GENERAL

attorney at law plural form

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Introduction

When drafting legal documents, writing contracts, or simply discussing the legal profession in everyday conversation, the phrase **“attorney at law”** appears frequently. Yet, many writers and even seasoned legal professionals sometimes stumble over its plural form. Is it *attorneys at law*, *attorney at laws*, or something else entirely? This article will explore the correct pluralization, the historical context behind the term, common mistakes, and practical guidelines for using it correctly in both formal and informal writing.

Understanding the Term “Attorney at Law”

The phrase **attorney at law**is a formal designation that refers to a licensed lawyer who has been admitted to practice law in a particular jurisdiction. The term originates from the 19th century English legal system and was adopted into American legal parlance. It distinguishes a lawyer who is authorized to represent clients in court from other legal professionals such as paralegals, legal assistants, or judges.

Historical Roots

In medieval England, the word *attorney* derived from the Latin *attornatus*, meaning “one who is entrusted.” The phrase “at law” was added to indicate that the person held the right to practice law, as opposed to merely advising or offering legal opinion. Over time, the phrase became a fixed legal title.

Why It Matters in Writing

Using the correct plural form is crucial for clarity and professionalism. An incorrect plural can signal a lack of attention to detail, potentially undermining credibility—especially in legal writing where precision is paramount.

The Singular Form: A Quick Review

The singular form is straightforward: **attorney at law**. When referring to one individual, you would write, for example, “The attorney at law will review the contract.”

Pluralization Rules for “Attorney at Law”

Unlike many English nouns that simply add an *s* or *es* to form the plural, **attorney at law** follows a more nuanced rule. The plural is formed by pluralizing the noun that precedes the phrase—specifically, the word *attorney*—while keeping the phrase *at law* unchanged.

Correct Plural Form

Attorneys at lawis the standard plural. The phrase is treated as a compound noun where only the first element takes the plural marker.

Common Mistakes

- Attorney at laws – Adding an s to the entire phrase is incorrect because law is not the noun being pluralized.
- Attorneys at laws – Pluralizing both attorney and law is also wrong for the same reason.
- Using “lawyers at law” – While “lawyer” is a synonym, it changes the idiomatic expression. Stick with the

established phrase unless you have a specific reason to use the synonym.

When to Use the Plural

In a sentence, the plural appears whenever you refer to more than one legal professional. For instance:

1. “The attorneys at law in the firm specialize in intellectual property.”
2. “Several attorneys at law will attend the conference.”

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Even seasoned writers can slip up. Below are some typical pitfalls and how to prevent them.

1. Confusing “attorney” with “lawyer”

Although *lawyer* is a more general term, *attorney at law* is a specific legal designation. Using the wrong term can alter the meaning. If you need a more generic term, simply say **lawyers** instead of **attorneys at law**.

2. Over Pluralizing the Entire Phrase

Adding an *s* to *law* is a common error. Remember: the phrase is a fixed expression; only the first word changes.

3. Neglecting Contextual Clues

In some documents, the plural form may be implied by context. For example, “The attorney at law will review the documents.” If you later refer back to the same group, you should say “The attorneys at law will review the documents.” Consistency is key.

Usage in Legal Documents

Legal documents demand precision. The plural form is used in various contexts, from contracts to court filings.

Contracts

When drafting a contract that involves multiple attorneys, the plural form appears frequently:

“The parties agree that the **attorneys at law** representing the parties shall maintain confidentiality.”

Court Filings

In pleadings, the plural might be used to refer to the attorneys of a party:

“The **attorneys at law** for the defendant respectfully request a continuance.”

Legal Correspondence

In emails or letters addressed to a firm:

“Dear **attorneys at law** of Smith & Associates, I would like to discuss…”

Alternatives and Synonyms

While **attorneys at law** is the most precise term, there are alternatives that can be used in less formal contexts.

Lawyers

“Lawyer” is a common synonym but lacks the formal weight of “attorney at law.” Use it when brevity or casual tone is appropriate.

Legal Counsel

In corporate settings, “legal counsel” is often used. This term refers to lawyers who provide advice rather than represent clients in court.

Legal Professionals

For a broad group that includes lawyers, paralegals, and other legal staff, “legal professionals” is inclusive but vague.

International Variations

The pluralization rule for “attorney at law” is largely consistent in common law jurisdictions. However, terminology can vary.

United Kingdom

In the UK, the term “solicitor” or “barrister” is more common. “Attorney” is less frequently used.

Canada

Canadian legal professionals often use “lawyer” or “attorney” interchangeably. The plural remains “attorneys.”

Australia

Like the UK, Australia uses “lawyer” or “barrister.” The phrase “attorney at law” is uncommon.

Practical Tips for Writing Correctly

- Check the context. If the document is formal, use “attorneys at law.” In casual writing, “lawyers” may suffice.
- Use a style guide. Refer to the Chicago Manual of Style or the APA Style Guide for consistent usage.
- Proofread for pluralization errors. A quick scan for “attorney at laws” will catch most mistakes.
- Ask a colleague. A second pair of eyes can catch subtle errors.
- Use a grammar-checking tool. Tools like Grammarly often flag incorrect plural forms.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. Is “attorney at law” a legal title? Yes, it is an official designation for licensed lawyers in many jurisdictions.
2. Can I use “attorneys at law” in a headline? Absolutely, but ensure the headline remains clear and concise.
3. What if I refer to a single lawyer in a plural context? Use “attorney at law” for singular and “attorneys at law” for plural.
4. Is “lawyers at law” acceptable? It’s uncommon and considered incorrect; stick with the standard phrase.
5. Do I need to capitalize “Attorney”? In formal legal documents, capitalization is typical. In informal writing, it may be lowercased.

Conclusion

Mastering the plural form of **attorney at law** is more than a grammatical exercise—it’s a professional necessity. By understanding the historical background, applying the correct pluralization rules, and avoiding common pitfalls, writers can ensure their documents are precise, credible, and free from ambiguity. Whether you’re drafting a contract, composing a legal brief, or simply discussing the legal profession, remember that the correct plural is **attorneys at law**. This small detail reflects the larger commitment to accuracy that defines the legal field.

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