

Antonin Scalia Law School
George Mason University
Fall 2024

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Property

This course surveys the fundamentals of property law. The class begins by studying the creation of property rights (both real and personal) through such legal doctrines as discovery, capture, and subsequent ownership interests created through voluntary conveyances or involuntary transfers, such as accession, find, and adverse possession. The balance of the course will be spent studying the myriad estates and legal interests that represent the different ways that a person can own something; topics will include possessory estates, future interests, joint tenancies, and leaseholds. The course will conclude by studying differing types of land-use controls, including servitudes, nuisance, zoning, and eminent domain. The goal is to provide students with the basic rules of property law, as well as a working knowledge of the social, moral and economic policies that gave rise to these legal rules and which affect their continuing application today.

LOGISTICS

1. Class Schedule

The class meets Monday and Wednesday, 1:50pm – 3:50pm.

2. Attendance and Class Preparation

Students are responsible for complying with Scalia Law’s regulations regarding attendance. The regulations are on the law school’s web site, and students should read them before their classes first meet. To ensure compliance, I will take attendance. If you are tardy, it will be counted as an absence unless you tell me to mark you as present before I leave the classroom at the end of class. Two tardies will equal one absence.

Students are expected to read the assignments, and I will call on students randomly to answer questions about the cases and related readings. Students who are consistently prepared and who actively participate in class discussion may receive a “bump up” in their final grades; conversely, if a student is unprepared for class or acts unprofessionally, then this may be taken into account in applying a “bump down” in the final grade (see “Grade” below). Do not worry about this distinction: your professors can distinguish between a student who has difficulty answering a question given the complexity of a case or legal issue and a student who cannot answer a question simply because he or she has not read the assigned material.

If you are motivated more by carrots than by sticks, there is a general correlation between final grade distributions and class attendance, preparation, and participation.

3. Grade

Your grade is based primarily on a final exam (see “Final Exam” below).

Final grades may be adjusted upwards or downwards one grade level (e.g., from B to B+ or from B to B-) based on classroom participation. I may raise a student’s final grade for exceptional contributions to classroom discussion. On the one hand, an “exceptional contribution” is defined essentially in terms of quality, not quantity; on the other hand, contributing only once to class discussion—no matter how brilliant the commentary—is insufficient to warrant a mark-up in your grade. *There is no entitlement to bumping up a grade*; it is only a gratuitous bonus. A student’s grade may be lowered for unpreparedness or unprofessional conduct, e.g., being rude to your fellow students.

4. Final Exam

The final exam is on December 16, 2024 at 12:00pm.

The final exam will consist of essay questions, although the exact format remains to be determined. If past practice means anything, my exams comprised short answer and short essay questions. To assist students in studying for the exam, I will post at least one of my old exams to the class website (TWEN). I will also discuss the exam at about mid-semester, and I always hold an official exam review session at the end of the semester in which I answer questions and review the answers to last year’s Property exam.

The exam will be open book, but this does not mean that students should bring everything written under the sun on property law. Understanding how one prepares for intensive and discrete events, such as contract negotiations, depositions, and trials, is as much a part of good lawyering as is learning the substantive law. If you want to bring five commercial outlines and a variety of “canned” case briefs to the final exam, I will not impede your desire to drown yourself (and your grade) under a mountain of superfluous materials.

With that warning in mind, the best way to succeed in this course is to read all of the assignments, come to every class, and take good notes. When studying for the final exam, I recommend preparing an outline that is detailed and comprehensive. Using the outline, you should also prepare a checklist that lays out the steps you will go through and the issues you will address in answering potential problems on the exam, e.g., creation of a legal interest in land (e.g., types of estates (fee simple, life estate, etc.) and their requirements). The idea is that you will use the checklist as the principal reference guide during the exam, and the more comprehensive outline will serve only as a backup in case you forget something or need more information. Feel free to use commercial outlines or canned case briefs to fill in holes in class notes—speaking with me though is always the best policy—but it is the *preparation* of the outline and checklist that constitutes proper studying for a final exam. If you read the material, attend every class, pay attention to class discussion, and prepare your own outline and checklist, then you will perform at your best on the final exam.

5. TWEN

Registration for the class website (TWEN) site is mandatory. (For those who may not have used TWEN yet, go to lawschool.westlaw.com, click on the TWEN tab at the top of the page and follow the instructions.) I will post announcements, updates to the syllabus, and supplemental class materials to the TWEN site. If you do not register with your current email address, you risk not receiving class notices, changes to the syllabus, and whatnot. “I forgot to register at TWEN” is not a defense against applying the grading rules.

6. Office Hours

Office hours will be held after each class meeting on Monday and Wednesday in the classroom.

I also have an open-door policy for students. Please feel free to stop by whenever you’d like, as I am in my office regularly throughout the workweek. (If my door happens to be closed, please knock and let me know that you are there.)

Students are welcome to email me or to schedule an appointment for us to speak, either in person or by Zoom.

7. Learning Outcomes

The goal of this course is to provide students with the basic rules of property law, as well as a working knowledge of the social, moral and economic policies that gave rise to these legal rules and which affect their continuing application today. Ultimately, students will learn the analytical skills to interpret and understand legal materials, such as court decisions and statutes, and to apply legal rules and policies derived from these legal materials in resolving problems that arise in the use of resources and other valuable assets governed under state and federal laws.

8. Miscellany

Students are not permitted to record lectures without first obtaining my permission to do so.

I RESERVE THE RIGHT TO CHANGE THE SYLLABUS AND ANYTHING ELSE IN IT, except the policies pertaining to attendance and grades, which proverbially will be set in stone as of the first day of class.

READINGS

The required text is Thomas W. Merrill, Henry E. Smith, and Maureen Brady, *Property: Principles and Policies* (4th ed. 2022) [“MSB”]. Additional assigned readings are available on the class TWEN site (in the file “Class Readings” under “Syllabus and Class Assignments”).

I will also make cases and other supplemental materials available by posting them on TWEN.

CLASS SCHEDULE – READING ASSIGNMENTS

Regardless of whether we discuss them in class, **you are responsible for all assigned material.** (A series of different page ranges, separated by a comma, come from whatever source is designated at the start of the series.) I reserve the right not to cover some material in the readings in order to stay on schedule, and, as a reminder, you will be responsible for all of the readings listed in the syllabus that we do not cover in class.

CLASS	TOPIC	READING ASSIGNMENT
1	First Possession (chattels)	MSB 339-340 (“Civil Actions”), 341-343 (“Civil Actions Protecting Personal Property”), 53-73, 255-260 Carol M. Rose, <i>Possession as the Origin of Property</i> , 52 U. CHI. L. REV. 73 (1985) [TWEN] Adam Mossoff, <i>Locke’s Labor Lost</i> , 9 U. CHI. L. SCH. ROUNDTABLE 155 (2002) [TWEN]
2	First Possession (Land)	MSB 340-341, 82-99, 33-40, 239-245
3	First Possession (Water and Body Parts)	MSB 311-334 MSB 209-224, 246-255
4	Second Owners: Accession & Finder Rules	MSB 124-129, 113-117, 138-151, 117-124
5	Second Owners: Adverse Possession	MSB 155-175 MSB 129-138 Thomas W. Merrill, <i>Property Rules, Liability Rules, and Adverse Possession</i> , 79 NW. U. L. REV. 1122 (1984-1985) [TWEN] – read only pp. 1122-1128, 1133-1135, 1152-1153

6	Adverse Possession (cont.) & Abandonment	MSB 175-182 <i>O'Keefe v. Snyder</i> , 416 A.2d 862 (N.J. 1980) [TWEN] MSB 488-502 <i>Property and Equity</i> [TWEN]
7	Trespass	MSB 340-341 (review again) MSB 1-10, 417-425 MSB 369-386
8	Conveyances, Licenses & Bailments	MSB 848-859, 862-864, 528 (“Disclaimer”) MSB 450-459, 465-483
9	Estate System: Possessory Estates & Future Interests	MSB 503-514 Problem Sets [TWEN] There is less reading assigned for this class so that students have time to work on the problem sets or on the CALI lessons.
10	Estate System: Future Interests (cont.)	MSB 515-521 MSB 545-547 Problem Sets: (1) M&S 521, and (2) Additional Problems on TWEN There is less reading assigned for this class so that students have time to work on the problem sets or on the CALI lessons.
11	Waste Doctrine & Restraints on Alienation	MSB 587-589 (“Vestigial Maintenance Doctrines”) MSB 547-566 <i>Morse v. Blood</i> , 71 N.W. 682 (Minn. 1897) [TWEN]

12	Rule Against Perpetuities	MSB 566-587 Problem Set: M&S 572
13	Estate System: <i>Numerus Clauses & Conservation of Estates</i>	MSB 521-545, 589-597 <i>Johnson v. Whiton</i> , 32 N.E. 542 (Mass. 1893) [TWEN]
14	Concurrent Estates & Leaseholds	MSB 597-620, 636-642, 713-716 Problem Sets: (1) MSB 642, and (2) Additional Problems on TWEN
15	Leaseholds (cont.)	MSB 643-653, 660-681
16	Leaseholds (cont.)	MSB 356-364, 658 (Notes) - 660, 686-693 (including "Transfer of Interests"), 697-713
17	Servitudes: Easements	MSB 979-1012
18	Servitudes: Easements (cont.) & Restrictive Covenants	MSB 1019-1047
19	Servitudes: Restrictive Covenants (cont.)	MSB 1047-1065

20	Nuisance	MSB 933-934, 950-964, 25-32, 941-950 Ronald Coase, <i>Problem of Social Cost</i> , 3 J. L. & Econ. 1 (1960) [TWEN] – read only parts I, II, V, and last paragraph of part VII (pp. 1-2, 8-15, 27-28).
21	Nuisance (cont.)	MSB 964-979 <i>Estancias Dallas Corp. v. Schultz</i> , 500 S.W.2d 217 (Tex. Civ. App. 1973) [TWEN]
22	Zoning	MSB 1065-1078, 1089-1105 Ohio District Court Decision in <i>Euclid</i> [TWEN]
23	Eminent Domain & Regulatory Takings	MSB 1107-1108, 1165-1168, 1211-1221, 1230-1247
24	Eminent Domain: Regulatory Takings (cont.)	MSB 1269-1291 <i>Lucas v. South Carolina Coastal Council</i> , 505 U.S. 1003 (1992) [TWEN] MSB 1302-1307
25	Eminent Domain: Regulatory Takings (cont.)	MSB 1307-1313 <i>Palazollo v. Rhode Island</i> , 533 U.S. 606 (2001) [TWEN] <i>In re Jacobs</i> , 98 N.Y. 98 (1885) [TWEN]
26	Property & Public Law	MSB 393-415