Law is a set of rules that are created and are enforceable by social or governmental institutions to regulate behavior, with its precise definition a matter of longstanding debate. It has been variously described as a science and as the art of justice. State-enforced laws can be made by a legislature, resulting in statutes; by the executive through decrees and regulations; or by judges' decisions, which form precedent in common law jurisdictions. An autocrat may exercise those functions within their realm. The creation of laws themselves may be influenced by a constitution, written or tacit, and the rights encoded therein. The law shapes politics, economics, history and society in various ways and also serves as a mediator of relations between people.  
Legal systems vary between jurisdictions, with their differences analysed in comparative law. In civil law jurisdictions, a legislature or other central body codifies and consolidates the law. In common law systems, judges may make binding case law through precedent, although on occasion this may be overturned by a higher court or the legislature. Religious law is in use in some religious communities and states, and has historically influenced secular law.  
The scope of law can be divided into two domains: public law concerns government and society, including constitutional law, administrative law, and criminal law; while private law deals with legal disputes between parties in areas such as contracts, property, torts, delicts and commercial law. This distinction is stronger in civil law countries, particularly those with a separate system of administrative courts; by contrast, the public-private law divide is less pronounced in common law jurisdictions.  
Law provides a source of scholarly inquiry into legal history, philosophy, economic analysis and sociology. Law also raises important and complex issues concerning equality, fairness, and justice.  
Etymology  
The word law, attested in Old English as lagu, comes from the Old Norse word lǫg. The singular form lag meant 'something laid or fixed' while its plural meant 'law'.  
Philosophy of law  
The philosophy of law is commonly known as jurisprudence. Normative jurisprudence asks "what should law be?", while analytic jurisprudence asks "what is law?"  
Analytical jurisprudence  
There have been several attempts to produce "a universally acceptable definition of law". In 1972, Baron Hampstead suggested that no such definition could be produced. McCoubrey and White said that the question "what is law?" has no simple answer. Glanville Williams said that the meaning of the word "law" depends on the context in which that word is used. He said that, for example, "early customary law" and "municipal law" were contexts where the word "law" had two different and irreconcilable meanings. Thurman Arnold said that it is obvious that it is impossible to define the word "law" and that it is also equally obvious that the struggle to define that word should not ever be abandoned. It is possible to take the view that there is no need to define the word "law" (e.g. "let's forget about generalities and get down to cases").

One definition is that law is a system of rules and guidelines which are enforced through social institutions to govern behaviour. In The Concept of Law, H. L. A. Hart argued that law is a "system of rules"; John Austin said law was "the command of a sovereign, backed by the threat of a sanction"; Ronald Dworkin describes law as an "interpretive concept" to achieve justice in his text titled Law's Empire; and Joseph Raz argues law is an "authority" to mediate people's interests. Oliver Wendell Holmes defined law as "the prophecies of what the courts will do in fact, and nothing more pretentious." In his Treatise on Law, Thomas Aquinas argues that law is a rational ordering of things, which concern the common good, that is promulgated by whoever is charged with the care of the community. This definition has both positivist and naturalist elements.  
Connection to morality and justice  
Definitions of law often raise the question of the extent to which law incorporates morality. John Austin's utilitarian answer was that law is "commands, backed by threat of sanctions, from a sovereign, to whom people have a habit of obedience". Natural lawyers, on the other hand, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argue that law reflects essentially moral and unchangeable laws of nature. The concept of "natural law" emerged in ancient Greek philosophy concurrently and in connection with the notion of justice, and re-entered the mainstream of Western culture through the writings of Thomas Aquinas, notably his Treatise on Law.  
Hugo Grotius, the founder of a purely rationalistic system of natural law, argued that law arises from both a social impulse—as Aristotle had indicated—and reason. Immanuel Kant believed a moral imperative requires laws "be chosen as though they should hold as universal laws of nature". Jeremy Bentham and his student Austin, following David Hume, believed that this conflated the "is" and what "ought to be" problem. Bentham and Austin argued for law's positivism; that real law is entirely separate from "morality". Kant was also criticised by Friedrich Nietzsche, who rejected the principle of equality, and believed that law emanates from the will to power, and cannot be labeled as "moral" or "immoral".  
In 1934, the Austrian philosopher Hans Kelsen continued the positivist tradition in his book the Pure Theory of Law. Kelsen believed that although law is separate from morality, it is endowed with "normativity", meaning we ought to obey it. While laws are positive "is" statements (e.g. the fine for reversing on a highway is €500); law tells us what we "should" do. Thus, each legal system can be hypothesised to have a 'basic norm' (German: Grundnorm) instructing us to obey. Kelsen's major opponent, Carl Schmitt, rejected both positivism and the idea of the rule of law because he did not accept the primacy of abstract normative principles over concrete political positions and decisions. Therefore, Schmitt advocated a jurisprudence of the exception (state of emergency), which denied that legal norms could encompass all of the political experience.