

A Law Student's Guide to
Law Firm Interviews

Six Tips to Help You Find
The Right Fit

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Hello, and Congratulations.

You've been selected to interview at a law firm.

You've worked hard to reach this point. Research, cover letters, interviews, OCIs. And you're balancing it all with your law school classes.

To say you're "busy" doesn't quite cover it.

I designed these tips with you, the law student, in mind. You'll get a lot of advice from your peers and social circles about interviews and you should listen to it, critically. You can learn a lot from what others tell you, including what you can do to put your best for forward and what mistakes you can avoid.

The strategies offered here a bit different. Yes, I offer some pointers on 'how to' interview at a law firm. *But*, I also highlight how important it is that you choose your first law firm based on what matters to you.

I've seen many lawyers in practice. The ones who are the happiest have chosen a path that aligns with *who they are*, not just what they do. Understanding what motivates you is a first step to landing in the right spot.

When you interview on site, you'll witness the inner workings of different law firms. You'll see from inside the walls of each office, and the people you meet, what distinguishes one firm from another.

My advice? Before you do that, take a peek under your own hood.

This guide contains exercises to help you do that. Exercises you can do to prepare for your interviews.

I recommend setting aside at least an hour to review – and complete – these exercises. You'll learn a lot about yourself. And the firms you'll be interviewing with.

Do the work now, before the intensity of interview week leaves you with little time to reflect.

Prepare yourself to be your best self. The one who doesn't just get a job.

The one who finds just the right fit.

With best wishes for your success,



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Tip #1 – Start With Your Values

Before you do any more research about law firms, take a moment to reflect on the person best poised to assess whether you're a good fit: YOU.

Your job search so far has likely focused on law firms and the areas in which they practice. *How much of your research has been focused on you and the kind of environment in which you will thrive?*

Most of us don't sit around thinking about our values. Who has time for that? But your values are powerful drivers. Acting in alignment with them generates energy. Acting against them creates resistance and churn. Acquainting – or reacquainting – yourself with your values gives you a useful framework that you can use to make decisions. And decisions that align with your values will set you up for success.

The first exercise is to take stock of your values. Look at the table of values on the next page. Pick the top five that speak to you most. If you can't narrow it to five, pick ten. Write them down on a sheet of paper. Describe in one sentence what each value means to you. Rank them. Challenge yourself to make choices. There are no right or wrong values. Your values can change depending on your stage of life. Pick what feels right to you.

Once you've identified your top values, consider how those values influence what you seek in a firm.

Some questions you might ask yourself are:

- Am I willing to trade greater compensation for a lower billing target?
- Am I prepared to give up collegiality in exchange for greater prestige?
- Do I want freedom to choose which groups I work with as a student or would I prefer the structure of a formal rotation program?
- Would I prefer to work in a smaller office or a larger office?
- Do I thrive in a competitive atmosphere or one that is less competitive?
- What is more important: the people I work with or the work that I do?
- Do I want independence and autonomy or a more controlled learning environment?
- Do I prefer larger files where I'll be part of a team or smaller files where I'll have more responsibility?

Thinking through these questions ahead of time will help you understand yourself better, and give you a lens through which to gauge your compatibility with different firms. You may find a "unicorn" firm where all your values are fully met. But as you know, there's plenty of grey. You may need to choose between competing values, and it will help in the moment if you've identified your values in advance.

What is "Fit"? You'll hear a lot about "culture" and "fit" during interviews. "Fit" is like art: you know it when you see it. All firms do legal work, but cultures vary widely. Some factors to consider: size, tradition, compensation structures, client base, practice areas, regions of service, entrepreneurship, collegiality, hierarchy, billable expectations and approaches to training and mentoring. The more you learn about the people who make up the firm, how they get along with each other, what they focus on and the work they do, the more you'll be able to assess the firm's culture and how it aligns with your values. Pay attention to the "vibe" you feel in each firm. It's a good indicator when it comes to "fit".

VALUES

Acceptance	Excellence	Perseverance
Achievement	Fairness	Persistence
Adventure	Faith	Personal Development
Aesthetics	Fame	Physical Activity
Ambition	Family	Pleasure
Appearances	Financial Security	Playfulness
Authenticity	Forgiveness	Power
Autonomy	Freedom	Prestige
Balance	Friendship	Practicality
Beauty	Fun	Privacy
Certainty	Happiness	Recognition
Challenge	Harmony	Relationships
Clarity	Health	Relaxation
Collaboration	Honesty	Reliability
Comfort	Honor	Religion
Commitment	Humor	Responsibility
Communication	Independence	Risk
Community	Influence	Romance
Companionship	Integrity	Rules
Compassion	Intelligence	Security
Competence	Intimacy	Self-Expression
Competition	Joy	Self-Respect
Confidence	Justice	Serenity
Connection	Kindness	Service
Contribution	Knowledge	Smart
Control	Leadership	Social Causes
Courage	Learning	Solitude
Courtesy	Logic	Spirituality
Creativity	Love	Strength
Dependability	Loyalty	Teamwork
Discipline	Mastery	Trust
Diversity	Money	Truth
Duty	Nature	Understanding
Elegance	Openness	Variety
Energy	Order	Vitality
Enthusiasm	Passion	Wealth
Environment	Peace	Wisdom

Tip #2 – Prepare to Shine

One thing you'll appreciate when you (eventually) find yourself on the other side of the interview table is just how accomplished and full of potential you are as a student. I sat in the interviewer chair for years. Candidates *glowed* with their accomplishments and energy. It's hard to say what specific traits result in an offer being made; but, being prepared obviously goes a long way. Here's a proposed framework:

1. Research about the firm and its lawyers
2. Questions you expect to be asked
3. How you will answer those questions
4. Questions you will ask

1. Research about the firm and its lawyers

It goes without saying that you should learn what you can about the firm and its lawyers. Here are some ideas of what you can do:

- Review the firm website. Look specifically at any material concerning students. Some firms provide information and advice about their student programs, what they look for in students and how to prepare for interviews.
- If you have the names of your interviewers, or know of certain lawyers at a firm, look them up. You can research the cases they have tried or deals they have acted on. Consider what questions you might ask them during the interview.
- Ask other students at your law school about the firm, particularly students who have summered or interviewed with the firm.

2. Questions you expect to be asked

Law firms don't just hire students. They hire their future leaders. Law firms tend to seek qualities that are almost universal: strong analytical skills, intelligence, ability to solve problems, ability to communicate, attention to detail, good judgment, time management skills, strong work ethic, proven ability to finish what they start, ability to work as part of a team, high energy, a positive outlook, flexibility, integrity, a demonstrated interest in the work offered at a firm, grit. To prepare, think about the questions you would ask of yourself if you were presented with your application materials. Write those questions down.

- Review your cover letter, CV, transcripts and anything else that you submitted to the firm. What questions would you ask to assess the above traits?
- What "red flags" do you have in your materials (eg. a poor letter grade, an unexplained gap in time) and what questions can you expect to be asked about them?

Here are some questions you may be asked:

- Some firms explicitly seek our certain qualities (you'll need to do the research about that). What about your experience demonstrates those qualities?
- What have you done that demonstrates an interest in what the firm does? For example, if the firm is highly commercial and your background is public interest, how would you demonstrate your interest for the firm's work?

- How has the work you have done as a student – moot court, *pro bono* work, papers, work experience – helped prepare you to work at a law firm? Think about how you can showcase your ability to understand and explain legal concepts.
- If you're from out of town, what connections do you have to the city?
- What drew you to apply to the particular firm?
- What is not on your CV that you think is important to highlight about yourself?

3. How you will answer the questions

Now that you have a list of questions, answer them. Write out your answers. (If you really don't want to write them down, say them out loud. Talk to your cat if you need to.) If you have the luxury of time, leave your written answers for a few days and go back and look at them. *Do you like what you see?*

Think about what you're trying to communicate with your answers. Are you doing that?

Pay attention to the "red flag" questions. What can you say about challenges and mis-steps? Show interviewers how you learned and grew from adversity.

MORE ABOUT "FIT"

Your interviewers will meet dozens of students over a short window. You'll meet dozens of lawyers, too. When you meet in person, you'll each be assessing the degree to which you fit with each other. Not every firm will be the right fit for you. You will not be the right fit for every firm. That's completely OK. The more genuinely you present at interviews, the more likely it is that you'll be selected on the basis of who you are, not some version of yourself that you must work hard to maintain.

4. Questions you will ask

There will be an opportunity for you to ask questions. Come prepared with some questions. *Please.*

People like answering questions, particularly questions about themselves.

Questions show that you're engaged. And that you've done your homework.

Come up with your own list. Some questions you can ask:

- What drew you to the firm (junior interviewer) or what do you appreciate about the firm (senior interviewer).
- Describe the type of work that a summer or articling student would experience.
- What qualities does the firm look for in students?
- What skills are essential to succeeding at the firm?
- When you compare your firm to others, what do you think makes it unique?
- How would you describe the firm's culture?

Make sure you listen to the answers. Ask follow up questions if appropriate.

Tip #3 – Cultivate Your Reputation

The fact is you've already been cultivating your reputation. It starts among your peers and instructors at law school and continues as you develop your career as a lawyer. The legal community is small, even in a big city. Especially in a big city! Please take some time to think about how you want to be known. Create for yourself a reputation to grow into. During your law firm interviews, you will meet many members of your local bar. Consider the impression you want them to have of you.

Create some ground rules for yourself. Write them down. Here are some suggestions:

1. Be kind, courteous, polite, positive, respectful and gracious with everyone you meet: the receptionist, other students, junior lawyers, senior lawyers, the person serving drinks at a reception.
2. Be truthful. Obviously.
3. Make conversation. This is particularly important if you're invited to a cocktail reception, coffee or meal. You may feel intimidated by the lawyers you meet or overwhelmed by the level of social activity compressed into just a few days. But, do your best to push through any resistance to making conversation. Your interviewers may have had several interviews while juggling their workload and run out of questions. They may have just lost a case. Or their dog. Ask questions, share stories. If groups are not your thing, strike up a conversation with a single person. You don't need to be the life of the party, but please make the effort to show that you're interested and engaged.
4. Send thank you emails to your interviewers. Include a detail or two about your conversation if you can. Try not to send the exact same message to lawyers at the same firm.
5. Don't speak ill of anyone. That includes other students, teachers, other firms and past employers. What you say may be true, but it will reflect negatively on you.
6. If you don't know the answer to something, don't make up an answer. Seek clarification if you need it. If you think you understand a question but you're not quite sure, try repeating the question back in your own words.
7. Don't miss any appointments. Be on time.
8. If you rule out a firm absolutely, cancel any scheduled appointments with them as far in advance as you can. They will appreciate the courtesy of knowing where they stand so they can focus their attention on other candidates.
9. If you receive an offer, be courteous in how you respond. You may need time to consider the offer, but be mindful that the firm extending the offer may need to wait for your answer before it can extend an offer to another candidate. There are different schools of thought on how to respond to a job offer. My view is that an enthusiastic yes (assuming it's genuine) starts you off on the right foot.
10. Show genuine interest in the people you meet. Listen to what they're saying. Let them finish their sentences. Don't interrupt.
11. Maintain appropriate eye contact.
12. Ask open ended questions.
13. Remember people's names.

When the dust settles, you can only pick one firm. As for the other firms you visit, you'll leave some sort of impression. Be intentional about what that impression is.

Tip #4 – Switch Lenses With Your Firm

Many years ago, Mel Gibson starred in a movie where he could hear the thoughts of women. Imagine what your interview would be like if you could hear what your interviewer was thinking. Much like Hollywood borrows from stereotypes when divining the thoughts of women, you can draw from common traits of law firms to guess what they look for in students. Despite their differences, firms want similar things. Thinking about those things can help you prepare for your interview... and assess whether you're a good fit.

To get you started, here are some ideas about what firms want.

Grades

Grades are one factor that law firms consider. Grades offer a relatively standardized data point about students. Firms generally have a threshold they like to see in candidates. The relative importance placed on grades depends on the firm. If you've been selected to interview at a law firm, then you've most likely met the basic threshold. If you're one of the few exceptions, then you have some other quality that shows promise. Interviewers may ask you about your grades. What they really want to know is whether you have the capacity and drive to do their work. Some interviewers want to hear how you explain legal concepts. Come prepared to talk about a legal issue – a moot, a paper you wrote. You'll be evaluated by the way you express yourself, answer and ask questions, maintain focus and explain concepts. If your grades have suffered because of outside commitments, you can highlight that.

Work Ethic

Most lawyers are hard working and they value that trait in others. Ask yourself what you have done that provides evidence of your work ethic. Grit is generally seen as a good thing. Find a way to highlight unpleasant or particularly challenging jobs you did to make it to where you are now.

Personality

The legal industry is a service industry. Your job will be to create satisfied clients by helping them navigate and resolve legal questions, hurdles and disputes that come up in their businesses and personal lives. Your clients will initially be other lawyers and eventually they will be external clients. Your ability to create a market for your work matters. People tend to like to work with people that they like. Your interviewers want to know that you'll be pleasant to work with, whether they ask you to draft a factum, order takeout or run a stack of photocopies. Will you keep your cool when adversity strikes? Can you make small talk when the pressure's on? Can you work in a team? Can you take feedback? Your personality matters so showcase it.

Trustworthiness

Your ability to inspire trust is critical to your work as a lawyer. Interviewers will ask themselves whether they could trust you with their work and, ultimately, with their clients. How do you demonstrate integrity and honesty? Your trustworthiness will be on your interviewer's mind – consciously or unconsciously – during any interview. Do what comes naturally to establish that trust.

Your Commitment to the Firm

Firms have a limited number of spots they can offer and they will want to extend those offers to candidates who seem the most interested in joining them. Expressing your genuine interest in a firm can influence their decision to extend an offer to you, especially if they are keen to have you join them. If a firm is your top choice, consider sharing that with one of the interviewers. But only if it really is your top choice!

Tip # 5 – Mind the Parsley

One of my favorite lawyers used to refer to boiler plate language in contracts as “parsley”. The half dozen or so clauses devoted to governing law, execution in counterparts, etc. don’t speak directly to the substance of what’s being achieved, but without those clauses, the contract would be incomplete. When it comes to interviews, there’s a place for parsley, and preferably not in your teeth;).

Here’s a review of the basics:

1. Dress the part. Wear a nice, clean suit. Have clean hair. Brush your teeth. You’re applying for a job at a law firm. It helps if you look the part.
2. Be on time. Five to ten minutes ahead of your appointment is appropriate.
3. Don’t overschedule your days. Leave space to breathe between interviews. You might leave longer spaces for firms you really like in case you’re invited to meet more lawyers.
4. Stand or sit up straight and look engaged. If you need some tips on body language, listen to Amy Cuddy’s [Ted Talk](#).
5. Be friendly, but not overly familiar. Confident, but not arrogant.
6. Be mindful of how you present. If you can, practice with a partner and ask for blunt feedback. Some common things people do that can be distracting:
 - a. Overuse “um” or other fillers.
 - b. Play with their hair.
 - c. Avoid eye contact.

Try to nail down and manage any distracting tendencies. If you don’t have a partner to practice with, try filming yourself on your laptop or phone and watch the playback. It can be humbling. And it can really help you identify unconscious habits that detract from your key message.

7. Take your time when answering questions. Pause to reflect on your answer. Pauses are golden. When used effectively, they convey confidence and allow you to plan and better articulate your thoughts.
8. Be polite, respectful and helpful.
9. Be courteous to other students who are interviewing.
10. Get as much sleep as you can.
11. Go easy on the cocktails.

Interview Guidelines for Law Firms – Law firms may have certain guidelines to follow during the student interview process. For example, most major law firms in Vancouver, BC voluntarily agree to follow a set of [guidelines](#) that was developed by the Vancouver Bar Association. See, in particular, the “[Best Practices for Vancouver Summer and Articling Recruitment Activities](#)” developed by the Vancouver Summer and Articling Working Group of the Canadian Section of NALP and the Vancouver Bar Association, which contains guidance for students as well as firms. Please consult with your law school’s career services advisors to ask about any guidelines or rules that govern your law firm interview process. This will help you to better understand the interview process, including how firms interact and communicate with you. For example, there may be restrictions on when law firms may speak with you (blackout periods) and what they may say about job offers.

Tip # 6 – Follow Your Instincts

You've reached the final tip. Last but not least.

At the end of the week, you may have more than one job offer to choose from.

The right firm may be clear to you.

If it's not, go back to your values. Use them as your guide.

And if you still can't decide?

Go with your gut.

Your gut will tell you, with freakish accuracy, exactly what consequences – good and bad – will flow from the decision you make.

At least, that has been my experience.

You may need to pick between a firm that looks prestigious on paper and one that promises exceptional mentorship. If you're longing to pick mentorship because you know you'll thrive with that personal attention, but you're scared of turning down a 'golden opportunity', I give you permission to follow your gut.

Conversely, if you fall hard for a group of lawyers at a firm, but the firm doesn't practice the type of law that you're truly passionate about, you may need to prioritize your long term vision over the connection you had with the group.

If you're torn between offers and you need a neutral person to speak with, in confidence, feel free to reach out to me. I mean it. My contact information is below.

Thank you for letting me be a part of your interview process.

I wish you all the best in finding your perfect fit. You've certainly earned it.



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