



The Beginner's Guide  
to a Career in **Law**

2018

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# Your 'first steps' checklist

If you do decide that a career as a lawyer is for you, there are a few things you should be doing even before you start university. Here is a brief checklist to get you started:

- Talk to your careers adviser at school to go through your options.

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- Research the different paths into law – university, chartered legal executive, paralegal, apprenticeship (read our new *The Law Apprenticeships Guide*) – and decide which is right for you.

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- Get some practical work experience at a law firm, barristers' chambers or legal advice centre; it will help you to decide what suits you best and will also improve any applications you make later.

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- Work hard at your academic studies. Excellent grades are essential!

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- Talk to friends, parents, acquaintances – anyone with a connection to the legal profession; they may also be able to help you get some work experience.

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- Think about the kinds of extracurricular things you can do to make yourself into a well-rounded candidate. Think sport, volunteering, drama, music...

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- Sign up to LCN Weekly on LawCareers.Net. Our free weekly email newsletter will deliver news and information about the profession, plus advice and reminders throughout the legal recruitment calendar, straight to your inbox.

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- Read the business pages of the newspapers to improve your commercial awareness and get you starting to 'think business'.

# Welcome

If you think you might be interested in law as a future career, but have little (or no) idea what that really involves, *The Beginner's Guide to a Career in Law* is for you. The guide has been designed with people like you in mind – on the one hand, we've assumed no prior knowledge, while on the other, we've assumed you'll have lots of questions.

Within these pages you will find information about the job of a lawyer, the differences between the three main types of legal professional (solicitors, barristers and chartered legal executives), and the courses and training you need to complete in order to qualify. There is also a selection of key questions, a welcome reality check and – for those who want to find out more – ideas on some of the next steps to take.

*The Beginner's Guide* is brought to you by LawCareers.Net (LCN), the number one resource for those interested in joining the legal profession. On the website you will find employer profiles; interviews with law firm recruiters, trainees, associates and partners; advice from LCN's resident agony aunt, the Oracle; blogs and videos from people at different stages of their legal careers; information on law courses (undergraduate and postgraduate); and a searchable database of training contract and pupillage vacancies.

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Welcome to the first  
stage of your legal career!

[www.lawcareers.net](http://www.lawcareers.net)

# What lawyers do

Everyone has their favourite scurrilous lawyer joke, but on the whole it's not a profession made up of conniving ambulance chasers and fat cats. Lawyers perform a valuable role, especially as law is intertwined with every aspect of our society – from the age at which you can take your driving test to the speed at which you can drive when you pass it; from the minimum wage you can expect to earn in a new job to the rights you have should you lose it.

The first thing to know is that traditionally, the profession has had two main branches – solicitors and barristers. However, in recent years the legal landscape has become much more complex, with chartered legal executives, paralegals, apprentices and more. This trend seems set to continue – read more about it in “Apprenticeships and paralegals” on pages 6 and 7 and in the companion to this booklet, *The Law Apprenticeships Guide 2018*, which is available free at schools and online at [www.lawcareers.net](http://www.lawcareers.net). For now, however, here is a broad introduction to what solicitors and barristers do.

## Practice area snapshot

Below is just a small selection of the vast array of practice areas out there:

### Corporate/commercial

Commercial and corporate solicitors advise on complex transactions and act for businesses of all sizes, from international corporations to small start-ups. General company law might involve advising on company directors' rights and responsibilities, board meetings and shareholders' rights. Corporate work often concerns mergers and acquisitions, demergers, joint ventures and share issues.

### Crime

Criminal lawyers advise and represent their clients in court on criminal charges that can range from minor motoring misdemeanours to more serious crimes, including murder. Barristers may be called on to act for either the defence or the prosecution.

### Employment

As a solicitor, you'll be working on disputes that end up in employment tribunals or in the High Court, helping to draft contracts of employment or advising on working hours. Your client could be the employer or employee. As a barrister, you will be appearing on behalf of your client in either a tribunal or court, often in different parts of the country.

### Family

Family lawyers deal with all legal matters relating to marriage, separation, divorce, cohabitation and legal issues relating to children. Family law also encompasses financial negotiations, inheritance issues and prenuptial contracts.

## Solicitors

Generally speaking, solicitors provide advice and assistance on matters of law. They are the first point of contact for people and organisations (eg, companies and charities) seeking legal advice and representation. Most solicitors work together in solicitor-owned law firms, while others work in central or local government, in a legal department within a business or organisation, or in an alternative business structure (ABS) – an organisation which provides legal services in the same way as a traditional law firm, but is funded and controlled by a company (eg, the Co-operative Group).

While solicitors are found in a variety of areas of law, the fundamentals of the job remain largely the same. These include a mixture of advisory and contentious (dispute) work, such as:

- meeting clients, finding out their needs and establishing how to help;
- researching relevant areas of law and proposing courses of action to clients;
- drafting letters, contracts and other legal documents; and
- acting on behalf of clients in negotiations and occasionally representing them at tribunals or in court.

Being a solicitor is a tough, but rewarding job. Many of those entering the profession work their way up through the ranks from newly qualified solicitor to associate to partner. (NB The responsibilities of a chartered legal executive are also very similar to those set out above.)

## Barristers

Barristers advise on specific legal issues and spend a lot of time representing clients in court. They receive their information and instructions through a solicitor and are essentially self-employed. When not appearing in court, they work in chambers where they prepare their court cases and arguments. Again, although barristers work in a wide variety of areas of law, the fundamental elements of the job remain largely the same. These include:

- advising clients on the law and the strength of their case;
- holding ‘conferences’ with clients to discuss their case;
- representing clients in court, including presenting the case and cross-examining witnesses; and
- negotiating settlements with the other side (when a legal dispute is resolved privately outside of court).

Upon being called to the Bar, a barrister is known formally as a ‘junior’. He or she remains a junior until such time as he or she is made a Queen’s Counsel (QC), also known as ‘taking silk’. A QC is a senior barrister with extensive experience who is regarded as having outstanding ability. The majority of barristers never become QCs.

## Areas of law

There are hundreds of different types of law. However, at the broadest level, you can divide lawyers between those doing commercial work (ie, work for companies) and those involved with individual people. On the one hand, you could be a banking lawyer scrutinising a major loan by a bank to a corporation; on the other, you could be a personal injury practitioner advising an individual who has had a fall. Different practice areas are like different jobs: very little connects the everyday professional life of a human rights solicitor with that of a corporate one. See the “practice area snapshot” below for more detail.

### Further reading

#### Solicitors

[www.lawcareers.net/solicitors](http://www.lawcareers.net/solicitors)

#### Barristers

[www.lawcareers.net/barristers](http://www.lawcareers.net/barristers)

**Chartered legal executives and paralegals are also legal professionals who work in law firms, but the route to these jobs does not require a university degree. Find out more about paralegals, legal executives and apprenticeships further on in this booklet.**

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### Human rights

This practice area is incredibly wide ranging and includes immigration and asylum cases, privacy cases affecting celebrities and international law issues. Clients may range from low-income refugees and prisoners through to large news organisations and government departments.

### Intellectual property

This involves protecting the exploitation of intellectual ideas, normally by way of copyright, trademarks and patents. IP lawyers advise on issues ranging from commercial exploitation to infringement disputes, and agreements that deal either exclusively with intellectual property or with IP rights as part of larger commercial transactions.

### Private client

Private client lawyers advise on all aspects of the financial affairs of clients, including capital gains tax, inheritance tax planning, setting up lifetime trusts and preparing wills. Private client lawyers also handle a wide range of charity work.

### Public law

Public law concerns relationships between people and government. This might mean challenging the level of care provided to a disabled person by a local authority, or on a larger scale, advising the government on national infrastructure development, such as a new energy or transport project.

# Branches of the profession

One of the key questions to address when considering a legal career is what type of lawyer you want to be. For many, that will mean deciding between becoming a solicitor or a barrister. For some, the option to 'earn while you learn' as a chartered legal executive will appeal.

Simply put, a barrister appears in court, while a solicitor or chartered legal executive works in a law firm. The term 'lawyer' applies to all three. However, the differences are much more complex. Some say that it comes down to whether you are an individualist (barrister) or a team player (solicitor/legal executive). While it is true that

a barrister is almost always self-employed and connected to other barristers only by convenience, and a solicitor/legal executive may be just one worker in a law firm of thousands of people, in reality the situation is less black and white. Barristers are often involved in teamwork and some solicitors/legal executives spend many hours on their own in a room drafting documents.

The decision as to which branch would suit you best rests on a number of factors concerning your abilities, temperament and – dare we say it – financial circumstances. Over the page is a brief guide with some key facts, which may help you to decide.

## Further reading

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### Solicitors

[www.lawcareers.net/solicitors](http://www.lawcareers.net/solicitors)

### Barristers

[www.lawcareers.net/barristers](http://www.lawcareers.net/barristers)

### CILEx

[www.lawcareers.net/morelaw](http://www.lawcareers.net/morelaw)

## Solicitors

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As of April 2017, there were 138,280 practising solicitors. The total number of solicitors on the roll was 181,000.

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Women make up around 47% of all practising solicitors. However, many fewer women than men are currently at partner level – an average split in private practice is 67% male partners compared to 33% female.

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BAME individuals make up 16% of all solicitors.

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Mostly employed in private law firms, so receive regular monthly salary.

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Work mainly with individuals, companies and barristers.

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Office-based, although have some rights of audience. Engage more in ongoing advisory and one-to-one client work.

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Aspire to become partner – that is, part-ownership of firm and entitlement to a percentage of its profits.

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While there is no longer a minimum annual trainee salary, the average UK salary for a first-year trainee is around £27,000, while City firms pay considerably more – anywhere from £35,000 upwards.

## Barristers

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As of July 2015, there were 15,899 practising barristers. Of those, 12,757 were self-employed (not including those in dual practice, registered European lawyers or second six pupils).

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Women make up around 35% of all practising barristers (ie, 5,660 women compared to 10,239 men).

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BAME individuals make up 12% of all practising barristers (ie, 1,891).

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Mostly self-employed, so receive irregular (but often substantial) fees.

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Work mainly with solicitors and other barristers.

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Chambers and court-based. Engage more in one-off advocacy (ie, court cases).

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Aspire to become Queen's Counsel (QC) – that is, a top barrister, normally instructed in very serious and complex cases.

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The Bar Standards Board requires that all pupils be paid no less than £12,000 per annum. Many earn much more – upwards of £60,000 in some cases.

## Chartered legal executives

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As of May 2017, there were around 20,000 trainee and practising chartered legal executives.

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Women make up around 74% of all CILEx members.

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BAME individuals make up around 12% of all CILEx members.

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Mostly employed in private law firms or in-house, so receive regular monthly salary.

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Work mainly with solicitors and individuals.

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Office-based, although they have some of the same rights of audience as solicitors. Engage more in ongoing advisory and one-to-one client work.

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Should they choose to do so, legal executives can go on to become coroners, judges or partners.

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Starting salaries are usually between £15,000 and £28,000 per year while qualifying, while chartered legal executives can expect to earn between £35,000 and £55,000, and can earn much higher.

# Apprenticeships

You don't have to go to university to start a career in the legal profession. Legal apprentices train on the job at law firms to eventually become solicitors, chartered legal executives or paralegals, without the tuition fees and accommodation costs involved with going to university. Some apprenticeships take 18 months to complete, but the more advanced levels last five or six years – around the same amount of time as it would take to qualify through the university route.

University tuition and maintenance loans are available and you don't have to start paying them back until you are in a job paying at least £21,000 a year, so high fees should not necessarily put you off higher education, but there are many reasons why you might decide that going to university is not right for you. This section is a basic introduction to legal apprenticeships. To learn more, read the companion to this booklet, *The Law Apprenticeships Guide 2018*, which explains everything you need to know about the different types of apprenticeship. Pick up a free copy from your school or read it online at [www.lawcareers.net](http://www.lawcareers.net).

## Am I eligible?

To become a legal apprentice, you must be 16 or over, not in full-time education and a UK citizen/someone who has right of residency in the United Kingdom. You must also not be a university graduate. Most legal apprenticeships require five GCSEs (or equivalent) graded A\*-C, including maths and English. The paralegal apprenticeship also requires two A levels graded C or above, while the solicitor apprenticeship requires three A levels graded C or above.

## Earn and learn

The minimum wage for a legal apprentice is £3.50 (as of 1 April 2017) an hour for people aged under 19, as well as for people aged over 19 who are in the first year of their apprenticeship. All other apprentices over the age of 19 are entitled to the National Minimum Wage.

There are currently four separate levels of legal apprenticeship.

## Intermediate apprenticeship

The intermediate apprenticeship provides training in a legal administrative role, involving tasks such as research, secretarial work and dealing with confidential information.

## Paralegal apprenticeship

The paralegal apprenticeship trains apprentices in the skills needed to work in a certain area of law (eg, personal injury) – paralegals support solicitors on legal matters and do many of the same tasks. Find out more about paralegals on the next page.

## Chartered legal executive apprenticeship

This programme trains apprentices to qualify as chartered legal executives, a type of lawyer that is similar to a solicitor. Candidates usually complete the paralegal apprenticeship before progressing onto this.

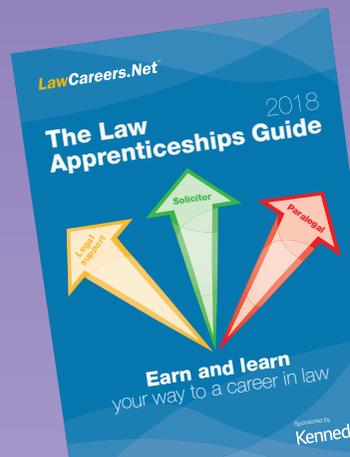
## Solicitor apprenticeship

This apprenticeship is a six-year programme which includes studying for a law degree with on-the-job training at a law firm, ending in qualification as a solicitor.

If you are considering applying for an apprenticeship, you can learn more by reading *The Law Apprenticeships Guide 2018* and then start your search for the right employer on LawCareers.Net's apprenticeship jobs board.

## Further reading:

*The Law Apprenticeships Guide 2018*



Paralegals are professionals who work in law firms, but are not qualified as solicitors or chartered legal executives. Although paralegals used to be seen purely as support staff, the role of paralegal has moved beyond just assisting solicitors – paralegals are becoming a distinct group of legal professionals in their own right, although at present this kind of role is still usually seen as a stepping stone to becoming a solicitor or chartered legal executive, rather than a career in itself.

The roles of some paralegals are often little different from those of trainee and junior solicitors. This means that you can apply to qualify as a solicitor while working as a paralegal, provided that you can satisfy the Solicitors Regulation Authority that you have gained the same knowledge and skills in your role as you would have through a training contract. The first paralegals qualified this way in April 2015 – dubbed the “equivalent means route” – and this is now a valid route to becoming a solicitor (on which more below).

Another common reason why many graduates work as paralegals is that this is a good way to gain the crucial legal work experience needed to get a training contract. Some paralegals gain experience and then apply for a training contract at the same firm, while others move on from firms where this is

not an option and go on to apply successfully elsewhere.

However, a note of caution: paralegals perform many of the same tasks as solicitors, but are generally not paid anywhere near as much and there is not the same clear career progression that solicitors can pursue. It may be that the equivalent means route to qualifying as a solicitor helps to counteract this status and pay imbalance, and put more power back into the hands of paralegals and aspiring solicitors, but for now be careful and stay mindful of your prospects for career progression.

## Further reading

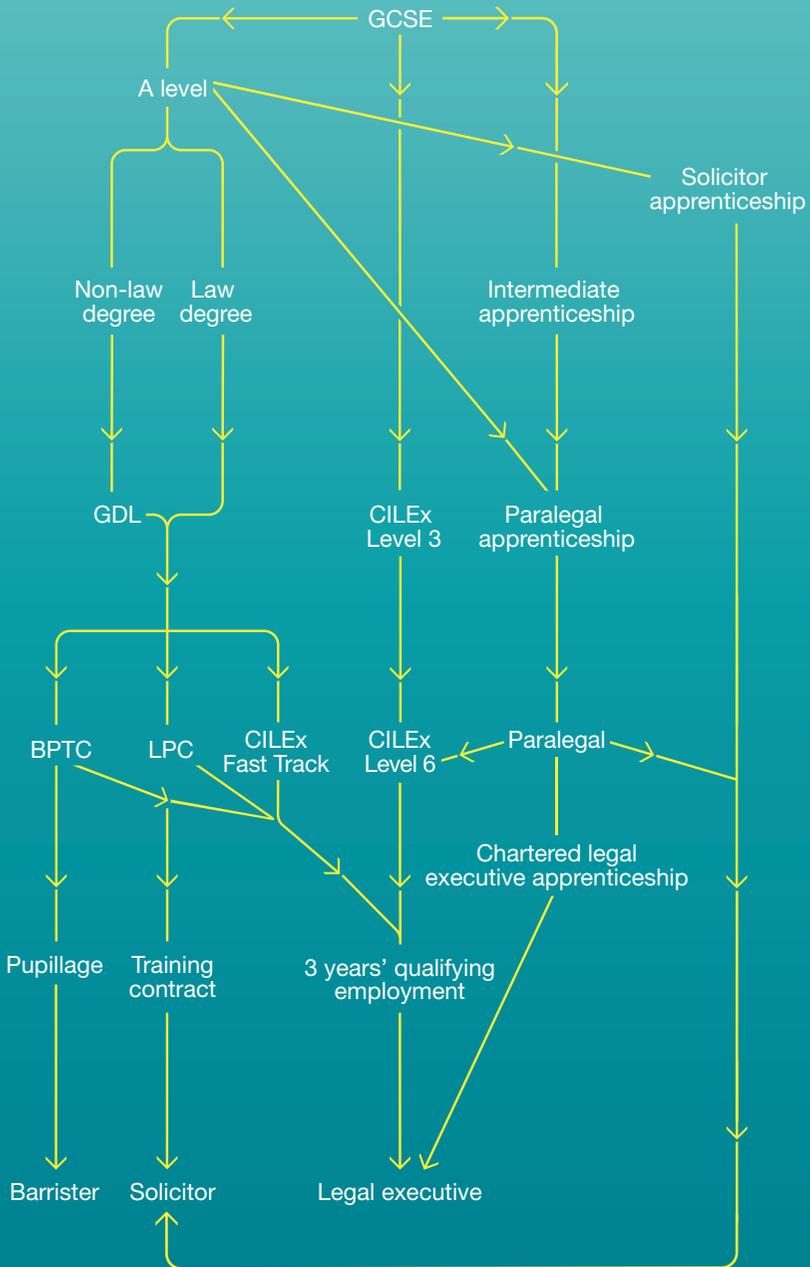
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The Paralegal section on LawCareers.Net – click on ‘More Law’ from the LCN homepage, then on ‘Paralegals’ in the sidebar on the right.

### **‘Equivalent means’ offers new path to qualification**

It is now possible to use the experiences gained in a paralegal role to qualify as a solicitor, as long as you have graduated from university and completed the LPC. In March 2015 Shaun Lawler was one of the first solicitors to qualify in this new way. He says: “If people have the necessary qualifications and experience, then they should be able to qualify as solicitors without needing a law firm’s say so.

Paralegal work effectively got my foot in the door of the legal profession. I moved away from home to London and applied for a few different paralegal roles with the aim of getting some experience while completing the LPC. Working and studying at the same time was hard, but it definitely gave me the experience that I needed to move forward, without which I would have found it much harder to pursue qualification as a solicitor.”

# Career paths



## **GCSE**

The foundation of your career and the essential first step – good grades are vital if you want to progress in your legal career.

## **A level**

The academic stage between GCSE and undergraduate level – again, good grades are essential. Some universities favour traditional, academically rigorous subjects such as history (A-level law is not usually specified).

## **Solicitor apprenticeship**

The solicitor apprenticeship is a six-year programme of paid, on-the-job training, integrating a law degree, which ends in qualification as a solicitor. The entry requirements are five GCSEs graded A\*–C and three A levels graded C or above (or equivalent work experience).

## **Non-law degree**

Lawyers are not required to have studied law at university! It is possible to do a non-law degree and then do the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL).

## **Law degree**

The qualifying law degree, or LLB, covers seven compulsory subjects: public, criminal, contract, tort, property, equity and trusts, and EU law.

## **GDL**

Like the law degree, the one-year Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) concentrates on the seven foundations of legal practice. When combined with a non-law degree, it is equivalent to a law degree.

## **BPTC**

The one-year Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) is the vocational stage of training to be a barrister.

## **LPC**

The one-year Legal Practice Course (LPC) is the vocational stage of training to be a solicitor.

## **Pupillage**

Pupillage is a compulsory, year-long traineeship before qualification as a barrister. Pupils practise under the guidance and supervision of a pupil supervisor.

## **Period of recognised training/training contract**

The period of recognised training (traditionally known as a ‘training contract’) is a period of paid employment and training with a law firm or other approved organisation before qualification as a solicitor. In most cases this will take the form of a two-year formal traineeship.

## **Barrister**

Barristers offer advice on specific legal issues and are on the front line, representing clients in court.

## **Solicitor**

Solicitors give advice and assistance on matters of law; they are the first point of contact for those seeking legal advice and representation.

## **CILEx chartered legal executive**

It is also possible to practise law as a chartered legal executive – a qualified lawyer (though not a solicitor) who is trained to specialise as an expert in a particular area of law. The route to qualification is to complete CILEx 3 and CILEx 6 (or CILEx Graduate Fast Track for those with a law degree) and three years’ qualifying employment. For more info, go to [www.cilex.org.uk](http://www.cilex.org.uk).

## **Legal apprenticeships**

A legal apprentice is someone who joins a law firm straight from school, rather than going to university. He or she receives paid, on-the-job training in legal practice. For more on legal apprenticeships, see p6 or visit our Legal apprenticeships section on [LawCareers.Net](http://LawCareers.Net).

## **Paralegals**

Paralegals have traditionally worked alongside solicitors in law firms as support staff, although in practice many paralegals do the same work as their trainee or newly-qualified solicitor counterparts. Paralegal roles provide a good route into the profession for students and graduates. For more detail on what paralegals do and how to become one, see p7 or visit our Paralegals section on [LawCareers.Net](http://LawCareers.Net).

### **Change ahead: the Solicitors Qualifying Examination**

The Solicitors Qualifying Examination is a new exam in development that all trainee solicitors will have to pass at the point of qualifying. The new exam

will be introduced in 2020. For more information, go to [LawCareers.Net](http://LawCareers.Net) and search “Solicitors Qualifying Examination”.

# Key questions

Below are some of the most commonly asked questions about a career in the law. If you want to ask something not covered here, email your query to [oracle@lawcareers.net](mailto:oracle@lawcareers.net).

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**Why should I choose law over other professions?**

Don't pursue a legal career for the sake of it; you need to have a strong desire to be a lawyer if you are to succeed. Do you find law interesting? Is there a particular practice area that has already caught your attention? Are you the kind of person who would thrive in a legal environment? The only way to really find out whether law is for you is by doing some quality work experience within and outside of the legal profession.



**What is commercial awareness?**

Law firms often stress that their lawyers need to be 'commercially aware'. This phrase can cause confusion, as it means different things to different people. However, in essence, it means that commercial lawyers deal with more than just the law. They must understand the client's business and the market/environment in which it operates, and be proactive in spotting and suggesting ways to avoid potential problems that the client might face. Commercial awareness does not mean the same thing to a student as it will to an experienced businessperson. Nobody expects you to be a veteran of the boardroom; what firms are looking for is a combination of basic knowledge, interest and enthusiasm for commercial matters, and, most importantly, the ability and willingness to 'think business'.



**What skills and strengths do you need to be a good lawyer?**

A number of core skills are needed to be a good lawyer – many of them you can hone during your academic studies and by doing work experience. The core strengths sought by legal recruiters are:

- intellectual ability;
- motivation;
- resilience;
- accuracy/attention to detail;
- teamwork;
- leadership;
- commercial awareness (see below); and
- communication skills.

If you have the majority of these, law could be a good option for you!



**How important are grades at A level and uni?**

Law is an intellectually rigorous career, which is why firms and chambers require excellent academics; in fact, many simply won't look at applicants who have less than a 2.1 degree, and As and Bs at A level. It is therefore absolutely vital that you get the best grades you possibly can.

## **Q** Should I go to university or try one of the new routes, such as an apprenticeship?

**A** Over the past couple of years, the chance to work in the legal profession by way of a legal apprenticeship has become a real option. A small number of firms have started schemes whereby they take on school leavers to work in a role similar to that of a paralegal, as well as receiving on-the-job training that takes them towards a formal qualification. This is something to consider instead of going to university to study law – your reasons for doing so may be financial or the more vocational training might suit you better. See the ‘Apprenticeships’ section on p6 for more detail and our new publication, *The Law Apprenticeships Guide*.

## **Q** How do I go about getting legal work experience?

**A** Work placement schemes are a great way to learn more about the profession and many firms run schemes specifically for first years. You can get a comprehensive list of which firms are doing what and when on LawCareers.Net’s work placement deadlines page. But you are not restricted to these structured schemes – you may be able to get a day or two shadowing a trainee or associate simply by writing speculatively to firms/chambers you’re interested in or which are local to you. You should also get involved with any university pro bono schemes or legal advice centres. Even if initially you’re just stuffing envelopes or answering phones, it’s all a valuable introduction to the types of work and client relationships that lawyers are involved with every day.

## **Q** Why are work placement schemes so important?

**A** Getting work experience at law firms is essential. Work placement schemes (usually run during university holidays) are a good place to start; they provide an opportunity for you to find out about not only law, but also individual firms. Firms increasingly rely on extended work placement schemes to figure out which candidates they really want to take on as trainees, so getting on a scheme is a great chance to impress and earn the offer of a training contract.

## **Q** Do law firms prefer candidates to have a law degree?

**A** Most firms are looking to recruit a balance of law and non-law graduates – in fact, these days roughly half of all solicitors are from non-law backgrounds, while studying another subject at university may also help to make you a more well-rounded individual. That means that if you have a burning desire to study English literature, but think you might want a career as a lawyer, it’s fine to do English at uni and convert to law by doing the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL). This postgraduate course squeezes the seven foundations of legal knowledge into one year. You then join the law graduates and do either the Legal Practice Course (LPC) or the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC), followed by a training contract in a law firm or a pupillage in a set of chambers. But note: most firms do favour traditional academic subjects (eg, history or sciences) over more modern options (eg, media studies or drama).

### Q Can I take a year out after uni?

**A** Definitely – it's something a lot of students do, especially if they don't have a training contract or pupillage by the time they leave uni. A year out gives you the opportunity to spend time making and enhancing your applications. Along with gaining experience (both legal and commercial), travel and/or charity work are great gap-year favourites – and provided that you end up with more to talk about than the beach, they can really enhance your applications.

### Q Are postgraduate law courses expensive? Do I have to pay for them myself?

**A** The total cost of qualifying as a solicitor or barrister is not to be underestimated. Over and above the £9,250 per year that you are likely to have to pay for your undergraduate degree, you will have to pay as much as £10,920, £15,740 or £19,070 (plus living costs) for, respectively, each of the GDL, LPC and BPTC in 2017-18. For this reason, it's best to have a training contract or pupillage before embarking on any of the courses – some large firms/chambers offer sponsorship (usually covering course fees and maintenance grant) to their future trainees/pupils. At the very least, you'll have a job at the end of all the study. Bank loans are usually the preferred option for those who self-fund; note, however, that most banks have withdrawn the preferential loan products that they used to offer to postgraduate law students. For more detailed funding advice, look at the 'Finances' section on LawCareers.Net.

### Q What's the lowdown on the postgraduate law courses?

**A** In brief, this is the compulsory vocational stage that must be completed before you do either the training contract (solicitor) or pupillage (barrister). The LPC and the BPTC are usually one-year courses, but each can be done two years part time, or by distance learning. Many providers around the country offer the courses, including our sponsor, Nottingham Law School. Alternatively CILEx offers a Graduate Fast Track Diploma. Note: the SRA is introducing a new Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) in 2020, which will likely replace the LPC, but the exact timing and format of this is vague, so for now, the above remains true.

### Q Have all lawyers been to private school and Oxbridge?

**A** No. Most firms and chambers fully understand the benefits of a representative workforce, which means recruiting the best candidates regardless of background. These days, most go further by establishing their own diversity policies to ensure that they provide a welcoming and supportive environment for people whatever their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, socioeconomic background and so on. That said, different firms and chambers do have different personalities and it's important to find one that suits you – a compelling reason to attend law fairs, open days and get work experience.

**Q** Is the role of lawyers essentially the same in all law firms and chambers?

**A** No. Take solicitors' firms – the work and lifestyle that you would experience in a large City firm and a small high-street practice are almost incomparable. And it's the same thing with a London-based commercial barristers' chambers and a small regional crime chambers. It's therefore vitally important that you find out which type and size of practice would suit you, by doing work experience and speaking to people in the profession. Only by getting first-hand experience and chatting to those in the know can you really start to get a feel for the kind of work that you think would appeal and that you would be good at.

**Q** How can I find out more?

**A** There's lots of info out there about careers in law. Pick up a copy of *The Training Contract & Pupillage Handbook* (updated every year) or our newest publication, *The Law Apprenticeships Guide*, from your careers service or a law fair (held at universities in autumn). Fairs are also a great place to speak to recruiters and current trainees/pupils. In addition, check out websites such as LawCareers.Net for news, advice, features and interviews.

**Q** What use is my careers service?

**A** Your school or university careers service is a key resource. Some advisers specialise in the legal sector and are great for checking through work placement and training contract/pupillage applications (or speculative CVs and letters, if you're trying to secure informal work experience). Some also have contacts at local law firms and chambers, so might even be able to help you set up some work shadowing.

**Further reading**

Got a question not answered here? Go to [www.lawcareers.net/information/oracle](http://www.lawcareers.net/information/oracle) to find out if it has come up before. Alternatively, email the Oracle direct at [oracle@lawcareers.net](mailto:oracle@lawcareers.net) for a personalised response to your question.

# Reality check

In the spirit of full disclosure, there are a few things worth mentioning as a reminder that a legal career is not all triumphant court victories and champagne-fuelled deal celebrations. So without wanting to detract from the exciting and challenging career on offer, here follows some food for thought...

## Finances

We cannot stress this enough – with up to £9,250 per year undergrad fees, plus postgrad study in 2017-18 costing up to £15,740 for the LPC and up to £19,070 for the BPTC, the road to qualification is not cheap and there are no guarantees of a job at the end of it. In addition, the minimum trainee salary has been abolished, so some firms may be paying trainees no more than the national minimum wage. Your ability to afford the courses and a potentially low starting wage must be a factor in deciding whether to pursue law as a career.



## Academics

Nothing but the best will do in this competitive market. You need to be getting excellent grades from your first year of university onwards – arguably, your A-level grades are just as important when it comes to applying for training contracts and pupillages, as anything less than As and Bs may prevent you from getting past the first application hurdle. Most recruiters we speak to say that excellent academics are a given, so make sure that you tick this very first box. Study and study hard.



## Competition

The numbers are stacked against you – there are many fewer training contract and pupillage places than there are people with the necessary qualifications. You have to find a way to stand out among thousands angling for the same job, so make sure you shine through by being resourceful, determined and committed to the profession and a career in law.



## Time

An awareness of the pressures of time is crucial if you are to succeed; you must give the requisite amount of time to your future career. You must spend time researching firms/chambers you like; planning how to get work experience; and filling out, refining, checking (and having someone else check) your application forms. Start early, have a schedule and be strict with yourself. Last-minute, rushed efforts are almost worse than no effort at all.



## Experience

You need a combination of work experience (both legal and otherwise) and extracurricular activities to become the all-rounder that firms/chambers want to hire.

One without the other isn't enough; having both strings to your bow is what will help you demonstrate, in a quantifiable way, that you are a complete human being and worth the organisation investing in you as a future employee.



## Online

Your online presence may currently be dominated by photos of debauched holiday antics and lewd comments, and you need to be aware that recruiters may be Googling your name! So it can be beneficial to build up a more 'professional' social media profile than your Facebook account offers. LinkedIn is great for maintaining a line of contact with the legal professionals you will be meeting, while Twitter can also be useful to follow the legal world's big influencers and stay up to the minute with the latest news and issues. And there is nothing wrong with keeping work and your social life separate, so mind your privacy settings!



## Commerciality

The legal world is part of the business world. If you harbour any ambitions to work for a commercial law firm, it is essential to develop a good understanding of the issues and events affecting businesses. Read the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* from time to time, and try to appreciate the appropriate legal issues thrown up by your studies from a commercial perspective.



## Diversity

Historically, the legal profession was overwhelmingly white, male and privately educated, and more still needs to be done to consign this unattractive legacy completely to the past, particularly at the senior end of the profession. This is not to say that if you don't meet those outdated, narrow criteria, you should be put off – quite the opposite. What it does mean is that you should have your eyes open to the opportunities available. The legal profession is much, much more diverse than it used to be. There are also organisations which work to help students from less-privileged backgrounds access the career opportunities that law has to offer. Aspiring Solicitors, LawCareers.Net's diversity partner, works for free with students to provide one-to-one advice on CVs, application forms and interview practice, while also working with employers to provide work experience opportunities and improve openness. Find out more by visiting [www.aspiringsolicitors.co.uk](http://www.aspiringsolicitors.co.uk).



# LawCareers.Net

The law is an incredibly competitive profession and it's never too early to start trying to boost your chances of success. One of the best ways to do that is to visit **www.LawCareers.Net** (LCN) to begin your online research. It's your one-stop shop for all things law-related.

LCN brings you continuously updated news, in-depth features, lawyer profiles, advice, blogs, videos and diaries of useful events and key dates, along with other crucial background information. Our free subscription email, **LCN Weekly**, highlights the best of the site's continually updated content. There is also a comprehensive directory of firms, chambers and legal educators – with over 1,000 organisations listed, LCN introduces you to all those who might ultimately offer you a job.

LCN is also keen to engage directly with readers, both in person at the many law fairs that we attend, or online via our Twitter feed (@LawCareersNetUK) and Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/LawCareers.Net](http://www.facebook.com/LawCareers.Net)). We try to post things that are useful and/or of interest, and are always keen to receive feedback and comments.

Every LCN user also has access to a personal **MyLCN** account. MyLCN offers expert practical support in the search for a job, allowing you to save and order your research, as well as analyse your experiences to see whether you have the skills for success and identify areas to improve through the innovative **MySelf** system.

So start your research, get proactive and good luck!

*If you would like more copies of The Beginner's Guide to a Career in Law 2018 or our newest publication, The Law Apprenticeships Guide, please contact [info@lawcareers.net](mailto:info@lawcareers.net).*





# Your first-year university checklist

You're at university (law or non-law) and you want to know what you should be doing. Here is a brief checklist to get you started:

- Keep up with the business sections on newspapers' websites to improve your commercial awareness, but also read the more specific legal press – a couple of the more reputable broadsheet newspapers also have great law sections.

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- Work with your university careers adviser on your application and interview technique, and start to think about where you might like to apply for a vac scheme/mini-pupillage next year.

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- Sign up to LCN Weekly on LawCareers.Net. Our free weekly email newsletter will deliver news and information about the profession, plus advice and reminders throughout the legal recruitment calendar, straight to your inbox.

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- Get some practical work experience at a law firm, barristers' chambers or legal advice centre. Talk to friends, family, acquaintances – anyone with a connection to the legal profession.

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- Go to law fairs, firm presentations and open days to meet people face to face. Think about how to stand out by asking good questions (eg, about a recent deal, case or merger).

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- Continue to work hard at your academic studies. Recruiters want to see exemplary grades and yes, your first-year grades do count!

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- Engage with some of the extracurricular options at university (eg, sport, debating, mooting or music) to make yourself into a well-rounded candidate.

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- Consider whether you want to become a solicitor or barrister. Read the 'Solicitors' and 'Barristers' sections in *The Training Contract & Pupillage Handbook* to help you decide.



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