

# What Do Lawyers & Attorneys Do?

The information provided below is from the "ABA Complete Personal Legal Guide: The Essential Reference for Every Household."<sup>1</sup> The book is available for purchase here:

<http://www.abanet.org/abastore/index.cfm?fm=Product.AddToCart&pid=2350246>

## What exactly is a lawyer?

A lawyer (also called attorney, counsel, counselor, barrister, or solicitor) is a licensed professional who advises and represents others in legal matters. Today's lawyer can be young or old, male or female. Nearly one-third of all lawyers are under thirty-five. Almost half the law students today are women, and women will probably ultimately be as numerous in the profession as men.

## For what kind of matters do Americans tend to see a lawyer?

In a recent study of Americans over the age of 18, researchers for the American Bar Association found almost half had used a lawyer in the past five years. The most common legal matters taken to lawyers involved

- real estate transactions (12%)
- drawing up a will (11%)
- as a party to a lawsuit (11%)
- divorce/separation (9%)
- probate/estate settlement matters (6%)
- child support/custody matter (5%)
- draw up an agreement/contract (5%)

Other fairly common matters requiring a lawyer's help included traffic matters, insurance claims, bankruptcy, auto accidents, and being a complainant or defendant in a criminal proceeding.

Source: Perceptions of the U.S. Justice System (Chicago: American Bar Association, 1999).

## Are there specific cases when I should see a lawyer?

Yes, there are matters best handled by a lawyer. Nearly everyone agrees that you should talk with a lawyer about major life events or changes, which might include:

- being arrested for a crime or served with legal papers in a civil lawsuit;
- being involved in a serious accident causing personal injury or property damage;
- a change in family status such as divorce, adoption, or death;
- a change in financial status such as getting or losing valuable personal property or real estate, or filing for bankruptcy.

**Should I save money and wait until I absolutely need the lawyer's services?**

No. An ounce of prevention is worth many dollars and anxious hours of cure. Once you have determined that you need professional legal help, get it promptly. You can get the most help if you are in touch with a lawyer as soon as possible.

**What are the professional requirements for becoming a lawyer?**

Lawyers must go through special schooling. Before being allowed to practice law in most states, a person usually must:

- have a bachelor's degree or its equivalent;
- complete three years at an accredited law school;
- pass a state bar examination, which usually lasts for two or three days; it tests knowledge in selected areas of law and in professional ethics and responsibility;
- pass a character and fitness review; each applicant for a law license must be approved by a committee that investigates his or her character and background;
- take an oath swearing to uphold the laws and the state and federal constitutions;
- receive a license from the state supreme court; some states have additional requirements, such as internship in a law office, before a license will be granted.

**I come from another country, and I need to hire a lawyer. Aren't notary publics actually lawyers?**

A "notary public," "accountant," or "certified public accountant" is not necessarily a lawyer. Do not assume that titles such as notary public mean the same thing as similar words in your own language.