Writing an exam summary in Law

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A summary is an exam aid. It is a précis of your lecture and tutorial notes, the cases you have read and the textbook reading you have done. However, it can be of no real value to you unless you have also done the necessary work during the period preceding the exam. Don’t therefore be tempted into photocopying a summary belonging to someone else and using that. It will do you little or no good. Other people’s summaries may be useful to you (depending on how you learn) but will normally only be a useful supplement to your own studies.

A summary is something you write for the purposes of doing a law exam and it is taken by you into the exam room along with whatever else is on the list of ‘Permitted Materials’. Read the notices from the Exams Section carefully so that you know exactly what you are permitted to take in with you.

How can a summary help me?

A summary saves you from the necessity of relying entirely on your memory. It joggs your memory and allows you to recognise some material rather than have the concern of trying to recall it. A good summary is important to you. It can help calm pre-exam nerves. It can help boost flagging morale. It will also mean that you know you are as well prepared as you can be for the exam you are about to do.

Once in the exam room a good summary allows you to concentrate on the all-important business of answering questions knowing that all the information you need is at your fingertips. This will add to the accuracy and allow you to cover all the relevant points. Both things are likely to work in your favour.

Why else should a summary be so important?

Writing a summary is one of the best possible forms of revision. It needs to be disciplined and orderly – so does your revision. It helps you to discover what you know and what you don’t know. It saves time and prevents wasted effort because it prevents the need for vast amounts of rote learning and last minute cramming. It does not take away the need to know your work but it lets you concentrate on learning what you most need to know.

Most important of all, a well organised and well written summary helps you produce neat, tight arguments backed up by relevant cases in your answers. Examiners seem to appreciate this.

How long should a summary be?

If other people seem to be writing more (or less) than you, don’t be too concerned. What might be right for someone else may not necessarily be right for you.

It is also important to remember that what is right for one subject may not be right for another. Your style for Contracts this year may be quite different from your style for Commercial Law next year. Take some time to consider what might be right for you. Think about your learning style and relate your summary to this.

What does a good summary look like? (specifically Torts and Contracts)

A summary is a personal piece of work but all good summaries tend to have points in common. These points will be considered first and then what sorts of information you might want to include will be discussed after that.