

CRIMINAL BARRISTER

What is your job title?

Criminal Barrister

What route of education and qualification did you take to get to your now chosen career position?

I qualified as a barrister four years ago. My legal life started out by doing a BA in NUIG (Legal Science and French), following on to do a one year LLB in NUIG. Upon graduating from NUIG I spent the summer studying for the Kings Inns entrance exams which were at the end of August.

Why did you choose this career?

My decision to become a barrister and not a solicitor was based on the fact that I loved debating and public speaking and hated the idea of being stuck in an office. Plus I found the idea of being in and out of court arguing cases really exciting.

What do you love about your job?

So now I work in the area of criminal law as a defence barrister. I love the work as every day is different and I meet all sorts of people from all walks of life. It is a tough job too as the pay for a junior barrister is very bad and we all work on our own as we are each self-employed so you have to work hard to build up a good reputation. But if you enjoy your job you will push yourself to succeed, as the saying goes, if you love your job you will never work a day in your life.

How much variety is there in your work?

I work mostly in the District Court and deal with cases from drink driving, to minor assaults, to public order offences (drunk & disorderly, breach of the peace) to theft. More serious matters will go directly to the Circuit Court where the sentences will be greater. In the District Court a person can only be sentenced to a maximum of two years imprisonment for two or more offences.

What is a typical work day like?

On an average day, I arrive at the Lawlibrary at 9.30 as Court sits at 10.30. I will do my main preparation for my case the night before so in the morning I will print out copies of the law and any caselaw I wish to rely on.

The Lawlibrary is really a library! There are approximately 1,900 barristers who pay membership fees every year and they have access to this library. Every law book we need is in there plus articles and judgments and copies of Statutes and Acts. There are seats but these are assigned based on seniority, however as it is a library while that member is away anyone can use his seat. We can borrow books to take home or sit in there to do research. Also, that is where we change into our gowns, tabs, and wigs. The wigs these days are optional and a lot of people have opted not to wear them. Personally, I feel that it sets me apart from my client where I would like to build a relationship with them. If I am to represent someone in Court I want them to feel I am on their side and will do the best I can for them. We must wear black/dark suits and white tabs and a gown.

How long is your work day?

When Court starts there is a long list of names to get through and it is packed. There are lawyers and Gardaí everywhere waiting for their case to be called. I spend time waiting for Judge chatting with old law school classmates and catching up. When my client's name is called it is up to me to inform the Judge what is happening and how we are proceeding – whether we will be pleading guilty and being sentenced or pleading not guilty and taking a hearing date.

The Gardaí must hand over copies of all the evidence they will be relying on when prosecuting the offence. This can take a few weeks/months depending on the type of evidence – statements/photographs/CCTV. So this means there will be various court dates where we must inform the Judge on the progress and if we are ready for sentencing or a hearing. I will meet my client numerous times before the case ends so this will give me a chance to get to know them and see the best solution for them in their situation.

If we are in Court for a short matter it all usually winds down by lunch time.

If we are in for a hearing we could be in all day as there could be many Gardaí and witnesses giving evidence. If Court ends early, that gives me a chance to visit one of my clients in prison to discuss their upcoming case. Visiting times are restricted so we grab any chance we can.

How would you recommend your career choice to others?

I would probably defend anyone charged with any crime. Everyone is entitled to a defence and a well-represented defendant helps assure that justice is really done. Law can be an amazing, diverse, exciting, challenging career. But those positions – the positions that you come to love – are at the lower end of the spectrum. If you go into law school thinking that you're owed a well-paid career simply because the entry fee is so high, you're out of luck.