

# Survive Law

## Interviews – Not just surviving, but thriving

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Want a law job but worried about the interview? Marque Lawyers managing partner Michael Bradley, who has been interviewing would-be summer clerks for two decades, shares his insights and advice with Survive Law:

Job interviews are awful ordeals. Artificial, contrived situations with ennui on one side and terror on the other. I've sat in literally thousands of them, and I feel the pain every time. It's true that no two interviewers are alike, so I can't write a perfect how-to guide, but there are universal rules of engagement and they're basically the same as those applicable to trying to pick someone up in a pub.

I'm not calling it a survival guide, because that isn't going to get you a job anywhere. If you set out to just get out of an interview with your skin and dignity intact, you might as well stay home. Every interview is there to be won. Doesn't mean you'll get the job, but you can make sure you leave nothing in the change room and give yourself the best shot before the factors which you can't control (prejudice, nepotism, random chance) come into play in the final selection.

I've elected to say nothing about applications, because the rules there are anything but universal. I can tell you what works for Marque, but I guarantee that it's almost the polar opposite of what most law firms want to see in a job application. So let's just pretend you got the interview already.

### 1. Know what you want

The job, yeah I get that. You want the job. But why? Why this job, why this firm? If the answer to that is "It's better than unemployment", well then you are probably screwed. Interviewers, like dogs, can smell uncertainty. So you need to do better than that and come up with a genuine reason why you want this job. If the answer stays the same, no need to read further. You might get the job, but it will be luck of the draw. And you'll then have a job you didn't really want, yahoo.

But if, happily, this *is* a job and a firm you really really want, then take the trouble to work out why. Articulate the reasons to yourself repeatedly until you can do so to someone else without embarrassment. The single biggest positive motivator for an interviewer is their belief that you really seriously want to join them. Not surprising, because your desire vindicates their own choice to work at that firm.

I've avoided the word "desperate" and so should you. Passionate enthusiasm is inspiring. Desperation just smells bad.

### 2. Study your prey

One word: research. You have no excuse, now they've invented the Internet. Read the entire website. Read all the available press about the firm. Find out if possible who will be interviewing you (just call up and ask) and research them too. Find out what the firm thinks differentiates it from its competitors and of what it seems to be proud.

### 3. Make a list

A very long list. Of questions that you are going to ask them. You will always be given an opportunity to ask questions. Your instinctive assumption will be that this is so that you can find out things you didn't already know. That is wrong, badly wrong. This is not an information gathering exercise. The purpose of letting you ask questions is to give you a

chance to demonstrate your interest in the firm. That's the sole purpose. And for you, it's your golden opportunity to shine.

When you are answering the interviewers' questions, there's more than a 50% chance that they're not listening to your answers. That's because they don't care about your answers. But when you ask them questions, they will be 100% focused on what you're saying. Why? Because *everyone* loves talking about themselves.

So, this is where you can show, visibly and verbally, how deep and passionate is your interest in this firm and its future, by the questions you ask.

I cannot believe how often interviewees say to me, when I ask what they'd like to know, "Nothing really, I think I've found out everything I need to know". They *never* get the job, because I'm left with the distinct impression that they don't care about my firm. How else could I feel?

So, make a list and make it very very long. It doesn't matter whether or not you know the answers. And think about the questions you're asking. If you were an interviewer, what kind of questions would you enjoy answering? "What practice areas does the firm have?" is a stupid question. "Why do you like working here?" or "What's your favourite cheese?" are way better.

Make the list long so that there's no chance you'll run out of questions. Take the list with you. It's actually really impressive if you pull it out in the interview. And you avoid the risk of drawing a mental blank.

## 4. Dress well

You're not going to lose out for being too well dressed (okay, ball gown maybe is a bit OTT). It's worth the expense of a well cut suit and decent shoes. As for the Bieber hair and piercings, well it's your call but you know we all judge each other within the first seven seconds of meeting. I don't care, but many interviewers do.

## 5. Arrive early

Time it so that you arrive at the building at least 15 minutes ahead of time. If you're unsure about directions, allow more time. Whatever it takes, just make sure you've got plenty of time to get lost, wander aimlessly around the lift lobby for a bit, take the wrong lift, and be settled in the reception 10 minutes early. Apart from avoiding the risk of being late, which is a killer, you will need this time to settle yourself down and not appear rushed and flustered. If you suffer sweaty palms, go to the gents and stick them under the air dryer for a few minutes. Works a treat.

And check your fly. Constantly.

## 6. First impressions

All obvious. Stand up straight. Direct eye contact. Firm handshake. Listen when they say their name and announce yours clearly.

Making small talk on the way to the interview room is a winner. Doesn't matter how inane. Remember that most lawyers are socially inept, that's why they chose law. So be prepared to jump in and break the ice if they don't.

In the room, sit up straight(ish), keep the eye contact going throughout, don't fidget and don't accept coffee if they offer. You don't need that stress. Ask for water.

## 7. The interview

You're actually already 80% of the way there before it starts, if you've got steps 1-6 nailed. Like I said, answering their questions is the least relevant part. I offer you no advice on how to answer the incredibly stupid questions you will be asked like "Where do you want to be in 5 years?", "Name a time you were under stress and how you dealt with it" or

“If you were a fruit, what kind would you be?” I decline because there are no good answers and you’d really have to ask yourself why you’d want to work at a place which asks questions like that.

But, generically, no matter what you’re answering or saying, the goal is to generate rapport with your interviewers. When they walk out, if they are left with a positive impression it will be because they felt they connected with you and had a good conversation. Most of the responsibility for that rests on you. While interviewers are often bored and uninterested, they’re usually capable of being influenced into forming a positive judgement of you.

So, treat it like you’ve been stuck next to someone boring at a wedding reception and you have a choice of either making the best of it or stabbing yourself to death with your fork. Make the best of it. Make conversation. And the easiest way to make conversation, as you know, is to ask questions. You don’t have to wait for the official question-asking part of the interview, jump in at any time and get them talking.

And then, when it’s your turn to ask questions, keep asking questions until they beg you to stop. If the interview runs over time, that’s fantastic. Don’t ever be the one who brings it to an end.

## 8. What’s the right tone?

Keen but not too keen? Confident but not arrogant? Relaxed but not comatose? Yeah, it’s tough to strike the right balance. The trick is to forget the stakes. That’s really hard to do, but if you can pretend to yourself that this is just a conversation with people about a job you’d really like to do and for which you are the perfect and obvious candidate, then there’s a chance you can be yourself. Most interviewees either clam up and present as boring non-entities or overcompensate and come across as utter wankers. Most of them aren’t either of these things.

The only way to get good at this is practice. Use every interview as a practice for the next one. The more you do, the better you’ll get at relaxing into yourself and allowing your real self to come out.

Don’t be shy about telling the interviewer how keen you are for the job. Don’t ever leave the impression that you’re anything less than passionately enthused. But never, ever beg.

## 9. After

Always send a thank you email to each of the interviewers. Just something short and not too gushy. Surprisingly few people do, but it’s a nice personal touch.

If the interview went really well (you’ll know if it did) and you talked about something specific, then there might be an opportunity for some not-too-obvious direct follow-up. For example, if you discussed a particular restaurant or movie, you could flick on a review. Or if they expressed interest in your blog, send them the url. But be careful not to be over-familiar. Your inner voice should be able to guide you on this.

## Final words

Having said all that, interviews still suck and you have my sympathy. Be realistic about it, there are way more law graduates than law jobs, so it’s going to be tough. You will go for jobs which you don’t really want to do. That’s okay. Just don’t allow yourself to lose sight of what you really do want to do. And when those opportunities come up, there’s no guarantee of success, but you can give it your best and let the universe take care of the rest.

Good luck!

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