

Law School's Missed Lessons: In Court, It's About Storytelling

By **Nicholas Steverson, Danielle Trujillo and Lisa DeCaro** (March 4, 2026, 5:15 PM EST)

While law school teaches everything from civil procedure to stare decisis, there are some aspects of practicing law that aren't covered during the three years that lead up to the bar exam. In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys offer advice on navigating real-world aspects of legal practice that are often overlooked in law school.

Learning to drive is a two-part process. First, you study the theory — how the vehicle works, what the signs mean and the rules that govern the road. Then comes the moment that actually matters: getting behind the wheel.

Only then do you feel the weight of the car, learn the sensitivity of the brakes and understand how other drivers affect your decisions. As every new driver eventually learns, theory is no substitute for experience.

Trial work is much the same. Law school provides doctrine, cases and hypotheticals — an essential foundation. But the moment that truly matters comes when we step into the courtroom.

No academic environment can replicate the courtroom's unpredictable dynamics, real-time decision-making or sheer pressure. As young trial lawyers, the courtroom quickly reveals how much we were not taught.

Suddenly, real-world practice shows us the importance of clarity, credibility, memorability and preparation — in other words, the importance of practicing how to tell simple, effective stories.

Here, we reflect on the courtroom presentation skills law school often overlooks, and how young lawyers can bridge the gap between theory and effective trial practice.

Clarity

Early on, one of the hardest courtroom habits to break is the urge to say everything. Law school trains us



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to be exhaustive — to identify every issue and present every argument.

But in the courtroom, judges already have the briefs. Repeating them verbatim wastes time and dilutes the force of the argument.

Focused presentations are not only clearer — they are more persuasive. Oral advocacy becomes more powerful when we shift from "here is everything you may want to know" to "here is what actually matters."

Identify those two or three crucial points and focus on them, because brevity signals confidence and gives the court a clear road map for resolving the issue.

Credibility

Effective oral advocacy also requires a human connection with the listener, not merely briefing the law and the facts. Jurors never receive briefs, but they still need a framework — a story — for processing the key facts of the case. And to believe the story, jurors need to believe the storyteller.

Law school too often trains lawyers to focus inward and focus on their performance rather than their audience. Effective trial lawyers reverse that instinct and direct their attention outward: to jurors who may know nothing about the subject matter, to witnesses navigating stress and to judges managing crowded dockets.

Audiences respond best to authenticity and human connection. Put simply, credibility is the currency of the courtroom.

How we communicate influences how judges and juries perceive and remember the case, especially when they are absorbing competing narratives and dense information under time pressure.

Fresh out of law school, it can be tempting to try to imitate the lawyers we've seen and admired. It can seem like their communication style is more interesting, more compelling or more entertaining than our own.

But eventually, we must each develop our own authentic style of communicating with the audience, with a focus on being credible and effective rather than simply entertaining.

Witnesses need a credible connection with their examining attorney, too. Associates learn quickly that direct examination rarely goes exactly as planned.

Witnesses forget details, become nervous or wander into unexpected territory. Without a strong relationship, redirecting a witness in the middle of trial becomes extraordinarily difficult.

That relationship — grounded in trust, active listening and, at times, a little self-deprecation — allows us to serve as a steady guide when testimony veers off course. It gives us the flexibility to ask questions that gently bring the witness back to what matters most.

Memorability

Above all else, trials need a memorable story. Although law school teaches the mechanics of admitting

exhibits into evidence, it says little about what to do with those exhibits once they are admitted.

In real trials, exhibits are far more than procedural requirements. They are storytelling tools. It isn't enough to simply display exhibits. Rather, the best lawyers use them to build the record and reinforce the narrative.

That means weaving key language into witness examinations, explaining numbers rather than assuming they are self-explanatory, and asking open-ended questions that allow witnesses to anchor their testimony in concrete, memorable evidence.

To tell that story in the most credible and compelling way, exhibits should not lie dormant until closing argument. Instead, they should be used to orient the listener throughout trial.

Demonstratives — even simple timelines or handwritten annotations — help impose structure on a complex legal theory. Seasoned trial lawyers on both sides of the aisle can turn dense records into clear road maps for witnesses and juries using nothing more than a highlighter and an overhead projector.

Technology has changed those expectations somewhat. But more technology isn't necessarily better. The medium should serve the point, not distract from it. When visuals are designed to help fact-finders understand the story and its complexities, they are effective regardless of how simple or sophisticated they may be.

Preparation

For young litigators, preparation for trial extends far beyond an academic exercise. In law school, preparation is mostly internal practice — namely, reading, writing and thinking. In the real world, preparation must extend to physical practice. Hands-on opportunities accelerate learning in ways law school cannot.

If partners seek associate input, take advantage of the opportunity to workshop arguments, ask difficult questions and conduct post-argument debriefs. Weigh in on case strategy, witnesses and themes.

And once a case is done, participate in debriefing discussions about what happened, what worked and what didn't, to keep learning how to tell the story of the case together.

Where possible, associates benefit from practicing in a full courtroom, where lawyers at every level conduct mock trials and arguments in realistic conditions and receive candid feedback. This works best when preparation is collaborative, and no one is considered too senior — or too junior — to contribute.

Practicing out loud is essential. The habits we develop pacing around an office with a legal pad do not translate into confident, audience-focused advocacy. Standing still, speaking conversationally and rehearsing with real listeners builds muscle memory and strengthens the substance of the argument itself.

What Law School Is Missing

When we reflected on what law school often overlooks, one theme stood out: its emphasis on appellate-style reasoning. Doctrinal courses teach case law, not storytelling.

But trials are stories. Jurors remember narratives, not statutes; themes, not case citations.

Law schools excel at teaching analysis, but they are less effective at teaching how to develop a case theory, weave facts into a compelling narrative and communicate in a way real people follow. And that skill comes with practice, and with an audience-centered focus.

Even trial advocacy courses cannot fully simulate the emotional and factual unpredictability of trial. Real witnesses change their phrasing. Facts surface unexpectedly. Human dynamics create pressures no hypothetical can replicate.

The courtroom demands a physical, human skill — the ability to talk to people — that develops only through doing. Law school trains the cerebral; trial work trains the human.

The Path Forward for Aspiring Trial Lawyers

No one leaves law school fully prepared for the courtroom. But these skills can be developed if young litigators approach trial work with a growth mindset.

That means seeking feedback, embracing practice, engaging with experienced trial lawyers and saying yes to hands-on opportunities — even when saying no feels easier.

Early courtroom exposure accelerates learning, but regardless of firm or setting, young lawyers benefit from recognizing that courtroom mastery comes with time, repetition, humility and connection. We've seen that performance does not persuade — credibility and human engagement do.

Ultimately, the courtroom is the best teacher we have.

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