



AMERICAN **BAR** ASSOCIATION

Free Legal Answers

Top 10 Tips For Answering ABA Free Legal Answers Questions

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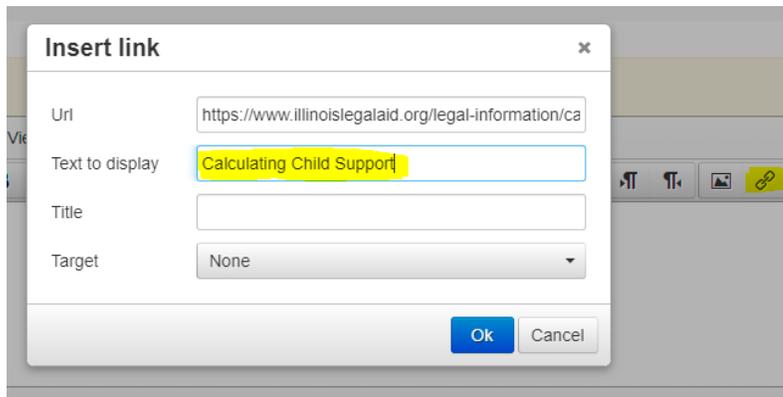
Thank you for your dedicated pro bono legal services to those who are in need. Your participation on ABA Free Legal Answers (ABA FLA) in answering many of the over 150,000 questions submitted on the site has helped tens of thousands of individuals, and for that the ABA and all the state site administrators are grateful.

There is an ever-increasing need for pro bono legal services to the poor, as our most vulnerable navigate the unprecedented economic and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the questions that are submitted on ABA FLA involve people in crisis, including the elderly, persons with disabilities, veterans, victims of domestic violence, persons with limited English proficiency, and other marginalized individuals.

Below are 10 tips on how to most effectively respond to users who are frequently experiencing stress in their daily lives and are reaching out for help and guidance.

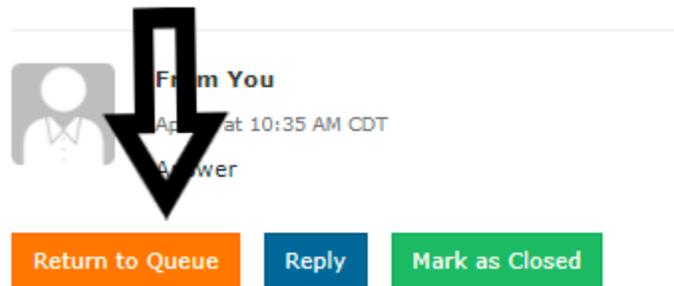
1. **Read the Question Several Times.** It is often helpful to read the question more than once to discern what the question is that must be answered. At times, users may provide unrelated facts and forget to ask a question. Take the time to review the facts, and you can always confirm with the user the specific questions or additional facts so you can properly respond.
2. **Strive for an Approachable Tone.** Your response should use a voice of understanding, refrain from judgment, come from a place of fairness, and help the user feel heard. Remember that the user cannot see your facial expression nor hear your caring tone of voice—all that they see is the text of your answer.
3. **Begin Your Answer With a Greeting.** Do not jump into the substance immediately. Remember that users are already often impacted by their own legal and emotional distress even before posting their question. It is important to provide not only a legal answer but also a sympathetic or encouraging message. You do not have to sugar coat the legal answer but adding a sentence or two that makes a human connection increases the effectiveness of your communication. At times, the answer to the legal question may not be the outcome for which the user hoped; however, if you include a sympathetic or encouraging message, the legal answer will be more palatable.
4. **Use Easy to Read Hyperlinks** ABA Free Legal Answers users are likely already stressed and experiencing difficulty navigating the legal system, so when referring to a form, statute,

documentation, or other resources in your answer, it is helpful to provide a hyperlink or attach the form/documents. Tip: Rather than pasting a long URL string in your answer, use “Text to Display” when providing a hyperlink:



5. **“Hire an Attorney” is Not an Appropriate Response.** Users have come to ABA Free Legal Answers with their legal questions to receive legal advice and information and have often been unsuccessful in otherwise obtaining legal help. Directing a user to simply hire an attorney is neither helpful, nor, in most cases realistic. While some matters are complex and indeed require sitting down with an attorney, please provide as much legal advice and information as you can based on the facts provided before informing the user that they have a complex matter, and it would be their best interest to try to hire an attorney. In such cases, best practice is to also provide a link to the local lawyer referral service or volunteer lawyers organization.
6. **Ask Follow Up Questions and Use “If, Then” Statements.** If the user did not provide enough facts for you to provide legal advice, ask follow-up questions and use qualifying language, e.g. “What is the amount of your assets? If you have below X amount, you may qualify for Medicaid in X state.” Then, make sure to leave the question open for the client to respond to your question.
7. **Keep Your Communications on the Platform.** It may be tempting for the user (and you!) to take the conversation off the FLA portal. However, you are representing these users on a limited basis via the Free Legal Answers secured platform and the malpractice insurance covers you only for your communications *on the portal*. If the user requires more assistance, you may refer them to an appropriate legal services organization or other resources in their area. Do not ask the client to contact you or a specific attorney off the portal. If you would like to take the case pro bono, please notify the administrator so he/she can try to pair you with an organization that can provide the malpractice coverage.
8. **Provide Encouraging Closing Remarks.** Empathy and respect are important, even in your closing remarks. Closing statement example: “Thank you for posting your legal question on the ABA Free Legal Answers platform. It was a pleasure providing you legal services and I wish you the best on resolving your legal matter. Please let me know if you have any questions.” You can create your own closing statement and use it every time you provide an answer.
9. **Leave the Question Open.** In case the user has any follow-up responses or has clarifying questions, leave the question open by either logging out or click on “Return to Queue” to

choose another question. You will receive an email notifying you that there has been a response and after 10 days of no communications, the question will automatically close.



10. **Contact Your State Administrator.** If you have any questions or would like more guidance when answering questions, please reach out to your FLA state site administrator for assistance. See below for link that is always available in the upper right-hand corner of your question thread.

 [Notify the State Administrator about this question](#)

Responses to our follow-up surveys of users have shown that when attorneys follow the above guidance, clients appreciate it.

“I cannot say enough good comments on how I was treated, and how well I was presented the information in a way I could understand,” said a disabled senior in Wisconsin. “If I had a question, [my attorney] would research the information for me and get back to me. I could not have figured this out on my own. I am very grateful for the help . . . [t]his was a life saver to me.”

Thank you again for your service. Together, we can continue our profession’s rich history of service in the public interest and have a meaningful impact in the lives of individuals in need of legal assistance in our communities.

For more information on [ABA Free Legal Answers](#) and how you can participate, please contact us at Tali.Albukerk@americanbar.org or FDigon-Greer@floridabar.org.