How to Pick Upper-Class Electives at MLaw
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What follows are a few thoughts about how JD students should go about picking elective classes during their 2L and 3L years. Please note that the following reflects only my opinions. It’s important to seek advice from other people along the way. More on that below. But let’s get started:

First, familiarize yourself with the curriculum.

You wouldn’t go into a fine restaurant and order dinner until after you took a good look at the menu, right? At MLaw, the menu is, of course, the curriculum. From www.law.umich.edu, click on the Curriculum link on the left side of the page, under “Quick Links.” There you will find, among other things, links to course descriptions of every course offered at MLaw during the current year and the previous two, and the Curriculum Interest Areas web pages, on which you will find the entire MLaw curriculum divided up into roughly two dozen subject.

Another useful tool is MLaw Schedule, to which you can link on the left side of the “Registration” section Office of Student Records web pages. MLaw Schedule includes information about professors, courses, demand for courses both past and present, and even information about the grade distribution in past classes.¹

Once you’ve reviewed the curriculum, you are ready to look at the class schedules for the upcoming academic year. The class schedules for the next academic year are released in early- to mid-March and posted on the Office of Student Records web page. They will list every course that will be offered each term and provide the meeting patterns for each class. The class schedules contain important information in the footnotes concerning pre-requisites, special meeting patterns, the degree requirements that each class fulfills, etc.

Finally, be sure to look at the exam schedule for the term in which you are choosing classes. The Office of Student Records Office posts a tentative exam schedule before upper-class course selection occurs each term under the “Exams” link on its web page. Your exams were spread out evenly for you during your 1L year; now that you are building your own class schedule, this is no longer the case. If you want to avoid taking exams that are scheduled too closely together, take this into account when choosing your classes.²

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¹ Although it’s OK to take grades into account when choosing classes, be careful not to give them too much weight. In other words, choose classes based primarily on the other factors described below. Otherwise, you will likely cheat yourself out of getting an education that will best prepare you for your legal career.

² Note that you might be entitled to have one of your exams moved slightly if you have too many exams scheduled close together. See the “Scheduling Special Exams” section on the Office of Student Records’
Go to Course Mapping and other programs.

Each spring, the Office of Student Life puts together a multi-panel Course Mapping Series, during which professors, administrators and practicing lawyers talk about different parts of the curriculum and even provide general advice about course selection. Plan to attend the Clinic Information Fair at least once; it occurs each term just as early registration starts. Additionally, you can often pick up some insights about how to choose classes by going to listen to the many lawyers that the Office of Career Planning and student organizations bring in to talk about their practice experiences. A good question to ask a lawyer at any of these presentations is “What did you do in law school to prepare yourself for this career?” Watch MLaw Live, the Law School’s Events Calendar, email, and the bulletin boards for information about all of these programs.

Talk to the people who know something.

You’ll find that there are many people with various levels and types of expertise about course offerings at MLaw. Here’s who they are:

Professors – needless to say, your professors know more about the courses they teach than anyone else does. They also have knowledge about courses that others teach in the same subject area. What’s more, they genuinely like to talk about these courses. So feel welcome to go chat with them! You can link to information about professors from the faculty web pages, to which you can link on the left side of www.law.umich.edu (click on “Faculty and Staff”), MLaw Schedule, or by clicking on their names on the class schedules.

Administrators – there are many lawyer administrators working in offices throughout the law school (e.g. Student Life, Career Planning, Center for International and Comparative Law, Admissions, Financial Aid, the Library) who can provide you with sound advice and fresh perspectives about course selection. Be sure to seek out Director Darren Nealy or me in the Office of Student Life. It is our business to know the curriculum. And it is our mission to enable you to have the richest possible experience at MLaw, a huge part of which, of course, includes the classes you take. Make an appointment through Trudy Feldkamp (316 HH, tfeldkam@umich.edu, 734-764-0516), or come to our open office hours in the Commons.

Student mentors – talk to your Orientation Leaders, FYI Fellows, MAP Instructors, Senior Judges, and other upper-class students you have come to know and trust to get an “on the ground” perspective about courses they’ve taken.

Finally, here are some general considerations.

Exams page.
Law School is a professional school. Take at least one or two classes each term in subject areas you think you might pursue as a practicing lawyer. And explore those subjects in multiple parts of the curriculum: traditional courses, seminars, and experiential courses. (More on experiential courses below.)

Law school is also an extension of a liberal arts education. That means you should explore multiple subject areas and types of classes. Even if you think you know what kind of law you want to practice, try classes in other arenas. You might develop a passion for a subject area or type of practice that you didn’t know you’d like. It will make you a more well-rounded lawyer, too. And since this is likely the last time you will be a full-time student, you owe it to yourself to explore!

Work in some upper-class core doctrinal courses. In my view, here (in alphabetical order) are the doctrinal courses every law student should seriously consider taking before he or she leaves, no matter his/her subject matter interests or practice goals:

- **Administrative Law or Legislation and Regulation** (having a firm understanding in statutory interpretation and the regulatory state is essential for every lawyer. Either of these courses will also fulfill the MLaw Statutory/Regulatory distribution requirement)
- At least one upper-class **Constitutional** law course (e.g. First Amendment, Criminal Justice, Equal Protection – so you can develop a sophisticated understanding of some of the legal cornerstones of American democracy)
- **Enterprise Organization or Corporate Lawyer: Law & Ethics** (corporations are a significant part of the U.S. societal, business, and legal landscape)
- **Evidence** (even if you’re not going to be a litigator, you might need to communicate effectively with litigators during your career)
- **International Law, Transnational Law or another survey course in international law** (given the global nature of legal practice today; such a course will also fulfill the MLaw International/Comparative distribution requirement)
- **Taxation of Individual Income** (a tremendous amount of social behavior is influenced by tax law and policy)

I want to be clear that failing to take one or more of these classes will not preclude you from being an effective, successful lawyer. Also, this is just my list; other professors and administrators certainly have other lists (and some even have no list at all).

Be strategic about your 2L fall term course selections. If you know where you will be working or would like to work during your 2L summer, take a course or courses that are substantively relevant to that type of work, will help you develop relevant skills, and will enable you to continue to build a narrative about why you want to do that work. Also, be sure to diversify a bit; e.g., try not to take all large-sized doctrinal courses next term. Mix it up with clinics, seminars, practice/simulation courses, and/or small-sized upper-class
courses. (You can generally tell the size of an upper-class course by the classroom to which it has been assigned, and you can get historical data about class size under the “Grades” section of M Law Schedule.)

**During one of your final four terms, take a clinic.** When you get into practice after law school, you will certainly have some lawyers as mentors. However, their full-time job will not be to provide you with in-depth advice or spend lots of time teaching you the specific skills you need to represent clients effectively. In contrast, these are the primary responsibilities of MLaw’s clinical professors. Why not learn how to represent clients under the watchful eye of a seasoned lawyer who is also a professional teacher? Finally, clinics provide important context for the substantive law and analytical skills that you learn in doctrinal courses. Many students have told me over the years that taking a clinic is the single best experience they’ve had at MLaw.

**Explore the other experiential parts of the curriculum.** MLaw offers about a dozen practice simulation courses each term. Some focus on litigation, others on transactional work. They are typically taught by practicing lawyers who bring real problems from practice into the classroom for students to grapple with. (Unlike in clinical courses, there are no live clients.) And check out the **Problem Solving Initiative courses**, which use a team-based, experiential, and interdisciplinary learning model to enable small groups of graduate and professional students to work with faculty to explore and offer solutions to emerging, complex problems. Finally, if working for academic credit in an off-site government or public interest law office in the U.S. or abroad will help you meet your educational goals, you might want to pursue a full- or part-time **externship**.

**Steep yourself in ethics and professional responsibility.** Among the most challenging and frequent issues lawyers deal with in day-to-day practice are those involving legal ethics and professionalism. Consequently, it is impossible to overexpose yourself to these issues during law school. We offer a rich array of doctrinal and experiential courses that focus on legal ethics, virtually all of which are taught by professors who have had extensive practice experience.

**Write! Write! Write!** Top-notch writing skills are critical to success in the practice of law. Be sure to take classes that will push you to improve your writing. You’ll find plenty of opportunities to do that through seminars, practice simulation courses, clinics, independent research (see below), and occasionally in upper-class doctrinal courses.

**Take at least one class each term that is “good for you” to get a well-rounded legal education.** This means that you should take hard classes you wouldn’t otherwise be inclined to take, given your interests. For me, an undergraduate English major who was interested in criminal and Constitutional law, those classes included Tax, Commercial Transactions, Enterprise Organization, and Federal Antitrust.
Consider taking non-law classes. Successful lawyers know more than just the law. MLaw is part of a world-class university with other highly rated schools and departments in the fields of business, public policy, social work, political science, and foreign language, among many others. You can take up to 12 credits outside of the law school and count them towards your JD degree. (Most students who take non-law classes take far fewer than 12 credits, though.) You can get details about how to get credit approved on the Office of Student Records web page under the “Registration” link.

Independent Research. Work one-on-one with a professor to develop a paper or project on a topic that interests you, or be a professor’s research assistant for credit. Besides providing an opportunity to delve deeply into the law and do high quality written work (cf. Write! Write! Write!, above), the professor could become a good professional reference. Enrollment and other details about Research for credit are also available on the Office of Student Records web page under the “Registration” link.

Take another course from a professor who has already inspired you in the classroom. If you enjoyed and learned a lot from him or her before, it’s almost a sure bet that you will again.

Take at least one class each term that you know you are going to enjoy. You deserve to take at least one class each semester that will make you happy. Hopefully, this will overlap with classes you choose because you think you might want to practice in that area – but not necessarily.

And finally, a couple of “don’ts”:

Don’t take a course only because the subject is tested on the bar exam. You were smart enough to get into MLaw. That means you are smart enough to pass a bar exam after a good bar review course teaches you everything you need to know. So there is no sense in making yourself miserable by enrolling in a class that you otherwise have no interest in taking.

Don’t pick courses based on the grading curve alone. See footnote 1, above.

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Although I hope these reflections are useful to you, again, please don’t rely on them alone to decide which classes to choose. Rather, make sure you also take advantage of all the other resources available to you here – especially the amazing people – to help you make the best decisions possible for yourself. Good luck!

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