

Pursuing a Law Degree

SECTION ONE: Types of Law Degrees

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Studying law in the United States requires an advanced degree. Explore the different types of law degrees you can earn when you're interested in practicing law or learning more about it.

Key takeaways

A law degree is a graduate-level qualification, available through multiple degree pathways, including the Juris Doctor and a Master of Laws.

- A few examples of courses you can take as part of a law degree program are civil and criminal procedure, constitutional and property law, and legal writing.
- In a JD program, you may specialize in a specific type of law, such as civil rights, corporate, criminal, employment and labor, environmental, immigration, real estate, tax, and more.
- You can find many [jobs](#) with a law degree, including traditional lawyer roles as well as those as a nonprofit manager, higher education teacher, director of human resources, or campaign manager.

Learn about the types of law degrees you can earn, the benefits of pursuing a law degree, and the variety of jobs you can pursue after graduation.

What is a law degree?

In the US, law degrees are considered [graduate degrees](#), meaning you must first earn your [bachelor's degree](#) before applying to law school or a [master's program](#) to specialize in law studies.

At the undergraduate level, many "pre-law" students choose to study English, political science, psychology, or related [majors](#) in the [humanities](#) or [social sciences](#) to improve their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills, which are key skills needed to succeed in law school.

Law degree coursework

The specific classes you take will depend on the type of law degree you pursue and the school you attend. However, classes typically include broad topics like the legal system, procedure, and law.

For example, as a first-year law student, you may participate in courses covering civil and criminal procedure, constitutional and property law, and legal writing. Later, you may take courses that concentrate on contract writing or [negotiation](#).

Law degree skills

When you earn your law degree, you'll have an opportunity to hone valuable [transferable skills](#), such as:

- [Critical thinking](#)
- Logical reasoning
- Public speaking
- Presentation skills
- [Communication](#)
- Persuasion
- [Leadership](#)

5 types of law degrees

Depending on your career goals, you can pursue the law degrees below after graduating with your bachelor's degree.

1. Juris Doctor law degree

The [Juris Doctor \(JD\) degree](#) is a [terminal degree](#) designed for students who want to practice law. Applying often requires taking the LSAT, the standardized entrance exam for law school, along with a range of materials, including your undergraduate GPA, a personal statement, letters of recommendation, and more.

It typically [takes three years](#), and you must take the bar exam once you've finished your program. While in your JD program, you can choose from various specialties when deciding what type of law to practice. Options typically include:

- **Civil rights:** Help counter discrimination and protect civil liberties.

- **Corporate:** Review contracts, prepare documents, and assist with mergers, acquisitions, and compliance.
- **Criminal:** Prosecute crimes or defend people accused of those crimes.
- **Employment and labor:** Cases can include labor disputes, unlawful terminations, discrimination, and workplace safety.
- **Environmental:** Work with cases focusing on natural resource management, pollution, and land disputes.
- **Family:** Assist families with issues involving divorce, child support, adoption, marriage, and domestic partnerships.
- **Immigration:** Assist people at any stage in the naturalization process or handle cases regarding asylum.
- **Intellectual property:** Help creators protect their inventions, writings, and works of art.
- **International law:** Work with private companies or governments to enter into agreements, comply with the law, and conduct business.
- **Personal injury:** Work on cases involving accidents, wrongful death, medical malpractice, and product liability.
- **Real estate:** Review contracts and assist with cases involving commercial or residential developers, tenants, and landlords.
- **Sports and entertainment:** Your clients may be artists or athletes who need help protecting intellectual property, staying in compliance with regulations, or negotiating contracts.
- **Tax:** Help clients comply with tax law while lowering tax liabilities.

Is a JD higher than a master's?

If you want to practice law in the US, you need to earn at least a [JD degree](#). However, while you need one to obtain a license, it is not the same as a research-based master's degree. A Master of Laws degree (LLM) allows JD holders to further specialize in a specific type of law. You can also think of a JD as a [professional degree](#) and an LLM as a graduate-level academic degree.

2. Master of Laws

The LLM is a graduate degree for those who've already earned their JD and want to build expertise in a specific area of law, such as tax law or immigration law. Lawyers from outside the United States and Canada may also pursue this degree to learn US legal skills. It's a customizable program that typically takes one year to complete.

3. Doctor of Juridical Science

In most schools, the Doctor of Juridical Science (SJD) is the most advanced law degree you can earn and is a common requirement for law professors. Most SJD graduates spend their careers teaching, researching, and [writing](#) in a specific area of interest.

SJD degrees take between three and five years of full-time study to complete all requirements, which typically include coursework, examinations, presentations, and a dissertation. Applying to an SJD degree often requires first earning your LLM, which itself requires first earning a JD degree.

4. Master of Dispute Resolution

A Master of Dispute Resolution (MDR) is a graduate degree with coursework focusing on conflict resolution. It requires around two years of full-time study.

Build your negotiation, mediation, and arbitration skills for public policy, law, health care, or human resources roles. You don't need a law degree to apply for an MDR program at most schools.

5. Master of Legal Studies

A Master of Legal Studies (MLS) allows you to build your law knowledge without pursuing credentials to practice as a lawyer. In other words, you can enroll in an MLS program without first earning your JD.

At many schools, you can complete the degree in one to two years. Customize your education by choosing a concentration, such as health care, [human resources](#), or finance. This degree may be called a Master of Science of Law, Juris Master, or Master of Jurisprudence.

What can you do with a law degree?

With a law degree, you can pursue careers in legal and nonlegal professions. All industries and sectors, such as corporations, nonprofit organizations, or government agencies, require legal expertise.

Legal jobs include work as a lawyer (bankruptcy, business, criminal defense, labor, entertainment, estate planning, immigration, personal injury, tax, etc.) and a judge at the municipal, state, or federal level.

If you prefer working in a non-legal field, you can apply your law school experience to many areas. The roles below allow you to use skills you developed in law school in many different situations:

- **Activism:** Nonprofit manager, community organizer

- **Administration and management:** Law firm administrator, business manager, [project manager](#)
- **Education:** Higher education educator, director of education
- **Finance:** Financial planner, investment banker, venture capitalist, certified public accountant
- **Human resources:** Employee trainer, director of human resources, [recruiter](#)
- **Journalism:** Reporter, editor, publisher
- **Politics:** Legislative representative, campaign manager, or policy watch organizer

Access free resources for your career in law

Learn about emerging industry trends and gain access to career tips by subscribing to [Career Chat](#), our LinkedIn newsletter. You can also explore the following free resources as you consider your law degree options:

- **Read our Career Chat issue:** [How to Strengthen Your Critical Thinking Skills](#)
 - **Take a quiz:** [Career Test: What Career Is Right for Me Quiz?](#)
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SECTION TWO: The Bar Exam

SOURCE: <https://esplawyers.com/lawyers-blog/what-is-the-bar-exam-for-lawyers-a-complete-guide>

1. Definition and Purpose of the Bar Exam

At its core, the bar exam is the licensing test required for law school graduates to practice law in a given jurisdiction. It measures not only knowledge of legal principles but also the ability to apply them in practical scenarios. Passing the exam signifies competence, ethics, and readiness to serve the public. Without it, no matter how strong a student's law school performance, they cannot officially represent clients in court.

2. Structure and Content of the Exam

The bar exam is typically divided into multiple sections, including multiple-choice questions, essay components, and performance tests. The Multistate Bar Examination (MBE) is a major component, covering topics like contracts, criminal law, and constitutional law. Essays challenge candidates to apply knowledge to real-life hypotheticals, while performance tests simulate practical lawyering tasks. Together, these sections assess whether a candidate can transition from theory to practice.

3. State Variations and the Uniform Bar Exam

In the United States, requirements vary by state. Some jurisdictions use the Uniform Bar Exam (UBE), which standardizes the test across multiple states, while others maintain their own exams with local law sections. For example, California's bar exam is famously rigorous, known for both its length and its demanding essays. This variation means aspiring lawyers must carefully research where they plan to practice, as the bar exam is not automatically transferable across all states.

4. Real Experiences and Stories from Aspiring Lawyers

Stories from test-takers reveal just how challenging the bar exam can be. One law graduate described the months of preparation as “a full-time job layered on top of student debt and personal pressure.” Another shared how failing the first attempt was devastating, but passing the second time brought an immense sense of achievement. These experiences highlight the emotional and mental weight of the exam, and why support networks and expert advice can be critical.

5. Challenges and Preparation Strategies

Preparing for the bar exam often takes months of disciplined study. Candidates rely on prep courses, practice exams, and strict schedules. Common challenges include balancing study time with financial or family responsibilities, managing stress, and retaining a vast amount of legal knowledge. Successful strategies involve breaking study into manageable chunks, practicing under timed conditions, and building resilience. Some even create study groups for mutual accountability and encouragement.