

Who is a Lawyer?

A lawyer is a person who, because of his or her high ethical standards and knowledge gained through education and experience, meets the requirements of a state regulatory body and receives a license to practice law in that state.

A lawyer serves both as an advocate and as an advisor. Our courts operate under an adversary system in which the parties to any case, civil or criminal, are entitled to have their positions advocated by lawyers. As officers of the court, lawyers assist in the administration of justice, while advocating their clients' positions through legal pleadings, procedures, rules of evidence, and written and oral arguments, in order to assure application of the appropriate law. As an advisor, the lawyer counsels clients in avoiding adverse legal consequences of contemplated actions, drafts documents to achieve desired results while complying with applicable laws and regulations, and advises clients about their rights and obligations in dealing with others.

In addition to his or her regular work, a lawyer is expected to render public interest legal service. This includes providing professional services at no fee or a reduced fee to persons of limited means or to public service or charitable organizations. Participation in activities for improving the law, the legal system and the legal profession, such as taking part in bar association projects concerning professional ethics or improving the administration of justice, are also acceptable ways for a lawyer to meet his or her public service obligation. Members of the Alabama State Bar subscribe to the motto "Lawyers Render Service."

Many people think all lawyers are trial lawyers. This is the way lawyers are usually depicted in movies and on television. In reality, most lawyers spend a small part of their time in the courtroom. They consult with clients and opponents; take

depositions; research legal issues; prepare contracts, deeds, title opinions and other documents; mediate and negotiate settlements; write laws; and engage in other noncourtroom activities. Areas of practice, too numerous to list, include everything from admiralty to zoning. Some lawyers work in governmental positions, teach or become judges. Others do not practice law at all; they use their legal skills while working as executives in businesses. A wide range of opportunities are available to anyone whose desire it is to become a lawyer.

Why Become a Lawyer?

Many picture a lawyer as glamorous professional, financially successful and socially prominent. If this image is the main reason you want to become a lawyer, you should reconsider. Practicing law often requires long, stressful hours of tedious work. Seldom is it glamorous. Financial success depends on the lawyer's ability to obtain business and handle it with skill, dedication, motivation, and a willingness to abandon personal endeavors in order to serve clients. Further, although a lawyer is a member of a prestigious profession, his or her social prominence depends on many factors, a number of which have nothing to do with practicing law.

If you are dedicated to assuring that the premise of "equal justice under law" continues to be the cornerstone of our legal system, do not mind hard work, are decisive, enjoy meeting challenges, have the ability to think quickly, speak with ease and authority, and are a leader, you should consider becoming a lawyer. Being a lawyer can provide you with a feeling of accomplishment, self-esteem and satisfaction that cannot be surpassed.

How Do I Prepare for Law School?

HIGH SCHOOL

The decision to attend law school is very important, and the preparation for law school should start as early as possible. A

good general high school curriculum is important and is useful in the development of good study habits.

COLLEGE

The American Association of Law Schools recommends a curriculum which emphasizes course work in English, speech, history, philosophy, mathematics, accounting, and social science. You should also take course work which will develop your skills in writing, communication, analysis and critical thinking. Due to the technical nature of law practice, mathematics and science classes are also helpful. It is imperative that good grades be earned. Participating in extracurricular activities which assist in developing social skills is also meaningful at this stage.

LAW SCHOOL

The law school application process should begin about one year in advance of your expected enrollment. The two major criteria for law school admissions are one's undergraduate grade point average and scores on the law school admission test (LSAT) which is offered four times each year in February, June, October, December. Other factors considered in the application process are the college attended, major and activities, as well as the motivation and personality of the applicant.

Your first step in applying for law school should be contact with the admissions office of the school which interests you. The following law schools are in Alabama:

Cumberland School of Law
Admissions: 205.726.2702 or 800.888.7213
law.admissions@samford.edu

The University of Alabama
Phone: 205.348.5440
admissions@law.ua.edu

Birmingham School of Law
Phone: 205.322.6122
www.bsol.com

Faulkner University
Thomas Goode Jones School of Law
Phone: 334.386.7210
law@faulkner.edu

Miles Law School
Phone: 205.923.7739
www.mlaw.edu

Of those schools, the Cumberland School of Law, University of Alabama School of Law and Faulkner University are accredited by the American Bar Association. The graduates of all five schools can take the bar exam in Alabama, but graduation from an accredited school is a prerequisite for taking a bar exam in many other states.

Admissions Statistics

Competition is stiff for admission to all law schools. Recent admission statistics for Alabama's accredited law schools indicate that they admit only about one-quarter of their applicants. The college grades of applicants they accept average better than 3.2 on a 4.0 scale and their LSAT scores average over 150.

What is Law School Like?

Law school consists of a three-year course of full-time study or a four-or five-year course of part-time study. Although the approach to the study of law varies somewhat from school to school, the first segment of law school study consists of what is defined as the core curriculum and generally includes courses such as contracts, constitutional law, torts, criminal law, legal writing, civil procedures, and property. All law schools offer instruction in practical professional skills, what is commonly called clinical legal education, and the breadth and number of these courses are increasing. All students, as part of their law school studies, receive instruction in the duties and responsibilities of the legal profession.

In the remainder of their course study, students choose from a variety of courses and areas of the law. Areas of study include such courses as commercial law, business organizations, evidence, tax, labor law, estate planning, antitrust, and international and comparative law.

Law school classes have traditionally used the case method of teaching, which involves detailed examination of a number of related, sometimes contradictory, judicial opinions. This method relies heavily on socratic inquiry and student-faculty exchange. Law school methods of instruction also include problem solving, readings, research, and seminars. Increasingly, a number of law school courses are interdisciplinary in nature.

Admission to the Alabama State Bar

Before admission to the Alabama State Bar, an applicant must: (1) obtain a law school degree from an American Bar Association accredited law school* and (2) pass the Alabama State Bar Examination.

However, before sitting for the exam, an applicant must first complete a detailed application and undergo a rigorous investigation by the Committee on Character and Fitness. Only after one's character is deemed satisfactory may one sit for the exam.

The exam is a three-day examination given twice a year, once in February and once in July. It consists of two days of essay examinations on Alabama law and one day of multiple choice questions on a series of multi-state principles. Each applicant's combined score must exceed a preset number to pass the exam.

In addition to the three-day exam, an applicant must also successfully pass the Multi-State Professional Responsibility Examination (MPRE). This examination is given several times a year and consists of a series of multiple choice questions testing the applicants' knowledge of the Rules of Professional Conduct (the ethics code).

After obtaining a law school degree and successfully passing the exam, an applicant may be licensed to practice law in the state courts of Alabama. The licensed Alabama lawyer then may also obtain admission to practice in the federal courts in Alabama. However, in order to practice in the courts of another state, the applicant must comply with the requirements of that jurisdiction, which may be similar to or more strenuous than those of the Alabama State Bar.

*Special rules may apply.

More information regarding admission to the Alabama State Bar can be obtained from the Admissions Office, Alabama State Bar, 415 Dexter Avenue, Montgomery, Alabama 36101.

Opportunities in the Law

As noted earlier, careers in law are extremely varied. Many lawyers are in private practice, some work within corporations as in-house counsel, and others work in banks, other financial institutions or with government legal departments such as the United States Attorney's Office, the State Attorney General or the local District Attorney's Office. Some lawyers never practice law, but use their legal background and education to assist them in their business endeavors.

Within the private sector, there are lawyers who are sole practitioners, practicing in an office without other lawyers; those who practice in firms range in size from as few as two lawyers to as many as several hundred in some national firms. Some lawyers specialize in one area of the law, such as tax, labor, civil rights, real estate, employment discrimination, patents, and criminal defense, to name a few. Many lawyers maintain a general practice which entails handling matters in varied situations and areas of the law.

The job market for law school graduates is tight and will become even tighter each year. In recent years, an average of 400 to

500 new graduates have been admitted annually to practice law in Alabama.

As of 1996, there were more than 11,400 attorneys licensed to practice law in the State of Alabama. This number has increased from a total of 4,588 in 1978. The greatest concentration of attorneys is in the urban areas of Alabama, particularly Jefferson, Mobile, Montgomery and Madison counties. As the number of attorneys increases, especially in the urban areas, the number of potential clients for each attorney will decrease. This may limit the opportunities available to new law graduates in the coming years.

Conclusion

Wide opportunities are available to anyone desiring a career in law. Being a lawyer can provide you with unsurpassable feelings of accomplishment, self-esteem and satisfaction. However, you must approach a career in law with realistic expectations and a willingness to work hard. Look carefully at job opportunities in law. The competition is great. Learn the requirements for admission to law school and make an early decision to attend. Then, tailor your curriculum to prepare yourself while developing good study habits. Once you have reached your goal and become a lawyer, you will be a member of a highly demanding and exciting profession in which the rewards can be great.

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415 Dexter Avenue
Montgomery, AL 36104
Phone: (334) 269-1515
Fax: (334) 261-6310
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