

49

TIPS FOR THE  
NEW LAWYER

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# 49 Tips for the New Lawyer

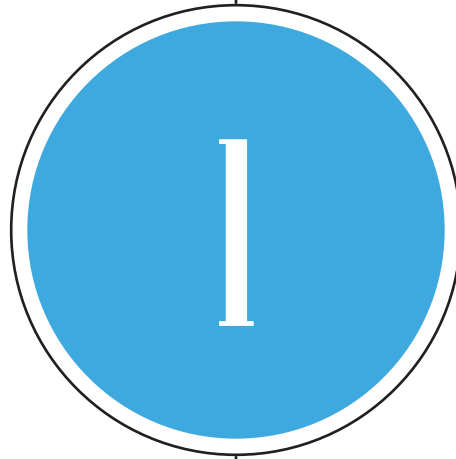
By Marilyn Astin Tarlton

**This is not going to be easy.** But you knew that well before you passed the bar. (Congratulations, by the way!) There are a lot of lessons you will need to learn the hard way. Still. It would be nice, wouldn't it, to have a slight edge when starting out as a new lawyer? Perhaps an older, savvier friend to fill you in on subtler codes of conduct or to introduce you to the court clerk. Someone to grab you by the elbow and steer you away from trouble and toward better decisions. Or even a cranky old guy to "teach you a thing or two."

We think so, too. So consider this list of tips and truths your friendly kick to the shins under the conference table and, in some cases, a not-so-subtle kick in the pants. We've compiled "49 Tips for the New Lawyer" to help you get out of the blocks with the best start possible. Whether you're backed up by an army of support staff and senior partners or valiantly braving it solo, soak up some of this sound advice and see if it doesn't help the hard lessons hit a little softer.

(Psssst. You'll find more than just 49 great tips here – there are also 128 links to some of Attorney at Work's most popular posts.)

Marilyn Astin Tarlton is a founding member of the Legal Marketing Association, past Trustee and President of the College of Law Practice Management and recipient of the LMA Hall of Fame award.



**There are people around you who know more than you do. Let them help you. Contrary to your every instinct, you do not have to know the answer to everything. Besides, nobody likes a smarty pants.**

#### Related Links

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[Learning How to Behave: Building Interpersonal Skills](#)

[Curmudgeon's Perspective: Decisions, Decisions](#)

[Startup Advice from Women Lawyers](#)



**As a general rule, the ability a person has to screw everything up for you is inversely proportional to their pay grade. So keep your staff happy.**

#### Related Links

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[Support Staff Makes Your Bacon](#)

[What Can a Marketing Assistant Do for You?](#)

[The Importance of Being Trained](#)



3

**Your client is always right. (Most of the time, that is.)**

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[Calming Down an Angry Client](#)

[Fire a Client](#)



4

**Your answer should never be “No, you can’t!” Try “Okay, let’s figure out how you can.”**

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The Art of We

Client Service: Make It More than a Buzzword

Are You a New Normal Lawyer?



**Return phone calls, emails and texts promptly. Really.**

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[Five Ways to Improve Client Communications \(And Avoid an Ethics Violation\)](#)

[Be the World's Most Client-Accessible Lawyer](#)

[Fear of Phoning](#)



6

**You are going to have to pay your dues. It may seem the work is beneath you. You may not enjoy it. Others may take credit for it. But to get to the really juicy stuff, you'll have to carry someone else's brief bag.**

#### Related Links

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[Your Career Is Your Job, Part 1: Advice Every First-Year Associate Should Know](#)

[Your Career Is Your Job, Part 2: Develop Your Professional Skills](#)

[Your Career Is Your Job, Part 3: Nurture Your Network for Success](#)





**Try, in everything you do, to teach as well as tell.**

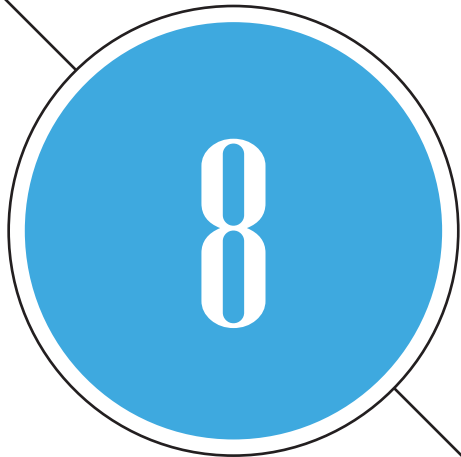
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[Four Things Your Assistant Can Do Better](#)

[Elephant in the Office](#)

[Wiser Words](#)



**Before beginning the work, ask your client or supervisor what success will look like. Don't just guess. Chances are, you'll be wrong.**

#### Related Links

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[Ask Yourself the Moneyball Question](#)

[When You Lose a Client](#)



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**You are responsible for getting all the facts you need. Even if people don't want to give them to you.**

#### Related Links

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[10 Ways to Avoid a Malpractice Claim](#)

[Is Your Staff Putting You at Risk?](#)

[Lawyers Suck at Listening](#)



**While your client or colleague is in your law office, you are the host.  
Act like one.**



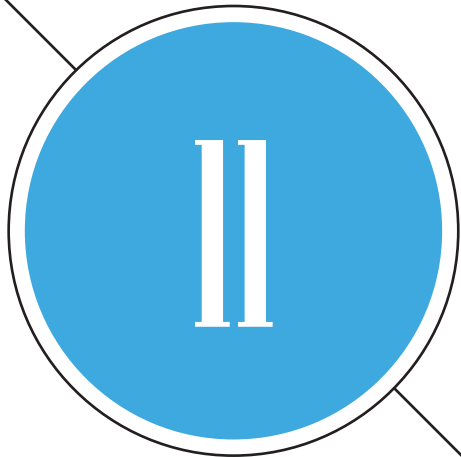
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[Big Ideas for Small Talk](#)

[How to Behave at an Event](#)

[At a Loss for Words? Conversation Starters](#)



**Under-promise and over-deliver. Never the other way around.**

#### Related Links

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Surprise Your Client  
Apps for the Mobile Solo



12

**Always be just a little bit early for an appointment. If you must be late, call ahead to warn them. It shows that you think they are important. Everyone likes to feel important.**

#### Related Links

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[Curmudgeon's Perspective: Late ... Again?](#)

[A Refresher Course in Table Etiquette](#)



13

**It's much easier to look at the big picture first and then figure out the little pieces than it is to fiddle with the little pieces and then try to make a decent big picture out of them.**

#### Related Links

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[Upside Down Thinking](#)

[Organize Your Brain with Mind Mapping](#)



**There's a difference between "telling" someone something and "communicating" it. In the first case, it left your lips. In the second, it left your lips, entered their mind and was understood. You are responsible for the entire cycle.**



#### Related Links

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[Don't Negotiate, Collaborate!](#)

[Curmudgeon's Perspective: What Did You Call Me?](#)

[Delegating Done Right: Context Is Key](#)





**While people around you may worry about their rates compared to other lawyers, your client is only concerned about fees in relationship to the value the work has to them. Try to think like your client. Always.**

#### Related Links

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[The Best Pricing Advice Ever](#)

[First Figure Out Your Fee](#)

[Getting the Fee You Deserve](#)



16

**Maintain your instrument. It is at least as important to rest and renew as it is to work hard and do “important stuff.” In fact, if you neglect vacations and downtime you will soon lose the capacity to do the important stuff well.**

#### Related Links

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[Knockout Burnout](#)

[Choose One Thing](#)

[New Balance: Finding the Dividing Line Between Life and Work](#)



17

**Sometimes the best answer is the one someone else thought of. Acknowledge that and give them credit. The long-term payoff will far surpass the momentary glory of feeling you were the smartest. Bright people will come back to work with you again.**

#### Related Links

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[Take It From the Wonder Pets](#)

[The Cost of Switching Law Firms](#)



**Your supervisor, mentor or senior partner is neither your mother nor your professor. She or he won't take responsibility for your personal or professional development. That's your job.**

#### Related Links

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[Can I Get a Little Help Here?](#)

[Stop, Look and Listen](#)

[Partnership: It's Not Just Lawyering Anymore](#)



# 19

**When you complete a matter or a task, ask for feedback. Be clear that you're not looking for flattery – you honestly want to know how to improve next time.**

## Related Links

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[Afraid to Talk? Overcoming Social Anxiety](#)

[Last Question to Ask a Client](#)



**It's time to clean up your act online. Potential clients know how to use Google just like you. So do employers, colleagues, reporters and everyone else. Make sure you look (mostly) professional.**



#### Related Links

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[Buff Up Your Bio](#)

[Clean Up Your Contact Info: Where Are You?](#)

[How to Get Online Reviews for Your Law Practice](#)



**Offer to help.**

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[Take Five Steps Up to Leadership](#)

[Take a Risk: Trust](#)

[Managing Up](#)



**Other people are busy, too.  
Value and guard their time as mightily as your own.**

#### Related Links

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[Ditch the "I Didn't Get It Done Today" Blues](#)

[Stamp Out Snoozing](#)





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**Take notes. It helps you remember, and it shows people that you believe what they are saying is important enough to write down. (Look them in the eye once in a while, too.)**

#### Related Links

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[Say What?](#)

[Conference Call Etiquette](#)

[Note-taking and Dictation Apps for Lawyers](#)



24

**Say please and thank you.**

#### Related Links

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[Curmudgeon's Perspective: Civil Matters](#)

[Say Thank You to Stand Out](#)



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**Remember that clients don't always want a lawyer. Sometimes they just need someone to listen to them.**



#### Related Links

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[Transforming the Needy Client](#)

[Client Service: Make It More than a Buzzword](#)

[Managing the Aggressive Client: Your Roof, Your Rules](#)



26

**Smile and look people in the eye. Be interested in them.  
(Even if you think you aren't. You might be surprised.)**

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[Five Ways to Boost Your Presence with Clients, Judges and Everyone Else](#)

[Tips to Boost Your Confidence](#)

[How to Look Them in the Eye](#)



**Put down that device and pay attention.**

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[Put Down the Phone and Back Away Slowly](#)

[Practice Safe Texting](#)

[Phoning It In: Why I Won't Have a Smartphone](#)



28

**Meet as many new people, from every walk of life, as you can. Thank those who make introductions by introducing them to good people.**

#### Related Links

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[40 Ways to Make Networking Work](#)

[Bad Networking Ain't Networking](#)

[Closing In on New Clients](#)



**It's never too soon to work on your business development skills.**

#### Related Links

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[Business Development Starters for New Associates](#)

[Your Business Development Marching Orders](#)



30

**Don't brag about yourself. (Even if it is true.) Instead, brag about others. They'll always remember it and perhaps brag about you next time.**

#### Related Links

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[Get Out of the Office!](#)

[Looking for Business with the Right Outside Organization](#)

[How to Build a Law Practice? Keep Showing Up](#)





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**Keep an orderly desk. People draw conclusions about the state of your mind and your ability to think clearly based on the state of your office. No one wants to work with a messy thinker.**



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[Project Management Basics: A Refresher for Lawyers](#)

[It's Time to Clean Up That Mess](#)

[Pen on Paper Works! The Bullet Journal](#)



32

**Always apologize when appropriate, but don't make a huge deal out of it.  
You don't want to embarrass them – or yourself.**

#### Related Links

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[How to Calm an Angry Client](#)  
[To Err Is Human – To Admit It, Divine](#)



33

**If you know it's a good idea, but they tell you it's "never been done that way" (but can't tell you why not), do it anyway. But be gracious about it.**

#### Related Links

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[Advice Every First-Year Should Know and Apply](#)

[Five Reasons You Should Care About "NewLaw"](#)

[Take Charge of Your Destiny](#)



**Be kind in your daily interactions. Have compassion.**

#### Related Links

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[A Cynic's Guide to Pro Bono Work](#)

[Wheaton's Law \(Don't Be a Dick!\)](#)



**Allow yourself to make mistakes as long as you learn from them.  
Allow others to make mistakes as well. Learn from those.**



#### Related Links

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[When Clients Get Angry About Results](#)

[The Ultimate Answer to Tough Questions](#)



36

**Often your client's or supervisor's goal will be different from what she says it is. (She may not even know what it is!) Listen between the lines and repeat back what you hear to make sure you're both on the same page.**

#### Related Links

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[Think Like a Client: Mind the Gap](#)

[Five Clients You'll Meet in Hell](#)

[Body Language Translator](#)



**Learn how to brainstorm, but know when it's time to blow the whistle and commit to a direction.**

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[Make Meetings Count](#)  
[Upside-Down Thinking](#)



38

**No one cares about your grade point average now. Really. They just care how well you can perform on behalf of your client.**

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[Five Ways to Improve Client Communication](#)

[Civility: Why It's Critical to Keep Your Cool](#)





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**Accept compliments with grace. Shrugging them off demeans the giver.**



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[Take a Victory Lap](#)

[Curmudgeon's Perspective: High-Five the Legal Profession](#)



40

**Keep a “me” file. When someone pays you a compliment, gives you a good performance review, passes you a flattering note ... drop it in there. A time will come when you need to close the door and remind yourself how good you are. This will help.**

#### Related Links

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[Talk Back to Bad Reviews](#)

[Five Tips for Making Positive Connections](#)



41

**Be curious. Learn about things with no bearing on your work. You'll be surprised at how often seemingly "irrelevant" information ends up being highly useful.**

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[Save Your Random Sparks of Genius](#)  
[Things to Do When the Internet Is Down](#)



**Be honest. Have integrity. Show grace under pressure.**

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[Civility: Why It's Critical to Keep Your Cool](#)

[Smart Lawyers Take Microbreaks](#)

[Is Work-Life Balance a Fraud?](#)



43

**Be aware of the signs of stress, depression and substance abuse – in yourself, and the people around you.**

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[Delicate Conversations: Is It Depression?](#)

[Lawyers, Depression and Substance Abuse: A Candid Q&A](#)

[Winter Blues or Something More?](#)



**Listen when others are speaking. Don't start working on your response until you hear them out and understand.**



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[Shutting Down Uncivil Opposing Counsel](#)

[Five Questions to Ask a New Client](#)



45

**Dressing professionally is important. Dressing to kill is a mistake.**

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[Tips for the Well-Dressed Male Lawyer](#)

[Keep Your Spring Fashion Frolic in Check](#)

[Be Bold in Black](#)



46

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**Learn about the business side of law practice. If you don't understand the money-making model and how to make it work, you won't be in practice for long.**

#### Related Links

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Three Ways to Compete in the Coming Legal Market

New Math, New Money: A Lawyer's Guide to the Changing Business of Law

17 Things I Wish I Knew as a New Associate





**Know your priorities and stick to them. If a client or supervisor directs you otherwise, talk it out to resolution.**



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[Signs It Might Be Time To Quit](#)

[Don't Negotiate, Collaborate!](#)

[How to Say No](#)



48

**Learn to write a clear sentence.**

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[Words Matter: How to Unmuddle Your Prose](#)

[Writing the First Three Sentences](#)

[Legal Editing With Three Simple Questions](#)



49

**If you don't know something, ask.**

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