



SUCCESSING IN APPLYING TO BE A BARRISTER

Over 100 tips and insights into improving your chances of acquiring pupillage

The guide describes the characteristics chambers look for in a candidate to join them as a pupil barrister and explains how you can acquire and demonstrate the same effectively.

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Succeeding in applying to be a barrister

Introduction

There are several career guides to becoming a [barrister](#) which detail the framework and timeline to qualify. The Bar Council publishes [Becoming a Barrister](#) which is the best starting point, accompanied by [Chambers Student](#). It describes, in general, areas covered below in more detail and highlights deadlines for making applications to the various stages of the qualification process. This guide focuses on, and outlines the range of, activities that combine during the years up to the point, and including the time when, a hopeful barrister applies to their chosen chambers during the annual round of recruiting known as the [Pupillage Gateway](#). This opens for applications each year at the end of the first week of January for just over a month. Interviews are then held from mid-February to early May when offers are made. It is the culmination of a process which can take up to several years of focussed preparation and will very often require more than one attempt...and so the timeline of preparing to apply and join the Bar is typically long, varies according to individual candidates and cannot be rushed. The Bar as a profession expects you to apply and join when you are at your strongest, best prepared and most competitive in terms of your developing professional profile.

Becoming a barrister in a set of chambers is unlike any other graduate career outcome. In particular barristers are essentially self-employed occupying space in a building shared with and contributing to the upkeep with other barristers (who you may find yourself opposing in court one day and supporting another). Additionally, your practice, that is your work and therefore income, is built around your personal reputation. The requirements of the work weigh on your shoulders alone...this is rarely a team environment.

Becoming a barrister at the Human Rights, Civil Liberties and/or Public Law Bar carries with it even further challenges around cost, time and effort due to the extreme competitiveness. To gain a real insight into the route ahead to a successful pupillage, and how varied it can be, listen to two of the "In Conversation" pieces on our YouTube channel. One is with [Tayyiba Bajwa](#) who is now at Doughty Street Chambers and the other [Maaha Elahi](#) at Garden Court Chambers. Both are worth following on LinkedIn to read their news and posts.

Context or why long-term preparation is the key to success

Joining the profession becomes ever more competitive each year and there are many more of those who wish to become a barrister than there are places available. This [page provides statistics](#) on the number commencing pupillage by year which probably represents about a third of those applying. For this reason, entry to the Bar can also seem a risky outcome because of the amount of time involved in preparing to apply. This is another reason why more effort is generally needed to develop a winning profile. Finally, the costs to the individual can be greater. Chambers do not (or more accurately very rarely) provide financial support for students undertaking the route to qualification. Successful candidates will find themselves populating their CV with volunteering activities (i.e. unpaid), there will be a shortfall in the costs of law

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school training that may need to be bridged with loans or savings (and savings acquired by taking time out to earn enough money to save), and there are [additional costs](#) incurred in [joining an Inn](#) to consider.

In the light of such competition, cost and time required there are always more things to add to your relevant experience. However, the core activities fall into one of three main categories....”**moots, minis and marks**”. In other words, those activities that demonstrate high intellectual ability, relevant work and pro bono experience providing you with the validation you are suited to the environment, and finally evidence of an interest and skill in advocacy.

Being self-employed your professional status is regulated by the [Bar Standards Board](#) which is also the organisation that defines the route to qualification, regulates course providers, and defines the training that barristers need to undertake and maintain in their professional lives. This is described on the [website](#) and the details of the route to qualification explained, including important [information about visas](#) for international students.

With changes to the qualification process in recent years, there is an [explanatory YouTube video](#) for Cambridge students and graduates hosted jointly with BPP University to watch.

Finally, of all the material and resources quoted in this short guide by far the most comprehensive and useful for you to engage with yourself is [“Pupillage and how to get it.”](#) Written by [Beheshteh Engineer](#) who is a barrister at [36 Crime](#) and a Cambridge alumnus [Simon Myerson KC](#) from [Byrom Street Chambers](#). It aims to shed light on what’s required to succeed, the financial support on offer, what the role entails, and how to prepare for interviews.

So, how to improve your chances of a successful outcome...

Developing a strong profile

With all the hurdles and competition facing candidates the more you can do to show you know what you are getting into, have navigated the process effectively, developed and enhanced the right skills and have made yourself ready not to waste the time of the pupillage committee you’ll be applying to, the more likely the outcome will be favourable. You can’t take a shortcut in this process or “wing it”. Indeed, navigating the complexities of the process itself is a test in its own right you need to pass.

Intellectual ability

The Bar is perhaps the most intellectually rigorous profession open to graduates and partly that is reflected in your [academic performance](#) from school onwards. Read the client reviews made of barristers and KCs in the Chambers profiles listed in one of the many directories e.g. [Chambers and Partners: UK Bar Directory](#) and you will see that barristers are valued most for their ability to “outthink” the opposition together with their care for their clients. This is the kind of reputation for which you too will strive. But how can you demonstrate it especially in your applications? (And looking

ahead your intellectual ability/advocacy aptitude will be tested during your pupillage interviews). Ideally you will be able to demonstrate one or more of the following:

- a) Consistent and high academic marks across all papers and years. Whilst a first isn't absolutely required a good 2:1 will be, and for many Chambers there will be applicants with firsts. If your grades have dipped and there is a mitigating circumstance do not be put off from applying. Outline the relevant details on your application. The Bar has a very understanding attitude in such situations.
- b) Prizes and awards for academic performance, or in national student legal essay competitions, are well regarded. Provide the context of the award or competition if you can i.e. number of prizes, number of potential applicants, nature of the excellence demonstrated. If you have won an essay competition you may be asked about your argument at interview.
- c) Material contributed to student run legal journals such as [Per Incuriam](#). Submitting a learned article as an extracurricular activity demonstrates not only analytical skills but also intellectual curiosity and organisational skills in meeting yet another deadline and commitment to the legal profession.

Relevant experience

Experience chambers would count as "relevant" can come in many forms. The most obvious is to apply for and carry out a "[mini pupillage](#)".

- **Mini pupillages.** It's a good idea to do [more than one mini pupillage](#) especially if you can arrange one at a chambers you think you might like to apply to for pupillage in due course. The link above has plenty of tips you'll find useful about mini pupillages. One to be added is to stay in, even occasional, contact with one of the barristers you encountered during your time in chambers...they can be valuable for you as supporters and "sounding boards" in due course.
- Some of your professional life at least will be spent in court so take every opportunity to **attend different courts** (all are part of the justice system in which you need to show a deep interest). You can search [locating a court near you](#) which will provide both phone and email contact details to confirm you are able to attend (although it's also possible to literally turn up and walk in on the day with the agreement of the court officials). It is even possible to observe the hearings and judgements of the [Supreme Court](#). There are many positive reasons for attending.
- There is a more formal way of viewing court proceedings and that is by [marshalling with a judge](#). Sitting next to a judge on the bench who will, occasionally, explain what's happening is one of the most insightful experiences you can have and can be arranged by contacting your local court(s) and via your Inn if you become a student member.
- **Pro-bono activities.** Throughout your time at university and/or law school there will be opportunities to help those more disadvantaged in society who find access to justice problematic and beset with difficulties or barriers. Find

out which are open to you and get involved. This brief article from [AllAboutLaw](#) and [this one](#) highlight some considerations to make.

- **Volunteering with a legal charity.** Both as a long term or short summer commitment there are many legal charities that survive only because of the support of their volunteers which they often recruit all year round. Many barristers in whatever area of practice will support charities with their time so it's another great place to encounter them. The Handshake resource "Volunteering with a legal charity" lists the most popular with their application details. It's in the Law section of "[Graduate Digital Publications](#)".

One of the most common pathways to developing work and advocacy experience and one which doubtless you will encounter if you continue with your academic and professional qualifications in London is with the [Free Representation Unit](#) (FRU). Their volunteers appear before either Employment Law tribunals or those for Social Security. Before you can carry out either, you will need to complete a short course of training with them. It is the most realistic experience of being a pupil barrister you can expect and plays well at interviews.

[Mooting and/or advocacy](#)

[Mooting](#) is how those intending to become barristers practice and improve their advocacy skills whilst a student. Although not all barristers will spend all their time in court it will be the essence of the work for many and whether representing a client or not, being able to advocate an argument will be how you interact with many peers and colleagues. Advocacy exercises are often part of pupillage interviews too. So, it is essential that you know how to advocate formally and that you practice and become comfortable with it. But don't worry. Although there are opportunities to involve yourself in advocacy you will receive formal training and support during your Bar course later on. There are earlier opportunities for both law and non-law students to moot laid on by your college law society and the [Cambridge University Law Society](#). A variation of mooting known as "speed mooting" has also become popular with students and each year BPP University hosts the [main competition](#).

[Standing out during the application process](#)

- a) It's vital you do your **research** into chambers, their practice areas and how a set may suit you and what you would bring, in time, in your own practice. In doing your research bear in mind that the profession is a personalised and individual one. Practitioners are known for what they do and in following them and quoting activities for which they have made the news at your interview you will be perceived as being comfortable with what's going on....a good sign at interview
- b) Showing **engagement and passion**. This is not a comment lightly made and is doubly important for those looking towards the criminal bar. In many respects the remuneration received will not reflect the volume of work to be covered and the often emotionally draining mental landscape of a barrister of long hours, dependant clients, responsibility and frustrations with the justice system. You will be demonstrating your career interests and values by

engaging with legal blogs and the social media published by those involved. Seek out practitioners to follow via their chambers' websites, LinkedIn or X (previously Twitter). Be an active reader of the opinion columns in the main broadsheet press and "take issue" with what is being argued to provide a counter view...practice developing an analytical insight to be advocated around the key argument. In short, strive to show that you "look and sound" the part of a barrister.

- c) **Talk to barristers.** Because, once again, you are following your own pathway to the Bar it's vital that all the thoughts and beliefs you form during your research about what life is like there are validated by those who actually do know. "What's it really like?" should be a question you ask of any barrister you encounter quickly followed by "What advice would you give me on what to do next?". Barristers are valued for their opinion giving so they will often readily respond. But be mindful of their time pressures and how busy they may be. You have ready access to practicing barristers with whom to have a conversation via:
- i. Most Chambers websites will, in the profiles of the barristers, list the University from which they graduated in the Education section of their details. If Cambridge is highlighted it provides an opening statement in your unsolicited approach to them, and you should also find their contact email address on the same pages.
 - ii. LinkedIn is a large national and international resource which, along with all other career sectors, provides not only the means of contacting Cambridge alumni but also learning from their career trajectories without having to contact them. Such insights will often provide you with many ideas for work experience you may never encounter otherwise. Start by accessing the [Cambridge alumni section](#). Thereafter navigate by using the search filters according to "what they studied" where are they located and "what they do." A simple free text keyword search on "Barrister" will suffice to get started.
 - iii. The Careers Service Handshake platform also facilitates contact with alumni. Select "Students" from your home page and then tick the box for "Alumni only" before going on to review career profiles by course of study.
 - iv. Use the connections afforded by your Inn if you become a student member (one of the many advantages and benefits of joining sooner rather than later).
 - v. Listen to lawyers speak at events and online presentations and catch up with episodes hosted on [Talking Law](#) where barristers also present their views and insights. Do quote anything important and relevant you take away by listening in your applications and assessments.

- d) As well as encountering and connecting with barristers there are **key events** in the year when either online or in person you can get to chat with practitioners. Look at the Careers Service Handshake diary of events for the Barristers Fair (just for chambers) held in late Michaelmas Term. Individual chambers will also host events through the diary, or your college law society or CULS, which you'll be able to attend. On the national scene there are large scale Pupillage Fairs organised by both the Bar Council which you will find promoted online and for which students from any University can register and then attend. They usually take place on a Saturday and as well as providing opportunities to meet the widest range of chambers also feature informative talks about the profession difficult to locate elsewhere.
- e) **Join an Inn as a student member.** You will need to join an Inn at the latest when undertaking your Bar vocational course and student membership fees are modest so why not join sooner or later. Talk to the relevant Student Officer or Educational manager at [each of the four Inns](#) to find out which is right for you...or simply choose by what they say on their websites. They provide sponsorship and scholarship finance and, as part of qualifying professionally, you can benefit from professional training events of which you will need to complete 12 as a necessary part of qualifying.
- f) **Seek out student societies** at Cambridge in which as a member you can participate and deepen your insights into current legal topics of concern to the Bar.
- g) **Think about further study.** You will have read already that the intellectual drive to be curious about the law and justice is one highly valued by the profession and so when you study the educational profiles of many pupil barristers on chambers websites you will see reference made to either one of the prestigious US Ivy League Law School's LLMs, the [Cambridge LLM](#), [Oxford BCL](#) or a specialised LLMs such as [UCL's Human Rights LLM](#). As well as demonstrating your drive you will benefit from the opportunity to acquire more detailed legal knowledge, practice your research skills and have the time to undertake even more volunteering, pro bono or mini pupillages all of which will continue to deepen the attractiveness of your profile. And those lacking in some areas of self-confidence will find more opportunities to practice and so develop the sense of their own maturity which they can then project at interviews.
- h) Finally, do take advantage of any opportunity to engage with an initiative or organisation that strives to address the key issues around **equality and diversity** at the Bar. There are several but they can remain out of sight for those that don't go searching. [Bridging the Bar](#) arranges mini pupillages, mentorship, alternative work experience with the likes of the Law Commission, and Supreme Court internships. Other supportive organisations include the [Association of Asian Women Lawyers](#), [Neurodiversity in Law](#), [Women in Criminal Law](#), and [Women in Family Law](#).

Application & Assessment process

CV and cover letter

“Pupillage Gateway” makes applying for pupillage easier than ever before. After you have completed and saved the online Practice Application Form, your details will be automatically copied across to up to 20 live pupillage applications. There is also a downloadable Sample Application Form available to help with your preparation.

However, when approaching chambers applying for mini pupillages, or as an accompaniment to an introduction when networking, intending barristers will require a CV that validates their relevant skills, interests and values in pursuing this career option. There are several resources to help you:

- a) The [CV and Applications Guide for Masters and Undergraduate](#) students includes many useful generic examples of putting together your CV but also a specific example for an intending barrister. Remember to make the reading experience of your audience productive and therefore impactful by being clear about your academic marks, any prizes or awards or essay competitions completed. Your advocacy and mooting skills should be clearly described perhaps under their own distinct heading and relevant experience should include mini pupillages but also any aspect of a role that requires you to represent a “constituency” that you then have to argue on behalf of, either an individual or group. You don’t have to list all your mini pupillages if you feel you have so many that it suggests indecision on your part; and three or four is sufficient. The key transferable strengths or skills that should shine through your material are taking the initiative or responsibility, being exceptionally well organised and resilient under pressure, and having well developed communication skills in front of an audience and when researching and presenting complex material.
- b) Having crafted your CV it can be reviewed and analysed for you by using the [CareerSet](#). This also has a cover letter review facility and will allow you to upload a real job specification with your CV which can then be analysed in context. The platform provides you with a score and a set of recommendations on how to improve your CV.
- c) It’s also possible to [book an appointment with a Careers Consultant](#) via Handshake to review your CV. They will cover much of the above but will also be able to comment on style and impact and how to improve those aspects.

Pupillage interviews

Listening to those who’ve had pupillage interviews it’s easy to think that it’s a “harrowing” exercise simply to get through and difficult to prepare for. With an intense interview schedule in a short time frame at several sets of chambers, quick fire questions in front of panels of experienced barristers keen to test your intellectual ability and capacity to advocate effectively it can pass in a blur. However, despite being a dense read as you’d expect the Bar Council does attempt to impose fairness, consistency and transparency into the process and for several years now

has made available to chambers the [Fair Recruitment Guide](#) which describes what to expect in detail. There is a chapter focused on interviews describing the different approaches you may encounter from biographical to structured, criteria-based interviews. The latter incorporates examples of competency-based questions and hypothetical or situational questions. It helpfully outlines what chambers (and therefore candidates) need to know about the STAR interview technique.

Chambers Student has a concise and [insightful list of “dos and don’ts”](#) at interviews which includes the straightforward “**Don’t** forget your main aim is to show your interviewers what a brilliant advocate you are. *“I don’t think people always realise that when we ask you to speak before us, we mean do so as a barrister,”* one recruiter shared. *“We don’t want to hear what your personal views are; we want to hear a structured argument that contains your best points.”* More insights and guidance on preparing and delivering successful pupillage interviews come from [BPP University](#). And there are many videos to watch in preference to reading, e.g. one from [Daniel Barnett](#) and one from the students on the University of Law vocational course on [answering ethical questions](#).

Perhaps the most challenging part of a pupillage interview is the “work sample exercise”. This will reflect basic level work carried out by pupil barristers in chambers and may require you to prepare in advance from a set of papers provided, or prepare on the day, or done in real time where the pressure can really be felt. Two typical exercises are to prepare a skeleton argument or a plea in mitigation and there is quite an amount of information available to find online but here are two examples of [preparing a skeleton argument](#) with [more examples](#) and a [plea in mitigation](#) from Oxbridge Notes.

Additional key resources and research

The definitive report and source of comprehensive data on the outcomes of students at each stage of the application process is the “[BPTC Key Statistics](#)”, analysis published by the Bar Standards Board. It is a goldmine of helpful information not least on what Bar course provider to select and apply to.

Inner Temple has published “[Becoming a barrister](#)” which as well as being a careers guide also describes the support on offer for members of the Inn, lists forthcoming events and newsletters to which you can subscribe.

[Secret Barrister](#). Everyone hoping for a career which facilitates access to justice should be aware of the Secret Barrister website, blog, podcast, books and X (previously Twitter) feed. Should you have the passion and interest to succeed at whatever area of the Bar in which to practice, stay up-to-date with the absolute fundamentals.

Before the proliferation of digital media two key text books stood out, written by Oxbridge alumni and still worth a read on the practical details. Firstly “*Bewigged and Bewildered?*” by Adam Kramer QC and Ian Higgins and also “*Path to Pupillage*” by Georgina Wolfe and Alexander Robson.

To follow the news affecting the Bar on a more regular basis access [The Law Society Gazette](#), and [Law.com](#).

To follow legal issues in podcast format, choose one or more to follow from the [list of top 15 sites](#) provided by LawCareers.Net.

Listen to the experts offer advice on how to develop advocacy techniques and tips drawn from real cases at the "[Advocacy Podcast](#)".

Public law and the access to justice generally are topics of interest to all those who aspire to become barristers, notwithstanding their areas of interest to practice. If public law is your area of interest or if you want to be prepared for questions that present themselves in interviews then [Public Law for Everyone](#) is the ideal place to keep up to date and is published by the Chair of the Faculty of Law at Cambridge, Professor Mark Elliot.

Following the theme of Human Rights there is an excellent resource known as [Human Rights Pulse](#) which has extensive material including a newsletter, two podcast series, dedicated careers pages which incorporate resource guides and a comprehensive listing of all the jobs sites internationally for those interested in roles in human rights including internships.

For those interested in the Criminal Bar one essential resource is the weekly newsletter produced by a Cambridge alumnus [Sam Willis](#) entitled "[Witness](#)". It provides highly readable and accessible accounts about key topics. Sam is a Research Fellow in Constitutional Reform with the [Public Law Project](#) which itself is a highly influential and informative organisation to follow. Becoming a student member enables you to attend their events at significant discount and they have a constant need for research volunteers for the work they do which often will appear in the headlines.

Finally, you can watch the one-hour video recorded online in front of a Cambridge audience entitled "[How to land a pupillage](#)" presented by the vastly experienced Mark Keith who is the Bar Course designer for BPP Law School. During this session Mark outlines the qualification process for becoming a barrister. In addition, the session touches on how to stand out, in what can be a long process, of strengthening your profile in acquiring pupillage. Mark describes the different interview frameworks used by chambers and, helpfully, highlights the often-overlooked element of "ethics" which always surfaces and suggest how to prepare yourself to discuss the topic.

Note about Bar Courses

Once you have completed your academic stage of studying you will need to go on to the vocational stage or Bar Course (it will come under a variety of names according to the provider). There may be several factors you'll want to consider when choosing a provider including the provision of any additional funding, teaching environment to support your studies and careers support whilst on the course. Also important will be the opportunity to continue to develop your advocacy skills and experience with pro bono activities. LawCareers.Net has provided a [good guide to barrister training](#) and

Prospects provides a [comprehensive list](#). To find out more always attend an open day in person or virtually and before committing ask the admissions team from the institution you are thinking of applying to whether it would be possible to speak with either a current student on the course or a recent alumnus.