

How many drinks does it take to get to the Bar?

Natalie Greenberg

I was amazed at the number of articulated clerks and even solicitors, who quizzed me on the requirements of becoming a member of the Bar. Terms such as, “reading” and “master” were foreign to all; whereas, comments like, “how many drinks does it take?” were common. This article is dedicated to all those who are in need of an introduction to the process leading up to becoming Counsel.

Firstly, one must be admitted to practice as a barrister and solicitor of the Supreme Court of Victoria. However, an application to sign the Bar Roll can still be made, if one has a reasonable expectation of being admitted prior to entering chambers.

An applicant who wishes to sign the Roll will then need to do a period of reading for nine months. During the first three months, the applicant attends full-time study at the old Four Courts’ building. This Course is termed the “Bar Readers Course”. After one completes the Course satisfactorily, one then signs the Roll. There are no examinations during, or at the conclusion of the Course, however, applicants will have a lot to keep them busy during this period, as there are a large number of work requirements that require completion. Naturally, the emphasis of the Course is on developing advocacy skills.

There are two intake dates for the Readers Course each year; namely, the first working day in March and September. Applications must be lodged at least three clear months, and not more than twelve months, in advance of the date on which the applicant wishes to commence reading. It should be noted however that an abridgement of time for the lodgement may be granted and that the requirement of undertaking the Course may be waived in exceptional circumstances. The Course Co-ordinator is Barbara Walsh and all enquiries can be addressed to her on 9608 7111.

Turning to the remaining six months, as the applicant/reader has now signed the Roll, he/she can take briefs of their own. The reader will spend this six months in their mentor’s chambers. Not only does this enable the reader to save money on rent, but more importantly, the aim is for the reader to learn the working conditions and practices of the Bar from their mentor, through observation.

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So who is a mentor? Every reader must have a mentor (previously referred to as a Master) to read with. A mentor is a member of the Bar, who has been at the Bar for no less than ten years, but who is not a QC. It is advisable to read with a mentor who practices in the area of law in which you are interested. The reader will share chambers with their mentor for the nine months. However, for the first three months of the Course, the reader will infrequently be in chambers.

A reader will also need to engage a clerk. There are a number of clerks and it is worth investigating the appropriate clerk for your needs. i.e., by speaking to members of the Bar, as certain clerks have certain reputations. One must send an application to the clerk and it is not uncommon to attend an interview prior to acceptance on the list.

The applicant should have both their mentor and their clerk organised prior to the commencement of the Course.

An applicant who is in practice as a solicitor, either as a sole practitioner or as a partner in a firm, must undertake, before the date of commencement of reading to:

1. Have his/her name removed from the letterhead and business name of the former practice; and
2. Pay all counsel’s fees for which the applicant has become liable whilst acting as a principal or to have transferred such liability to the former practice.

Starting out



So what does it cost? The Course costs \$900.00 and the reader cannot take any briefs for the first three months of the Course. Then, there are further costs including: telephone (approx. \$100.00), nameplates (approx. \$150.00), insurance (approx.

\$350.00) and subscription fees (approx. \$200.00). It should also be noted that it takes approximately six months before most barristers find even the most modest of cash flows.

This article has addressed only the procedural requirements and makes no comment on the state of the Bar itself, suffice to say that the March 1997 intake has 50 applicants and one must consider how the Bar can continue to absorb these numbers. The best source of information as to the availability of work, comes from speaking to the clerks.

Finally, due to the new legislative changes, clerking and traditional chambers are no longer compulsory. However, it is advisable that those starting out at the Bar have a clerk and the traditional chambers. Hence, it is unlikely, that any substantial changes will be experienced by the newcomer to the Bar. I welcome any queries on 9601 6842.

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