School Admission Test, affectionately known as the LSAT, to all of the DiscoverLaw.org registrants. We're going to be talking with James Lorié, who is a Senior Test Specialist at the Law School Admission Council, sponsors of the DiscoverLaw.org website, where he has worked since 1995. James, thanks for joining us.

James: Thank you very much for having me.

Troy: First question, James: Exactly what does the LSAT measure, and why is it important to the study of law?

James: Well, in a nutshell, the LSAT is a measure of acquired reading and reasoning skills. I think it's important, by the way, to emphasize the word acquired. And that's because the LSAT does not—is not designed to test IQ or innate ability or anything like that. What it tests are acquired skills—namely, your ability to read and reason at a high level, and these are skills that are acquired and developed throughout your education. Now, as to why these skills are important to the study of law, the first thing I would say is that if you go to law school, you're clearly going to be doing a lot of reading and a lot of reasoning. With respect to the reading that's required in law school, well, it's famously not light reading. So high-level reading skill is obviously going to be very important. But, you not only have to read and understand difficult texts, you also have to analyze them. And what that means is you have to understand the arguments they contain. You have to break the arguments down into their component parts, which is identifying premises and conclusions, assumptions or flaws, and so on. All of that comes under the heading of reasoning ability. And by the way, law school faculty and students agree with us that these skills are necessary for success in law school. About 12 years ago, our organization surveyed thousands of law students and professors about which skills are most important in law school, and reading and reasoning came out among the top skills.

Troy: That's very interesting, James. There's a perception that the LSAT is a biased test that disproportionately affects minority students. How do you respond to that?

James: Well, that's a good question. Unfortunately, it is true that some minority groups score lower, on average, than the majority population scores, on average. That said,

however, I would hasten to add a couple of very important points. First, I think it's very important to tell people that we take our responsibility to create a fair and unbiased test very seriously. In fact, we go to great lengths to avoid bias on the test. First, we have very detailed and rigorous standards regarding the way our questions have to be written in order to avoid unfair cultural bias, and every single question that we develop for the test is carefully reviewed with these criteria in mind. But we don't only rely on our own judgment. Every single question that's developed for the test is also sent to a panel of outside experts who represent each of the major racial and ethnic groups in our test-taking population. So, for example, each question that might ultimately be used on the test is scrutinized by outside experts who are African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American or Pacific Islander, and Native American. And we also make sure, by the way, that women are represented among those reviewers as well. Finally, it's also worth noting that every question that might ultimately end up on the scored test is first tried out among LSAT test takers through our unscored section. What that means is that one section of the test isn't scored; it doesn't count toward test takers' scores. But instead, we use those as a way to try out questions ahead of time and ultimately improve the quality of the test. And among other things, what we do is we find any question in that unscored section that unfairly affects any group; that question is thrown out and never used again. Beyond all our efforts to avoid bias, however, I think it's important to talk about one other side of this question. And that is, as I said at the beginning, there are differences in average scores between groups, but these differences are just that—differences in group averages. Within each group, there are always individuals who do very well. I like to think of it this way: I speak publically about the test from time to time, and I always like to tell people group averages are not individual fate. Whatever happens with the group average of any group that you might belong to, you are an individual and, with the right groundwork and the right preparation, you can put yourself in a good position to succeed.

Troy: That's very encouraging information, James. So, are you suggesting that students can prepare for the test?

James: Absolutely, and in fact, it's never too early to start preparing. So, even if you aren't sure whether you want to go to law school and if you just want to keep your options open for the future, I'd still recommend a few critical things to ensure that you have the skills to do well on the LSAT and beyond. The first and most important thing you can do is to develop and strengthen these skills, your reading and reasoning skills. And you can do that by taking challenging courses as an undergraduate—courses that require

you to use those skills. Specifically, the kinds of skills I'm talking about are things like the ability to read complex texts with accuracy and comprehension, the ability to understand the relationships among various parts of texts, and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from the information provided in that text. I'm also talking about skills like the ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate arguments, which includes the ability to recognize conclusions already drawn in an argument or to draw new conclusions from the information provided in the argument; the ability to identify assumptions in an argument; to identify errors in reasoning; and the ability to identify and apply principles. So, again, these are the kinds of skills you want to be strengthening throughout your coursework, and the important thing is to take courses that require you to use those skills because, as with any kind of skill, the way you strengthen these skills is through repeated use.

Troy: I think that's really sound advice for all of those aspiring lawyers listening to this podcast, James. Are there specific courses that might be helpful for students to take while they're undergraduates?

James: Well, you know, there's no definite list of courses that you must take in order to strengthen these skills. That said, however, there are a number of types of courses that I'd strongly advise undergraduates to look into and take if they're thinking about taking the LSAT and, ultimately, going to law school in the future. So, depending on what your particular school offers, I'd look at things like courses in logic, critical thinking, philosophy, literature or history, economics, anthropology, even mathematics or linguistics. Basically, whichever of these courses you pick, the thing you want to do, again, is to make sure that you're taking courses that require you to read challenging texts as much as possible and that require you to use your reasoning skills as much as possible. By the way, I'll also add that you could also do some of this on your own time—maybe over the summers or over other breaks or whatever. And you can do this simply by reading challenging material on your own all the time. So, it can be books, or it can even be things like high-level publications written for educated audiences, things like *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Economist*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and so on. Whatever it is, the main point is just to read, to read as much as possible, and to think critically about what you read. Finally, I also think it's worth saying that strengthening your reading and reasoning skills will definitely help you do better on the LSAT, but these are skills that are not just useful for that one particular purpose. As I said back at the beginning of this podcast, these are skills that are necessary for success

in law school itself. So, having stronger reading and reasoning skills will help you succeed on the test, yes, but also in law school and, ultimately, as a lawyer as well.

Troy: Very good information, James. Thanks for sharing that. As a test developer for LSAC, is there anything else you'd like to share with students listening to this podcast?

James: Yeah, actually. In addition to all of the information that we've been talking about—taking challenging coursework to prepare for the test, etc.—I'd like to add a few more things. I'd encourage all undergraduate students considering law school to take advantage of the resources available to them, both on their campus and at DiscoverLaw.org. So, specifically, I'd recommend things like, first, visit your prelaw advisor if your campus has one. If there isn't one at your school, get in touch with your career services office and they can help you get in touch with one. Second, I'd advise joining a prelaw club at your school. That's a good way to get information about preparing for law school and also a good way to connect to other students who are considering a career in the law. And, finally, definitely just—definitely register at DiscoverLaw.org, and that's a good way to stay up-to-date on all the latest information, resources available to you, and events that are planned in your area, and so on.

Troy: Great advice. Thanks again, James. I think the information you provided has been very insightful and helpful. Students, those listening to this podcast, we want DiscoverLaw.org to be your source of information about preparing for law school. Please visit the site frequently for new podcasts and other exciting and valuable information. Until next time.