

How to Become a Law Professor

Maybe you had a particularly inspirational professor in law school who motivated you to follow in their footsteps. Or, after a few years of practice, you miss law school and decide you'd rather go back and teach. Whatever your motivation,...

Method 1 of 4:

Taking the Traditional Path

1. **Go to one of the top law schools in the country.** Most law professors got their law degree at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, or Chicago. There are another dozen or so prominent law schools that regularly produce law professors as well. If you're planning on taking the classical path toward becoming a law professor, you need to get your law degree from one of these schools.^[2]
 1. Some high-ranking schools have greater prominence regionally. For example, if you wanted to teach at a southern law school, you could likely make the cut with a degree from Emory, Duke, or Vanderbilt.
 2. If you were planning on teaching on the west coast, you could add Berkeley and UCLA to the list.

Tip: For the classical path, the emphasis is on prestige. While this path has become somewhat less relevant as law schools place more focus on clinical training, it's still a viable way to become a law professor.

2. **Perform exceptionally well academically while in law school.** How well you do is determined relatively according to your class rank. While you don't necessarily have to graduate first in your class, aim to be in the top 5%. The lower-ranked your law school, the higher your class rank needs to be if you want to get noticed.^[3]
 1. Regardless of which school you go to, there is little hope for you to become a law professor if you aren't in the top 25% of your class.^[4]
3. **Join the law review and hold a senior editorial position.** If you're taking the classical path toward becoming a law professor, you need to be a member of the most important law review at your law school. While most law schools have several journals that focus on a particular field of law, for the classical path, the main law review is the only one that matters.^[5]
 1. You also need to hold a senior editorial position in your third year. Ideally, you'll be editor-in-chief. If you don't manage to take the top spot, you should at least be in charge of a particular department or process. For example, you might be the articles editor.
4. **Publish at least one article in law school.** If you're on law review staff, you'll write a student note and submit it for publication. Not all student notes are published. However, if you want to become a law professor, your note should be good enough to be published.^[6]
 1. In addition to your student note, start working on an article that you can submit to other journals for publication after you graduate from law school. Ideally, your other article will be in the same area of law as your student note so you can start building expertise in an area.

2. You might also consider writing an article about a core area of law that you studied your first year of law school, such as contracts or criminal law. New law professors often teach first-year classes so it's a good idea to establish expertise in one of those areas.

Tip: Tenure-track law professors are usually required by the law school to publish articles in law journals. Having published articles under your belt before you become a professor shows your dedication to legal scholarship.

5. **Serve as a clerk for a judge after law school.** The top law professor candidates usually spend the first few years after graduating clerking for prestigious judges. The US Court of Appeals is a good place to start. A clerkship with a justice on the Supreme Court is best.^[7]
 1. New graduates typically clerk for a judge on the appellate court first, then apply for a clerkship with a Supreme Court justice.
 2. State court clerkships, even at the appellate level, are not as impressive as federal court clerkships.
6. **Continue to publish after law school.** A clerkship typically also gives you the opportunity to research and write. You'll see challenging cases come through the courts every day and will have a sense of developing trends in the law. You'll also have insight on hot-button issues that could make for compelling journal articles.^[8]
 1. Look for an issue on which federal circuits are divided. A case that presents that issue is ripe for a Supreme Court decision and could serve as the basis for a strong journal article that could be cited by appellate court judges or even Supreme Court justices.
7. **Practice at a top law firm for 2 to 5 years.** After your clerkships, gain some experience practicing law — preferably at a nationally renowned "white-shoe" law firm. Most of these firms are located in New York City, although they typically have branch offices all over the world.^[9]
 1. While you do want some experience practicing law, too much experience could sink your chances of becoming a law professor. Law schools favor academic scholarship over practice in the legal trade, particularly for tenure-track positions.
 2. The career services company Vault publishes law firm rankings every year based on the assessments of practicing lawyers. If you're taking the classical route toward becoming a law professor, aim to be an associate at one of the top 10 law firms on this list.^[10]
8. **Get recommendations from professors.** For a law professor application, you'll need at least 3 or 4 references. They should be from professors who understand your research and scholarship interests, not necessarily professors whose classes you took in law school.^[11]
 1. The professors can be from any school. However, you typically want at least 2 professors to be from the school where you graduated.
 2. It helps if you have a famous professor or two, but don't go for prestige over substance.

Method 2 of 4:

Going the Post-Doc Route

1. **Earn strong grades in law school.** If you follow the post-doc path, you'll be getting another degree after your law degree, so your grades and class rank in law school aren't as important as they would be if you took the classical path. However, you still need strong grades to be accepted into a post-doc program. Law schools will also look at your grades in law school when you apply to be a professor, even if you have another degree.^[12]
 1. Generally, you should be in the top 25-30% of your class if you're getting another degree after law school.

Tip: While the prestige of the law school you attend is not as important for the post-doc route as for the classical route, you still need to go to a more prominent, nationally renowned law school.

2. **Serve on the editorial board of a law journal.** When you're getting another degree after your law degree, you may not necessarily need to be the editor-in-chief of your school's most prestigious law review. However, some journal experience is still important to demonstrate your interest in legal scholarship.^[13]
 1. Serving on the editorial board is typically less important than publishing articles. However, being on the staff of a journal gives you the best opportunity to write a journal article.
3. **Write at least one legal research article while in law school.** If you're on the staff of a law journal, your article might be your student note. However, it's a good idea to get started on another article with the aim of submitting it to law journals after you graduate.^[14]
 1. If all you have is your student note, you should at least have a thesis for an additional research project lined up, along with some preliminary research.
4. **Apply to graduate law programs at top law schools.** If you get another degree after law school, you might have a better chance of getting a job as a law professor if your other degree is also in law. Advanced law studies include LLM, JSD, or SJD programs. However, these degrees won't help you much in your quest to become a law student unless they're from one of the best law schools in the country, such as Harvard or Yale.^[15]
 1. Yale also has a Ph.D. in law offered by Yale Law School.
 2. Graduate law programs also give you additional opportunities to engage in legal scholarship, so you could potentially get another publication or two under your belt by the time you graduate.
5. **Teach legal research and writing at a top law school.** Legal research and writing (LRW) instructors typically aren't tenure-track professors who are only hired to teach for a semester or year at a time. LRW instructors primarily teach first-year legal writing classes, but may have other duties, such as overseeing brief writing for the school's moot court teams.^[16]
 1. Because these are non-tenure-track positions, they are typically easier to get and allow you to get your feet wet and decide if teaching law is what you really want to do.
 2. As an LRW instructor, you have full use of the school's library and access to the other faculty. This can give you the tools you need to write and publish articles.

Warning: Because LRW is a more clinical area, it might be difficult for you to transition from legal writing into a more academic tenure-track ("doctrinal") position.

6. **Get a fellowship to increase your research and writing.** Many top law schools, including Harvard and Yale, offer fellowship programs that give students who want to become law professors the opportunity to pursue legal scholarship. Typically, you need a specific proposal for the type of research you plan to do. Fellows may also assist in teaching classes at the law school or mentor JD students.^[17]
 1. Fellowships are highly competitive. You might also try getting a job at a law school as a Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP). These jobs also allow you to continue your research and writing, although your work will be far more self-directed than it would in a fellowship.^[18]

Method 3 of 4:

Trying the Interdisciplinary Approach

1. **Get exceptional grades in law school.** Regardless of your approach to becoming a law professor, a strong academic record is important. At a minimum, you should rank in the top 25-30% of your class. The

highest possible rank is always the best.^[19]

1. Your class rank and grades will be more important to the law schools when you apply as a law professor than they will be when you apply for your graduate degree. Faculty and admissions staff in other disciplines will likely be unfamiliar with the law school grading process.
2. **Work on a law journal to show your interest in legal scholarship.** Particularly if you're getting a degree in another discipline, law schools might question if you're more committed to that discipline than you are to law. Law schools tend to hire professors who are passionate about legal study and scholarship. Your work on a law journal in law school helps you establish and demonstrate that interest.^[20]
 1. You might consider a position at a journal related to your other degree, if your law school has such a journal. For example, if you're planning to get a Ph.D. in economics, you might serve on the editorial board of a law and economics journal.

Tip: Even if you don't get selected for a journal, try to write at least one article in law school that you can submit to journals after you graduate. For example, you might take a seminar and then adapt and expand your seminar paper for publication.

3. **Practice law for 2 to 5 years before going back to school.** Generally, it's a good idea to get some legal practice in before you get your graduate degree in a related discipline, as opposed to going straight to school. It will be easier to find a job at a law firm while you're in law school and can take advantage of your school's career resources.^[21]
 1. When potential employers ask you about your career goals, you shouldn't lie. However, it's probably best to downplay the fact that you're planning on going back to school to get a degree in another discipline in a couple of years.
4. **Pursue a graduate degree in an academic area related to law.** To take an interdisciplinary approach toward becoming a law professor, you need a Ph.D. in a discipline that frequently intersects legal study. The specific degree might also dictate the types of law school courses you would be qualified to teach.^[22]
 1. For example, many jurisprudence or legal philosophy professors also have a Ph.D. in philosophy. Economics is another discipline that frequently intersects with legal study.

Tip: The prestige of the school from which you get your Ph.D. doesn't matter as much as the prestige of your law school if you want to be a law professor. However, you typically want to try to get your degree from one of the top schools for that discipline.

5. **Continue to publish in law journals while getting your graduate degree.** The danger in getting a degree in another discipline is that you will appear to have abandoned the law for several years. Although your focus will be on your degree programs, balance your study out with a couple of publications in law journals.^[23]
 1. Look for interdisciplinary journals where you can write articles about areas where the two disciplines intersect or overlap. This will reinforce the idea that you're getting the other degree to supplement and enrich your law degree and contribute to your legal scholarship.
6. **Keep in touch with your old law school professors.** As you work towards your graduate degree, continually reach out to old law school professors and maintain relationships with them. When you enter the legal teaching market, you'll need recommendations from professors. Keeping these relationships active also demonstrates your commitment to legal scholarship.^[24]
 1. For example, you might start an email correspondence with a professor you admire. When legal issues or questions come up in your graduate study, you might write to them for advice.
 2. If you have an idea for an article for a law journal, write to a professor who has done research in that area and ask for advice or assistance. This will ensure that the professors you get recommendations

from are familiar with the type of research you want to pursue as a professor.

Method 4 of 4:

Establishing Yourself as an Expert Practitioner

- 1. Get substantial practical experience after law school.** If you're considering being a professor based on your practical experience, you want to become an expert at whatever legal niche you practice. Professors hired based on their experience typically are clinical professors, but some also teach academic classes in niche subjects, such as entertainment law.^[25]
 1. The type of law firm you practice at doesn't matter as much if you're following this path. You might even start your own firm, which can be especially helpful if you're practicing in an area of law that people regularly need, such as criminal law or family law.
 2. Keep your practice focus as narrow as possible and tied to the type of law school classes you ultimately want to teach. For example, if you want to teach criminal law, you might work as a defense attorney.
- 2. Publish articles in practice journals and academic journals.** Law schools typically look down on practice journals or trade magazines. However, if you're trying to become a law professor based on your experience, publication in practical journals helps bolster your reputation as an expert.^[26]
 1. You might also consider writing a book or chapter for a nonfiction book related to your area of legal expertise. If you get your name out there by publishing in journals a lot, these types of opportunities may come up.

Tip: The longer you practice, the more publications you should have in academic journals. This demonstrates your commitment to scholarship over the practice of law.
- 3. Make yourself available as a legal commentator to gain name recognition.** Start with your local news station. Send over your résumé with a letter and explain what issues you're available to discuss as a commentator. In many places, good local legal commentators are in high demand, so it shouldn't take long before you're contacted.^[27]
 1. If you live in a larger city, it might be a little more difficult to get established as a legal commentator, even on local news stations. You might start with smaller towns nearby.
 2. You can also establish a name for yourself as a commentator by starting a blog or writing articles and submitting them to local news outlets.
- 4. Teach as an adjunct professor while practicing law.** You can enhance your reputation as an expert as well as gain teaching experience by working as an adjunct professor. Adjuncts typically only teach one class a semester, usually in a niche area, such as entertainment or environmental law, that they also practice.^[28]
 1. Teaching as an adjunct is typically easier if you have your own law firm because you can adjust your client intake to make time for the class.
 2. While teaching even one class can take up significant time and resources, make sure you can keep up with your writing and publications at the same time. If you want to get hired in a full-time, tenure-track faculty position, publications are essential, regardless of which path you take to get there.^[29]
- 5. Make friends with law professors.** Contact law professors who teach the same area of law that you practice (or an area that intersects with your practice). You might send a journal article you've written by way of introduction or offer to come and speak to their students about your practice.^[30]

1. For example, if you practice music law, you might reach out to copyright or intellectual property law professors and ask if you could come to their class to discuss the different copyright and trademark aspects you encounter in your practice.
2. If you want to become a law professor, not only practitioners but also professors must view you as an expert in your field. The recommendations from these law professors will make it much more likely for you to get a position on a law school faculty.

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