

Practical advice for the brand-new lawyer

By Gerard Mullins



It's hard for the experienced lawyer to keep on top of their area; it's even harder for the new one embarking on their career. Here are ten tips from G Courtney French,¹ a leading lawyer from Alabama.

1. **Ask for help.** As a young lawyer, no one expects you to be an expert. By not asking, you run the risk of making a serious mistake that could not only cause you to lose a case but jeopardise your career. Find an experienced lawyer in the area and ask questions. A good lawyer will remember what it was like to be a young one and should be more than willing to lead you in the right direction.
2. **Admit your mistakes.** Inevitably, at some point you will miss a filing date, the statute of limitations will run out or you will forget to do something altogether. When it happens, admit it to the lawyers you work with as soon as it comes to your attention. They will find out anyway, and hearing it from you is always better than from a court clerk, angry client or opposing counsel. Although their immediate reaction may not be favourable, in the long run they will appreciate that they can trust you to tell them when you have messed up. After all, how you handle correcting a mistake reflects as much on the firm as it does on yourself.
3. **Treat non-lawyers with respect.** This includes office and court staff. Keep in mind that these people, even if they do not have law degrees, have considerably more legal experience than you do. A good paralegal can save you from committing a mistake. But they might let you do it if you treat them as inferior. Staff can make your life easier or a nightmare depending on how you treat them. If you need a time extension or have to file something after hours, how you have treated the staff will determine how they treat you.
4. **Do not believe that having qualified, you have nothing left to learn.** This is a common mistake. The first few years of a legal career are as much of a learning experience as law school. Use the people around you for ideas on how to handle cases, improve trial skills and learn new techniques. Collect draft forms or pleadings you may be unfamiliar with. They can save you time and money and be a priceless tool for expanding your career. Try out unfamiliar areas of law. Chances are you are not sure of the exact area you want to focus on and handling a variety of cases will broaden your skills and make you more marketable.
5. **Clients do not need you to be their friend.** While you should treat clients courteously, your job is to resolve a case in their best interests, which may mean making choices they do not agree with or understand. Most clients are not looking for a 'Mr Nice Guy'. Clients hire you to get a job done.
6. **Choose your cases carefully.** You can't take every case that comes your way. If the statute of limitations is approaching, reject the case if you do not feel you have time to assess it. Do a complete initial client interview. Ask the hard questions that will arise during litigation. If you listen to the client, and a red flag is raised, chances are your instincts are right and you are wasting your time. If you know you cannot handle a case, pass it on. You may be lucky enough to land a large case as a new lawyer, but keeping it may not be the smartest choice to make.
7. **Be a leader in and out of the office.** People look up to lawyers. Because of your profession and education, you have a certain reputation. People judge you accordingly. Your actions will determine what kind of lawyer people believe you are. Get involved in committees and services. It is a good way to be marketable and make contacts. Moreover, it is a unique opportunity to give back to the community.
8. **Do not lose 'yourself' in being a lawyer.** Have outside goals and interests. Don't think money is the most important thing in life. Being involved with your family may mean sacrificing a high-paying position with a large firm. In the long run, you'll be glad you did it.
9. **Be selective where you take advice.** People will give advice that mirrors what they have done themselves. Years of experience do not necessarily mean years of doing things correctly. Some lawyers will give friendly advice, others might look to lead you astray. Be careful about acting on it.
10. **Be a mentor.** When you first get out of law school, you are in no position to mentor anyone. After a few years, young lawyers will come to you for advice. Help them. Nothing is worse than older partners who have forgotten what it is like to be a new lawyer. Remember when you started out and be willing to do what you can for new lawyers you meet down the road. ■

Note: ¹ Fuston, Petway and French, LLP, Birmingham, Alabama. Paper delivered to the ATLA 2004 Annual Convention, Boston.

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