

CAREER KIT

Judge Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Judge

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

howtobecome — independent career guides

At a glance

Most judges first earn a bachelor's degree, finish a three-year law degree (J.D.), pass the bar exam, and then practice law for years before they are elected or appointed to the bench. Expect about 7 years of school plus roughly 5–15 years of legal experience, and law school alone often costs well over \$100,000. Some lower courts, such as certain magistrate or justice-of-the-peace positions, do not require a law degree, so check your state's rules.

Timeline	12–20+ years after high school
Typical cost	\$100,000–\$300,000+ (mostly law school)
Education	Bachelor's degree + Juris Doctor (J.D.) for most judgeships
License	State bar admission; years of practice set by each state or court
Median pay	\$153,990 per year (judges, magistrate judges, and magistrates)
Job outlook	+3% (2025–35) for judges and magistrates; +2% for all judges and hearing officers

Step-by-step path

1. Earn a bachelor's degree with strong grades

Time: 4 years · Cost: \$40,000–\$200,000+

Law schools accept any major, but courses in political science, history, English, philosophy, and economics build the reading and writing skills you will need. Your GPA matters a lot for law school admission. Join debate, mock trial, or student government to practice arguing and public speaking.

2. Take the LSAT and apply to law school

Time: 3–12 months · Cost: \$500–\$3,000 (test, prep, applications)

Most ABA-approved law schools require the LSAT, and some also accept the GRE. Study for two to four months and take official practice tests. Apply to a range of schools and compare scholarship offers, since debt will shape your career options later.

3. Earn your Juris Doctor (J.D.)

Time: 3 years · Cost: \$60,000–\$250,000+

A full-time J.D. takes three years. Aim for law review, moot court, and a judicial externship, because judges and selection committees look for these. A clerkship with a judge after graduation is one of the best ways to see how courts work from the inside.

4. Pass the bar exam and the MPRE

Time: 2–6 months · Cost: \$2,000–\$5,000 (fees and prep course)

Every state requires you to pass a bar exam to practice law, and most also require the MPRE ethics exam and a character and fitness review. Many states use the Uniform Bar Exam, and some are moving to the NextGen bar exam starting in 2026. Plan for 8–10 weeks of full-time study after graduation.

5. Practice law and build a record

Time: 5–15+ years

Most states require a minimum number of years as a licensed attorney before you can serve, often 5–10 years for trial and appellate courts. Trial work as a prosecutor, public defender, or litigator is a common path because it puts you in court every week. Keep your record clean; your discipline history and reputation will be checked.

6. Build a reputation in your legal community

Time: Ongoing

Join your state and local bar associations, serve on committees, and volunteer as a mediator, arbitrator, or pro tem judge if your court allows it. Write, teach CLE classes, and get to know the judges and lawyers in your county. Selection commissions, governors, and voters all rely on what your peers say about you.

7. Seek election or appointment

Time: 1–3 years per attempt · Cost: \$0–\$100,000+ for an election campaign

States choose judges in different ways: partisan or nonpartisan elections, appointment by the governor, or appointment from a list made by a nominating commission. Federal judges are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Learn your state's method, then apply to the commission or run a campaign, which can mean raising money and getting endorsements.

8. Complete judicial training

Time: 1–4 weeks, then yearly

New judges usually attend orientation run by their state court system or a national program such as the National Judicial College. Expect ongoing judicial education each year. If you were elected, plan for future reelection or retention elections.

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Bachelor's degree	\$40,000	\$200,000	In-state public vs. private, tuition only
LSAT, prep, and applications	\$500	\$3,000	Free official prep is available from LSAC; courses cost more
Law school (J.D.) tuition	\$60,000	\$250,000	Three years; scholarships can cut this sharply
Bar exam fees and prep course	\$2,000	\$5,000	Fees vary widely by state
Bar dues and CLE	\$300	\$1,500	Per year while you practice
Judicial campaign (election states only)	\$0	\$100,000	Trial court races are often far cheaper than supreme court races
Total	\$102,800	\$559,500	

Requirements

Education	A J.D. from an accredited law school for most judgeships. Some magistrate, municipal, and justice-of-the-peace positions do not require a law degree; this varies by state.
Bar admission	Active, good-standing membership in the state bar for most state judgeships. Federal magistrate judges must have been bar members for at least 5 years.
Legal experience	Set by each state constitution or statute; often 5–10 years of practice for general jurisdiction and appellate courts. Federal Article III judgeships have no written minimum, but nominees usually have long careers.
Residency and citizenship	US citizenship and residency in the state, county, or district you will serve are typical requirements.
Age limits	Some states set a minimum age (often 25–35) and many set a mandatory retirement age, commonly around 70–75.
Character and record	A clean disciplinary record and a background review. Selection commissions and bar associations often rate candidates.
Selection	Election, governor appointment, commission-based appointment, or legislative election, depending on the state and court. Federal judges are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Map your path

Days 1–30

Goal: Know exactly how judges are chosen where you want to serve and what you are missing.

- ☐ Look up your state constitution and court rules for the court you want: required years of bar membership, age, and residency
- ☐ Find out how that court selects judges (election, governor, nominating commission) on your state judiciary site and Ballotpedia
- ☐ Read the bios of 10 current judges on that court and note their prior jobs, schools, and years of practice
- ☐ Write an honest gap list: degree, bar status, trial experience, bar association roles, community ties
- ☐ If you are a student, set an LSAT or bar exam date and build a weekly study schedule
- ☐ Set up a simple career file to track cases, trials, writing, and service from now on

Phase 2: Get closer to the courtroom

Days 31–60

Goal: Put yourself where judges and selection committees can see your work.

- ☐ Apply for a judicial clerkship, externship, or internship (students) or a trial-heavy role (attorneys)
- ☐ Join your state and county bar associations and sign up for one committee
- ☐ Watch at least four full days of hearings in the court you want to join and take notes on how judges manage the room
- ☐ Request informational meetings with two judges or retired judges about how they got the job
- ☐ Volunteer for a court mediation, pro tem, or arbitration panel if your court offers one
- ☐ Start a list of potential references who have seen you in court

Phase 3: Build a long-term record

Days 61–90

Goal: Turn short-term steps into a multi-year plan you can follow.

- ☐ Draft a judicial-style resume and a one-page statement of why you want to serve
- ☐ Get a copy of your state's judicial application or questionnaire and fill it out as a practice draft
- ☐ Pick one area to write or teach on (a bar journal article, a CLE talk, a law school guest lecture)
- ☐ Review your public record and social media for anything a commission or opponent could question
- ☐ Set 1-, 3-, and 5-year milestones: trials handled, leadership roles, years of bar membership
- ☐ If your state elects judges, learn campaign finance and judicial conduct rules before you do anything political
- ☐ Schedule a quarterly review of your gap list

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Undergraduate and law school transcripts
- ☐ LSAT score report (if applying to law school)
- ☐ Bar admission certificate and certificate of good standing
- ☐ MPRE score report
- ☐ Current resume and judicial-style CV
- ☐ List of significant cases and trials with dates and outcomes
- ☐ Writing samples (briefs, opinions, articles)
- ☐ Professional references with contact details
- ☐ Disciplinary and malpractice history disclosures
- ☐ Proof of residency in the county or district
- ☐ Bar association and community service records
- ☐ Financial disclosure information (required for many judicial applications)

Exams & how to prepare

LSAT

What it is: Law school admission test covering reading comprehension, logical reasoning, and a writing sample.

How to prepare: 2–4 months of practice with official LSAC tests; many people use LawHub.

Bar exam (UBE, state exam, or NextGen)

What it is: Two-day licensing exam with multiple-choice, essay, and performance sections, required in every state to practice law.

How to prepare: 8–10 weeks of full-time study, usually with a commercial bar review course.

MPRE

What it is: Two-hour multiple-choice exam on legal ethics, required for admission in almost all jurisdictions.

How to prepare: 2–4 weeks of study; many students take it during law school.

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a judge?

Tip: Talk about public service and fairness, not prestige or a career step.

2. Describe your judicial philosophy.

Tip: Keep it simple: follow the law, treat people with respect, decide on the record.

3. Tell us about a case where you had to apply a law you disagreed with.

Tip: Show that you separate personal views from legal duty.

4. How would you handle a self-represented litigant?

Tip: Mention patience, plain language, and staying neutral while explaining procedure.

5. What trial experience do you have?

Tip: Give numbers: jury trials, bench trials, hearings, and your role in each.

6. How would you manage a heavy docket?

Tip: Describe concrete habits like scheduling orders, firm deadlines, and prompt rulings.

7. Have you ever been disciplined or sued for malpractice?

Tip: Answer fully and briefly; commissions will check, and hiding it is worse.

8. How do you handle a lawyer who is disrespectful in court?

Tip: Show calm control and knowledge of contempt and conduct rules.

9. What would you do if you had a possible conflict of interest?

Tip: Explain disclosure and recusal under your state's code of judicial conduct.

10. Describe a time you changed your mind after hearing an argument.

Tip: Shows open-mindedness, a key trait commissions look for.

11. How do you ensure fairness for people from different backgrounds?

Tip: Give real examples of access, language, or bias issues you have handled.

12. What do lawyers who have opposed you say about you?

Tip: Be ready with names; commissions often call opposing counsel.

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Tried 25 jury and 40 bench trials to verdict as an assistant district attorney
- Drafted bench memos and proposed opinions for a state appellate judge during a one-year clerkship
- Served as volunteer pro tem judge in small claims court, hearing about 15 cases per session
- Managed a caseload of 120+ active felony matters while meeting all court deadlines
- Chaired the county bar association's access-to-justice committee for two years
- Taught a 2-hour CLE course on evidence rules to 80 attorneys
- Published an article on sentencing reform in the state bar journal
- Mediated 30+ civil disputes through the court's settlement program

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Assuming there is one national rule; requirements and selection methods differ by state and court
2. Staying out of the courtroom for years and building no trial record
3. Ignoring bar association and community work that selection committees weigh heavily
4. Making political or social media statements that later conflict with judicial conduct rules
5. Applying once, getting turned down, and giving up instead of asking for feedback and reapplying
6. Leaving a disciplinary issue undisclosed on an application
7. Taking on heavy law school debt without a plan, which limits public-sector career options

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **Ballotpedia: Judicial selection in the states**

https://ballotpedia.org/Judicial_selection_in_the_states

- **National Center for State Courts**

<https://www.ncsc.org>

- **The National Judicial College**

<https://www.judges.org>

- **OSCAR federal clerkship applications**

<https://oscar.uscourts.gov>

- **LSAC LawHub (LSAT prep)**

<https://www.lsac.org/lawhub>

- **BLS: Judges and Hearing Officers**

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/legal/judges-and-hearing-officers.htm>

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than \$46,950	\$153,990 per year (judges, magistrate judges, and magistrates)	More than \$221,710

Outlook: Employment of judges, magistrate judges, and magistrates is projected to grow 3% from 2025 to 2035; all judges and hearing officers, 2%, slower than average. BLS expects about 1,300 openings a year, mostly from retirements. Competition for judgeships is strong.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 —
<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/legal/judges-and-hearing-officers.htm>

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.