

Skills Law Firms Actually Look for in Interns

What partners, senior associates, and recruiters really want — beyond your grades and college name

Most law students walk into internships believing that a good CGPA and a well-known law school are enough. They are not. Law firms — whether litigation chambers or top corporate practices — receive dozens of applications from academically strong candidates. What separates the intern who gets a pre-placement offer from the one who does not is a set of practical, demonstrable skills. This guide breaks down exactly what those skills are, how firms assess them, and how you can build them before you ever step into a firm.

1. The 10 Skills Law Firms Actually Look for in Interns



1

Legal Research — Precise, Structured, and Source-Verified

Legal research is the foundation of every task an intern is given. Firms do not expect you to know all the law — they expect you to find it accurately, quickly, and from reliable sources.

What firms assess:

- ▶ Can you identify the correct statute, regulation, or precedent for a given legal issue?
- ▶ Do you use primary sources (Acts, SC/HC judgments, Gazette notifications) or rely on summaries?
- ▶ Do you verify currency — is the provision still in force? Has it been amended?
- ▶ Can you present research in a clear, structured memo rather than a brain dump?

How to build it:

- ▶ Practice on SCC Online, Manupatra, Indian Kanoon, and BLC regularly
- ▶ Write research memos on legal issues you encounter in class or articles you read
- ▶ Learn to distinguish ratio decidendi from obiter dicta in judgments

💡 Interns who format research as a clear memo — Issue / Applicable Law / Analysis / Conclusion — stand out immediately from those who paste links and paragraphs.



2

Legal Drafting — Clear, Precise, and Purposeful Writing

The ability to draft clean legal documents is the most consistently cited skill by law firm partners across litigation and corporate practices. It is also the most underdeveloped skill among interns.

Documents interns are typically asked to draft:

- ▶ Litigation: bail applications, complaints, written statements, legal notices, reply notices
- ▶ Corporate: board resolutions, NDAs, term sheets, MOU clauses, due diligence summaries
- ▶ Both: client emails, research memos, case summaries, internal notes

What firms assess in your drafting:

- ▶ Is your language precise — no ambiguous pronouns, vague referents, or unnecessary qualifiers?
- ▶ Does the document achieve its legal purpose — does it actually say what it needs to say?
- ▶ Is structure logical — definitions before operative clauses, conditions before consequences?
- ▶ Is the tone appropriate — formal in legal documents, clear in client correspondence?

💡 *Read and mark up 10 NDAs, 10 legal notices, or 10 complaints before your first internship. Pattern recognition in drafting is a learnable skill.*

⚠️ *The most common intern drafting error: copying precedents without reading them. A supervising lawyer will notice immediately.*



3

Attention to Detail — Catching What Others Miss

In legal practice, a missed comma, an incorrect cross-reference, or a wrong date can have serious legal consequences. Firms test attention to detail constantly — often without telling you they are doing so.

What this looks like in practice:

- ▶ Proofreading your own work before submitting — spelling, numbering, defined terms
- ▶ Noticing inconsistencies in a contract (e.g., a definition used differently across clauses)
- ▶ Checking that citations are accurate and formatted correctly
- ▶ Flagging discrepancies in dates, party names, or figures in documents you review

How to build it:

- ▶ Never submit work without reading it twice — once for content, once for errors
- ▶ Read documents backwards to catch spelling errors your brain auto-corrects
- ▶ Use a checklist before every submission during your internship

💡 *Partners routinely give interns a document with a deliberate error to see if they catch it. The ones who do are remembered.*



4

Time Management and Reliability — Delivering on Deadlines

Legal practice is deadline-driven. Courts have limitation periods. Deals have signing dates. Clients have board meetings. An intern who cannot manage their time reliably creates risk for the firm.

What firms observe:

- ▶ Do you deliver assigned work by the time it was requested — or do you ask for extensions?
- ▶ If you are going to miss a deadline, do you flag it early or disappear and deliver late?
- ▶ Can you handle multiple tasks simultaneously without dropping any?
- ▶ Do you show up on time — to the office, to meetings, to court?

How to build it:

- ▶ Under-promise and over-deliver — give a realistic time estimate, then beat it
- ▶ Maintain a daily task list during your internship — prioritise by deadline, not by interest
- ▶ If you are stuck, communicate early — never go silent when you are behind

💡 *One reliably delivered task beats three brilliant-but-late ones. Dependability is valued above intellectual fireworks at the intern stage.*



5

Communication — Written and Verbal Clarity

Lawyers communicate for a living. Firms need interns who can express legal ideas clearly — in writing, in person, and increasingly over email and video calls.

Written communication:

- ▶ Emails to supervisors: concise, well-structured, no spelling errors
- ▶ Memos and summaries: clear headings, logical flow, no unnecessary padding
- ▶ Client-facing documents: formal, professional, and free from legalese where possible

Verbal communication:

- ▶ Can you explain a legal issue in plain English when asked by a supervisor?
- ▶ Do you ask good questions — specific, thought-through, not answered in a 2-minute Google search?
- ▶ Are you composed in client meetings or court environments?

💡 Many interns are academically strong but cannot explain a legal concept clearly in conversation. Practice summarising judgments and statutes out loud.



6

Commercial Awareness — Understanding the Client's World

Commercial awareness is the ability to understand legal issues in their business context — not just as abstract legal problems. It is one of the most sought-after skills at corporate law firms and increasingly valued in litigation practices too.

What commercial awareness means in practice:

- ▶ Understanding why a client wants a deal structured a particular way
- ▶ Knowing what a company's core business is before walking into a client meeting
- ▶ Understanding that the legally 'best' answer may not always be the commercially preferred one
- ▶ Being aware of regulatory trends, market developments, and sector-specific risks

How to build it:

- ▶ Read Economic Times, Mint, or Business Standard daily — 15 minutes is enough
- ▶ Before each internship, research the firm's major practice areas and recent deals or cases
- ▶ Follow SEBI, RBI, CCI, and MCA for regulatory updates relevant to corporate law

💡 In interviews and internships, show that you understand why a legal issue matters commercially — not just what the law says about it.



7

Professionalism and Conduct — How You Carry Yourself

Technical skills get you the internship. Professionalism determines whether you get a return offer or a strong reference. Firms assess conduct continuously — often informally.

What professionalism looks like at a law firm:

- ▶ Dressing appropriately for the office, court, and client meetings
- ▶ Maintaining confidentiality — never discussing client matters outside the office
- ▶ Being respectful to all staff — partners, associates, and support staff alike
- ▶ Showing initiative without overstepping — knowing when to ask and when to proceed
- ▶ Accepting feedback without becoming defensive
- ▶ Being present and engaged — not on your phone during meetings or in court

⚠ *Confidentiality breaches — even unintentional ones — are grounds for immediate dismissal from an internship. Never post about client matters on social media.*



8

Intellectual Curiosity and Initiative

The best interns do not just wait to be told what to do — they ask good questions, show genuine interest in the matters they are working on, and look for ways to add value beyond the task assigned.

What this looks like in an internship:

- ▶ Reading the full case file — not just the specific document you were asked to work on
- ▶ Asking a follow-up question that shows you thought about the problem beyond the task
- ▶ Flagging an issue you noticed while doing your research, even if it was not part of the brief
- ▶ Reading judgments and articles relevant to the practice area on your own time
- ▶ Coming prepared to every supervision meeting with thoughts, not just a status update

💡 *Curiosity is the one skill that cannot be faked over a 4-week internship. Firms identify it quickly — and value it enormously.*



9

Adaptability — Handling Ambiguity and Change

Legal practice is rarely linear. Briefs change. Deals collapse and restructure. Cases take unexpected turns. Interns who can adapt without losing composure are remembered.

What adaptability means for an intern:

- ▶ Taking on a task outside your comfort zone without refusing or complaining
- ▶ Revising a research memo three times because the brief changed — without frustration
- ▶ Moving between matters and practice areas as the firm needs you to
- ▶ Performing under pressure during deal signings, court deadlines, or urgent matters

💡 *Firms notice interns who treat every task — however routine — as an opportunity to learn. Enthusiasm for the unglamorous work is a strong signal of resilience.*



10

Basic Technology and Document Competence

Law firms operate in a document-heavy environment. Interns who are confident with legal technology tools, document formatting, and digital research platforms save supervisors time and signal readiness for practice.

Core tools and competencies firms expect:

- ▶ MS Word: tracked changes, styles, numbering, cross-references, table of contents
- ▶ Legal databases: SCC Online, Manupatra, Westlaw India, Indian Kanoon
- ▶ Document management: organising, naming, and version-controlling files correctly
- ▶ PDF handling: redlining, commenting, and converting documents accurately
- ▶ Email etiquette: correct formatting, attachments named properly, appropriate tone

💡 *Many firms now use contract management and deal room platforms. Familiarity with tools like Kira, Relativity, or even SharePoint is a growing advantage.*

2. How Firms Rank These Skills — Litigation vs Corporate

Skill	Priority	Firm Type Context
Legal Research	●●●●●	Universal — highest priority at all firm types
Legal Drafting	●●●●●	Critical in corporate; essential in litigation
Attention to Detail	●●●●●	Assessed in every task assigned — non-negotiable
Time Management	●●●●○	Urgent in deal-driven corporate; equally vital in litigation
Communication	●●●●○	Written clarity valued everywhere; oral key in litigation
Commercial Awareness	●●●●○	High priority at corporate firms; growing in litigation
Professionalism	●●●●○	Table stakes — without it, other skills are irrelevant
Intellectual Curiosity	●●●○●	Differentiates good interns from great ones
Adaptability	●●●○●	Noticed over time — especially on long-term internships
Tech Competence	●●●○●	Growing importance — especially at larger corporate firms

● = High Priority ○ = Not Assessed at Intern Level

3. Myths vs Reality — What Firms Do NOT Care About

X Common Myth	✓ What Actually Matters
<p>X Myth You need a 9+ CGPA to impress law firms</p>	<p>✓ Reality A 7.5 CGPA with strong research, drafting, and professionalism will outperform a 9 CGPA with none of those skills.</p>
<p>X Myth Only NLU students get good internships</p>	<p>✓ Reality Work ethic, writing quality, and initiative matter far more than your institution's name once you are in the room.</p>
<p>X Myth Knowing the most case law makes you a standout intern</p>	<p>✓ Reality Knowing where to find the right law — and presenting it clearly — matters more than memorising judgments.</p>
<p>X Myth Asking questions makes you look weak or unprepared</p>	<p>✓ Reality Asking well-thought-out questions signals engagement and intelligence. Supervisors prefer this to silent confusion.</p>
<p>X Myth</p>	<p>✓ Reality</p>

The best interns are the most aggressive and visible ones

X Myth

A great CV is enough — skills will develop on the job

Reliability, quality work, and professional conduct are noticed far more than overt attempts to impress.

✓ Reality

Firms expect interns to arrive with baseline skills. Those who do not keep up are quietly not invited back.

4. Self-Assessment Checklist — Are You Internship-Ready?

Go through this checklist honestly before applying for or starting a law firm internship. Identify your gaps and work on them.

Legal Research

- I can find and read an Indian statute on SCC Online or India Code without guidance
- I can identify the leading Supreme Court judgment on a given legal issue
- I can write a structured research memo in Issue / Law / Analysis / Conclusion format
- I verify that provisions I cite are still in force and not amended or repealed

Legal Drafting

- I have drafted at least one legal document (notice, memo, application, or contract clause) before
- My writing is clear, concise, and free from unnecessary padding
- I understand the structure of a contract (definitions, operative clauses, conditions)
- I can write a professional email to a supervisor or client

Professional Conduct

- I understand the basics of client confidentiality and would not discuss matters externally
- I know how to dress appropriately for a law firm, court visit, and client meeting
- I can receive feedback without becoming defensive
- I show up on time and meet the deadlines I commit to

Commercial Awareness

- I read at least one business or legal news source regularly
- I have researched the firm I am interning at — its practice areas, clients, and recent work
- I understand the difference between a company's legal needs and its commercial interests

- I can name 2–3 current legal developments relevant to the firm's core practice area

The Lawmento Bottom Line

Law firms do not expect interns to be lawyers. They expect interns to be reliable, curious, and coachable — with a solid foundation in research, writing, and professional conduct. Every skill on this list can be built before you walk through the firm's door. The students who do that preparation are the ones who come away with the opportunities that change their careers.

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