Personal background

A little about me - I am a first-time taker, foreign attorney applicant (English law and Singapore law qualified). I'm 43 years old and graduated from law school in 2005, so exactly 20 years ago! As for why the Californian bar, my partner is Californian so I thought it would be helpful for any future plans if we ever decided to relocate.

I have never studied in the US or had any experience with the American legal system (England and Singapore are both common law jurisdictions). So, I knew that before I even started to learn the BLL, I needed to study the exam itself. To me, the bar exam was a game and to play the game well, I needed to know the rules of the game.

This meant starting my bar prep from scratch. I had no clue what IRACs or PTs were, I didn't realize California tested specific topics for essays, I didn't know how to cook an essay, I thought accommodation meant a hotel room and so emailed the bar admin asking how I could sign up for a room during the exam period! (They never responded.)

I spent about a week and a half familiarizing myself with the various resources, tools and terminology of the bar exam. All that stuff about the longest journey beginning with the single step etc, well I applied that to bar prep and decided that I was going to Shawshank myself and start chipping away at my tunnel to a California bar license one spoon at a time! Each day, I wrote out a few points/things I learned about the bar exam itself in a little notebook. Google and reddit were very helpful tools and that's how I found out about MTYLT.

I had originally considered signing up for Barbri but after considering the costs, and from reading your website about being the dean of your own studies and how big bar prep wasn't necessarily the answer, I decided against it. Whilst Barbri might work for a lot of people, given my limited background in California law, I needed something more tailored to my personal circumstances. After all, who's going to know the best way for me to study, other than me! I also briefly considered CA Bar Style and had a call with Shauna. But the cost was also too prohibitive.

The Singaporean education system is predicated on the idea that there is a strategic way to study. When I came across your website and saw that you advocated studying smart for the bar exam, this made a lot of sense to me. I downloaded the Passer's Playbook first, because I wanted a roadmap to the exam and I wanted to look at some examples of study schedules. I took inspiration from a few to suit my own study patterns and timelines, but I didn't work out a very detailed study schedule until I had done my first complete round of review (more on that later). The Passer's Playbook was incredibly helpful because it

distilled the information I needed as to how to approach the exam. Why reinvent the wheel when the work's already been done for you? This allowed me to get down to the real hard work of studying for this beast of an exam.

BLL / MBE

Because I wasn't familiar with federal or Californian state law, I needed to learn the BLL. I used Mary Basick's book for this. I started off with the MBE topics and specifically, the hardest subject for me, which was Civ Pro (there's no concept of federal or state civil procedure in the jurisdictions I qualified in).

I did a rolling pattern of study. So for example, I would read a few sections of the book at a time, and then type out the text verbatim into a Word document. At the end of each chapter, I would basically just have a word document of that entire subject. I found that typing out the text helped me with memorizing, and it was also easier for studying because I could just take my Civ Pro notes with me instead of the entire textbook.

Once I was done with Civ Pro, I plunged straight into the questions on Adaptibar. I've always prepared for exams by actually working on questions, instead of just trying to memorize. Meanwhile, I would start studying the next subject (Crim) whilst continuing to work on Civ Pro MBE questions on Adaptibar. Once I finished with Crim, I started doing the Adaptibar questions alongside the Civ Pro Adaptibar questions, while starting on the next subject.

I then hit my next stumbling block, which is when I realized that the MBE questions tested nuances, which weren't covered in the Basick book. For each question on Adaptibar, whether I got them right or wrong (and there were A TON I got wrong), I made sure I understood the explanation. This meant understanding why I got it right (sometimes I chose the right answer but my reasoning wasn't correct) and why I got it wrong. Then I typed out the Adaptibar explanations into my word document. At the end, I had one master document for each MBE subject. This was pretty tedious, but it worked for me.

I know some people would recommend not doing too many Adaptibar questions at once. I would agree with this. I needed to do the Adaptibar questions because that's how I was studying the BLL as well, but if I had to do things over, I would probably slow down the rate at which I was doing them in the beginning, so that I could really absorb the answers. Maybe 10 a day instead of 30 as I was doing.

I did about 3700 MBE questions altogether. My scores started at 40% and gradually trended upwards. There wasn't a massive jump which, to be honest, did frustrate me especially since I knew I was putting in the effort. The hardest part for me was getting the same

questions wrong. For those, I kept referring back to my notes and hammering them until the explanations really sank in.

I did struggle with civil procedure and real property. In my last month of study, I signed up for Quimbee which had bite-sized videos (nothing longer than 15 minutes) for most of the sub-topics. This was helpful for me, because I could watch videos for the topics I couldn't seem to grasp. My advice would be that if you don't understand a topic and the answers on Adaptibar/Basick/whatever resource you have don't make sense, just google. Keep googling until you find a source, article, YouTube video, TikTok (ok maybe not TikTok) that explains it in a way that clicks for you.

I did all the Adaptibar mock exams (I made sure not to do those questions earlier). And on my last mock exam, I scored about 78%. I did the last mock exam 2 weeks out from the bar exam because I wanted to leave myself enough time to fix any issues, but still close enough to the actual exam to know that I was heading in with good momentum.

The February 2025 exams used Kaplan and not the NCBE questions, which did throw me off since I'd been practicing NCBE questions. But I figured there was nothing I could do about that. About 2 weeks before the exam, I saw on the Reddit forum that some people had signed up for Kaplan. My FOMO made me consider doing the same, but I decided to trust my process and have faith that what I had done to prepare was enough. I'm glad I listened to my gut because in the end, it didn't matter that I didn't have Kaplan, and by doing a whole set of questions so close to the exam, it could have shaken my confidence.

Essays

Basick was good for understanding BLL but I found some of the rule statements unwieldy and difficult to memorize. For the California subjects, I used Smartbar Prep and Magic Sheets. Despite my best efforts, it wasn't possible to memorize everything, so I focused on the most frequently tested rules which were set out in Magic Sheets.

If I had a foundation in American law, I probably could have just relied on Magic Sheets to be honest because they distilled the rules into statements I could remember and work with. But because I had not previously studied in the US, it was still helpful for me to have read Basick and Smart Bar Prep first, to get a broader understanding of the law.

I found that when I was doing the essays on the exam, I was in such a panic that I ran on autopilot. So I would have to say, drill down on the rules and have them in a form you can remember. In the last month of bar prep, I would spend 2 hours each night just writing out the rules from memory. At the end of the day my brain would be so fried from studying that I couldn't absorb new stuff, so evenings were a good time for me to just write the rules reflexively because I wasn't trying to learn new things. I kept a notebook so I didn't write out

the same rules. I wanted to get to a position where I was writing out the rules automatically when I saw the triggers, without having to stop and think about how to phrase them etc. It was like building muscle memory and I feel that this really helped me on the essay portion because I could then focus my time on the analysis.

I didn't sign up for Baressays because at that point, I didn't want to use too many resources. I did read that a lot of people were using Baressays which definitely gave me FOMO. But I managed with the free essays on MTYLT and the answers on the State Bar website. I mostly referred to the model answers and looked at maybe a handful of essays which scored 50 to know what not to do. I might have changed my approach if I had access to Baressays, but I wanted to know how the top scoring essays answered the questions, so that I could aim high.

I outlined about 100 essays altogether by the end of bar prep, by grouping subjects together. I would group 2 MBE subjects (1 easy and 1 challenging) with 1 CA subject (e.g. Crim, Evidence, Wills). Then the next day, I would swap out one of the subjects. This kept the subjects rotating for me, and meant that I was always practicing a new subject each day, whilst still drilling down on the other 2 subjects on consecutive days. I made sure that I practiced all the Professional Responsibility questions I could find, since PR was almost certain to appear. The only subject I didn't really practice essays for was Property, because I hated the subject and since it had appeared in July 2025, I assumed it wouldn't appear again. Ha! When I saw the essay in the exam, my heart sank a little. But then I reminded myself that meant that the rest of the questions would be ones I had practiced rigorously for.

PT

I signed up for the PT course with Bar MD and did about 15 practice PTs. Because I'm already a qualified attorney, I didn't find the PTs to be too difficult. Once I got the hang of what a PT was supposed to look like, I just applied the same formula that Bar MD gives you. I didn't want to neglect the PT section because I knew that the weightage was double that of an essay.

General stuff

I also had to unlearn certain things – I'm a corporate attorney by practice, and some of the Contracts model essay answers or MBE answers would not be how I would advise my clients in reality. I had to put all that out of my head and tell myself not to wear my practicing attorney hat, but my bar exam taker hat.

I took the February 2025 exam remotely and 3 days before my exam, my partner and I reorganized the room and made sure I had all the approved items laid out already (eg my ID

and the whiteboard). I did a test run of the exam experience the day before (including timing myself on a bathroom break!) and whilst that might not apply to someone who takes the exam in person, there's something to be said for trying to do a run through of the things that ARE within your control.

My partner would also insist that we take daily study breaks, where we would just walk around the neighborhood for 30 minutes to get some fresh air. At first, I resisted, because that was 30 minutes away from my bar prep! But those walks acted as a brain reset and allowed me to stretch after sitting for hours. I found that I could concentrate much better after the daily walk.

The day before the exam, I stopped studying at around 3 pm and took the rest of the day to just chill, watch an episode of The White Lotus, and go for a walk with my partner.

I also had a fight song – which was a song that I would listen to before I started my study session to pump me up, or if I was struggling through a particular topic. I listened to it right before I started the exams, to put myself into the frame of mind that I was going into battle. To me, confidence was the most important and I would advocate doing anything you can to instill the belief that you got this. Don't go into the exam feeling defeated. Anxiety is normal, but I would tell myself that I was pissed off with being anxious and I told myself to channel that anger into beating the exam.

There were several technical difficulties that day, although I was much luckier than most. The biggest issue for me was not being able to save a few of my MBE answers, being interrupted by the proctor a few times, and having to hold the curtain shut with my left hand for an hour whilst typing with my right (fortunately that was on the MBE section so it was basically just clicking answers), because the proctor insisted that there was glare from the sun on my face.

Finally, I stayed off the bar exam social media groups (like Reddit or Facebook) a week before the exam. Reading about what other people were or weren't doing, or how crap the exam was going to be, just made me more anxious. In the end, I had to remind myself that I was in my own race and that I had tried my best. And regardless of the outcome, I could be proud of the effort I put in.