

What Can't Attorneys Bill For?

Few questions create more uncertainty for lawyers than what belongs on a client invoice. Tasks like [basic legal research](#), administrative work, or internal coordination often raise the question: Is this billable? For many firms, the answer isn't always clear—and that uncertainty can lead to client frustration and billing disputes.

While junior attorneys may not draft the final bill, their time entries form its foundation. Without consistent guidance, those entries can vary widely in quality and judgment. Senior attorneys sometimes assume this knowledge is intuitive or hesitate to restrict billable time too tightly, leaving room for confusion about how lawyers charge ethically and efficiently.

The problem: all it takes is one questionable entry to undermine an otherwise accurate invoice. When a client spots a single charge that feels out of place, it can cast doubt on the entire bill, delay payment, and erode trust.

Clear internal standards on what lawyers can't bill for protect both your revenue and your reputation.

10 Common Tasks Clients Will Dispute

Ultimately, what tasks your firm's client will pay for (and not pay for) should be determined by the agreement and bar guidelines. But understanding how lawyers charge ethically—and the importance of billing transparency under [ABA Model Rule 1.5 \(Fees\)](#)—to build client trust and minimize disputes is just as critical.

Overbilling or misrepresenting time entries can lead to disciplinary action, while clarity and reasonableness in billing protect both the attorney and the client relationship.

Clients are particularly sensitive to vague time entries, excessive research time, or descriptions like "review of email chain." These tend to raise

questions about efficiency and necessity.

The best way to prevent disputes is to ensure clear time descriptions, perform pre-bill reviews, and follow compliant client billing guidelines consistently.

With that in mind, here are ten of the most commonly disputed tasks when attorneys consider how to bill for their services:

1. Assigning Tasks to Other Attorneys and Staff

Clients may push back on time billed for internal delegation or supervision unless it directly advances their case strategy. These activities are often viewed as part of firm management, not client service.

2. Filing Documents Related to the Matter

Filing is typically an administrative task. Unless the filing involves substantive legal judgment, clients usually expect it to fall under a paralegal or support role that's not billed at attorney rates.

3. Training of Attorneys or Staff on Technical Platforms

Clients generally expect attorneys and staff to be proficient with the tools of their trade. Billing for internal training on new software or platforms is typically seen as an overhead cost to the firm, not a direct client expense.

4. Administrative Tasks Related to Sending and Receiving Correspondence

Logging, printing, or organizing correspondence, especially email, rarely justifies billable time. These are routine tasks that fall under firm administration.

5. Simple Data Input/Entry

Tasks that include entering client details or updating case files are typically clerical in nature and part of overhead, not substantive legal work.

6. Formatting/Scanning of Documents

Clients are unlikely to pay for document formatting, pagination, or scanning. These activities are administrative rather than legal in nature.

7. Continuing Education, Seminars, and Review of Journals

Ongoing education ensures competence, but it's not client-specific. Professional development falls outside the scope of billable work.

8. Researching Established Law in Your Area of Practice

Clients may question time billed for general principles of law that a competent attorney in the practice area should already know.

Tip: Not sure what constitutes basic research? See our detailed discussion on "[Can I bill a client for 'basic' legal research?](#)" next.

9. Non-Approved Travel Time

Unless travel time is authorized in advance or used productively for case work, clients often dispute these charges.

10. Preparing and Reviewing Client Bills/Invoices

Billing for billing tends to create friction. Time spent preparing or reviewing invoices should typically be absorbed by the firm as part of its cost of doing business.

What a client agrees to pay will always depend on your engagement terms and applicable bar guidelines. When questions arise, seek clarity early—whether from a managing attorney or directly with the client—to protect both your time and your relationships.

Tip: Ethical billing is both a standard and a strategy. To see how firms are modernizing compliance while improving realization rates, download [Beyond the Billable Hour: A Guide to Flexible Billing Options for Law Firms](#) for insights into today's most profitable billing models.

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](#)

Ethical Billing Guidelines for Client-Friendly Compliance

Ethical billing upholds the integrity of the legal profession. The [ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct](#), particularly Rule 1.5, stress that fees must be reasonable and communicated clearly.

This means attorneys should:

- **Disclose billing methods upfront.** Whether [billing hourly or via fixed fees](#), transparency from the outset builds trust and avoids surprises.
- **Avoid duplicative billing.** Two attorneys attending the same call or meeting may not both record billable time unless each adds unique value to avoid [double billing](#).
- **Ensure entries reflect substantive work.** Vague terms like “worked on case” should be replaced with precise, outcome-oriented descriptions.
- **Keep records current and complete.** [Efficient time tracking](#) requires precision and promptness. Enter time daily to ensure accuracy and compliance.
- **Regularly review firm billing policies.** Aligning your [internal billing practices](#) with bar recommendations helps prevent inadvertent ethical breaches.

By treating billing as both a financial and ethical responsibility, attorneys protect their reputation and maintain client confidence. Both are key drivers of long-term success and sustainable profitability.

Increase Billable Time Ethically—and with Confidence

How do attorneys bill accurately while navigating the gray areas of what can—and can't—be billed for? The smart move is to focus on ways to capture more billable time ethically.

When your billing practices are transparent and grounded in client trust, every recorded hour strengthens your credibility and your bottom line.

TimeSolv helps you lead with clarity. Our [legal time and billing tools](#) make it easy to distinguish between billable work and firm overhead so your team spends less time second-guessing and more time delivering value.

For practical ways to boost your billable hours without crossing ethical lines, explore *“Seven Ways to Increase Billable Time.”* You'll learn how attorneys use precise time capture methods, weekly missing time reviews, and simple daily habits to build up billable hours. [Download your free guide now.](#)

Want to give your billable hours a boost without client disputes? [Start your free trial today.](#) and see how TimeSolv makes accurate, ethical billing effortless.

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](#)

Frequently Asked Questions: Non-Billable Tasks for Attorneys

What are common tasks attorneys cannot bill clients for?

Attorneys can't bill clients for administrative duties, internal training, document formatting, or research on well-established law within their field. These tasks are considered part of firm operations, not client value. Understanding what lawyers can and cannot bill for helps attorneys maintain billing transparency and avoid disputes that erode client trust.

How do attorneys bill ethically to avoid client disputes?

Ethical billing starts with clarity. Attorneys should record time based on agreed-upon terms and ensure every entry demonstrates value to the client. Detailed, outcome-focused descriptions strengthen transparency in how lawyers charge and prevent confusion over routine or non-substantive tasks. Avoiding charges for firm overhead or baseline legal knowledge reinforces professionalism and credibility.

Does a client agreement define what attorneys can and cannot bill for?

Yes. A clear, well-structured client agreement or engagement letter sets the boundaries for how lawyers charge clients, including what activities are billable, what are not, and the rates for each. Regularly reviewing and [discussing these terms with clients](#) helps establish mutual understanding and reduces billing disputes before they arise.

How can law firms improve transparency in what attorneys bill for?

Law firms can improve transparency by using [time-tracking tools](#) that capture work accurately and clearly distinguish between billable and non-billable activities. Providing detailed invoices and training team members on what lawyers can't bill for ensures consistency across all time entries. As a result, clients will feel informed, confident, and respected in every billing interaction.

How to Create a Paperless Document Management Workflow for Your Law Firm

Go paperless to work smarter, save time, and deliver greater value to your clients. This free guide gives you a step-by-step roadmap to building an efficient, eco-friendly workflow for your firm. Download it now to start simplifying today!

[Get Your Free Guide](#)

Method 2: File Sharing via Email Attachments

As a familiar tool that most people already use regularly, email is primed for legal file sharing. But additional measures must be taken to send sensitive

documents via email without jeopardizing data security.

Pros:

- **Familiarity:** Email is a familiar tool that requires no special software or steep learning curve, even for clients without tech expertise.
- **Security Features:** Modern file-sharing and [document management platforms](#) offer email features like data encryption, password protection, and expiration dates for email attachments to reduce security risks associated with traditional email.
- **Data Encryption:** Encrypted email attachments help ensure secure file sharing for lawyers while speeding up legal workflows with near-instant client access to important files that never leaves client details or data exposed.

Cons:

- **Unencrypted Risk:** Clients may send personal details or sensitive documents attached as standard, unencrypted attachments that are vulnerable to cyberattacks.
- **Link Confusion:** Clients might not recognize links as safe and avoid opening encrypted files sent via email when firms take additional security measures.
- **Inbox Overload:** Some clients check email less frequently, which can leave important documents buried under spam and marketing newsletters.

Method 3: File-Sharing Platforms

File-sharing platforms like [LexShare](#) provide dedicated, professional tools for securely exchanging sensitive legal documents. These platforms are designed to handle large files and offer a range of advanced security features.

Pros:

- **Large File Support:** They allow for large file transfers that might be impossible to share via email or client portals.
- **User-Friendly:** The interface is designed for optimal user experience, which helps present the law firm as security-conscious and tech-savvy.

- **Permission Controls:** Platforms let law firms specify user permissions, so that only authorized individuals can access sensitive files.

Cons:

- **Client Support:** While file-sharing platforms may be intuitive for some, clients unfamiliar with them may require extra guidance.
- **Subscription Cost:** Many platforms involve ongoing subscription fees that factor into firm overhead.

Which Method Is Best and Most Secure for Legal File Sharing?

When it comes to secure file sharing for law firms, client portals and file-sharing platforms are the most reliable options. Both methods provide strong protection against cyber threats and help attorneys meet their ethical and regulatory security obligations.

While email attachments seem convenient and familiar to clients, they carry significant risks that make them less advisable for professional use. For example, if a recipient mistakenly forwards or mishandles an email, sensitive data can be exposed. Many clients are also unfamiliar with encryption protocols, which can lead to errors like replying with unprotected attachments or ignoring links with an expiration date.

In comparison, client portals act as all-in-one communication hubs. For firms that prioritize a seamless client experience and efficient data protection, portals are often the better long-term solution. They minimize risks while fostering stronger client involvement.

Secure file-sharing platforms for law firms, on the other hand, offer just as much flexibility and scalability, particularly for transferring large files or accommodating clients who prefer a simpler interface. These platforms are the best choice when quick, straightforward exchanges are required, like in discovery document transfers or sharing large exhibits with co-counsel.

For the most versatile solution, a hybrid approach often works best. By combining client portals with legal file-sharing platforms, firms can cater to a wider range of client needs, maintain compliance, and ensure sensitive

information remains protected. It's a balanced approach that offers the security and flexibility today's clients demand.

File Sharing is Smart, Simple, and Safe with TimeSolv

For a modern legal practice, investing in client portals or secure file sharing for law firms is a crucial step toward meeting professional standards and ethical compliance obligations. TimeSolv provides the tools you need to keep data secure while simplifying how you collaborate with clients.

With powerful client portal features and seamless integration with file-sharing tools like LexShare and DropBox, TimeSolv empowers law firms to share sensitive documents safely, efficiently, and with less friction for clients.

Whether your focus is streamlining workflows, staying compliant, or strengthening client trust, TimeSolv offers a single, secure solution.

Take the next step toward a more secure, efficient law firm—[schedule a demo now](#) or [start your free trial today](#).

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