

The 10-Step, "No-Fail" Guide to Distinguishing Yourself as a First-Year Associate

Be a Prince (or Princess) Amongst Paupers

Remember Prince...the Artist Formerly Known as Prince...who is now, apparently, Prince once again? I saw him today. I was finishing up minute 46 on a treadmill at the New York Sports Club on the Upper West Side of Manhattan when, lo and behold, he appeared before me clad in purple, heels, and big hair.

It has been a long time since I have loved Prince. Seeing him on the video screen fastened my treadmill reawakened many old feelings. Fascination. Confusion. Having the luxury of space and time between us now, I can look at him with a fresh eye. Simply put, in the 1980s world of big hair, Prince stood out. Why? His confidence, musical abilities, artistic generosity, and presentation distinguished him from his peers when he hit the music scene. He acted as if he belonged there. He wrote music as he belonged there. He carried himself as he belonged there. We believed he belonged there. He still belongs there.

[Do you belong in the world of big firms?](#) Do you stand out? Distinguishing yourself in law school is very different from distinguishing yourself amongst others in your first-year associate class. How is it possible that in a class of 60 first-year associates, one or two eventually crawl to the top? What do these people have that others do not?

Having spent several years practicing in a large [New York City law firm](#), I have had my share of first-year associates sitting across the desk from me, taking notes, and running off to libraries to assist me with projects. Generally speaking, I would inevitably pick only one associate to continue working for me out of five associates who might work for me in a given year. What made that one associate special? Why, inevitably, would that one associate become a "favorite" to other mid-levels, as well?

[First-year law firm associates](#) often believe that they are not advanced enough in their careers to start establishing *names* for themselves. But it is never too early. It may be too late if you wait until your second year to craft your identity. [Partners](#) and upper-level associates at law firms generally form their impressions of associates fairly early on (sometimes even during their summer associate periods). So how can a new associate make themselves stand out from the crowd? It is easy. Be a prince (or princess) amongst paupers, or in the words of the Artist Formerly Known as Prince, remember that it is all about P-U-R-P-L-E R-A-I-N:

Please take ownership.

Understand your limitations.

Respect others.

Professionalism is key.

Look for work.

Embrace fear.

Remember where you are.

Acknowledge others.

Ignorance is unacceptable.

Never lose control.

Please Take Ownership

The associate who takes [ownership of a new assignment](#) from the get-go will always stand out. What does this mean? It means understanding how your work fits into the rest of the case or transaction. It is not enough to get an assignment and run to the library. Ask your [partners](#) or assigning associates to explain to you the

nature of the deal or the case so that you may better complete the task at hand by understanding how it fits into the whole deal or litigation. Asking this question will produce one of three results: 1) they will spend 10 minutes explaining the case or deal with you; 2) they will not have the time to explain things but will give you the necessary documents to get up to speed yourself; or 3) they will tell you, "Do not worry about it; you do not need to know that right now."

Whatever the result, one thing is absolutely 100% for certain. Senior attorneys or assigning associates will appreciate that you asked and took ownership of the project assigned to you. [On that note, ownership of a project does not always end with one assignment.](#) Very often, [the supervising attorney](#) will, for instance, look at your research and say, "We need a letter or memorandum based on this research." This is your next chance to take ownership. Do not wait to be told to write the letter or memorandum. Ask your supervising attorney if you can do it. They may say "no," but again, one thing is 100% for certain: they will recognize that you took the initiative and took ownership of the project as it progressed. Taking ownership sets the good associates apart from the disinterested.

Understand Your Limitations

One of the biggest mistakes that new lawyers make is taking on too many projects at once and producing low-quality work as a result. It is very difficult to say "no" to an assignment when a first-year law student. You will be tempted to never say "no," in fact. I never said "no" until things got to the point of pure chaos. However, I can tell you that taking on too many projects or working with too many partners will result in you being pulled in too many directions at once. Being pulled in too many directions means that you will inevitably be unable to dedicate your full talents to each project or person. As a result, at least one of the projects you produce will be of poor quality.

This is one of the biggest mistakes associates make--taking on a lot of work and producing substandard results. Junior associates do not realize that Procter & Gamble was right--you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Hence, if you work for five different partners and can only produce three and half-quality projects, those two partners who get the short end of the stick will not rely on you again. Moreover, they will tell other partners about your low-quality work, lack of judgment, and inability to recognize your limitations. Most likely, they will not commend you on your ability never to say "no." Instead, they will remember you as the one associate who did not take their work seriously.

There are two points you should take away from this discussion. First, you should strive for consistent quality in your work product. If you produce ten projects and nine are stellar while one is poor, you will have done yourself, your law degree, and your firm a disservice. That one poorly produced project will represent one client who did not get what they paid for, one angry partner or senior associate who must redo your work, one bill for which time must be written off, and one lost opportunity for you. Second, partners have very long memories. Eight years of quality work look pretty good when partnership discussions arise. In contrast, I know quite a few associates who, when partnership discussions arose, were queried on "poor quality" results produced in their fifth or sixth years. One of my colleagues was asked about a project completed in his second year, regarding which one, in particular, remained upset five years later.

Respect Others

It may seem logical that you should show deference to your firm's partners and senior associates as a junior associate. However, not everyone recognizes that deference displays many different faces. There is deference for the good times, for the bad times, and when you just do not care. Let's begin with the good times. Partners and senior associates are always watching you--during billable hours, in the elevator, in the cafeteria, at firm functions, etc. You should display deference at all times. Say "hello" in the elevator (even if you have been up working all night), say "good morning" as you pass in the hallway, and say "thank you" when you are assigned a project (no matter how tedious it is).

One associate I worked with always looked interested no matter what task I gave her, whether it involved distributing, researching a murky subject, or organizing discovery documents. She always said "thank you," even if her task was merely writing a letter. Because of her unfailing gratitude and enthusiasm, I was encouraged to give her better and better projects. Mind you, she did not have to show appreciation. She was only two years below me. However, she showed me a lot of [deference and respect](#), and as a result, I wanted her to get better and better. I told colleagues about her "can-do" attitude and eagerness, and I wanted to work with her. Soon, as a first-year, she was doing third-year work.

In contrast, I gave another associate in her class a research project and received disappointing results. This associate researched two relevant arguments for a potential summary judgment motion. She returned to me a completed project within which she had researched *her* ideas about the arguments at hand instead of the two arguments I had asked her to look into. Believing that our close class ranks somehow made her judgment equal to mine, she chose to disregard what I had asked her to do completely and came back to me with her ideas. I told her to go back to the library and start again. I never worked with her again.

Deference, however, is more than just a "thank you" when you are assigned a good project, a "hello" as you pass a senior colleague in the hallway, or a "yes, you may cut into the line (because you are a partner)" at the corner Starbucks. Deference is also about immediately stepping up to the plate when things go wrong (also known as the "dark hours"). These are the times when projects go wrong, mistakes are made, deadlines are missed, or clients are angry. For instance, as a junior associate, you will come upon deadlines you cannot meet. *Do not* wait for the partner or senior associate to call you in and ask you where your completed project is on the deadline date. Always call the partner or senior associate first when you cannot meet a deadline. It is [your responsibility](#) to step up to the plate.

Professionalism is Key

Although you should respect authority as you progress through your practice, you will encounter colleagues in other firms and peers at your firm whom you will want to disregard. I hate to say it, but it is true. You may feel they are too competitive with you, less intelligent than you, less skilled, less talented, or simply annoying. Despite your judgments about their successes or alleged failings, you should always treat your colleagues professionally.

Many moons ago, I was at a dinner party for one of New York's most prestigious top law firms. Sitting to my right was a man who was not particularly noteworthy at first glance. He was very stoic, and when he spoke, he spoke so softly I could barely hear him. Remember the *Seinfeld* episode featuring the "low-talker" girlfriend? Well, this particular gentleman would have given Seinfeld's girlfriend a run for her money. I was tempted to ignore him because I could not take the low talking much longer. I could either listen to him or chew my food since the sounds of his voice, and the sounds of chewing were coming in at about the same decibel level. Instead, I remembered the importance of exhibiting professionalism, and I did my best to sit patiently through dinner and engage in conversation while my turkey dinner grew cold.

When dinner ended, and I walked away from the table, I said to a coworker who was seated nearby, "Thank heaven dinner is over. That partner to my right could make watching paint dry seem exciting." My coworker turned to me and said, "Well, lucky you were a professional because that man is one of the highest rainmakers at his firm." Lesson learned.

Look for Work

This step is two-sided: ask for work and work for everyone. Let's start with the former. Asking for work is the most logical thing a junior associate can do to establish their reputation. Very few associates, however, actually do it. Instead, most sit at their desks and wait for their phones to ring with their next assignments. This is a bad idea. A passive nature is never good in the law firm setting. The rewards go to those who reach out

and ask for them. Asking for work is as simple as [appearing at the door of your mentor partner](#) or another partner and requesting an assignment. If you work in a firm with an assignment coordinator, this is as simple as picking up the phone and letting the assignment coordinator know that you need work. Either approach produces the same result. You are not being bothersome or greedy. You are showing initiative, drive, individuality, and commitment.

On that note, work for everyone. Many [junior associates](#) only want to work for *this* partner or *that* associate. Isolating yourself to one or two people, however, can be dangerous. What if the one person you work with leaves the firm? What if their practice slows down? What if, after six months, that preferred partner informs you that they do not care for your work product? Where do you go from there? The following benefits of working for several partners cannot be denied:

You will have several more voices in your corner when bonus and partnership considerations arise. Your hours will never slow down. Working for many partners ensures that you will be the one associate who is always busy, even in a down market. Practicing law, I have worked on both sides of the fence--intellectual property litigation and transactional. Hence, when [intellectual property support on mergers and acquisitions](#) was slow, I was certain to take on patent litigation. When patent litigation slowed, I was certain to assist with secured financing. My hours were never reduced, and I never had to worry when the market tanked. Your knowledge base will increase rapidly. Knowing several sides of a die (mergers and acquisitions, banking, intellectual property, etc.) [makes you more marketable earlier in your career](#). Your ability to work with many different personalities will develop. Partners' personalities vary, and the more quickly you become acclimated to these variations and adjust your writing and analytical skills accordingly, the better you will perform in your practice when dealing with diverse clients and others.

Embrace Fear

It will make [you a better lawyer](#). You are a first-year. Essentially, you know nothing. You are supposed to know nothing. This will be the only time in your career when the expectation is that you know nothing. Because of this, when you receive an assignment, you may be fearful. You also may feel trepidation about speaking to partners, senior associates, and/or clients. This is natural. Embrace it and move on. Fear is not a bad thing. It is a powerful motivator. Describing the art of motorcycle riding, my father once told me, "The minute you lose your fear, the minute you think you know everything, sell the bike." This is a metaphor for practicing law. The minute you lose the fear, stop feeling challenged, and projects become commonplace, you have lost something.

Fear challenges you. Embrace it as a positive motivational force. It will push you to reason harder, research longer, write more fluidly, communicate more clearly. It will push you beyond the limits of what you think you can be in life. It will make you a better lawyer. When I first started practicing, one of the best trial lawyers in the city (who became my mentor and guided me in my early years of practice) told me, "Forget fear. Forget failure. Forget negatives. If you are not failing often enough, you are not trying hard enough." I am not recommending failure. I recommend acknowledging the door marked "fear" and then walking through it to success. It is important to note that some associates will tell you, "I have no fear. What is there to fear?" They need to [go back to law school](#) if they do not know.

Remember Where You Are

You are not at the Roxy. In addition to producing quality work and perfecting the approaches, you take to dealing with others, remember that what you look like is important to a firm. I know there is a struggle here. Very often, junior associates want to keep their nose rings or mullets. They fear losing their individuality to "the man." While this is a valid fear, you might have validated it even more by not choosing to [pursue a career in law](#). Law firms are businesses. Businesses rely on clients. If a client is uncomfortable with your appearance, it is a problem for your firm. Thus, while sporting a nose ring or mullet may [make your appearance distinctive](#), you will be walking down the wrong path if you choose to do so.

In the world of practice law, distinguishing yourself in terms of appearance is all about wearing tailored suits or other business attire and proper grooming. You can add the colorful tie, celebrity-designed blouse, Jimmy Choo shoes, or another accouterment that sets you apart to a professional base. A member of my first-year class was known for her sense of style. She exhibited a unique sense of individuality by including rare estate jewelry in her wardrobe, wearing unique brooches, and one-of-a-kind rings. She always wore something eye-catching--something to set her apart. Very often, her jewelry helped her start conversations with clients. The accessories she wore were always discrete yet fascinating.

Acknowledge Others

The associates who distinguish themselves in their classes recognize the value of their classmates. This is the one step in our 10-step guide that focuses not on what you are doing to connect people to you but on what you are doing. Top associates are almost always favorites amongst their first-year classmates. They are the types of individuals about whom people will say, "You know, if it were anybody else, I would be jealous. But hearing that it was [insert name], I cannot be upset." You have met these people. They naturally stand out because they do not have to be petty or competitive. They are simply good at what they do and generous in urging others to rise to the same bar.

Several years ago, I walked into my firm's library late one evening. A summer associate from the class of 2000 was sitting there with another summer associate from the same class. I knew them both. The next morning, I saw one of these associates in the lobby of my building, and I rebuked him about working too hard. He told me that he was being "tutored" by the other associate. That other associate's [legal writing](#) talents were quite good, and he had offered to teach this particular associate how to improve his writing and produce clearer analyses. Both of these summer associates got offers. The one who served as a tutor is still at my old firm and has become an exceptional standout performer in his class. This has come as no surprise.

Ignorance is Unacceptable

[Junior associates](#) should [learn how to independently handle all aspects of the firm practice](#). In addition to completing research and writing, it is your responsibility to learn how to get copies made, do a distribution, reserve a night secretary or paralegal, deal with the word-processing center, send fax, organize a courier, arrange for a FedEx pick up, know where the "latest possible FedEx drop-off site" is located, and other assorted skills. In other words, it is your responsibility to learn your firm's business beyond your office door.

There will be times when your secretary will not be at their desk. There will be times when it is 2 a.m., you are the only one on the floor, and you need to get distribution out immediately because the partner has already left for the evening. There is no excuse for not knowing how to do these things independently. Furthermore, there is no excuse for not doing these things on your own when help is unavailable. As a junior associate, I knew the word-processing folks like the back of my hand. I knew where the FedEx drop-off sites were and how late they were open. I have typed envelopes at the 12th hour, applied labels, organized couriers, and sent faxes. When I first joined my firm, a senior associate said to me, "Learn about the world beyond your office door, or you will not be here very long." I learned; I learned very quickly.

Never Lose Control

You should always treat your secretary, copy people, [paralegals](#), library help, drivers, couriers, mailroom folks, cafeteria staff, and other support staff members with courtesy and respect. When I was practicing, it never ceased to surprise me when a first-year would walk into my firm and promptly ream out their secretary, embarrass a mailroom person, or otherwise abuse a member of the support staff. There is *no* excuse for such treatment. No, matter how bad your day has been or how many deadlines you are trying to meet. Never lose control or, at the risk of quoting a household-product developer, "Never let them see you sweat."

Many [junior associates](#) make the mistake of treating a staff member poorly, and you only have to make one such mistake to feel the burn. Senior associates know this fact is true: "You are only as good as your secretary." Your secretary and other support staff can make your life easy or hard. They can anticipate your needs or ignore them. Again, remember that people (namely other associates and partners) are watching you. How you treat others reveals your image of the world and how you view your place in it. You should be proud of what you have accomplished as a young attorney, and you should always be encouraging others--including your support staff--to rise with you.

Conclusion

The above ten steps will help you distinguish yourself as a leader at your firm. Print them out. Laminate them. Sleep with them under your pillow. They are tried and true ways for you to get ahead of the pack. Remember (since law students love mnemonics), it is all about P-U-R-P-L-E R-A-I-N.

*You say you want a leader.
But you cannot seem 2 make up your mind.
I think you better close it.
And let me guide you two the purple rain.*

--Prince