

The LSAT: This Ain't Your Momma's Test



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For 22 years I've been involved in test preparation, and for a large number of those years I've taught LSAT students, trained LSAT teachers, and written LSAT materials. In all that time, one of the most important things I've learned has been that the LSAT is unlike any other test and requires focused, structured and adaptable preparation that is different from what most of us have done in our lives. It asks us to reason in ways we typically don't, it asks us to pay attention to details with a level of clarity and specificity that we typically don't, it uses words we typically don't in ways we typically won't, and asks us to do all of this under significant pressure (both *real* caused by the clock and *invented* caused by our perception of the importance of this one day).

In my 22 years in the test prep industry, I've learned, and tried to teach others, that doing well on the LSAT requires not that we find our inner Michael Jordan (the epitome of perfection in a singular field, arguably the best pro basketball player ever, but a mediocre semi-pro baseball player and general manager) but more importantly our inner Deion Sanders (a rare professional athlete in both baseball and football and an exemplar of broad application of underlying skill).

Unlike many of the tests we've taken in the past, the LSAT requires more than just knowledge acquisition. In fact there is no googlable fact tested on the LSAT, there are no LSAT textbooks (only practice books and strategy guides), there is no knowledge bank that contains the *information* you need to do well on the LSAT. The LSAT is a test of reasoning, thinking, and language usage. Think about it this way, the LSAT tests how well Michael Jordan can use his athletic ability not in basketball — the sport he dedicated his life to for 30+ years — but instead to baseball, the sport he only sporadically engaged in, or maybe even in volleyball, a sport he's probably not tried since middle school. The LSAT asks you to apply your intellectual ability to situations and concepts that you've likely not been exposed to and certainly not been exposed to in the way you are on the LSAT. This is one of the things that makes the LSAT so deceptively challenging; it feels familiar (we've all done reading comprehension) and looks familiar (we've all engaged in arguments and debates and seen logic statements in 7th grade math), but isn't quite familiar. This false familiarity is often what gets us in trouble, because it leads us to believe that preparation will require less time and money than it actually does. Let me tell you that preparing for the LSAT requires a lot of time and possibly a lot of money. It will require more time than you spent on the SAT or ACT. It will require more time than you typically spend for a final exam in college. The LSAT is the final exam for your entire K - 16 educational experience. Prepare accordingly.

So, how do you get started preparing for the LSAT?

Now that we know what we are dealing with, the good news is that the LSAT can be prepared for. It can be prepared for effectively and scores can be increased significantly. The catch is that it takes time and effort, hard work and analysis. It might even take money, and it certainly takes resilience. Michael Jordan said it best "I've failed over and over and over again in my life, and that is why I succeed."

Here is a quick pre-LSAT training camp plan:

1. Review question types and instructions online or offline

Go to information sessions and free workshops with test prep companies to find out what they know about the test that you don't. You can also just go to a book store and check out the LSAT prep section, read a few pages on the same topic from each book to see which is best for you.

2. Take a practice test

Before you begin preparing for the LSAT you need some understanding of what your starting score is. The only real way to determine this is with an actual timed LSAT test. Get a real LSAC prep test from their site (www.lsac.org) and take it under timed conditions.

3. Assess how you did

Once you have a score you can assess how you did relative to how you might want to do to gain admission to a school, and also relative to national averages. For example, a 156 is an above average score, however, it's well below the average of admitted students at Georgetown Law School. How long might you need to prep and how much help might you need to get your score to the next level?

4. Consider getting help

After you have a baseline score, have visited a few prep companies' info sessions, and maybe even had a free consultation with a tutor, you can better gauge how to prepare for the test. We've all hired experts and coaches to train us to do things in our lives, from piano coaches to driving instructors to basketball coaches. A test prep coach is the same. You want to take advantage of the greater experience and knowledge of someone whose job it is to help others improve their performance. You can get advice from books just like you can learn to play piano from a book, but you have to consider in what format you learn best. If you have taught yourself to play basketball from a book or video then perhaps you can do the same with the LSAT. If you've tried to teach yourself from books and failed, now is probably not the time to try again.

5. Plan ahead

Once you have a sense of your practice plan you should target taking the official LSAT one administration earlier than you need to. This means you should be scheduling at least 6 months in advance of your first test date. If you need to have an LSAT score by November 1, you should target taking the June LSAT. That way if you need to retake the test you have the October administration as a back-up plan. Therefore, your preparation should begin prior to the June LSAT rather than prior to the October LSAT.

Making the most of your prep!

Once you know what the LSAT is and have put an effective plan in place the only thing left is to put that plan into action. Putting a prep plan into action is when many students' LSAT preparation falls apart. There are many pitfalls that you can fall into even when you have the most effective preparation plan and the best possible tutor. The key to making the most of your preparation is not only learning the rules of the game but learning to apply them under the conditions of the test itself. It's one thing to know the rules of basketball, it's a completely different thing to make the winning shot in the last second of the game with defenders all around you. To ensure you become as effective as possible on game day you have to ensure that your practice is highly effective. To do that remember a few key things:

1. *Be willing to change*

Test prep often involves non-intuitive strategies and requires you to break some bad habits you've developed. You'll have to be willing to admit that the test is right. Based on the parameters it gives and the rules of the test, the answers to the questions are always right and the way it arrived at those answers is highly logical within those rules. Many students who struggle to improve their LSAT scores struggle to accept that just because the test doesn't reason as you are used to reasoning does not mean it's incorrect or tricking you. You have to learn to play the game by the rules that LSAC has established. Don't try to make the test fit your logic. Learn LSAT logic and accept that it's right. To continue our basketball theme, you have to understand that the rules of college basketball, NBA ball, and Olympic ball are all different and unless you accept the rules of whichever game you're playing, it will be difficult to excel and really difficult to have fun (since you'll spend all your time arguing with the refs).

2. *Start by building accuracy*

There are two different elements of prep for most people: accuracy and speed. You've got to focus on them independently and develop strategies to improve each. Most people can get every question on the LSAT right if they had a week to work on it. The challenge is learning to do it with a high level of accuracy in the time you have. As you prepare, remember to look at accuracy and speed independently. Often the strategies that improve speed hurt your accuracy and vice versa. When you prep, focus on one, then the other, then combining the two.

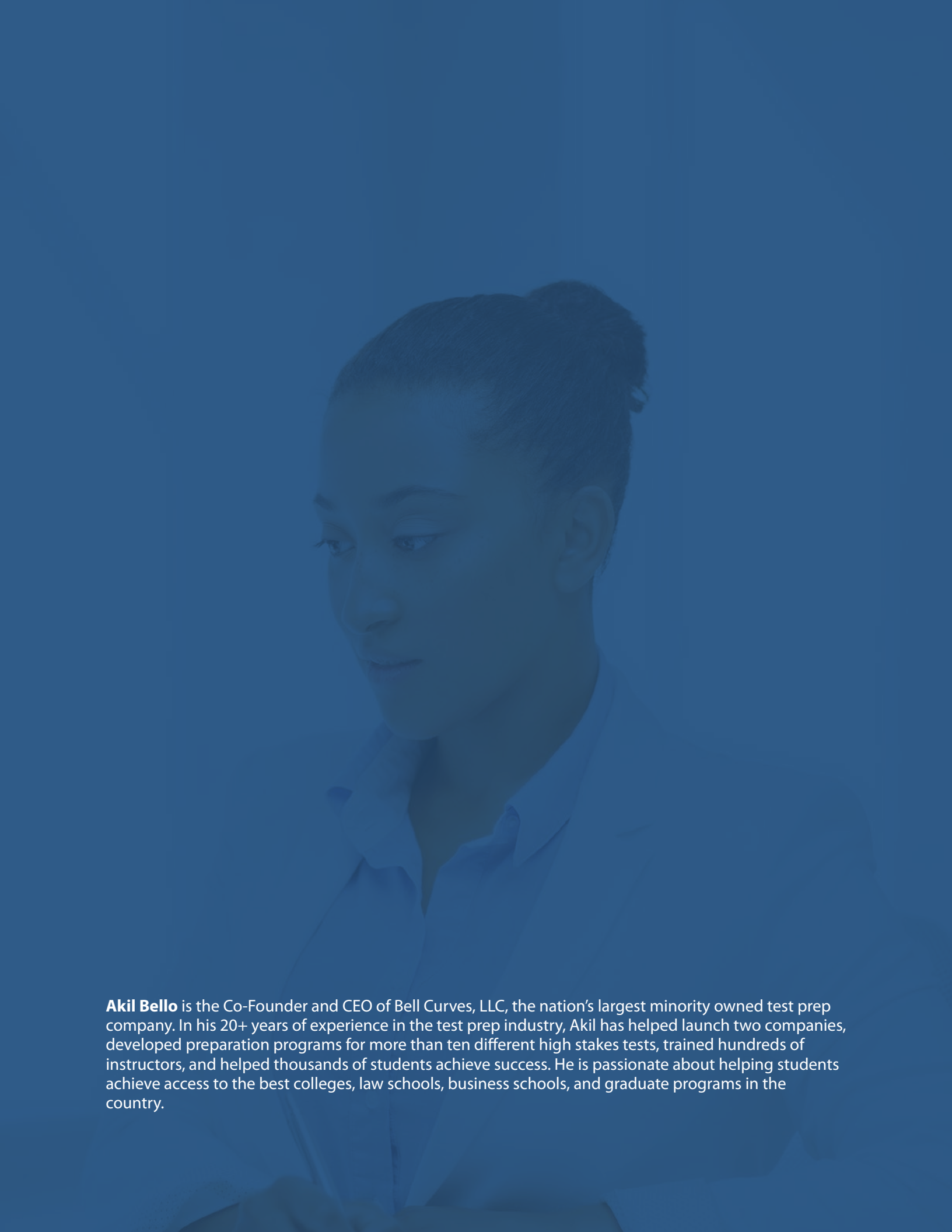
3. *Dedicate the time*

Effective practice requires significant time to learn strategies, practice, review what you got wrong, revise strategies, practice some more, then evaluate your learning by taking a test. All of this requires time, time that can't be shorted-cutted and the greater your needed improvement, the more time it will require. Make sure you dedicate enough time to effectively practice and to improve your score.

4. *Be analytical, adaptable, and accepting*

No company or tutor can provide you with a clear learning algorithm that will tell you how many hours to study, how many weeks to study, or how many points you'll improve. You've got to be ready to adjust your plans. (Should you switch from the June test to the October test? Should you study in the morning because you learned you can focus more?) You've got to be ready to accept advice. (Should you only work on three games rather than four because that increases your accuracy significantly?) And you've got to be ready to look at yourself and identify why you got a question wrong. (Is your vocabulary not quite as good as you thought? Go ahead and define "peruse" then look it up to see if you're right.) The more analytical, adaptable and accepting you are, the easier it is to improve your score.

With this solid prep advice, you should be able to set yourself up for getting a great score and getting into your school of choice!

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a white lab coat, is looking down and to the left. The image is overlaid with a blue gradient that fades from the top to the bottom.

Akil Bello is the Co-Founder and CEO of Bell Curves, LLC, the nation's largest minority owned test prep company. In his 20+ years of experience in the test prep industry, Akil has helped launch two companies, developed preparation programs for more than ten different high stakes tests, trained hundreds of instructors, and helped thousands of students achieve success. He is passionate about helping students achieve access to the best colleges, law schools, business schools, and graduate programs in the country.