

THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA

HOW
DO I
BECOME
A
LAWYER?

GET THE
LEGAL
FACTS
OF LIFE

How do I become a lawyer?

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Introduction

You're considering a career in law. Or maybe you just want to find out more about becoming a lawyer. Are you familiar with the vast range of career options available to those with legal training? Have you asked yourself why you might like to be a lawyer? Do you know what you need to do to become one? Are you willing to spend several years studying law in order to do so?

Becoming a lawyer — and practicing law — is not easy. A career in law, however, can be extremely rewarding. And it can be a good fit for many different kinds of people from many different cultural, ethnic and educational backgrounds. There is no one “lawyer” type of person or job. As a lawyer, you might choose to prosecute accused criminals, for example, or negotiate real estate deals, advise corporations, help arrange adoptions, work to protect the environment or teach law. A legal career can provide you with an opportunity to help people, businesses or governments solve problems. And you can play a crucial role in our justice system as well. As a lawyer, you truly can make a difference.

This pamphlet summarizes the general requirements for becoming a California lawyer. It also touches on the many opportunities available to those who pursue a legal career. We hope it assists you in planning for your future.

1 *What do lawyers do?*

Lawyers are both advocates and advisors. They help solve — or prevent — legal problems for others. For example, a lawyer might:

- Assist in drafting a will.
- Help a merchant sue a customer for unpaid bills.
- Advise someone who is seeking a divorce.
- Prepare mortgages and other loan documents for a bank.

- Research a tax law in international trade for a corporate executive.
- Prosecute a defendant in a criminal trial.
- Help an impoverished tenant with a landlord dispute.

As a lawyer, you might serve as general counsel for a corporation. You might choose to become a lawyer in a big firm. You might work for a legal services agency and help destitute families resolve their legal crises. Or you could become a prosecutor, public defender, county counsel or city attorney.

A lawyer's choice of legal fields is as varied as the society in which he or she lives. And the nature of the law-related work available within each field varies as well. No matter what you have seen on television, the practice of law is not all courtroom drama. Many practicing lawyers rarely see the inside of a courtroom. Others do not even practice law, choosing instead to work in business, government and other law-related fields. It all depends on what appeals to you as an individual. The possibilities are virtually limitless.

2 *What are the requirements for admission to practice law in California?*

In general, you must:

- Be at least 18 years old.
- Complete two years of undergraduate college work or pass certain equivalency tests.
- Graduate from a State Bar-accredited or American Bar Association-approved law school, complete four years of study at an unaccredited or correspondence law school, spend four years studying law in a law office/judge's chambers program, *or* complete a study program that combines these various methods.

- Register with the State Bar within 90 days of beginning your law studies.
- Pass the *First-Year Law Students' Examination*. Law students who successfully complete their first year at certain law schools are generally exempt from this requirement (see #7).
- Receive a positive "moral character" determination.
- Pass the *Multistate Professional Responsibility Examination* (see #9) and the *California Bar Examination* (see #10).
- Provide a Social Security number, unless you are exempt (see #12).
- Comply with any California court-ordered child or family support payments.

For a more detailed description of these admission requirements, refer to the State Bar publication entitled *Rules Regulating Admission to Practice Law in California*. (The requirements can vary according to the applicant's legal background.) The publication can be found on the State Bar's Web site at www.calbar.ca.gov (click on *Bar Exam* in the right-hand menu). Or, to request a printed copy, call 415-538-2300.

3 *How do I prepare for law school?*

There is no required pre-law course of study. The educational backgrounds and life experiences of law students vary widely. Taking the time to develop certain skills, however, may help prepare you for a career in law. Such skills include the ability to:

- Write logically, clearly and concisely.
- Critically analyze problems and come up with workable solutions.

- Clearly articulate a position on an issue and engage in debate.
- Read, analyze and retain large amounts of printed material.
- Work well with many types of people.

To hone such skills, you might join a school debate team, work in student government or write for a school publication. An internship or part-time job in a law office or working for an investigator might be useful as well. Ask your academic or pre-law college advisor for additional suggestions.

Applying to law school is a long process. You may have to take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) nearly a year before starting law school. You will need to fill out school applications and, in many instances, write a personal essay and solicit letters of recommendation. Also, keep in mind that admission to law school can be highly competitive. According to the Law School Admission Council (LSAC), most applicants apply to at least four law schools.

For more information on taking the LSAT and applying to law schools, visit the LSAC Web site at www.lsac.org.

4 *What is the LSAT?*

The Law School Admission test (LSAT) is a law school entrance exam administered four times a year at hundreds of locations. This half-day test provides a standard measure of reading and verbal reasoning skills. Law schools use the LSAT score as one of several factors in assessing law school applicants. Many would-be law students take preparatory courses to help prepare for the test.

5 *How do I choose a law school?*

Choosing a law school is a big decision. Whether a particular school is right for you will

depend on your circumstances, financial means, academic background, future goals and other factors.

In California, there are three types of law schools — those approved by the American Bar Association (ABA), those accredited by The State Bar of California's Committee of Bar Examiners, and those that are registered correspondence or unaccredited law schools.

ABA-approved schools and schools accredited by the Committee of Bar Examiners have met certain standards regarding the school's teaching staff, curriculum, scholastic program and other factors. (Most states require graduation from an ABA-approved law school as a prerequisite to seeking admission to practice law in their state.)

In California, unlike in many other states, you need not study law at an accredited law school in order to take the bar examination. If you decide to study law at an unaccredited or correspondence law school, however, you will have to take and pass the *First-Year Law Students' Examination* (see #7).

For a list of California law schools, visit the State Bar's Web site (www.calbar.ca.gov). Or, write to the bar's Office of Admissions (see State Bar address on back cover). For a list of ABA-approved schools, go to the ABA's Web site (www.abanet.org).

6 *Can I become an attorney without going to law school?*

Yes. You can meet California's legal education requirements by spending at least four years studying law under the personal supervision of a California judge of record or a California attorney in his or her law office. (The attorney must be an active member of the State Bar of California who has been in practice for the last five years or longer.) For more detailed information, visit the State Bar's Web site at www.calbar.ca.gov and click on *Admissions*.

7 *Will I have to take the First-Year Law Students' Examination?*

It depends on your chosen course of study. All law students enrolled in unaccredited or correspondence law schools or in the law office/judge's chambers study program must pass this exam after their first year of law study. Students who successfully complete their first year at a California-accredited or ABA-approved law school are exempt from this requirement (unless they did not finish the required two years of college work).

If a student fails the *First-Year Law Students' Examination*, the student can retake it without interrupting his or her legal studies. However, he or she must pass the test within a certain period of time — or lose credit for all but one year of law study.

8 *What is the "moral character" screening process?*

It is a four-to-six-month inquiry into the would-be attorney's background and moral character. To practice law in California, an applicant must receive a positive moral character determination.

The process involves filling out an application, submitting fingerprint cards and providing references. In reviewing information provided by the applicant, law schools and other sources, the Committee of Bar Examiners' Subcommittee on Moral Character considers:

- Evidence of candor and honesty.
- Respect for the law and the rights of others.
- Fiscal responsibility.
- Records of fidelity and trustworthiness in other professions for which he or she is licensed.

It's up to the applicant to show that he or she is of good moral character. Applicants who have been convicted of a violent felony or certain

other serious crimes frequently are determined not to have good moral character. Drug and alcohol abuse also raise red flags. However, many factors are taken into account and each case is considered on an individual basis.

Most applicants pass the moral character screening process with ease. And if an applicant does not pass, he or she can appeal to the State Bar Court.

9 *What is the Multistate Professional Responsibility Examination?*

It is a national ethics examination that takes place three times a year. Candidates seeking to practice law in California must pass it with a scaled score of at least 79 out of a possible 150. (Students who begin law school in 2008 or later will have to receive at least 86 on the exam.) As a law student, you may take the test any time after completing your first year of law study.

10 *What is the California Bar Examination?*

It is an exam that must be passed before a would-be California attorney can be admitted to practice law in California. The three-day test — administered twice a year — consists of six essay questions, two performance tests and the *Multistate Bar Examination* (a national 200-question, multiple-choice test on constitutional law, contracts, criminal law, evidence, real property and torts). In some instances, out-of-state attorneys seeking admission to practice law in California can apply to take the *Attorneys' Examination* instead (see #14).

11 *If I fail the bar exam, can I take it again?*

Yes. But once you pass the exam, you must take

the attorney's oath within five years to meet the requirements for practicing law in California.

12 *What should I do if I don't qualify for a Social Security number?*

You can request an exemption to this requirement. Simply submit the required form along with your State Bar registration application. To qualify for an exemption, you will have to explain why you cannot qualify for a Social Security number and state that you are not behind in fulfilling any court-ordered child or family support obligations.

13 *If I'm a licensed California lawyer, can I practice law in other states as well?*

Generally, no – not unless you meet additional requirements. There may, however, be some exceptions for certain types of legal work. Every state has its own rules. To find out a particular state's requirements, contact that state's bar to find out who handles attorney admissions. In most instances, you would have to take that state's bar exam and meet other requirements as well before practicing law there.

14 *How do I become licensed to practice law in California if I'm an out-of-state attorney?*

In general, you would have to meet many of the same testing requirements as the non-attorney applicants. However, attorneys who have been admitted to active practice for at least four years in another state (and who remain in good standing) may choose to take the *Attorneys' Examination* rather than the *General Bar Examination*. In addition, there are a few circumstances in which out-of-state attorneys

are allowed to do certain types of legal work in California without meeting the usual requirements. For more specific information, visit the State Bar's Web site (www.calbar.ca.gov).

If you received your legal education and/or were admitted to practice law outside the United States, visit the State Bar's Web site for more detailed information (go to *Bar Exam*, then *Rules Regulating Admission to Practice Law in California*). Or call the State Bar at 415-538-2300.

15 *Where can I find out more about becoming a lawyer?*

You will find a wealth of information on the American Bar Association's Web site (www.abanet.org), the Law School Admission Council's site (www.lsac.org), and the State Bar's Web site (www.calbar.ca.gov). You also could contact law schools directly. And you might ask a school counselor or pre-law advisor for additional resources. We hope this pamphlet has opened your eyes to the basic requirements for becoming a lawyer and to the wide range of possibilities available to those who pursue a legal career.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide general information on the law, which is subject to change. If you have a specific legal problem, you may want to consult a lawyer.

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