EDITORIAL DRAFT FOR REVIEW

Breaking Into Big Law

A Practical Guide for First Year Law Students

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WHEN SOMEONE ASKS A 1L what kind of lawyer they want to become, the question can sound as if the student should already understand the work, the firms doing it, and where they would like to spend the next several years. And if you have just started learning how to read a case, there is a pretty obvious gap between what you know and what the conversation seems to expect from you, not to mention that law firms have been gradually changing their recruiting strategies over the past 3 years. All of this arrives alongside cold calls, a new way of reading and writing, and your first exams, so if you feel behind, that feeling says more about the timing than about you. We remember that pressure well. I do think we can make these conversations more useful, but it starts with being honest about what we have not figured out, rather than finding a more impressive way to describe a career we have not tried.

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01

Understanding Law Firms

“知己知彼，百战不殆。”

Know yourself and know the other side, and in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.

孙子 SUN TZU

What kinds of law firms will I come across

Everyone wants to work at a good law firm.

When someone says a firm is “good,” I would first ask what they mean, because a firm can be well known for major business transactions, strong in a particular local market, or excellent at a specialized kind of litigation, and those descriptions do not tell us the same thing. The categories below are ways to get oriented, not a ranking or a set of boxes every firm fits into perfectly.

1 Large firms with many practices may have offices across the country or internationally, and can bring different specialists into the same matter. If you are interested in how several areas of law fit together on business problems, that breadth is worth investigating, but it does not mean every practice exists in every office or that a junior can freely move between them.

2 Regional and midsized firms may offer a range of services while concentrating more of their work in particular markets. I would ask about

their actual clients and matters rather than assume a less familiar name means less sophisticated work, lower expectations, or easier recruiting.

3 Specialist firms, often called boutiques, concentrate on particular work, such as litigation, tax, intellectual property, or employment. "Boutique" describes focus more usefully than size, and some specialist firms have substantial teams across several offices. That focus can be attractive if you understand what you want to explore, though you should check how much room there is to try something else.

4 Small firms and local practices can serve individuals, smaller businesses, or highly specialized clients, sometimes with a broad practice and sometimes with a narrow one. I would investigate the supervision and resources available rather than assume that a smaller team automatically gives a new lawyer better responsibility or better hours.

There are other distinctions inside these categories. A litigation firm might represent businesses defending claims, people bringing claims, or different clients on different matters, which can change the work and business model without fitting neatly into a size category. Government, public interest organizations, courts, and legal departments inside companies also employ lawyers, but they are different kinds of employers rather than lower tiers of law firms.

The three differences I would compare first

Do not look only at the rankings. A ranking measures just one dimension of a law firm.

1 What work does the firm do, and for whom? Look at the clients and problems the particular practice handles, then ask what portion reaches a junior's desk. A recognizable client does not explain your assignment, and "litigation" does not yet tell you which disputes, which side, or what role you might play. I would begin here because an impressive workplace can still be a poor match for work I do not enjoy.

2 Where does that capability sit, and how is the team organized? A firm's overall reach is different from the depth of the group in your target office. Ask whether the lawyers you would work with are local, how they work

across offices, and how staffing is controlled. If Firm A has a famous name but the practice you want sits elsewhere, while Firm B has an established team in your city, that is a reason to ask better questions about both firms, not automatically choose either one.

3 What would the junior experience actually involve? Compare the available information about assignments, supervision, feedback, compensation, expectations, and room to explore, keeping confirmed terms separate from recruiting impressions. A billing rate tells you what a client is charged, not what you will earn or how well you will be trained. I would not turn size, revenue, prestige, or a high rate into a shortcut for the experience I am trying to understand.

These are my first 3 comparison lenses, not the 3 measures that produce an objective winner. Someone who wants to explore several practices and someone already committed to a specialist field may reasonably prefer different opportunities, even after looking at the same information.

Where I would look for firms and how I would use the sources

TL;DR: the career office, the firm's website, and alumni.

1 Start with the career office at your law school. Ask which employers have recruited students from your school, which offices are relevant to your interests, and what employer information you can access. This helps you build a list connected to your circumstances, although past hiring does not establish your own chances or future vacancies.

2 Read the firm's official office, practice, people, and student recruiting pages together. A practice description helps identify work, an attorney biography helps identify people, and the recruiting page is where I would check the program and application instructions. A public matter description can give you a question to ask, but a marketing page is not independent proof of training quality or a promise that you will do that work.

3 Use Chambers to investigate recognition in the relevant practice and market, and read its methodology so you understand that the research includes firm

submissions and reference interviews. Check the guide year and geographic scope instead of turning one ranked practice into a claim about the whole firm. A ranking can help you discover names; it does not certify the summer program or tell you that an unranked firm is a bad employer.

4 Use alumni conversations to test what the written material leaves unanswered. Northwestern's alumni page links to its directory; ask the school which networking resources are available to current students rather than assume every alumni tool is open to you. LinkedIn and discussion forums can suggest people or questions to investigate, but a profile can be outdated and an anonymous account is not verification of a firm's policy or culture.

5 Use resources such as Vault as another route into employer research, but check what a particular ranking measures before using it to compare firms. Prestige, practice recognition, and employee experience are different questions, and I would not combine their scores as if they measured the same thing. I would spend more time on specific comments about the work, training, and office than on the difference between 2 positions in a ranking, because those details can give me something to investigate. A ranking can be useful marketing material for a firm without answering whether I would want to work there, though a detailed comment is still an account to check, not a verified description of everyone's experience. Some information may require an account or subscription, so check what your school provides before paying for access.

6 Ask the career office about employer directories, including the NALP Directory of Legal Employers, as another starting point for finding participating employers. Check the office, reporting date, and available information against the firm's current materials. A missing directory entry does not establish that a firm is poor or that it does not hire students. The directory's live contents could not be checked for this draft, so confirm access before relying on it for a particular detail.

For each firm, I would keep one simple record: the office and practice, why it interests me, the source and date of that information, someone I could learn from, and the next thing to verify. Start with a manageable list and expand it with your career adviser, rather than assuming the most familiar names are the entire market.

How I would find attorneys and make the first connection

Attorneys do not turn into strangers or monsters just because they became attorneys. Think about how you make a new friend, because the method is the same.

Once you have an office and practice in mind, search the firm's people page for lawyers who actually work there, then look for a connection that makes the conversation relevant, such as your school, a previous field of work, or a genuine interest in their practice. A junior associate may be well placed to describe early assignments, while a more senior lawyer can offer a different perspective on the practice. I would choose the person for the question, not simply contact whoever has the most senior title.

Check their current firm biography before writing, use a publicly listed professional contact or a school approved channel, and make a small request that someone can reasonably answer. An alumni connection gives you a reason to introduce yourself, not an entitlement to their time. If there is no reply, one courteous follow up can be reasonable; after that, move on rather than contacting several people to pressure the same person.

For example, you could write, "Hi [Name], I'm a 1L at Northwestern, and I saw that you also attended Northwestern and now work in [practice] in [office]. I'm trying to understand [specific question], and your work on [verified public topic] caught my attention. Would you have 15 minutes for a conversation sometime in the next 2 weeks? I understand if your schedule does not allow it." Only include the shared connection and public topic if they are true, and leave either out if you do not have it.

If the goal is to apply, follow the firm's application instructions separately. A lawyer agreeing to speak with you does not replace an application, guarantee a referral, or authorize you to describe them as recommending you. After a useful conversation, thank them for something specific you learned and record the next action, which is how the connection becomes part of your thinking rather than another name collected.

02

Choosing the Work

Q1 How do I choose an area of law when I have barely studied law

Trust me, you do not need to know which area of law you will ultimately choose when you are a 1L. Someone who sounds completely certain may have real experience behind that choice, or they may still be living in their law school personal statement. And if they really have figured it out, go make friends with them, because I would like to hear how they managed it.

If we think about why a practice sounds interesting, we may be responding to the industry, the client, or a case we read about, which is not necessarily the same thing as being interested in the work a junior lawyer would do on it. Someone can be genuinely interested in businesses without knowing whether they would enjoy revising an agreement, working through a disputed record, or researching a regulatory question. I would start with that difference before trying to decide whether I am a "corporate person" or a "litigation person."

A useful question for an associate is, "Could you walk me through a recent assignment you are allowed to discuss, including what you produced and how it was reviewed?" Once you have a concrete example, you can compare it with something you have actually enjoyed doing and ask what you are missing. For now, I would choose 2 or 3 areas to explore through conversations, courses, or public materials, and let the interest become more specific as you understand the work. You do not need to turn an early preference into a permanent identity.

Q2 How do I choose a practice group within a firm

You will hear people divide legal work into transactional work and litigation, but the choices are more complicated than those 2 labels suggest. Transactional lawyers help clients structure, negotiate, and document arrangements such as acquisitions, financings, and commercial agreements. Litigators handle disputes, which can involve investigating facts, researching legal questions, writing briefs, negotiating settlements, and appearing in court, though not every matter reaches trial. Each category contains different practices, and work such as regulatory advice can connect with both without fitting neatly into either one.

So when a firm says you can join its corporate practice, I would want to understand what "corporate" means in that office and how someone gets from being a summer associate to doing particular work. The label alone does not answer whether you will rotate, receive assignments through a coordinator, or need to express a preference before you have much exposure, and those differences matter if you are still exploring.

I would ask, "How does a summer associate here get exposure to different groups, and when does the placement decision actually happen?" If the answer sounds flexible, the next question is what that flexibility looks like in practice, including who helps when an interest changes. You are not being difficult by asking how the process works. At the same time, I would keep a positive recruiting conversation separate from a placement commitment, and confirm any specific program terms with the person responsible for them before treating them as part of the offer.

Q3 How do I choose a firm without just following prestige

I can understand why someone would begin with prestige, especially when a familiar name gives them something to compare before they know much about the work. I do not think that is a bad starting point, but if you expect to spend years practicing law, I would look beyond the name before deciding where to begin.

The person you work with and the assignments you receive will be much more specific than the firm's name. If you are comparing opportunities, I would put the office, practice, staffing process, and supervision next to each other, and leave space for what you still do not know rather than filling every box with an impression.

For example, "everyone seemed nice" tells you how a recruiting interaction felt, while an associate explaining who reviewed their first assignment and how they received comments gives you something you can ask another person about. Neither guarantees your experience, but the second conversation takes you further. I personally think prestige can be part of the discussion without doing all the thinking for us, and I would rather understand why a particular office makes sense for me than have a ranking I cannot connect to the work I hope to do.

Q4 How should I choose a city or office

This sounds like a simple question, but it is actually a bit philosophical. The question underneath it is what kind of life you want to live and what you are chasing, whether that is money, reputation, health, family, influence, or simply more control over your time. A city is more than the place you move to for a job, because you are also choosing an environment, a professional community, and some version of an ordinary day.

If you want to work on major business matters, I would investigate where the relevant clients and teams are rather than assume a city's reputation tells me what a particular office does. And if you want a balanced life (if there is one), moving to a different market does not by itself establish what your hours or responsibilities will be. I would ask about the actual work and expectations, then consider what they would mean for sleep, relationships, and whether I would get outside and see some daylight. The tradeoffs are worth taking seriously, but "bigger city means bigger matters and less life" is too simple to make the decision for us.

If you are considering a city because the office has work you want to do, that is a real reason, and if your family, partner, or close friends are there, that is also a real reason. I do not think we need to turn the life we want outside work into something embarrassing to explain. Ask, "What about practicing

here is different from the firm's other offices?" and consider the cost, daily routine, and support you would have when work becomes super hectic. If you are new to the market, explain your actual interest rather than invent ties, and investigate any future transfer possibility separately instead of treating it as an escape plan.

Q5 How do I evaluate a partner or team before joining

You may not be able to choose a particular partner or team before accepting a summer or permanent offer, but I would still think about supervision and staffing early rather than wait until the first assignment. The team you imagine joining and the process that assigns your work may be two different things, so first ask how much choice a new associate actually has. Once you understand who controls staffing, you can ask how instructions, draft review, and competing deadlines are handled, which gives you a better picture of supervision than a general question about whether the team is supportive.

Consider a junior who receives 2 assignments with the same deadline. I would want to know who helps resolve that conflict and whether the junior is expected to coordinate it alone, so I might ask, "When someone is staffed on matters with conflicting deadlines, how do they raise that and who helps prioritize?" During a summer, you can also observe how people respond when someone is unsure or makes a mistake. I would use those observations carefully, without turning diligence into gossip or treating one warm conversation with a partner as proof of what working together under pressure will be like.

03

Recruiting Conversations

Q6 What should I do at a reception

When you walk into a reception and see groups of lawyers already talking, it is easy to spend more time thinking about how to enter the conversation than listening once you are in it. I would give myself a smaller task: have a few conversations I can actually remember, rather than try to meet everyone before leaving. If a group looks open, wait for a pause and introduce yourself with your name, school, and something you are trying to learn. "I'm a 1L at Northwestern, and I've been trying to understand what junior work in your practice looks like" is enough to give the other person somewhere to start.

Then follow the answer instead of immediately moving to the next prepared question. If another student is waiting to join, make room, and when the conversation has run its course, you can say, "Thank you, that gives me something specific to look into. I'll let you catch up with the others." I do not think staying beside someone longer automatically makes the interaction better, and I would not treat drinking alcohol or acting unusually outgoing as part of the assignment. You are there to meet people, not to perform a version of yourself you cannot sustain.

Q7 How do I make a coffee chat useful

If someone has agreed to give you time, I would do enough preparation that they do not have to repeat their website biography, but I would not prepare so rigidly that their answers cannot change the conversation. Explain why

their experience interests you and what you have been trying to understand, then ask something they can answer from their own perspective, such as, "What did you misunderstand about this practice before you started doing it?"

The useful part may be the follow up. If they say the work surprised them, ask what was different and how they adjusted, rather than treating the first answer as a completed item on your list. As the agreed time approaches, acknowledge it and ask whether there is room for one more question. Afterward, a short thank you referring to something you actually learned is enough. And if you later act on their advice, that gives you a natural reason to update them, which is different from inventing messages just to stay visible. I would not assume the chat includes a referral or a recruiting commitment, though if the person raises an opportunity, you can be direct about your interest.

04

Questions Students Can Ask

If you meet one lawyer at a reception and later have one useful coffee chat, you already have somewhere to begin. I would not build a networking plan around reaching every level of a firm. Choose 2 or 3 questions that fit the conversation, listen to the answers, and leave the rest for another time. The senior attorney questions are there if the opportunity comes up, not because a 1L needs a partner meeting to make progress.

At Receptions

These are easy ways to start talking without asking someone to give a presentation about their firm. Once a conversation gets going, you can follow what interests both of you rather than keep asking about work.

1. "What kind of work do you do at the firm?"
2. "How did you end up in that practice?"
3. "What do you enjoy most about the work?"
4. "What brought you to this city?"
5. "Was there anything about practice that surprised you after law school?"
6. "When you were a student, how did you figure out what interested you?"
7. "Have you been to one of these events before?"
8. "Is there anything you would suggest reading or attending to learn more about your practice?"

9 "What drew you to this firm?"

10 "What are you hoping to do more of in your work over the next 2 years?"

In One on One Coffee Chats

With a little more time, I would ask about the person's experience and use it to understand the choices in front of me. You can ask these questions of the lawyer you actually meet; you do not need a different contact for each topic. If something falls outside their experience, move on rather than expect them to speak for the firm.

11 "Could you walk me through a recent assignment you are allowed to discuss?"

12 "What do junior lawyers spend most of their time doing in your practice?"

13 "How is the work different from what you expected before joining?"

14 "What mattered most when you chose your firm, and would you weigh anything differently now?"

15 "How did you get your first assignments, and who helped you get started?"

16 "What kind of feedback helped you most when you were new?"

17 "If I am still deciding between practices, how would you suggest exploring them?"

18 "When assignments have competing deadlines, how does your team sort out priorities?"

19 "How does your office work with lawyers in the firm's other offices?"

20 "What do you wish you had asked before choosing a firm?"

If You Speak With a Senior Attorney

If you happen to speak with a senior associate, counsel, or partner who supervises others or has a broader view of the practice, these questions can make use of that perspective. I would still follow the setting: a brief introduction at a reception does not need to become an interview about how the firm is managed.

21 “What makes a junior lawyer someone you can rely on?”

22 “What makes an early draft useful to you, even when the person is still learning?”

23 “How can a junior judge when to keep working through a problem and when to ask for help?”

24 “When a junior makes a mistake, what do you hope they do next?”

25 “How do you make room for teaching and feedback when a matter gets busy?”

26 “What changes in your practice should someone entering it pay attention to?”

27 “If you were choosing where to begin your career today, what would you want to understand about the team?”

A follow up such as “What did that look like in practice?” can be more useful than another prepared question, as long as you leave room for the person not to discuss protected details. Keep formal eligibility, deadlines, compensation and program policy questions for the designated recruiting contact rather than expect a lawyer’s personal experience to establish the rules.

05

Questions Attorneys May Ask Students

When someone at a reception asks how school is going, I would answer the conversation they are starting rather than reach for a prepared interview story. A scheduled interview calls for different preparation, especially when the question asks for a specific example of how you handled something. Questions about your interests can appear in either setting, but that does not mean every casual chat needs to sound like an interview.

The sample answers below are fictional illustrations of structure, not the editors' experiences or facts a student should borrow. Replace every bracket and personal detail with something true, and use your own words rather than memorize the samples.

Social Questions in Group Conversations or Casual Chats

I would keep these answers short enough for someone else to join in, and mention something I would actually enjoy discussing. You do not need to prove a professional strength every time you speak, though the setting still calls for judgment about what you share.

1 "How is your first year going?"

Answer with something specific rather than turn it into a performance review of yourself or your professors.

> *"I'm still getting used to the reading, but I've enjoyed seeing how people can read the same facts differently. [Class] has been especially interesting. What do you remember most about your first year?"*

2 "What brought you to this event?"

A real reason is enough; you do not need a polished statement about your commitment to the firm.

> *"I've been trying to learn more about [practice], and I thought this would be a good chance to talk with people doing the work. I'm still pretty early in figuring it out."*

3 "What kind of law are you thinking about?"

Name an interest and leave room for exploration. This can start a conversation without becoming a declaration of your permanent plans.

> *"I'm curious about [practice] because I enjoyed [real subject or experience], but I haven't seen enough of the work to know yet. How did you decide what you wanted to do?"*

4 "Are you from here?"

Share what you are comfortable sharing, and let the answer connect naturally to the city rather than manufacture a recruiting story.

> *"I grew up in [place] and moved here for law school. I've been enjoying [something true about the city], though there is still a lot I haven't explored. Have you been here long?"*

5 "What did you do before law school?"

Describe your actual background simply, including coming straight from college if that is your path. You do not need to make it sound more substantial than it was.

> *"I came straight from [college], where I studied [subject]. I also spent time on [real activity], which I enjoyed because [reason]. Law school has been a different kind of challenge."*

6 "What do you do when you are not studying?"

Let this be a human answer, not another argument for hiring you.

> *"I've been learning to cook a few dishes I grew up eating, and mine still taste different. It's been a good reason to have friends over and talk about something other than school."*

You can ask a question back when you are genuinely curious, but you do not need to attach one to every answer. In a group conversation, sometimes the better next step is simply to leave space for another person.

Questions in Interviews and Callbacks

Here I would prepare a small set of real experiences I can discuss clearly, particularly for the behavioral questions about teamwork, mistakes, feedback and deadlines. Give enough context to understand the problem, explain what you personally did, and say what happened or changed afterward. You do not need to announce a framework, invent a successful ending, or force the same story into every question. For motivation questions, connect an actual interest to something specific you have learned about the opportunity.

1 "Tell me about yourself."

I would connect the parts of my background that explain why I am here, rather than recite every line of the resume. A short answer should leave room for a follow up.

> *"I'm a 1L at Northwestern, and before law school I [actual background]. I became interested in [issue] through [real experience], which is why I've been exploring [practice]. I'm now trying to understand how that work looks inside a firm."*

2 "Why law?"

The useful part is the link between an experience and the work you want to learn, not claiming you have always loved arguments or already understand every part of practice.

> *"In [real setting], I kept coming back to questions about [issue], but my role did not let me work through the legal side. That made me want to study it more seriously, and [actual coursework or experience] has given me a better sense of what interests me."*

3 "Why this firm?"

I would give a reason grounded in this office or practice and explain why it matters to me. Replace general praise with something verified, and do not imply that reading an attorney's biography is the same as knowing them.

> *"I'm exploring [practice], and the [office] team's work on [verified public matter or topic] caught my attention because [real reason]. I'd like to understand how juniors contribute to that work and whether the program would let me explore [specific interest]."*

4 "Why this city?"

Give the actual reason, including personal connections if you want to share them, and explain what you have learned about working there. I would not invent ties or promise to stay forever.

> *"I'm interested in [city] because [true personal or professional reason]. I've been learning about its [practice or industry] work through [actual research or conversations], and I want to build a clearer picture of what starting my career here would involve."*

5 "What practice are you interested in?"

You can show direction without pretending the decision is final. Explain what interests you about the work and what you are doing to test that interest.

> *"I'm most interested in [A] and [B] at the moment. I enjoyed [real task or subject], which drew me toward them, but I haven't understood how the junior experience differs. I've been [actual exploration] to get a more concrete picture."*

6 "Walk me through this experience on your resume."

Separate your own responsibility from what the team or organization accomplished. A modest contribution you can explain is better than taking credit for a result you did not produce.

> *"The team was trying to [goal], and I was responsible for [specific contribution]. When [problem] came up, I [action], which led to [true outcome]. The part I would approach differently now is [specific reflection]."*

7 "Tell me about a difficult teammate or a disagreement."

Explain the work problem without turning the other person into a villain, then show how you tried to resolve it. An imperfect outcome can still support a useful answer.

> *"On a student project, we disagreed about what needed to be finished first. I asked us to compare the deadline and divide the remaining work explicitly, which helped us finish, although I should have raised the coordination problem earlier."*

8 "Tell me about a mistake or difficult feedback."

I would choose a real example I can discuss appropriately, acknowledge my role, and show what I changed. Avoid confidential details and a story in which the only mistake was caring too much.

> *"I sent a draft before checking whether it answered the question my supervisor wanted resolved. After the feedback, I restated the task and revised it, and on later assignments I began confirming the intended use before drafting."*

9 "How do you handle competing deadlines?"

Show how you gather information, communicate, and prioritize, rather than simply say you work harder. If it is hypothetical, describe what you would do without pretending it already happened.

> *"I would clarify what each assignment requires and when the work is actually needed, then tell the relevant supervisors where the conflict is. I would use the team's staffing process to agree on priorities rather than silently choose which deadline to miss."*

10 "What is a weakness you are working on?"

Choose something genuine, describe its effect, and explain an action you are taking. I would not dress a strength up as a weakness or claim the issue has disappeared without evidence.

> *"I can put too much background into an early draft, which makes the main point harder to find. I've been asking what decision the reader needs to make and moving material that does not serve it out of the opening."*

11 "Can you explain this grade or part of your transcript?"

Respond to what was asked without becoming defensive or inventing an explanation. You can take responsibility and describe a concrete adjustment without promising a result you do not have yet.

> *"That result was below what I wanted. After reviewing [actual feedback], I realized I needed to change [specific approach], and I've been working on it through [real action]. I don't have a later result yet, so I can speak to the change rather than claim an improvement already."*

12 "Where else are you interviewing?"

Answer truthfully and at a level you are comfortable sharing, and explain the connection between your choices if there is one. Do not invent offers or deadlines to seem more desirable.

> *"I'm exploring [actual types of offices or practices] because [reason]. I would prefer to keep the specific firms private at this stage, but I'm happy to explain what I'm looking for and any real timing constraints relevant to this process."*

13 "What would you bring to the team?"

I would choose a quality I can support with an actual example rather than compare myself to candidates I do not know. Keep the claim proportionate to what the experience shows.

> *"In [real role], I was responsible for [task], and I learned to make [specific contribution] useful to the rest of the team. For example, [brief true action and result]. I'd like to bring that habit with me while learning the legal work."*

14 "What questions do you have for me?"

Use something from the conversation or your research, and ask a question this person is well placed to answer. You do not need a complicated question to prove preparation.

> *"You mentioned that juniors work with several teams early on. How did that affect the way you found people to learn from, and was there anything you wish you had understood about the process when you joined?"*

Before using any sample, I would practice saying the idea in my own words and check that every factual detail is true. If the real experience involves a client, employer, or court, choose details you are allowed to share or use another example. The point is to make your reasoning easier to follow, not to sound as if you have memorized the "right" personality.

06

Summer Work

Q8 How do I make my 1L summer useful if it is not at a firm

If the question is whether a summer will help you become better at legal work, the employer's name does not tell you everything you need to know. I would also ask what you will produce, who will review it, and whether you will have an opportunity to improve after receiving comments. That can be worth investigating in a court, government office, nonprofit, research role, firm, or another appropriate setting, rather than treating everything outside a firm as a consolation prize.

At the beginning, I would ask my supervisor, "What would a successful summer look like from your perspective, and when would it be useful for us to check in?" That gives you something concrete to work toward and a basis for a later conversation about what improved. Keep notes about your own learning without retaining confidential information, and obtain the relevant permission before keeping work or using a writing sample. I do think you should leave with a clearer account of what you learned, but you should be able to tell that story without disclosing the organization's protected work or pretending the experience settled your entire career direction.

Q9 What matters during a 2L summer beyond being sociable

Consider what happens when someone gives you an assignment and hears nothing until the deadline. Even if you have been working hard, they may not know whether you understood the question, whether you are waiting on something, or whether another assignment has taken over your time. I would pay attention to that gap, because being reliable involves making the work understandable to the people depending on it, not just privately putting in the effort.

When an assignment comes in, confirm the question, intended audience, format, and deadline, and if you are unsure, do enough initial thinking to ask a focused question. If the workload conflicts with something already assigned, say so early: "I'm working toward Thursday's deadline on another assignment, and this looks like it may take [estimate]. How should we coordinate priorities?" Follow the program's staffing process rather than quietly choosing which person will be disappointed. When you submit, explain the result and anything unresolved, and if you make a mistake, raise it instead of hoping it stays invisible. Social events can help you know people, but I would not confuse being enjoyable at dinner with being dependable on an assignment, and neither is a guarantee of a return offer.

07

Working With People

Q10 How do I build relationships with peers without making everything competitive

When everyone is entering the same recruiting process, it can become very easy to treat ordinary conversations as a way to figure out who is ahead, especially when people are comparing interviews, assignments, or offers. I do think you can take your own goals seriously without making every lunch another measurement of where you stand. A peer is also someone you can learn from, work alongside, and simply enjoy spending time with, which gets lost if every interaction has to produce an advantage.

You can start with ordinary things, such as inviting someone to walk to an event, sharing useful logistical information, or giving credit when they helped you. If you disagree on a joint task, talk about the work and responsibilities rather than building a group against the other person. None of this requires sharing private recruiting news, circulating work product without permission, or secretly taking over someone else's assignment. I would keep those boundaries clear, because being a good colleague should not require either person to give up their privacy or responsibility for their own work.

Q11 How should I interact with partners and senior lawyers

If you are speaking with someone much more senior, it can be tempting to either stay almost silent or turn the conversation into a demonstration of how much you know. I would try to make the interaction useful instead, which in a work setting means explaining what you found, what you are unsure about, and what you need from them. Preparation helps, but pretending uncertainty does not exist makes it harder for the other person to help you think through it.

In a social setting, you can let the conversation be more ordinary and follow what the person seems interested in discussing, without forcing every opening into a request for mentorship. At an appropriate moment, I might ask, "When you review a junior's draft, what makes it easier to give useful feedback?" and listen for something I could apply. I would also respect the team around the work. Going around the person supervising an assignment simply to be seen by someone senior can create confusion, while direct contact makes sense when the assignment, invitation, or team process calls for it. The difference is the reason for the contact, not how impressive the person's title is.

Q12 How should I communicate with recruiting professionals

If a recruiting contact opens your email between other scheduling requests, the message should give them enough context to understand the issue without reconstructing your situation. I would include my name, the office or program, where I am in the process, and the specific question, then leave out the extra language that makes a simple request harder to answer. Recruiting professionals are people you are working with in the process, not a barrier you need to get around to reach a lawyer.

For example, if another offer has a response deadline, I would state the actual date: "I'm interviewing for [program and office] and have another response deadline on [date]. Is there any update you can share about timing? I understand you may not be able to accelerate the process." That

communicates the issue without creating urgency that does not exist. Ask the designated contact about logistics, and if a matter is sensitive, find out which channel should handle it before copying a large group. For questions about commitments or how to assess your options, involve your career office as needed. I would not assume recruiting can promise a particular team, and would ask who actually owns that decision.

Q13 What if I meet clients at a firm event

If you are invited to an event with clients, your role matters. You may be a student or summer associate meeting people through the firm, which does not mean you are expected to sell legal services or answer questions on the firm's behalf. I would introduce myself accurately, follow the host lawyer's lead, and allow the conversation to be a normal conversation rather than try to prove expertise I do not have.

If someone raises a work question, you can say, "I'm a summer associate, so I should connect you with [host] on that question." There is no need to improvise legal advice, promise what the firm can do, or discuss nonpublic work to keep the interaction moving. I would also ask before initiating a work related follow up or using contact information obtained through the event, because being included in a conversation is not the same thing as being authorized to manage the relationship. Different hosts and organizations may have different expectations, so I would clarify those instead of applying a generic networking rule.

08

Keeping Options Open

Q14 What can I learn from alumni who are clerking

A clerk's experience may help you think about research, writing, feedback, and whether you want to explore a clerkship, but the conversation needs to stay within what that person is permitted to discuss. I would ask about habits that can be described without discussing particular matters or internal deliberations, such as, "Is there a writing habit you would encourage a 1L to build now?" That gives the person room to share something useful without being asked to speak for a judge or court.

If a question is off limits, move on rather than asking for the same information anonymously. I would not ask how a judge will decide a matter, what was said in chambers, or for private assessments of the lawyers appearing there. And if an alumnus is contributing to this guide, we need their confirmation of the applicable permission requirements before including the contribution. Their career path can give us questions to investigate, but I would not turn one person's route into a prediction of our own prospects or treat their personal advice as an institutional endorsement.

Q15 What if I still do not know what I want

When someone says, "I'm open to anything," I can understand the intention, but it leaves the other person with very little to respond to. If instead you explain that you are exploring 2 areas, what interests you about each, and the difference you have not understood, the uncertainty becomes a real

conversation. You can say, "I'm exploring [A] and [B]. I like [specific feature], but I haven't understood [specific difference] yet," without pretending you have already made the decision.

I would turn that conversation into one manageable next step, whether that is comparing 2 kinds of assignments, learning about an office, or speaking with someone whose work you do not yet understand. Keep actual application requirements separate from the exploration, so not knowing your final direction does not become a reason to miss an opportunity's deadline. If you start 1L in fall 2026, summer 2027 is your 1L summer and summer 2028 is your 2L summer, and you still need to confirm the target summer on each posting. I do think you can be honest about not knowing and serious about finding out at the same time, which is a better place to begin than borrowing someone else's certainty.

NOTE

From the Editorial Board

We designed this guide because, when we were 1Ls, we were often confused about what to do and whom to turn to. The editorial board is a mix of experienced law school graduates, recent graduates, and current 2Ls and 3Ls, and our roles range from summer associate to partner.

When the guide says "I" or "we," it reflects the view of one of our editors or of a group of editors.

APPENDIX A

Am Law 100

2026 edition. Ranked by gross revenue. I would use this list to find firms to research, not to decide which firm or office is right for me. Revenue does not tell us what work a junior lawyer will do, how a team teaches, or whether a firm is recruiting for a particular summer.

Source: Am Law 100. 2026 edition, based on 2025 gross revenue. The Tableau chart uses shortened firm names; labels and verein tags are retained as shown. Checked on 18 September 2026.

AM LAW 100

Ranks 1 to 50

1	Kirkland
2	Latham
3	DLA Piper (verein)
4	Gibson Dunn
5	Skadden
6	Sidley
7	Ropes & Gray
8	Baker McKenzie (verein)
9	White & Case
10	Simpson Thacher
11	Morgan Lewis
12	Hogan Lovells
13	Paul Weiss
14	Davis Polk
15	Jones Day
16	McDermott
17	Greenberg Traurig
18	Dentons (verein)
19	Norton Rose (verein)
20	Quinn Emanuel
21	Goodwin Procter
22	Paul Hastings
23	King & Spalding
24	Cooley
25	Sullivan & Cromwell
26	Holland & Knight
27	Mayer Brown
28	Milbank
29	Weil
30	Covington
31	Willkie
32	Cleary Gottlieb
33	Troutman Pepper Locke
34	Orrick
35	Debevoise
36	Akin
37	Wilson Sonsini
38	Wilmer
39	Dechert
40	Reed Smith
41	Proskauer
42	Morrison & Foerster
43	Foley & Lardner
44	Alston & Bird
45	Squire Patton (verein)
46	Wachtell
47	Sheppard
48	K&L Gates
49	Winston & Strawn
50	Cravath

Ranks 51 to 100

51	Perkins Coie
52	Fried Frank
53	Arnold & Porter
54	McGuireWoods
55	Polsinelli
56	Faegre Drinker
57	O'Melveny
58	Vinson & Elkins
59	Baker & Hostetler
60	Nelson Mullins
61	Taft
62	Littler
63	Seyfarth
64	Hunton Andrews
65	Pillsbury
66	Katten
67	Bryan Cave
68	Venable
69	Fenwick
70	Gordon Rees
71	Fox Rothschild
72	Lewis Brisbois
73	Blank Rome
74	Fragomen
75	Baker Botts
76	Womble Bond
77	Ogletree Deakins
78	Barnes & Thornburg
79	Jackson Lewis
80	Cozen O'Connor
81	Jenner & Block
82	Husch Blackwell
83	Mintz Levin
84	Duane Morris
85	Haynes and Boone
86	Crowell & Moring
87	Williams & Connolly
88	Nixon Peabody
89	Ballard Spahr
90	Davis Wright
91	ArentFox Schiff
92	Susman Godfrey
93	Shook Hardy
94	Wilson Elser
95	Kilpatrick Townsend
96	Akerman
97	Cadwalader
98	Steptoe
99	Dorsey
100	Bradley Arant

APPENDIX B

Vault Law 100

2027 edition. This list ranks perceived prestige based on associates' assessments of other firms. It is not a ranking of training, working hours or the fit of a particular office. I would use it to find names to research, then investigate the practice, office and people separately. The edition year follows Vault's published label. Some listings are marked as legacy profiles; check current firm names and recruiting pages before reaching out.

Source: Vault Law 100. Names and ranks follow the publisher's list, checked on 18 September 2026.

VAULT LAW 100

Ranks 1 to 50

1	Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP
2	Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz
3	Skadden
4	Latham & Watkins
5	Sullivan & Cromwell LLP
6	Kirkland & Ellis
7	Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP
8	Gibson Dunn
9	Milbank LLP
10	Simpson Thacher
11	Sidley Austin LLP
12	Covington & Burling
13	Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP
14	Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, LLP
15	Weil
16	Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton
17	Williams & Connolly LLP
18	White & Case
19	Susman Godfrey
20	Ropes & Gray LLP
21	Paul Hastings LLP
22	Cooley
23	Debevoise & Plimpton LLP
24	Perkins Coie LLP (Legacy Profile)
25	WilmerHale
26	Jones Day
27	Morrison Foerster
28	O'Melveny & Myers LLP
29	Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP
30	Hogan Lovells (Legacy Profile)
31	Goodwin
32	Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer LLP
33	Proskauer Rose LLP
34	Wilson Sonsini
35	Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP
36	King & Spalding LLP
37	Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP
38	Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP
39	Winston Taylor LLP
40	Orrick
41	Clifford Chance US LLP
42	DLA Piper LLP (US)
43	Jenner & Block
44	Mayer Brown LLP
45	Baker McKenzie
46	McDermott Will & Schulte
47	Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP
48	Holland & Knight LLP
49	K&L Gates LLP
50	Freshfields US LLP

Ranks 51 to 100

51	Dechert
52	Linklaters
53	Vinson & Elkins
54	Baker Botts L.L.P.
55	Greenberg Traurig, LLP
56	A&O Shearman
57	Norton Rose Fulbright
58	Alston & Bird
59	Reed Smith LLP
60	Pillsbury
61	Boies Schiller Flexner LLP
62	Dentons US LLP
63	BakerHostetler
64	Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft LLP (Legacy Profile)
65	Crowell & Moring
66	Sheppard
67	Foley & Lardner LLP
68	McGuireWoods
69	Venable LLP
70	Kellogg Hansen
71	Fenwick
72	Troutman Pepper Locke
73	Cahill Gordon & Reindel LLP
74	Davis Wright Tremaine LLP
75	Nixon Peabody LLP
76	Fox Rothschild
77	Mintz
78	Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP
79	Steptoe LLP
80	ArentFox Schiff LLP
81	Haynes and Boone, LLP
82	Squire Patton Boggs (US) LLP
83	Gunderson Dettmer Stough Villeneuve Franklin & Hachigian, LLP
84	Fish & Richardson P.C.
85	Faegre Drinker
86	Irell & Manella LLP
87	Polsinelli
88	Cozen O'Connor
89	Seyfarth
90	Foley Hoag LLP
91	Blank Rome LLP
92	Ballard Spahr
93	Hunton Andrews Kurth LLP
94	Duane Morris LLP
95	Akerman
96	Husch Blackwell LLP
97	Kilpatrick
98	Eversheds Sutherland (US) LLP
99	BCLP
100	Littler Mendelson P.C.