What Education is Required to Be a Lawyer?

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If you're setting out on the path to be a lawyer, what are the educational requirements you will have to meet? Determining the education required to be a lawyer can be a confusing process, especially considering variations among different states. In this article, we provide a general overview of the education required to become a lawyer in the United States.

It's important to note that requirements vary widely between states. Accordingly, the best way to ensure you are meeting your legal education requirements is to consult with your state's bar association. Nonetheless, this overview can give you a sense of what your legal journey will look like.

How long does it take to become a lawyer?

The post-high-school education required to be a lawyer generally takes seven years. This includes four years of undergraduate study and three years of law school. However, you also need to pass the bar exam, and this could add extra time, especially if you don't pass on the first attempt. In addition, some may wish to take the LSAT more than once to improve their score and increase their chances of law school admission, and this could also add time.

Can you become a lawyer without law school?

In some states, you can become a lawyer without attending law school. Or, at least without attending the full three years. In four states—California, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington—you can become a licensed attorney without attending law school at all. In three other states—Maine, New York, and Wyoming—one can substitute an apprenticeship for one or two years of law school.

The apprenticeships typically require a minimum number of weekly hours worked in a legal practice for a specified period of time, some of which must be under the direct supervision of an attorney. This also requires a certain number of study hours. In California, legal apprentices must pass the First Year Law Students' Examination, or "Baby Bar," before continuing their studies and eventually taking the bar exam.

How to become a lawyer: Step-by-step including required education

Assuming you take the traditional route of becoming a lawyer, including going to law school, below are the steps involved in that process.

1. Obtain your bachelor's degree

Law schools generally require a bachelor's degree before admission. However, most law schools will allow you to apply without having received your degree yet. Some law schools may not even require an undergraduate degree, although you should check with the school of your choice.

What type of education is required to be a lawyer? At the undergraduate level, the answer is fairly simple—none in particular.

What degree do you need to become a lawyer

There are no undergraduate study requirements to become an attorney. However, the AALS particularly suggests majors such as political science, criminal justice, history, and philosophy that help develop necessary skills.

What undergraduate degree do you need to be a lawyer?

For the vast majority of attorneys, there are no particular undergraduate study requirements. Nonetheless, the American Association of Law Schools (AALS) recommends that prospective law students focus on experience and coursework that helps them develop essential skills for law school—critical reading and writing, oral communication, problem-solving, research, and organization.

The AALS specifically points to some majors which that can be the most helpful when looking to become a lawyer and attend law school, such as:

- Political Science
- Criminal Justice
- History
- Philosophy

One important exception here is for patent attorneys, who must be admitted to practice before the United States Practice and Trademark Office (USPTO). In order to take the USPTO's registration exam, known as the Patent Bar exam, you will generally need at least a bachelor's degree in a specified field of engineering or science. You may qualify without such a degree based on the completion of engineering or science-related coursework.

Regardless of your exact path, the keys to undergraduate success are to earn a high GPA and consider extracurricular activities and volunteer work, in order to broaden your horizons and develop a strong law school application.

2. Take the LSAT

Another essential element of a legal education is taking the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). The purpose of the LSAT is to test for skills necessary for law school success, including reading comprehension, reasoning ability, and writing skills.

What is the LSAT?

The LSAT is a standardized test required for admission to most law schools in the U.S. and Canada. It measures reading comprehension, logical reasoning, and analytical thinking skills.

The primary part of the LSAT is a four-section multiple-choice test with questions intended to measure reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical reasoning. Each section takes 35 minutes, with all four sections taking three hours to complete for the standard test-taker.

The second part of the LSAT is a written essay, known as LSAT Writing, which is administered online using the test taker's computer. One can complete LSAT Writing up to eight days prior to the multiple choice test. The essay—which is not scored—measures your ability to make a written argument.

For law schools considering applicants, undergraduate grades and the LSAT score are the primary factors. Accordingly, the higher your LSAT score, the better your chances of acceptance into a prestigious law school. Writing the LSAT multiple times is possible if you aren't happy with your score.

The LSAT is administered on a monthly basis at different locations throughout the world. Registration is required to take the test, and it is advisable to register as early as possible once you know you will be sitting for the exam.

Do you need to take the LSAT to attend law school?

In most cases, you'll need the LSAT to attend law school in the US and Canada, however, some schools now accept the GRE as an alternative.

3. Finish law school

If you are able to maximize both your undergraduate GPA and your LSAT score, you should be able to get into law school. It typically takes three years of law school to obtain your law degree, known as a Juris Doctorate (JD).

The law school curriculum generally covers some core areas of law for the first year and a half, such as criminal law, civil procedure, property law, and contracts. During this time, law students can also expect to learn the basics of legal writing and research. After the midpoint of the three-year law school journey, law students can then choose to courses specialized to types of law practices, such as bankruptcy, tax law, or environmental law. If you're still deciding what area of specialty you want to go into, take our "What Kind of Lawyer Should I Be?" quiz.

Many law students will seek to earn placement on their school's law review or other legal journals, to develop and demonstrate their writing and research skills. Students can also apply for externships and legal clinics that will allow them to observe real-world legal activities. Getting high grades in law school, as well as obtaining reputable positions such as law review membership, will generally be an advantage in gaining legal employment after graduation.

It's also important to seek a well-rounded education that exposes the student to the realities of practicing law. Many facets of the profession, such as working at law firms, will be vastly different from your law school experience. Accordingly, take advantage of any experiential opportunities that interest you while you are still in school.

What education do most lawyers have?

Most lawyers first obtain a bachelor's degree, followed by a Juris Doctor (JD) from a law school. After earning a JD, they must also pass the bar exam in their jurisdiction to practice law.

4. Sit for the bar exam

You must take and pass the bar examination before you're licensed to practice law in a state. Bar exams tend to be comprehensive, difficult, and a test of endurance. Depending on the state, the exam will take two or three days. Moreover, bar exams are generally only available twice a year. This raises the stakes for each exam. Accordingly, you will need to study hard and should take a bar preparation course.

Even after passing the bar exam, there will likely be other requirements that will vary from state to state. For example, you may need to pass a professional responsibility exam. Many states also have character and fitness requirements. For example, they might require prospective attorneys to allow background checks or explain any criminal histories.

A final word on the education required to be a lawyer

The education required to be a lawyer is difficult and arduous, but it can also be quite rewarding. There are many reasons that lawyers enjoy their work and even come to love the practice of law. It is important to plan and prepare for each step of the way. It's also good to have contingencies in place for any unexpected delays, such as not passing the bar exam.

The lengthy legal education process can also tend to be discouraging at times. Whether it's an unexpectedly low LSAT score, or failing the bar exam, these are temporary setbacks.

Keep your chin up and keep moving forward, even through adversity. This attitude will pay off many times over in your legal career. After all, the legal profession can be stressful, but the stress is manageable with the right strategies and attitude. Why not start developing those beneficial strategies and attitudes during the course of your legal education?

Frequently asked questions

Can you become a lawyer without law school?

No, in order to practice law, a person must have a law degree from an accredited law school and pass the bar exam in the state/province in which they wish to practice. Without a law degree, a person cannot become a lawyer.

How long does it take to become a lawyer?

The length of time it takes to become a lawyer varies depending on the country and type of law. Generally, speaking, it takes around seven years of education and training to become a lawyer. This includes a bachelor's degree, law school, and passing the bar exam.

How do you start being a lawyer?

The first step is to obtain a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university. Aspiring lawyers must then attend an accredited law school and pass the relevant bar exam upon completion of the degree. Finally, lawyers must obtain a license and be sworn in to practice law.

What are the requirements for a career in law?

A career in law requires a degree in law, excellent communication and research skills, and the ability to think critically. In addition, you need to have a strong understanding of ethical standards and be able to work independently. You may also need a license or certificate for certain practice areas.

What degree do you need to be a lawyer?

You need a bachelor's degree in law and a Juris Doctorate (J.D.) degree to become a qualified lawyer. These are the two formal degrees you need to earn, alongside taking the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) and sitting for the bar exam.

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