

RESOURCES FOR NEW ATTORNEYS

Your First 90 Days as a New Associate

A checklist for new attorneys

Law school taught you to think like a lawyer. Your first year teaches you everything else: managing your time without a syllabus, handling work that arrives without warning, and performing before any of it feels natural.

The habits you build in your first 90 days will shape the rest of your career. Start here.

Days 1 to 30: Set Up Your Systems

The goal this month is infrastructure. Get the basics in place before the workload ramps up.

- ☐ Pick one place to track every open assignment, deadline, and next step. A running document, a task list, or a notes app all work. What matters is that it is one place, not your head.
- ☐ Block five minutes at the end of each day to update your task list, and five minutes each morning to review it and plan your day.
- ☐ Start treating your calendar as a work tool, not just a meeting log. If a memo is due Thursday, block writing time Tuesday and Wednesday. Unscheduled work gets crowded out.

- ☐ Set a pattern for checking and responding to email. Responsive during business hours does not mean dropping everything the moment a message lands. Constant context-switching destroys your ability to concentrate.
- ☐ Get familiar with your firm's research platforms before you need them under deadline pressure. Learn which resources answer which kinds of questions.
- ☐ If you practice in California, learn CEB's Practitioner platform thoroughly. The practice guides are written by practitioners and updated regularly. When you are new to an area of law, a well-organized guide that walks you through the framework and points you to key authorities is far more efficient than starting from a raw case search.
- ☐ Start a time-estimate log. Every time you begin a task, write down how long you think it will take. When you finish, note how long it actually took.

Days 31 to 60: Sharpen How You Take On Work

The goal this month is precision. You have systems. Now use them to close the gap between what supervisors expect and what you deliver.

- ☐ Before starting any assignment, confirm the output. Ask about format, length, audience, and whether a prior version or template exists.
- ☐ Ask what the most important issue is, so if you hit time pressure you know where to focus.
- ☐ When you are not sure you understood an assignment, send a quick summary email: "Just to confirm, you are looking for a memo of about three to five pages summarizing California's approach to X. I will have a draft to you by end of day Wednesday." That signals competence, not insecurity.
- ☐ Review your time-estimate log. Look for patterns in where your estimates run short: research, drafting, or review. Use what you find to give supervisors realistic timelines.
- ☐ Start a feedback log. When work comes back marked up, capture not just what changed but why. Where did the analysis fall short? Where did the writing confuse the reader? What issue got missed?

- ☐ Treat heavy edits as information, not a verdict. Substantial markup is a normal part of the first year. It means you are learning a new job, not failing at one.

Days 61 to 90: Build for the Long Run

The goal this month is sustainability. The associates who come out of year one strongest are not the ones who worked the most hours. They are the ones who worked thoughtfully.

- ☐ Review your feedback log for repeat patterns, and build a personal pre-submission checklist from them. The goal is catching those issues before the work goes out.
- ☐ Audit your calendar. Are you still blocking time for real work, or has it filled up with everything else? Reclaim it.
- ☐ Protect sleep, take real breaks, and keep at least some time that is genuinely yours. A six-month sprint that leaves you running on empty does not serve you or your clients.
- ☐ Check your estimates against reality one more time. By day 90, your predictions should be noticeably closer than they were on day one. That self-knowledge is one of the most valuable things you can build.
- ☐ Look back at your first three months and name the habits that are working. Keep those. The first year is hard by design, but it is also an investment in the career that comes after it.

Keep building from here.

Explore CEB's full collection of guidance for early-career attorneys: [CEB resources for law students and recent graduates](#).