

CAREER KIT

Paralegal Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Paralegal

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

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At a glance

Most paralegals complete a paralegal certificate (often 3–12 months) or a two-year associate degree in paralegal studies, then get hired by a law firm, company, or government office. No national license is required, and training usually costs \$1,000–\$15,000 depending on the program. Voluntary certification, such as NALA's Certified Paralegal, can help you stand out.

Timeline	3 months–2 years
Typical cost	\$1,000–\$15,000 for most certificate and associate programs
Education	Paralegal certificate or associate degree; some employers prefer a bachelor's
License	None required in most states; voluntary certification (NALA CP, NFPA PACE)
Median pay	\$62,890 per year
Job outlook	0% (2025–35), little or no change; about 40,800 openings a year

Step-by-step path

1. Decide on your education route

Time: 1–2 weeks

If you have no degree, a two-year associate degree in paralegal studies is the most common entry path. If you already have a bachelor's degree, a post-baccalaureate paralegal certificate is faster. Look for ABA-approved programs when you can, since many employers and certifications recognize them.

2. Complete a paralegal program

Time: 3 months–2 years · Cost: \$1,000–\$15,000

Courses cover legal research and writing, civil procedure, torts, contracts, and legal ethics. Online, evening, and community college options are widely available. Keep your best research memo or brief as a writing sample for job applications.

3. Get hands-on experience

Time: 2–6 months

Do an internship or practicum through your program, or volunteer at a legal aid office or court self-help center. A legal secretary, receptionist, or file clerk job at a law firm is another common way in. Employers value real experience with case files, deadlines, and e-filing.

4. Learn the software firms use

Time: 2–8 weeks

Get comfortable with Westlaw or Lexis research, Microsoft Word and Excel, and case management tools such as Clio. E-discovery platforms are a plus for litigation jobs. Many programs and vendors offer free student access or training.

5. Choose a practice area

Time: Ongoing

Litigation, corporate, real estate, immigration, family, and intellectual property are common specialties. Pick one that matches your interests and local job market, and tailor your resume to it. Specialized paralegals, such as patent or e-discovery paralegals, often earn more.

6. Apply for entry-level paralegal jobs

Time: 1–3 months

Search law firms, corporate legal departments, government agencies, and legal staffing agencies. Send a tailored resume, a short cover letter, and a writing sample if asked. Join your local paralegal association to find job leads and networking events.

7. Earn a voluntary certification

Time: 2–6 months of study · Cost: \$300–\$700 including exam fees

NALA's Certified Paralegal (CP) and NFPA's PACE Registered Paralegal (RP) are the best-known national credentials. Each has education or experience requirements and an exam, plus continuing education to keep it. Some states, such as California, also set their own education and continuing education rules for anyone using the title paralegal.

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Paralegal certificate program	\$1,000	\$10,000	Community colleges are usually the cheapest; university programs cost more
Associate degree in paralegal studies	\$6,000	\$30,000	Two years; in-district community college tuition is at the low end
Textbooks and software	\$200	\$1,500	Some programs include Westlaw/Lexis student access
NALA CP exam (application and testing fees)	\$300	\$500	Lower rates for members and students; check nala.org for current fees
Paralegal association membership	\$50	\$200	Per year; useful for jobs and CLE
Total	\$7,550	\$42,200	

Requirements

Education	Most employers want a paralegal certificate or associate degree. Some, especially large firms, prefer a bachelor's degree. A few hire people with a high school diploma plus legal experience.
License	No general license is required in most states. Paralegals must work under the supervision of a licensed attorney and cannot give legal advice.
State rules	Some states regulate the title. California, for example, requires specific education and ongoing continuing education to work as a paralegal. A few states, such as Arizona and Utah, license separate limited-practice roles. Check your state.
Certification	Voluntary. NALA CP, NFPA PACE/RP, and NALS credentials are the most widely recognized.
Skills	Strong writing, research, organization, attention to detail, and comfort with deadlines and legal software.
Background	Many firms run background checks because you will handle confidential client information.

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: Choose and start your training

Days 1–30

Goal: Pick the right program and learn the basics of the job.

- ☐ Check your state's rules for paralegals (title restrictions, education, CLE)
- ☐ Compare three programs on cost, length, format, and ABA approval
- ☐ Enroll and set a weekly study schedule
- ☐ Read 20 local paralegal job ads and list the skills and software they ask for
- ☐ Join your local paralegal association as a student member
- ☐ Set up a professional LinkedIn profile

Phase 2: Build skills and experience

Days 31–60

Goal: Get practical skills that employers test in interviews.

- ☐ Complete a legal research and writing course and save your best memo as a writing sample
- ☐ Practice Westlaw or Lexis research using student access
- ☐ Learn calendaring of court deadlines and how e-filing works in your state
- ☐ Apply for an internship, volunteer role at legal aid, or part-time law office job
- ☐ Attend one paralegal association meeting or webinar
- ☐ Pick a target practice area based on your interests and local demand

Phase 3: Get hired

Days 61–90

Goal: Land interviews and your first paralegal role.

- ☐ Write a one-page resume tailored to your target practice area
- ☐ Prepare a short cover letter template and a polished writing sample
- ☐ Apply to 5–10 jobs per week at firms, corporate legal departments, and agencies
- ☐ Register with one or two legal staffing agencies
- ☐ Practice answers to the interview questions in this kit
- ☐ Check eligibility and plan a date for the NALA CP or NFPA CRP exam
- ☐ Send thank-you emails within 24 hours of each interview

Documents checklist

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

- ☐ Paralegal certificate or degree (or enrollment letter)
- ☐ Official transcripts
- ☐ Resume tailored to legal jobs
- ☐ Cover letter template
- ☐ Legal writing sample (memo or brief, with names redacted)
- ☐ List of 3 professional references
- ☐ Internship or volunteer verification letters
- ☐ Certification exam application and eligibility documents
- ☐ Government-issued photo ID for exams and background checks
- ☐ Proof of state-required CLE (if your state requires it)

Exams & how to prepare

NALA Certified Paralegal (CP) exam

What it is: Two parts: a multiple-choice Knowledge Exam on substantive law and procedure, then a written Skills Exam. Eligibility is based on education or experience.

How to prepare: 6–12 weeks using NALA's study materials and practice questions.

NFPA PACE (Registered Paralegal)

What it is: Exam for experienced paralegals covering legal knowledge, ethics, and practice skills.

How to prepare: 2–3 months; NFPA offers a study manual and online review.

NFPA CRP (Core Registered Paralegal)

What it is: Entry-level exam for newer paralegals and recent graduates.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks of review of your program coursework.

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a paralegal?

Tip: Link your answer to detail-oriented work and helping clients, not to 'law school someday.'

2. What legal research tools have you used?

Tip: Name the platforms and give one example of a research task you finished.

3. How do you track court deadlines?

Tip: Describe a system: calendaring software, double checks, and reminders.

4. Tell me about a time you handled several urgent tasks at once.

Tip: Show how you prioritized and communicated with the supervising attorney.

5. What would you do if a client asked you for legal advice?

Tip: Say you would not give it and would refer them to the attorney; this tests ethics.

6. How do you protect client confidentiality?

Tip: Mention secure file handling, not discussing cases, and conflict checks.

7. Which practice area interests you most and why?

Tip: Pick the firm's area and explain a real reason.

8. Can you walk me through drafting a discovery request?

Tip: Know the basic steps and the documents involved in your state.

9. How comfortable are you with Word, Excel, and case management software?

Tip: Be specific about features you use, like styles, tables of authorities, or pivot tables.

10. Describe a mistake you made and how you fixed it.

Tip: Choose a small error, explain how you caught it, and what you changed.

11. How do you handle a demanding attorney?

Tip: Show calm, clear communication and asking questions early.

12. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Tip: Mention certification, specialization, or senior paralegal goals.

Resume bullet examples

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

- Completed a 900-hour ABA-approved paralegal certificate with coursework in civil litigation and legal research
- Drafted research memos on contract disputes using Westlaw during a legal clinic internship
- Organized and indexed 3,000+ pages of discovery documents for a civil case
- Prepared client intake summaries for 40+ legal aid clients each month
- Tracked filing deadlines for 60 active matters using a shared court calendar
- E-filed pleadings and served documents in state court under attorney supervision
- Maintained confidential client files in compliance with firm privacy policies
- Proofread and cite-checked briefs using Bluebook citation rules

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Choosing an expensive program without checking cheaper community college options
2. Skipping an internship and applying with no practical experience
3. Giving legal advice to friends or clients, which can count as unauthorized practice of law
4. Sending one generic resume instead of tailoring it to the practice area
5. Ignoring your state's specific rules for using the title paralegal
6. Not having a writing sample ready when an employer asks
7. Overlooking legal staffing agencies as an entry point

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

- **NALA: The Paralegal Association**

<https://nala.org>

- **National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA)**

<https://www.paralegals.org>

- **ABA Standing Committee on Paralegals**

<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/paralegals/>

- **BLS: Paralegals and Legal Assistants**

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/legal/paralegals-and-legal-assistants.htm>

- **NALS: The Association for Legal Professionals**

<https://www.nals.org>

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than \$44,740	\$62,890 per year (\$30.24 per hour)	More than \$101,500

Outlook: BLS projects little or no change (0%) in employment from 2025 to 2035, but about 40,800 openings each year, mostly to replace workers who leave the field. There were about 404,900 paralegal and legal assistant jobs in 2025.

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

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