



20 Essential Legal Tips to Know Before You Hire a Lawyer

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Do I Need a Lawyer?

1. Define your problem carefully before considering hiring a lawyer.

Start with the basics: "Do I need a lawyer?". Sometimes it's easy to know if you need to find an attorney. If you've been charged with a crime, been served with a lawsuit, or need a divorce — a lawyer is exactly what you need. Lawyers, however, aren't just for criminals or those in litigation. Qualified attorneys — like those at LegalMatch — can also provide advice and knowledge to people who just need to talk to an expert.

A skilled lawyer's advice can help you understand the complex rules associated with business negotiations and partnerships, estate planning, adoption, will and trust drafting, tax strategies and much more.

Lawyers improve their clients' quality of life by protecting them from situations that might later bring emotional and financial hardship. A good, high-quality lawyer is there to help those in trouble now and those who want to avoid trouble in the future. You can begin your search for legal help by presenting your case to LegalMatch, where qualified lawyers can review your situation and help you to resolve it. Finding a lawyer is fast, free and confidential at LegalMatch.

2. Ask yourself, and others, if it is possible and prudent to solve your own problem.

In many cases, you may be able to solve your problem without an attorney's help. If a company has wronged you, see if it has a customer service department. Often, a complaint can be settled to your satisfaction without having to find a lawyer. You may also want to contact the consumer protection department at your state attorney general offices.

If a regulated industry (like a bank or insurance company) has wronged you, there is a state-run agency in charge of watching that industry that you can contact. The agency may be able to deal with the problem on your behalf. Community groups might also be able to offer you free advice on these types of legal matters.

On the other hand, sometimes a lawyer's advice can be well worth the money. A lawyer can help ensure that you contact the right people first, and that you don't do something that will hurt your case later. LegalMatch makes finding the right lawyer easier than ever.

3. Determine the immediacy of your situation.

If you've been accused of a crime or find yourself the defendant in a legal suit, contact a lawyer immediately.

Avoid delay in seeking legal counsel if you've been injured and plan to pursue your rights. Waiting several months could jeopardize your right to seek relief.

Even if you are thinking about legal help merely to avoid problems in the future, it's never too early to begin your legal search. For example, tax strategies, corporate and employment law





advice, and estate planning shouldn't be put off for too long. Putting legal matters on the back burner might cost you more in the end.

When you decide to act, when you've comprehensively answered that "Do I need a lawyer?" question, LegalMatch is there to make finding the right lawyer fast, safe, and secure. At LegalMatch, you can confidentially present your case on-line for lawyers to review, and then evaluate lawyer responses, credentials, and experience at a speed you're comfortable with.

Finding a Lawyer

4. Find a lawyer that best suits your needs.

There are a lot of lawyers out there, but how do you find one that best suits your needs?

First, you need to find one who works in the proper jurisdiction. Typically, lawyers are licensed to practice in a particular state. LegalMatch clearly indicates the states in which its lawyers are licensed, making the selection process very easy for you.

Second, you need to find one who knows how to best handle your case best. Many lawyers specialize in one type of law or another. A specialist in family law won't be your best option if you need a bankruptcy lawyer. LegalMatch matches your case with lawyers based on their practice areas and expertise to make it simple for you to find a specialist or a generalist as you search for legal help.

Third, you need to find a lawyer compatible with your budget. If a lawyer on television advertises low fees, they may not include every service you'll need in that fee. LegalMatch requires lawyers to spell out exactly what is included in the advertised fee. This allows you to compare what lawyers are charging with what services they actually provide.

LegalMatch makes finding a qualified lawyer fast and easy. Present your case, and interested attorneys will send you a message commenting on your case and describing why they may be best qualified to help you.

5. Read legal advertisements carefully.

As a general rule in life, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Many reputable lawyers don't advertise in newspapers or the Yellow Pages. Don't assume that the size of the Yellow Page ad means that a lawyer is better qualified than one with a small ad (or no ad at all). Always review a lawyer's background. LegalMatch makes this easy with the profiles we offer on our LegalMatch Member Attorneys. These help you learn about a lawyer's experience and qualifications.

6. Consider more than one lawyer.

Consider several lawyers before selecting one. It is important that you find someone who has the skills you need, who will be honest with you and who will work hard on your behalf. Make sure you review all the responses from attorneys on your LegalMatch homepage and carefully read





each LegalMatch Member Attorney's profile to learn about his or her experience and qualifications. Then, check out each attorney's LegalMatch Client-Rating to find out the experiences of other clients with this attorney.

Be prepared when you call or meet with the lawyer you selected. Make a list of questions so you get the information you need. If you think you might feel intimidated asking these questions in person, e-mail them to the LegalMatch Member Attorney and don't agree to anything until you get the answers. Focus on what you want to know, including asking for references, recent cases they have handled, whether or not they have tried similar cases, if they will have a less experienced lawyer working on your case instead of handling it themselves, or if they will refer you to a different lawyer if it looks like you will be going to court.

Never sign anything until you have time to review it and consider other responses, and certainly do not sign anything you do not fully understand.

Hiring a Lawyer

7. Don't hire a lawyer who actively solicits your business.

If, without your permission, a lawyer or someone acting on their behalf contacts you in person or by telephone and asks you to hire him in connection with your accident, it is commonly referred to as "ambulance chasing." This is against the Legal Rules of Professional Conduct. When a lawyer will break those rules to get your business, he is probably not the kind of lawyer you want representing you.

8. Make sure you understand what you're paying for.

No two contingency fee arrangements are alike. Find out if your lawyer will take their fee "off the top" or only after all the expenses are counted up. Insist on getting this information in writing and in clear, direct language that you are comfortable with. Typical expenses include: court costs (fees for filing a lawsuit), court reporter and copies of transcripts, expert witness fees, private investigator, postage, telephone, courier, photocopying, legal research, out of town air or car transportation, and hotel and meal expenses. LegalMatch Member Attorneys will typically provide this information in their responses to your case.

9. Learn how you can fire a lawyer.

Some contracts specify that even if you fire a lawyer, he still gets a large percentage of any future award or settlement you may receive on your case. Make sure you know how to fire your lawyer – before you hire him or her.

10. Check out your lawyer's records.

Ask your state bar association if your lawyer has ever been the subject of an ethical complaint or inquiry. Knowing if your lawyer has a pattern of questionable conduct could alert you to potential problems and save you time and money. LegalMatch Member Attorneys are pre-screened for such violations prior to joining LegalMatch.



11. Know your options and make sure your lawyer gives you them.

Lawyers don't just sue. In fact, suing can be one of the more expensive and time-consuming ways for you to get compensated. Make sure your lawyer has an open mind about alternative means to resolve your problem, such as mediation or arbitration.

Working with a Lawyer

12. Ask yourself these 11 questions — and be able to answer them.

It is important to not only find a lawyer with the fairest price, but also find the one most qualified to handle your case. At LegalMatch, much of the legwork has already been provided for you.

Here are 11 important questions to ask before agreeing to hire any lawyer:

1. Is the lawyer a generalist, or a specialist in one type of law?
2. Has the lawyer handled cases like yours before?
3. What different outcomes can the lawyer predict for your case?
4. What alternatives to a lawsuit might be considered?
5. Should mediation or arbitration be considered?
6. How long should you expect to retain the lawyer's services?
7. How often will you be billed, and what's the lawyer's estimation for fees and services?
8. How will the lawyer inform you of the case's progress?
9. What style can you expect from the lawyer: aggressive or open to settlement?
10. Will others be assisting in the case?
11. Is the lawyer covered by malpractice insurance?

The lawyer-client relationship is stronger when the lawyer and client understand each other. Let LegalMatch assist you in finding the lawyer who is the most qualified, affordable, and understanding of your needs.

13. Establish ground rules.

Legal matters can have a variety of outcomes. None are ever predictable. Once you've chosen a lawyer from LegalMatch, you need to communicate your expectations before you begin discussing strategies to win. Your lawyer needs to know what your "dream outcome" for the lawsuit is, and your lawyer needs to explain all other possible outcomes that could happen if you pursue the case in court. Even if your "dream outcome" seems ridiculous, your lawyer needs to be aware of it. After explaining your "dream outcome," you need to list all other possible outcomes that you would accept in the order that you would accept them. This will give your lawyer something to shoot for as well as keeping him or her from settling for less than you expect.

Here are some things to bring up with your lawyer as you discuss the possible outcomes you'll accept in your legal matters:

- What is the maximum amount in legal fees you want to pay?



- When is the latest/earliest you want the legal matter attended to?
- What is the minimum amount of settlement you will agree to?
- What is the worst way you think your case can end?
- How much are you willing to disrupt your life to pursue this matter legally?

By ranking acceptable outcomes with your lawyer, you avoid the possibility of your lawyer not obtaining the best possible outcome that you'll accept. Be sure to give the lawyer a chance to voice an opinion about your ranked outcomes.

14. Develop a strategic plan.

After you and your LegalMatch lawyer understand your ground rules, it's time to discuss the plan for winning your case. In most cases, the better plan with the better follow-through generally wins. Your lawyer needs to be able to explain how he or she plans to win the case, and after your initial meeting should be given the opportunity to draft a strategic plan. The strategic plan, for the most part, forces your lawyer to give immediate attention to your case, encouraging creative and proactive thinking. A strategic plan explains all of the following:

- What the plan is and what results it should probably produce
- Why it's the best possible plan
- How long the plan will probably take, from beginning to end
- How much it will probably cost to implement the plan
- What special circumstances might require deviation from the plan

Your lawyer will charge you for the time it takes to draft a strategic plan. You might decide it's an unnecessary cost, especially if you're not expecting to need a lawyer's services for long or you're paying a lawyer with a flat fee agreement. Still, some legal matters take a longer amount of time than a client expects. Knowing this ahead of time is exactly why a strategic plan might be in your best interest. In the long run, you might be saving yourself a good deal of money. As for the cost of drafting the plan, you can instruct your lawyer up front to spend only a certain amount of money on drafting the plan.

Finally, don't hesitate in modifying the plan that your lawyer comes up with, if necessary. The strategic plan, when agreed upon by lawyer and client, will keep your lawyer on the right path for the duration of your lawsuit.

15. Temper what you are getting vs. what it's costing you on an ongoing basis.

If you're not paying a flat fee to your lawyer, this information is for you. A lawyer's services are rarely cheap. A client has the right to be in control, and to fully understand how his or her money is being spent. LegalMatch helps you find the right lawyer for the best price, but you still should monitor how your money is being spent. Do the following to minimize your costs:

- Right from the start, tell your lawyer all that you know. Remember, lawyers must maintain confidential relationships. Waiting until the last minute to communicate something with your lawyer wastes money.



- Brush up on matters related to your legal affairs. Ask good questions and establish intelligent communication. Keep copies of important documents in your own files.
- Be certain you've found the lawyer who's right for you. Changing lawyers after the legal process has started can be very expensive.
- Understand the fee agreement you and your lawyer agree upon, and question unclear charges before you pay them. Insist your lawyer honors thrift if out-of-pocket expenses are part of the fee agreement.
- Ask if there's anything you can do or gather to help the process. Be prepared and honor deadlines at all your meetings.
- Ask your lawyer about all alternatives to the dispute's resolution.

The lawyer-client relationship is a two-way street, and these simple steps can help to insure your money is being spent in your best interest.

About Legal Fees

16. Understand where all the fees are generated.

You should feel comfortable when discussing fees with a lawyer. LegalMatch requires lawyers to explain their fees up front, but you may want to question the matter in further depth. Talking money with your lawyer is an excellent way to judge how he or she treats clients. The types of fees a lawyer can charge are discussed below.

Hourly rates are the most common type of fee. Depending on a lawyer's experience and location, an hourly rate can vary quite a bit. Cheaper might be better, but a more expensive and experienced lawyer could very well handle your case faster and better. At the consultation, remember to ask for an estimate of how many hours you can expect to pay for.

Flat fees are usually charged when the services being provided are more predictable. It is important to ask the lawyer exactly what services and expenses are and are not covered in a flat fee. LegalMatch requires lawyers to explain these expenses when responding with a flat fee.

A contingent fee means the lawyer charges no fee but instead earns a percentage of the settlement or judgment, if any is awarded. Contingent fees — typically one-third of the settlement or judgment — can be negotiated. In some cases, contingent fees are prohibited.

Retainer fees are advanced payment based on an hourly rate. Clients put money into a special account, and the lawyer deducts fees as services are completed. The client is responsible for reviewing the account periodically. The client should be aware that the retainer fee is generally refundable if not used by the lawyer.

A statutory fee is a fee set by law. Some legal work requires the court to set or approve the fee.

No matter which type of fee agreed upon between you and your lawyer, always obtain proof of the agreement in writing.



17. Have realistic payment expectations.

In addition to a lawyer's fees, you might be expected to pay certain expenses. These should be discussed in as much detail as you feel is necessary before hiring a lawyer and the lawyer should be willing to provide explanations of these charges with each monthly bill. Review your response carefully to see which expenses are included in your legal fee and which expenses are separate.

A client generally pays for the following expenses:

- * Photocopying charges
- * Long distance telephone charges
- * Courier, postage, and overnight delivery charges
- * Filing fees
- * Court reporter and expert witness charges
- * Reasonable travel and transportation charges

A client usually does not pay the following expenses, unless under special circumstances:

- * Standard secretarial and office staff services
- * Standard office supplies
- * Local telephone charges
- * In-town meals
- * First-class travel costs and out of town meals without restrictions

Ensure that you're not taken by surprise with the hidden costs of expenses. Discuss them with a lawyer before you hire.

18. Always look at your monthly bill.

A monthly bill from a lawyer takes time to look over. It is in your best interest to take the time so that you completely understand where your lawyer is coming from. This can only strengthen the relationship between the two of you.

It is important to ask for specifics if your itemized bill seems unclear in some area. Your bill should show your lawyer's fees and your lawyer's expenses. If you've been charged for five hours of research time, your bill should tell you what exactly was being researched; if it doesn't, you need to ask. All items on your bill should have some degree of explanation.

Track specific time and activities that you are billed for each month. Keep your eye out for time billed that seems repetitious with other bills. If something seems out of the ordinary, don't accuse your lawyer, but question him or her. Even if it's a justified expense, by bringing it up you let your lawyer know that you're paying close attention, which is completely within your rights.

Finally, everyone makes mistakes in math — lawyers too. Don't be afraid to get out the calculator and check the addition. Learn more about Attorney Fees and what are considered Reasonable Lawyer Fees in the LegalMatch Law Library



19. Always evaluate your lawyer.

LegalMatch allows clients to evaluate a lawyer's service on-line after a case is over.

A good lawyer is, above all, a professional. In evaluating your lawyer, measure their ability to:

- Provide case updates regularly.
- Return your phone calls within one business day.
- Honor deadlines, with a reasonable amount of flexibility.
- Maintain a loyalty to you while keeping honest, even while being critical of your wishes.
- Honor confidences.
- Discuss openly all billing matters while honoring the original agreement for services.
- Refer you to talk to someone else when specialized expertise is needed.
- Appear prepared at meetings or court appearances.

20. If you are happy or unhappy, do something.

If you're happy or unhappy with the lawyer you found on LegalMatch, remember to rate them at LegalMatch. This will help others when deciding whether or not to hire the lawyer. That's how LegalMatch works, and why it works so well.

If you are unhappy with your lawyer, remember that firing your legal counsel can be costly. If you are in the middle of a lawsuit or criminal case, it may also require the court's permission. Act fast, but be certain it's what you want to do.

If you feel your lawyer is being unprofessional, or you were not treated with care and respect, please send us an e-mail at feedback@legalmatch.com before you file a complaint with your state's bar association. We may be able to help resolve any misunderstandings or disputes.