25 Tips for the New Lawyer

This is not going to be easy. But you knew that well before you passed the bar (Congratulations, by the way!). There are a lot of lessons you will need to learn the hard way. Still. It would be nice, wouldn’t it, to have a slight edge when starting out as a new lawyer? Perhaps an older, savvier friend to fill you in on subtler codes of conduct or to introduce you to the court clerk. Someone to grab you by the elbow and steer you away from trouble and toward better decisions. Or even a cranky old guy to “teach you a thing or two.”

We think so, too. So consider this list of tips and truths your friendly kick to the shins under the conference table and, in some cases, a not-so-subtle kick in the pants. We compiled “25 Tips for the New Lawyer” to help you get out of the blocks with the best start possible. Whether you’re backed up by an army of support staff and senior partners or braving it solo, soak up some of this sound advice and see if it doesn’t help the hard lessons come a little easier.

(Pssssst. You’ll find more than just 25 great tips here—there are also 50+ links to some of Attorney at Work’s most popular posts.)

—Merrilyn Astin Tarlton
There are people around you who know more than you do. Let them help you. Contrary to your every instinct, you do not have to know the answer to everything. Besides, nobody likes a smarty pants.

Related Links:
- Curmudgeon’s Perspective: Decisions, Decisions
- Startup Advice from Women Lawyers
- The Importance of Being Trained
As a general rule, the ability an individual has to screw everything up for you is in direct inverse relationship to their pay grade. So keep your staff happy.

Related Links:
- The Elephant in the Office
- What Can a Marketing Assistant Do for You?
- Stupid Mistakes Lawyers Make with Their Computers
Your client is always right.
(Most of the time, that is.)

Related Links:
- Calming Down an Angry Client
- Fire a Client
The answer should never be “No, you can’t!”
Try “Yes, let’s figure out how you can.”

Related Links:
The Art of We
05

Return phone calls promptly. Really.

Related Links:
Be the World’s Most Client Accessible Lawyer
Fear of Phoning
You are going to have to pay your dues. It may seem the work is beneath you. You may not enjoy it. Others may take credit for it. But to get to the really juicy stuff, you’re going to have to carry someone else’s brief bag.

Related Links:

- Managing Up
- You’re Hired! Here’s How to Stay That Way
Try, in everything you do, to teach as well as tell.

Related Links:

- Four Things Your Assistant Can Do Better
- A Cynic's Guide to Pro Bono Work
- Wiser Words
Before beginning the work, ask your client or supervisor what success will look like. Don’t just guess. You’ll probably be wrong.

Related Links:
- Ask Yourself the Moneyball Question
- When You Lose a Client
You are responsible for getting all the facts.

Even if people don’t want to give them to you.

Related Links:
10 Ways to Avoid a Malpractice Claim
While your client or colleague is in your law office, you are the host. Act like one.
Under-promise and over-deliver.
Never the other way around.

Related Links:
- Surprise Your Client
- Essential Cloud Apps for Lawyer
Always be just a little bit early for an appointment. If you must be late, call ahead to warn them. It shows that you think they are important. Everyone likes to feel important.

Related Links:
Curmudgeon’s Perspective: Late ... Again?
It’s much easier to look at the big picture first and figure out the little pieces than it is to fiddle with the little pieces and then try to make a decent big picture out of them.

Related Links:
Now for Something Completely Different
Organize Your Brain with Mindmapping
There’s a difference between “telling” someone something and “communicating” it. In the first case, it left your lips. In the second, it left your lips, entered their mind and was understood. You are responsible for the entire cycle.

Related Links:

Don’t Negotiate, Collaborate!
Curmudgeon’s Perspective: What Did You Call Me?
While people around you may be worried about their hourly rate in relationship to other lawyers in your firm, your clients is worried about it in relationship to the value the work has to them. Try to think like your client. Always.

Related Links:
- The Best Pricing Advice Ever
- First Figure Out Your Fee
- Getting the Fee You Deserve
Maintain your instrument. It is at least as important to rest and renew as it is to work hard and do "important stuff." In fact, if you neglect vacations you will soon lose the capacity to do the important stuff.
Sometimes the best answer is the one someone else thought of. Acknowledge that and give them credit. The long-term payoff will far surpass the momentary glory of feeling you were the smartest. Bright people will come back to work with you again.

Related Links:
- Take It From the Wonder Pets
- The Cost of Switching Law Firms
Your supervisor, mentor or senior partner isn’t your mother or your professor. She or he won’t take responsibility for your personal or professional development. That’s your job.

Related Links:
Can I Get a Little Help Here?
Stop, Look and Listen
When you complete a matter or a task, ask for feedback. Be clear that you’re not looking for flattery—you want to know how to improve next time.

Related Links:
Afraid to Talk? Overcoming Social Anxiety
It’s time to clean up your act online. Potential clients know how to use Google just like you. So do employers, colleagues, reporters and everyone else. Make sure you look (mostly) professional or you’ll be your own worst enemy.

Related Links:
- Business Development Marching Orders
- Buff Up Your Bio
- Shape Up Your Social Status Daily
- Today’s To-Do: Promote Self
Offer to help.

Related Links:
- Take Five Steps Up to Leadership
- Take a Risk: Trust
- Being Kind
Other people are busy, too. Value and guard their time as well as your own.

Related Links:
- *Ditch the “I Didn’t Get It Done Today” Blues*
- *Stamp Out Snoozing*
- *Back Off That Send Button, Buddy*
Take notes. It helps you remember, and it shows people that you believe what they are saying is important enough to write down. (Look them in the eye once in a while, too.)

Related Links:
- Say What?
- Make Meetings Count
- Conference Call Etiquette
- Using the iPad in Meetings
Say please and thank you.

Related Links:
- Curmudgeon’s Perspective: Civil Matters
  Say Thank You to Stand Out
Remember that clients don’t always want a lawyer. Sometimes they just need someone to listen to them.

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Visit our website at www.attorneyatwork.com (ALERT: You’ll find a lot of really useful and entertaining stuff in that daily stream!) and then simply type your email address into the Subscribe box to receive a free dispatch every workday morning.

Merrilyn Astin Tarlton has been helping lawyers and law firms think differently about the business of practicing law since 1984. She was a founding member of the Legal Marketing Association, past Trustee and President of the College of Law Practice Management and recipient of the LMA Hall of Fame award. Merrilyn is Partner/Catalyst of Attorney at Work along with Joan Feldman, Partner/Editorial and Mark Feldman, Partner/Creative.