

TOP 10 TIPS FOR PUPILLAGE AT KINGS CHAMBERS

1. Mini-pupillages – valuable experience, not a tick-box exercise

Mini-pupillages are an invaluable and precious insight into what can otherwise be a relatively opaque world. It is not a pre-requisite to complete a mini-pupillage at every set you want to apply for, but if you feel that a particular set could be a good fit for you then it can be sensible to do a mini-pupillage there to confirm it, if possible.

It is also useful to do mini-pupillages in a few different 'types' of sets (e.g. large / small, specialist / generalist) to see how that can make a difference to the culture and ethos.

When you are doing a mini-pupillage, be a sponge. Absorb as much as you can; not just about the work but also the working environment, the different specialisms, the culture and feel of the chambers. And do not be put off by assessed mini-pupillages – they are an opportunity to show more of yourself and your skills than you otherwise could through just an application form.

However, there is absolutely no need to fill an application form with mini-pupillages. As a rough guide, focus on the most relevant 2 – 4 for the set you are applying to.

3. Applications – fewer is more

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of believing that your odds can only improve for every extra application you make. After all, surely you have a better chance of getting pupillage somewhere if you make 20 applications rather than 5?

Although there is a grain of truth in this belief, it rests on the highly dubious assumption that you have the time and ability to make 20 applications that would be as strong as if you had focused on 5.

Recognise that each application takes a significant amount of time. Applications are made during a relatively compressed window when you will have other commitments, whether exams, work or personal commitments. In general, you will make better applications if you devote more time to each one so use your limited time wisely.

Be realistic, it will be very rare for anyone to have absolutely no preference between 20 sets, so focus on the sets you would be most excited about pupillage at and that interest will shine through on the application.

2. Address your own weaknesses

The advice to aspiring barristers can sometimes feel entirely generic – do mooting, do pro-bono work, perform well academically etc. Recognise why these things are recommended and what skills they are seeking to demonstrate. But in particular recognise where your own skills need shoring up and address those areas, rather than simply doing more of what you are good at or enjoy.

For example, mooting is effective at demonstrating an aptitude for oral advocacy. Certain types of pro-bono work can be useful at giving you experience of dealing directly with real-world clients. If you have mooted throughout university but never done any pro-bono work, then there is little point in doing more mooting on the bar course at the expense of pro-bono work simply because you think you should and everyone else is.

But also look behind the activity to the skill it demonstrates, so even if you haven't done any pro-bono work, you may have had a job which can demonstrate the same skills. Giving serious thought to your own strengths and weaknesses and how you can address them will give you a far more balanced application.

4. Application forms are written advocacy

If you are applying for the bar you will be aware of the statistics. Nearly all sets receive hundreds of applications for very few places. What may be less well appreciated is that the people reading your application are not full time recruiters, they are busy barristers trying to fit the process around multiple other demands.

So at all times, focus on making your application easy to read, succinct, punchy and to the point. Use your application to persuade the reader that you will be able to persuade judges and clients alike with your written skills. Word limits are just that, a limit and never a guide. It takes courage to say less, but sometimes it makes for a far better application.

5. Get a second (and third) opinion

Asking a trusted friend or family member to read through your application is always helpful. At the very least for typos and grammar, but more than anything for how well it reads, whether the language is clear and precise and whether your best qualities stand out. If the friend or family member is not a lawyer, all the better! Your motivation for the bar and the reasons why you will be successful as a barrister should be clear to anyone.

If possible, it is also worth asking your BTC provider careers department to review your application. They can often give you far more focused feedback on exactly what chambers might be looking for.

8. Do not be intimidated by barristers' profiles

It is a very good idea to thoroughly research any chambers that you are applying for. And when doing so it is also a good idea to look at the profiles of the most junior tenants at that set. Do their experiences and qualifications broadly match up with yours? If they do, then it is a good sign and there is no reason at all on paper why you would not fit in there.

Equally, do not become intimidated by the same profiles, or rule out a set, simply because you think that every tenant's CV appears more impressive than yours. Often they will not be, it is simply that their profile is designed to show that barrister in the best possible light to help them sell their services to clients (or occasionally intimidate their opponents!). Recognise profiles for what they are and use them as a guide as to the sort of applicant who is ultimately successful. But remember, if a set truly has a minimum requirement for academics (etc.), they will not be shy to state it on their application page. If you clear those hurdles, there is no reason why you should rule yourself out.

6. Mock interviews – highly recommended

Similarly, careers departments at BTC providers have a lot of experience with pupillage applications and the tutors are often familiar with the style of pupillage interviews and types of questions asked – make use of them.

Performing in an interview is as much of a skill as anything else. Some are naturally good at it, but generally it comes with practise. It does not matter if the questions are different to those you will be asked at interview, it is all experience in how to answer questions effectively.

7. Structure your answers in interview (where appropriate)

Good advocates can effectively structure their oral submissions, even when responding to points on the spot. For example: "I have three points in response to that, the first point is...". Do not overuse this technique or apply it rigidly, but if you are able to think about answering interview questions in a more structured way it makes for a far more impressive and memorable answer.

Even if you are asked a question that you do not feel you have a good answer to, a very well-structured answer can sometimes help to make the answer seem much stronger. After all, barristers are well used to sometimes having to make the best of a weak case!

9. Be “commercially aware”

This phrase is oft-used but means so much more than just reading business news, and is something which is applicable to nearly all areas of legal practice. It is exceptionally rare for any piece of work at the bar to require purely legal considerations. Especially in civil work, all clients have different priorities and interests. For example a client may have a fantastically strong case for breach of contract, but the defendant is bankrupt and the client may never be able to recover their money and the money they spend pursuing the case would be entirely wasted.

If you are given a problem scenario or situation to consider in an interview or application, always look at the bigger picture, try to assess the client’s likely priorities and give these weight or consideration in any answer you give.

10. Have belief and keep going

There is no getting round the fact that the bar is competitive and the majority of applicants are initially unsuccessful. Rejections are always hard to take, but use each and every one as an opportunity to reflect and improve.

The bar is a career where barristers hugely benefit from having a broad range of professional and personal experience. Although facing another application cycle can be dejecting use the time wisely and as an opportunity to shore up your weaknesses and gain another year’s experience and knowledge. If the bar is right for you, you will get there eventually. And when you do, you may well be glad of those extra years spent preparing.

Good luck.

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