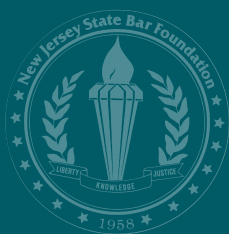


How to Become a Lawyer



A NEW JERSEY STATE BAR FOUNDATION PUBLICATION

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How to Become a Lawyer

Introduction

Do you know what a lawyer does? Are you considering the possibility of going to law school and becoming an attorney? First, you should educate yourself about what lawyers do and determine whether a career in the legal profession is for you.

Lawyers come from various backgrounds. There is no single path that will help you become a better lawyer. More importantly, there are many career paths within the law. For instance, you may want to work for a big law firm that represents banks and corporations, or you may want to work for the government defending people accused of crimes, or you may want to work for individual people who need help with their divorce, drafting a will, or selling their homes. There are many different areas of the law for you to choose from where you can make a difference in people's lives.

This pamphlet outlines the general requirements for becoming a lawyer in New Jersey. It touches on the aspects of what you need to do as you educate yourself about a career in the law.

What do lawyers do?

Lawyers are advocates, counselors and advisors. They give legal advice or assistance to people who need problems solved or need to prevent a problem from occurring. A lawyer may, among other things:

- advise a parent in a child custody dispute;
- prepare documents and contracts for people buying a new home;
- defend a person in a criminal trial; or
- work for a legal services agency helping impoverished families resolve their legal disputes.

There are many opportunities for you as a lawyer. While some lawyers appear in court daily, there are many more lawyers who advocate for their clients without ever setting foot in a courtroom. Many lawyers work in businesses, government and other law-related fields. It is up to you to expose yourself to different aspects of the law and determine what interests you.

Can I become a practicing attorney in New Jersey without going to law school?

No. Some states, such as Colorado, do not require a law school education in order to sit for the state bar exam. However, in order to sit for its bar exam, the state of New Jersey requires that candidates receive a degree from an American Bar Association (ABA)-accredited law school.

What are the requirements for admission to the practice of law in New Jersey?

- You must be at least 18 years old.
- You must receive a law degree from an ABA-accredited law school.
- You must qualify for and pass the New Jersey Bar Examination.
- You must receive a Certification of Character from the Committee on Character. (See question below.)
- You must pass the Multistate Professional Responsibility Examination or an approved course on ethics.
- You must take the Oath of Admission and sign the attorney's roll.

For a more detailed description of admission requirements, refer to the New Jersey Board of Bar Examiners' website (www.njbarexams.org). Or, call them directly at 609-984-2111 and ask for the *Admission to the Bar* booklet.

What is the Committee on Character?

The Committee on Character is appointed by the New Jersey Supreme Court and is comprised of attorneys from the state of New Jersey. The duty of the committee is to determine whether each candidate for admission to the New Jersey Bar is fit to practice law. In order to practice law within the state of New Jersey, candidates are required to demonstrate their fitness by showing the requisite traits of honesty, integrity, fiscal responsibility, trustworthiness and a professional commitment to the judicial process and the administration of justice. The committee also reviews the personal record and reputation of each candidate. Upon review, the committee will certify the fitness of that candidate to the New Jersey Supreme Court or shall withhold such certification.

In making that determination, the Committee on Character reviews a certified statement provided by each candidate, obtains credit history reports on all candidates, obtains fingerprint cards that are processed through both the New Jersey State Police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation for a criminal record check and receives complete driver's abstracts for each state in which the candidate has been licensed to drive within the past seven years.

How do I prepare for law school?

If you are in high school or already in college and are thinking about becoming a lawyer you probably know that in addition to your college degree, you will also need to attend law school. Your fellow law school students will come from various backgrounds and have different life experiences. There are certain skills that will greatly assist you in your law school studies. These skills include:

- writing concisely, clearly and logically;
- the ability to critically analyze a problem;
- being able to articulate your position on a problem and engage in debate to support your position;
- developing workable solutions to problems and being able to present them;

- being able to read, analyze and retain large amounts of written material; and
- learning to work well with many different types of people with different skills.

Discuss with your academic advisor what courses or extra-curricular activities would best assist you in honing the above skills. Taking a part-time job or internship in a law office, prosecutor's office, public defender's office, governmental office or courthouse might also be useful in helping you understand what a lawyer does on a daily basis and whether the career is right for you.

How do I choose a law school?

While choosing a law school is not very different from choosing a college—city versus suburban school, large state university or small school—you might have other considerations to keep in mind, including cost, your future goals or other personal factors. A good resource to begin your search is the Law School Admissions Council (www.lsac.org). Its website contains information about the LSAT exam, applications and links to the sites of various law schools.

You should know that not all law schools are ABA approved. A school that has been approved by the ABA means that it has met certain criteria regarding teaching staff, curriculum, scholastic programs and other factors. The New Jersey Board of Bar Examiners does not allow graduates of non-ABA-approved law schools to sit for the New Jersey Bar Examination. If you ultimately plan to practice in New Jersey, you should take this into consideration when choosing a law school.

While you can attend law school outside of New Jersey and then practice in New Jersey, you should keep in mind that some of the contacts you make during law school or during your summer jobs will also assist you in your job search after graduation. Therefore, the location of the law school you choose may be important if you are committed to living in a specific geographic location after graduation. Also, if you have a specific interest or area of law that you are considering as a career, such as the public sector, environmental or criminal defense, you may want to consider a law school that in addition to having a good general program, has a good reputation in your field of choice and runs clinics that will provide you with hands-on experience. Of course, just like applying for college, it is recommended that you visit the law school and talk to students and faculty to get a feel for the school.

Are there law schools in New Jersey?

Yes. There are three law schools in New Jersey—Seton Hall University School of Law (<http://law.shu.edu>), Rutgers School of Law–Newark (www.law.newark.rutgers.edu) and Rutgers School of Law–Camden (www.camlaw.rutgers.edu). Comprehensive information about the law schools can be found on their respective websites.

What are the academic skills needed for success in law school and a legal career?

There are important skills and values, and significant bodies of knowledge that you can acquire prior to law school that will provide a sound foundation for a legal education. These include analytic and problem-solving skills, the ability to read critically, writing skills, oral communication and good listening skills, general research skills, task organization and management skills, and the values of serving faithfully the interests of others while also promoting justice. If you wish to prepare for a legal education and for a career in law, or for another professional service that involves the use of these skills, you should seek educational, extra-curricular and life experiences that will assist you in developing those attributes. For additional information relating to the skills required for a successful legal career, see the American Bar Association's website (www.abanet.org/legaled/prelaw/prep.html).

What is the New Jersey Bar Examination?

This is an exam that must be passed before you can be admitted to practice law in New Jersey. It is given twice a year and consists of the Multistate Bar Examination (MBE) and the essay portion. The MBE consists of 200 multiple choice questions on the subjects of contracts, criminal law, constitutional law, real property, evidence and torts, and is prepared by the National Conference of Bar Examiners (NCBE) (www.ncbex.org) in conjunction with American College Testing (www.act.org). The essay portion consists of seven 45-minute essay questions that are drafted by the New Jersey Board of Bar Examiners and are designed to examine a candidate's ability to reason, analyze and express him or herself in a lawyer-like manner. The two bar examination components each count as 50 percent of your grade.

What is the Multistate Professional Responsibility Examination (MPRE)?

The MPRE is a national ethics test that takes place three times a year. Candidates seeking to practice law in New Jersey must pass it with a minimum score of 75. In lieu of the MPRE, candidates may submit evidence (in their law school certificate) of successful completion at a law school of an approved course on professional ethics. Candidates must receive a minimum grade of "C" or its equivalent.

How can I find out more about becoming a lawyer?

The New Jersey Board of Bar Examiners maintains a website at www.njbarexams.org. Further inquiries can be directed to the New Jersey Board of Bar Examiners at 609-984-2111.

About the New Jersey State Bar Foundation

The New Jersey State Bar Foundation, founded in 1958, is the educational and philanthropic arm of the New Jersey State Bar Association. The Foundation is committed to providing free legal education programming for the public. Programs provided by the Foundation include seminars on such topics as wills, divorce, taxes, retirement planning, disability law and health issues; mock trial programs for students in grades K to 12; and training sessions for teachers on the topics of conflict resolution, peer mediation and teasing and bullying prevention. Publications geared for the public include *Law Points for Senior Citizens* (Second Edition), *Consumer's Guide to New Jersey Law, Legal Consequences of Substance Abuse, AIDS and the Law in New Jersey* (Second Edition), *Disability Law: A Legal Primer* (Fifth Edition), *Domestic Violence: The Law and You* (Second Edition), *A Basic Guide to Personal Bankruptcy, Starting and Succeeding With a New Business: A Primer for the New Entrepreneur* and *Residential Construction and Renovation: A Legal Guide for New Jersey Homeowners* (Second Edition). School-based publications available through the Bar Foundation include *Bill of Rights Bulletin*, *Constitutionally New Jersey*, *Legal Consequences of Substance Abuse*, *Historical Documents of New Jersey and the United States*, *What You Need to Know About Plagiarism*, *The Legal Eagle, Respect*, a newsletter about tolerance and diversity, and *Students' Rights Handbook* (Third Edition), which is cosponsored with the ACLU-NJ. Some publications are available in Spanish and all are available in alternative formats for the visually impaired. For more information or copies of program materials, visit the New Jersey State Bar Foundation online at www.njsbf.org or call 1-800 FREE LAW.



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