

Work Assignments

Students should be assigned challenging, varied, and increasingly complex legal projects over the course of the semester. The assignments should be designed to expose students to the variety of legal tasks and issues that a lawyer in the practice regularly encounters in the context of actual cases and projects. Although every office has a different emphasis, stressing different subject matters and skills, assignments should require the students to apply and develop legal skills and judgment. Students should not ordinarily be assigned to perform routine or repetitive work, or clerical tasks such as filing, photocopying, or library updating.

An effective approach to work assignments entails:

- 1. Defining the task.** Mentor Attorneys should clearly explain what the task involves and should put the specific task into the context of the entire case or project on which the office is working. Details of the assignment should be provided in writing, or the student should take written notes while receiving the assignment. These details include:
 - Format, style, and length of the work product to be delivered by the student;
 - How much time the student should spend on the project;
 - How the work product will ultimately be used; and
 - Deadlines.
- 2. Discussing methods and tools.** The Mentor Attorney should provide suggestions for how the student should perform the task, including available resources and tools. An experienced attorney may take for granted knowledge and skills that a student has yet to encounter, for example, where to find specialized legal research materials, how to organize and review case files, how to communicate with interested and uninterested parties. Take the time to strategize with the student about how to approach the task, giving the student an opportunity to develop his or her own plan, but vetting that plan before the student gets started. You should also give the student an opportunity to ask questions about the assignment. If possible, provide appropriate examples or models of work product or documents similar to what you expect the student to produce.
- 3. Reviewing progress.** Set a time for interim review of the student's progress on an assignment to re-direct or fine-tune the project as necessary. You cannot always anticipate all the nuances and tangents that may tempt the student off the main course. When a student is engaged in a lengthy assignment, periodic meetings to check progress and handle problems are particularly useful to both the student and the Mentor Attorney. Once a student submits a draft of written work, prompt review is essential since a student usually is unable to proceed without some feedback.
- 4. Reviewing final work product or performance.** Mentor Attorneys should review all work produced by the student to maximize the educational benefit of the student's experience, and to provide a basis for fair evaluation at the end of the externship. While a busy law practice may sometimes require delaying review of student work, or missing an opportunity to observe student performance of a lawyering activity, the Mentor Attorney should always find time to circle back to the student about each assignment. Even if the need for an assignment changes, or becomes obsolete as when a case settles, the Mentor Attorney should always review and comment on work performed by a student.