

Ten Tips for New Attorneys

1. **Join the club.** Consider yourself a professional writer from the moment you join the firm. Treat every email, letter, or memo as a chance to impress your supervisors and clients. Choose several types of work product you want to learn to draft by the end of your first year.
2. **Know where you're headed.** After you meet with an assigning attorney, send an email that summarizes the assignment. Supervisors often spot misunderstandings only after seeing them in writing.
3. **Hunt for context.** If you find that you don't fully understand how your assignment fits into "the big picture," consult the assigning attorney or another attorney on the matter, read the file, pull the complaint, or search the Web. Do whatever you can to understand the client needs that prompted the assignment.
4. **Stay in touch.** After you've worked several hours on a major assignment, email your assigning attorney to explain where things stand. This exercise will help you organize your thoughts and keep you on track.
5. **Obsession's not all bad.** Partners love associates who produce technically perfect work product. That means no typos, perfect citations, flawless punctuation, and clean formatting. Get a legal-usage guide and keep it at your desk. If you're a corporate associate, triple-check every name, number, and cross-reference.
6. **Descend from the clouds.** When supervisors pick up your work product, they want a handbook for solving a practical client problem, not a display of your vocabulary or high IQ. The way to make supervisors think you're smart is to solve their clients' problems.

7. **Take a stand.** When you draft a memo, distill your research into substantive points that help answer questions about the law. Avoid the “on the one hand, on the other hand” approach that characterizes many junior-associate memos. Similarly, don’t rely on the old saw that “the law is unclear.” That’s why the firm needs a memo. Use your judgment to make the law clear—or at least clearer.
8. **The one-minute rule.** Before you submit any assignment, print it out and then pick it up as if you were the assigning attorney. Begin reading. After the first few paragraphs, ask yourself if you have answered a key question on the partner’s mind? If not, move more quickly to the bottom line.
9. **Edit aggressively.** Block out time to cut needless words and phrases. Proofread from the last line to the first. Read aloud—if you have trouble breathing, the sentence is too long.
10. **Appreciate feedback.** When you receive feedback, keep an open mind. Many associates want to challenge the assigning attorney’s edits. Others become defensive or throw up their hands. *Handling criticism well can be as important as writing well in the first place.* To make the most of feedback, separate the attorney’s edits into two groups: (1) changes that are idiosyncratic or cosmetic; and (2) changes that are stylistic or substantive. Keep a running list of changes in the second group. If several partners make the same edits, add them to your list even if you think they are wrong.