

# Searching for prospective pupils

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Head of Pupillage and Tenancy, Amy Smith, talks through the key skills and qualities we are looking for in our search for prospective pupils and how you might demonstrate these at interview.

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# Who are we?

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As a Chambers we understand how difficult the pupillage application process can be. Everyone at Nine Chambers has been through a process, one way or another. I was interviewed at Nine Chambers and made it through the several staged process. I was also interviewed at several other sets before getting my offer from Nine Chambers.

I have been a member of our Pupillage and Tenancy Committee for several years; but as it is my first year at the helm of the Committee, I thought I could pass on a few hints and tips that I think could serve you well. I have read hundreds of applications and sat on countless interview panels. I hope, therefore, I have sufficient experience on this topic to give you some good insights.

# What are the skills and qualities?

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The main thing that I want all applicants to know, is that Chambers is looking for applicants to demonstrate that they have the required skills to be a successful pupil. That does not mean that you need to know the ins and outs of complex costs in the civil courts, or how to apply the Proceeds of Crime Act, or even know in which court and for which application you need to wear your wig and gown. What you need to show to us, and prove, is that you have the general skills of any successful pupil barrister. Remember, we aren't recruiting barristers to pupillage, we are recruiting pupils.

I consider the following to be the main skills you need to satisfy an interviewer that you have:

- Ethics/judgment
- Advocacy/persuasion
- Legal knowledge/research skills
- Ability to work with others/alone
- Ability to work under pressure
- Commercial awareness

Please note that the above order does not suggest a hierarchy of skills. Whilst they are all equally important, each practice area often has its own emphasis.

# Formats

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Most recruitment rounds (of not all) involve a written application and in person or virtual interview(s). You therefore must be able to demonstrate your skills in those different formats.

Written applications are a form of skeleton argument/ written submissions. When I am instructed to argue that a claim has been issued out of time, I may produce a skeleton argument. A skeleton argument needs to do several things: present the purpose of the document, demonstrate the appropriate test(s) and how they are to be applied, and persuade the reader that your circumstances fit that application. A written application for pupillage is no different.

You ought to be able to highlight what Chambers is looking for, and use evidence to prove that you satisfy those criteria. You must, above all, persuade the reader as to your message.

You may want to consider the best format to present your written arguments. Clarity is essential. Headlines, bold, bullet points, are all things that can help make your message clearer and therefore more persuasive.

Virtual interviews require slightly different skills than in person interviews. The body language aspect of seeing someone in person is reduced significantly. Think about your surroundings. An unmade bed covered in clothes behind you may not demonstrate to the interviewer that you are an organised and professional person. Tidy up what is in view of the camera and make that bed! Remember, lots of our hearings are now virtual. An interviewer is likely to have in mind that this is how you would present to a Judge on a virtual hearing.

There are debates about eye contact in virtual settings. Eye contact is important to show confidence and to engage. Don't overdo it. Have a practice go and record yourself speaking to the camera. Try and reach a happy medium.

Make sure you are sat somewhere comfortable, but in a chair that encourages good posture. Ensure that your space will be quiet and undisturbed if possible. Test your internet connection and earphone/microphone set up beforehand.

Do not be late. If you are, explain why and apologise. Wear something that you would be happy for a barrister who was representing you in court to wear.

If you are in person, think about your posture and your hands. Try and demonstrate calm confidence with your body language. There is nothing wrong with taking time to consider an answer, in fact it often shows that you are thoughtful. Do not be afraid to smile, and show us who you really are.

Speak up. Speak clearly. And if you want to start a sentence over or rephrase something, say so. We are not looking for the perfect candidate. There is no such thing. There are no perfect barristers. We want to find people who know when they make mistakes, and work to correct them.

If you need any reasonable adjustments, make sure you ask in good time. That way your interview day will be less stressful for you. That doesn't mean that you cannot ask for adjustments on the day, but you will be far less anxious if you know Chambers is set up for you on arrival.

Remember that Chambers wants you to succeed. There have been occasions where Chambers has advertised for a pupil and then not made any offers. That upsets us and does not help us develop in the way we might want. The pupillage is there for you. Please help us fill it.

# How to demonstrate skills



## Ethics/Judgment

This is not just about your understanding of the Codes of Conduct. It is about being able to identify when an ethical issue arises and being able to reason it out. Most ethical issues do not have an obvious or clear answer. Your ability to weigh up multiple viewpoints and arguments and come to a reasoned decision is key.

Think about times when you feel you have had to decide something that was difficult to reason out. It could be a friend asking you how an exam went if they haven't sat it yet. Or when someone asks you to cover for them in work and pretend that they clocked in when they didn't. Or if there were several ways of doing something, and you made a choice one particular way.

If you have considered your options and balanced all sides, you have exercised judgment.



## Advocacy/Persuasion

The best way to prove advocacy skills are mooted competitions, plea in mitigation competitions, debating competitions, and the like.

You might also have persuaded a boss to give you time off from work when they initially didn't want you to have it. Or persuaded someone to give you funding for an event. Or obtained a better price for something than what the price tag suggested.

Remember that barristers don't always persuade on the law. We persuade on the facts as well.



## Legal Knowledge/Research Skills

Your degree result will help you here. But there are other ways.

Mooting competitions provide ample evidence for researching different areas of law. Pro bono advice groups also will help dramatically.

You may have had to research something for a family member who got a parking ticket unfairly. Or helped a friend understand the clauses in their tenancy agreement.

The way you answer questions in interview and how you present your application will show us your skills. Be able to present clearly, and persuasively. Be able to adapt. Be able to show your reasoning.



## Ability to work with others/alone

Have you worked in groups during your degree? Have you worked with others during any employment or in any societies. Do you help your parents look after siblings or elderly relatives. We don't necessarily want to hear about the times your group work went fantastically with no issues, we want to hear about the skills you developed when things went wrong.

Was there someone in your group who did not pull their weight and you got them to be more involved? Have you worked with anyone who had any particular vulnerabilities? How did you adapt your approach to work with them?

We work alone quite a lot as barristers. It can be challenging when you are in the spotlight with no one to turn to. Have you ever been put on the spot? How did you deal with it?



## Ability to work under pressure

There is no getting around it, being a barrister means working under pressure. Whether that's because your client is very demanding. Or whether you only got the papers the night before. Or whether the Judge is looking at you for an answer you do not have.

Have you ever worked behind a busy bar on New Years Eve? Have you had to help arrange a last-minute event because a caterer pulled out? Have you ever had to help a sibling revise for an exam overnight because they left it too late?



## Commercial Awareness

Make sure you have read up on key news topics. Even those without a legal angle. I have no doubt that many chambers will ask about the Post Office scandal in their interviews this year. Don't just be aware of the facts. Be aware of the debates surrounding the topics. Be ready to express a reasoned view.

If you have been involved in any organisations, charities or run any events, you will have picked up commercial skills you can demonstrate.

# Conclusion

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Remember: you are persuading the reader/ interviewer that you are a better lawyer for your experiences. A week's work experience shadowing a Judge can be beaten by someone's week working behind a bar. It's all about HOW you describe why it can prove you will be the better barrister.

**Good luck with your applications and I look forward to reading them!**



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