

# Common Client Complaints About Lawyers: What They Are and How to Prevent Them

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Client complaints are among the most stressful events a law firm can face. Whether they surface as a difficult conversation, a formal bar grievance, or a negative online review, complaints represent a breakdown in the attorney-client relationship that almost always could have been prevented. Understanding what triggers client complaints, how professional ethics rules respond to them, and what operational practices reduce complaint risk is essential knowledge for any firm that wants to protect its reputation and retain clients.

## 9 Fundamental Time and Billing Features

Accurate time tracking leads to precise invoices, better project management, and fairer pricing for legal services. Download this checklist to discover the 9 key features you need.

[Get the guide](#)

## The Most Common Client Complaints About Lawyers

Bar associations and legal malpractice insurers track complaint data consistently across jurisdictions. The categories that generate the most client grievances year after year are:

**Communication failures.** The single most common complaint against attorneys is inadequate communication. Clients who cannot reach their attorney, do not receive timely updates on their matter, or feel that their questions are being ignored are far more likely to file a grievance than

clients who receive regular, responsive communication, even when outcomes are unfavorable.

**Billing disputes.** Unexpected fees, unclear invoices, and charges that clients feel were not authorized or explained in advance are a leading driver of formal attorney complaints. This category overlaps significantly with trust accounting irregularities, which carry especially serious professional consequences.

**Missed deadlines and neglect.** Failing to file documents on time, missing statutes of limitations, or allowing a matter to sit without action for extended periods are grounds for both malpractice claims and bar complaints. Neglect is one of the most serious categories of professional misconduct.

**Competence concerns.** Clients who feel their attorney lacked the skills or knowledge to handle their matter effectively, or who receive an outcome they attribute to poor legal work, may file complaints alleging incompetence.

**Failure to follow client instructions.** Attorneys are obligated to follow their client's lawful instructions. Taking actions the client explicitly did not authorize, or failing to take actions the client requested, is a common source of grievances.

**Trust account mismanagement.** Commingling client funds with operating funds, failing to maintain accurate trust account records, or using client funds for unauthorized purposes are ethics violations that trigger serious professional discipline in every jurisdiction.

## Professional Ethics Rules That Govern Attorney-Client Relationships

The Model Rules of Professional Conduct, adopted in some form by most U.S. jurisdictions, establish the baseline standards attorneys must meet. Several rules are most directly relevant to common client complaints:

**Rule 1.1** requires competent representation, meaning the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness, and preparation reasonably necessary for the

representation.

**Rule 1.3** requires diligence, directing attorneys to pursue a matter with reasonable promptness and without unnecessary delay.

**Rule 1.4** governs communication, requiring attorneys to keep clients reasonably informed, promptly respond to requests for information, and explain matters sufficiently for clients to make informed decisions.

**Rule 1.5** governs fees, requiring that fees be reasonable and clearly communicated. Written fee agreements are required or strongly recommended in most jurisdictions for engagements above a threshold amount.

**Rule 1.15** governs the safekeeping of client funds and property, including the trust accounting requirements that firms must follow.

Violations of these rules, whether substantiated through a bar investigation or civil malpractice proceeding, can result in reprimand, suspension, or disbarment depending on the severity and whether the conduct is a pattern.

Free Legal Billing Terms Cheat Sheet

Legal billing terms can be confusing. TimeSolv has prepared a list of the most commonly used legal billing terms that lawyers use in routine. It's a must to have it in your pinned files, sticky notes, or however you carry your essentials while practicing.

Download the cheat sheet and master every billing term!

[Get Your Free Cheat Sheet](#)

## **How to File a Complaint Against an Attorney: What Clients Need to Know**

Clients who believe their attorney has violated professional ethics rules or committed malpractice can file a complaint with the state bar association in the jurisdiction where the attorney is licensed. Each state bar maintains a

disciplinary process, typically beginning with an intake review to determine whether the complaint falls within the bar's jurisdiction.

Bar complaints address professional conduct violations. They are not the mechanism for recovering money from an attorney. Civil remedies, including legal malpractice claims, are pursued separately through the courts.

Common grounds for filing a bar complaint include the communication and [billing](#) issues described above, trust account irregularities, conflicts of interest, and abandonment of a client's matter without proper notice.

## **Understanding 'How to Fire Your Attorney'**

Clients have the right to terminate the attorney-client relationship at any [time](#) for any reason. When clients search for information about how to fire their attorney, they are usually in one of two situations: they are experiencing a serious breakdown in the relationship and want to understand their options, or they have received a bill they believe is excessive or unauthorized and want to understand whether they have recourse.

Attorneys who receive notice of termination must take steps to protect the client's interests during the transition, including returning the client file, refunding unearned fees from retainer, and cooperating with successor counsel. Failure to do so cleanly can itself generate a bar complaint.

From the firm's perspective, proactive communication, transparent billing, and clear engagement letters reduce the likelihood that clients reach the point of termination in the first place.

## **Attorney Complaints and How Billing Software Reduces Risk**

A significant percentage of bar complaints and malpractice claims trace back to billing disputes that could have been avoided with better billing systems. Specifically:

**Unclear invoices** that do not show sufficient detail of work performed give clients grounds to dispute fees and allege unauthorized charges. TimeSolv's flexible invoice templates let firms include the level of detail that meets client and bar expectations, with line items organized by date, task, timekeeper, and matter.

**Trust accounting errors** that occur because firms are manually tracking retainer balances and applying payments in spreadsheets are largely eliminated by dedicated trust accounting software. TimeSolv's trust accounting tools maintain accurate retainer balances, log all trust transactions, and apply funds to invoices in a documented, auditable way.

**Fee agreement disputes** often arise because clients were not clearly informed of billing rates, billing increments, or what activities would be billed. Building a billing process around a clear engagement letter and a professional billing platform that generates consistent, itemized invoices reduces those disputes significantly.

**Delayed billing** creates client anxiety. Clients who receive a bill covering six months of work often do not remember the scope of what was done and are more likely to question charges. Firms that bill monthly, using tools like TimeSolv's batch invoicing to make frequent billing operationally efficient, tend to have fewer billing disputes.

## What Clients Want from Their Law Firm

Beyond avoiding complaints, understanding client expectations gives firms a framework for improving retention and referrals. Legal consumer research consistently shows that clients prioritize:

- Feeling heard and informed throughout their matter, even when there is no new development to report.
- Receiving invoices that are clear, predictable, and explain what was done and why it was necessary.
- Having a clear path to reach their attorney or a knowledgeable member of the legal team without unreasonable delay.
- Being treated with respect and without condescension regardless of their sophistication about legal matters.

Firms that build systems around these expectations, through consistent communication schedules, clear billing practices, and accessible client service, generate fewer complaints and more referrals.

See how TimeSolv makes can improve productivity and keep clients happy.

[Schedule your demo today.](#)

## **Protecting Your Firm From Client Complaints**

No firm can guarantee zero complaints, but operational practices that address the most common complaint categories reduce risk substantially. Clear engagement letters, responsive communication systems, professional and itemized billing, accurate trust accounting, and matter management tools that prevent deadlines from being missed are the core infrastructure of a low-complaint firm.

TimeSolv supports the billing and trust accounting side of that infrastructure. Accurate [time](#) capture, professional invoicing, transparent payment collection, and trust accounting tools give your firm a billing process that is less likely to generate disputes and better positioned to defend itself if one arises.