The Difference Between a Barrister and a Solicitor

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The differences between barrister vs solicitor hinge on their role in the UK legal system. A solicitor is your go-to general legal practitioner, chatting directly with clients, sorting out paperwork, drafting contracts and handling disputes. On the other hand, a barrister is the person who argues the case in front of the judge.

In the US, the terms “lawyer” and “attorney” are used to describe people who are licensed to practice law. In the UK, “barrister” and “solicitor” are the proper terms, both are lawyers but they’re not the same.

When you’re trying to work out whether you need a barrister or solicitor, it’s handy to know how they work together to solve your legal issues. Barristers and solicitors in the UK often collaborate, but which one you need depends on which stage you are in your legal proceedings.

Solicitors are your first port of call when you need legal advice and someone to manage your initial legal processes. If things get more serious and you need someone to represent you in court, that’s when you should call a barrister.

This post will clarify the key differences between a barrister and solicitor and also look into the training and working lives of both.

What is a solicitor?

Solicitors are all about problem-solving: spotting risks, finding solutions, and helping you make legal decisions with your eyes open. They are the ones you go to when you think, “I want to know my rights” or “I need to protect my assets.”

Difference between solicitor and barrister

Let’s look at the key differences between a solicitor and a barrister that you should know.

A solicitor carries out the following roles:

- **Primary point of contact for clients:** A solicitor is the person you go to when you first need to discuss a legal matter or action. Whether you’re thinking about buying your first home, setting up a business, or hashing out a contract, a solicitor is who you need to see.

- **Provide legal advice:** One of a solicitor's main jobs is to explain the law in plain English. Laws are often written in a way that can feel like an alien language, and solicitors specialise in telling you what they actually mean for your situation.
- **Handle day-to-day legal matters:** Solicitors are the people who do the legal legwork on your behalf, such as gathering documents, drafting agreements, negotiating terms, and making sure deadlines don't get missed.

Where do solicitors work?

Solicitors work in a range of organisations:

- **Private law firms:** These range from small high street practices, or boutique firms, serving local communities right up to huge city firms advising multinational corporations, often called Magic Circle law firms.
- **Government departments:** Think legal advisors to public agencies.
- **In-house legal teams:** Working inside a company to keep the business compliant and avoid legal landmines.

Read more: The Top Big Law Firms

Rights of audience:

In the UK, solicitors *can* now represent clients in court. Traditionally only barristers had full "rights of audience" in the higher courts like the Crown Court or Court of Appeal. These days solicitors can study for extra qualifications to allow them to act as advocates in bigger cases.

So while many solicitors mostly stick to case preparation and behind-the-scenes strategy, others enjoy a more public role arguing cases in court. Whether your solicitor takes your case all the way to court or brings in a barrister to handle the trial comes down to the complexity of your matter and your solicitor's own qualifications.

When you'd call a solicitor

You might want to call a solicitor for:

- **Writing and reviewing contracts:** Whether you're hiring someone, selling your property, or entering a business partnership.
- **Dealing with life events:** Things like wills, probate, divorce and child custody.
- **Handling disputes:** Anything from employment issues to commercial disagreements.
- **Keeping things legal in business:** Covers intellectual property rights, regulatory compliance and commercial risk management.

What is a barrister?

Barristers are trained to spar with words. Think dramatic speeches, razor-sharp cross-examinations, and quick-witted retorts. Their job is to present your case as persuasively as possible.

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A barrister has the following roles:

- **Advocacy expert:** A barrister specialises in advocacy, which makes them different from solicitors. What this means is that they stand up in front of the judge (and sometimes jury) and argue your case on your behalf.
- **Contacted via a solicitor:** You don't usually call up a barrister to represent you. You would first approach a solicitor. The solicitor does the case preparation. If and when things go to court, the solicitor will call in a barrister on your behalf.
- **Specialist legal opinions:** Barristers are legal experts. Your solicitor may consult them to unravel complex legal issues that your solicitor cannot handle on their own.

Where do barristers work?

Barristers are self-employed. They don't work for law firms, but group together in shared workspaces known as "chambers." Each barrister runs their own legal practice. They share the admin staff and the coffee machine in chambers, but they set their own schedules. Although they handle cases on their own, they benefit from having peers to bounce ideas off when dealing with a legal conundrum.

The wig and gown

Barristers, both male and female, are famous for wearing distinctive wigs and gowns when they go to court. It isn't just a theatrical flourish—it's a continuation of a tradition that goes back to the 17th century. The wigs, which are made of white horsehair, help to create a sense of professional anonymity. This puts the focus on the words spoken, not the person behind them.

When you'd call a barrister

You'd call a barrister when our legal issue is heading to court or when you need specialist legal advice. Barristers are the courtroom pros and your solicitor will get them on board when things get complex or when there's a legal dispute. In short, if your case

is high-stakes, legally knotty, or needs to be argued in court, you should get a barrister.

Key differences (summary)

Thinking of a career in law? Or just curious about who does what in those addictive courtroom dramas? Let's summarise the most important barrister-solicitor differences:

- **Client contact:** Solicitors chat directly with clients, helping with everything from buying a house to dealing with a divorce. Barristers don't deal directly with clients but are called in by solicitors when things get escalate to a court.
- **Workplace:** Solicitors are sole practitioners or are employed in firms and organisations. Barristers are self-employed specialists who co-work in chambers.
- **Specialism:** Solicitors are like GPs in healthcare; they cover a range of legal issues. Barristers are like the surgeons of law; courtroom specialists called upon to deliver a decisive argument.
- **Training & qualifications:** Education required to be a solicitor includes a undergraduate degree, then passing the Solicitors Qualifying Exam (SQE), and then undertaking 2 years of qualifying work experience (QWE). Barristers need an undergraduate law degree or a law conversion course, then complete the Bar Practice Course (BPC), and then 12 months of qualifying work experience known as pupillage.
- **Attire:** Solicitors often wear business-like dark suits. Barristers have a bit more flair with their wigs and gowns.

Overlap and modern changes

Barristers and solicitors in the UK used to move in different worlds with little to no overlap. You'd have the barristers in their stately wigs arguing cases in courts, while the solicitors would be busy advising clients from their offices. But things have shifted and the difference between a solicitor and a barrister is not as clear-cut as before.

Higher rights of audience

Once upon a time, if you wanted a courtroom representative, you needed a barrister. Solicitors were kept to legal advice, contract drafting, and shepherding clients through the legal system. These days, some solicitors have gained higher rights of audience which allows them to represent clients in courts. There's a new hybrid breed of "solicitor advocates" who will be happy to put their courtroom skills to work on your behalf.

The direct access scheme

Traditionally, arranging for a barrister meant going through a solicitor, and that was the only way you could do it. Now you have the direct access scheme, which allows you to contact a barrister directly for advice or representation. So you can skip the solicitor middleman altogether, providing your case isn't too complex and the paperwork required isn't too overwhelming. It can be a way to save costs, and the Bar Council even offers handy guides to help you through the process.

Barrister or solicitor – The difference is focus

At the end of the day, the difference between a barrister and solicitor comes down to focus. Barristers are the courtroom specialists—advocacy is their art form. Solicitors are the client guides—managing cases, paperwork, and behind-the-scenes legwork.

Having said that, modern changes like solicitor advocates and the direct access scheme mean that those neat little boxes are no longer quite so neat. These days, both can appear in court, both can give expert advice, and in some situations, you can even go straight to a barrister without seeing a solicitor first.

If you're plotting your own route into the legal profession, the most suitable path depends on your preferences. Do you see yourself cross-examining witnesses or conducting negotiations from your office chair?

Ready to take the next step? Check out our guide to educational requirements for UK lawyers.

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