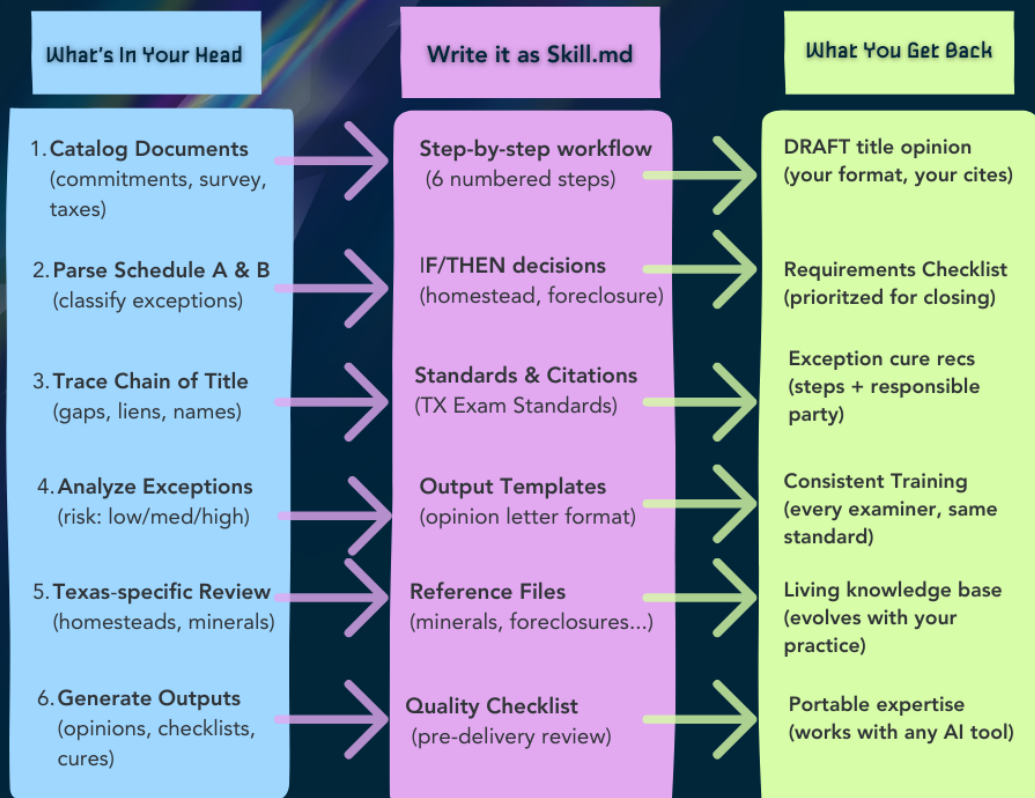


How to Build Your First Legal Skills File

A Step-by-Step Guide for Legal Professionals

From Expertise to Skill File

How a Texas Title Attorney Captures Knowledge
by Code & Counsel



Real Example: TX residential title review

What Is a Skill File?

A skill file is a plain text document (typically named **SKILL.md**) that captures **how you approach a specific legal task** — your process, your decision criteria, your standards, and the output you expect.

Think of it as a senior partner’s practice guide, written clearly enough that a junior attorney (or an AI assistant like Claude) could follow it and produce a solid first draft for your review.

A skill file is NOT code. It’s structured plain English. If you can write a memo, you can write a skill file.

Real example: A TX-licensed attorney built a skill for reviewing residential title reports — covering foreclosure scenarios (nonjudicial sale requirements, home equity judicial foreclosure, trustee’s deed verification), bankruptcy issues (automatic stay, debtor-in-possession authority, lien survival after discharge), and standard closing analysis. It’s 253 lines of structured instructions backed by 11 reference files covering minerals, water rights, probate, entities, foreclosure, and the full Texas Title Examination Standards.

Skill Files Are Living Documents

Here’s what most people miss: **a skill file isn’t a static document you write once and forget.** It’s a living, breathing knowledge base — just like the expertise in your head.

Your legal knowledge evolves constantly. New case law changes how you evaluate homestead issues. A legislative amendment modifies mechanic’s lien perfection requirements. You develop a better approach to analyzing Transfer on Death Deeds after handling a difficult probate. Your skill file should evolve the same way.

Tools that make this accessible to everyone: You don’t need to be at a BigLaw firm with a dedicated innovation team. Today, any attorney can use Claude Cowork (desktop, no coding required), Claude Code (command line for tech-forward attorneys), Codex, or ChatGPT to create, manage, and iterate on skill files. These tools learn from your process and preferences over time. For the first time, this capability is accessible to solo practitioners, small firms, and mid-market practices — not just the firms with seven-figure technology budgets.

The iteration cycle looks like this: you build your first draft, test it against real work product, refine the decision criteria based on what the AI missed, add edge cases you forgot, and improve. Every cycle makes the skill file — and the AI’s output — better.

Step 1: Pick One Repeatable Task

Choose a task you do often enough that consistency matters. Good first candidates:

Residential title review — for closing, foreclosure, or bankruptcy scenarios

Contract review — initial markup against your firm’s playbook

Due diligence — checklist-driven review of transaction documents

Discovery responses — evaluation and objection drafting

Regulatory compliance — DPA review, data subject requests

Estate planning — document review checklists, tax analysis

The key question: Is this something I explain to junior attorneys or paralegals regularly? If yes, it’s a great candidate. Our example: a TX attorney who reviews residential title commitments for closings, foreclosures, and bankruptcy-affected properties.

Step 2: Walk Through Your Process Out Loud

Pretend you’re sitting next to a smart junior attorney who has never done this task. Walk them through it step by step.

Real example — TX Residential Title Review:

When a title commitment lands on my desk, the first thing I do is catalog every document — commitment, recorded instruments, surveys, tax certificates, HOA docs, and searches. If the transaction involves a foreclosure or bankruptcy, I’m immediately looking for the trustee’s deed, the foreclosure notices, or the bankruptcy court orders.

I parse the commitment: Schedule A for coverage, vesting, legal description. Schedule B for requirements and exceptions. I classify each exception as standard/printed or special/property-specific.

For chain of title, I trace ownership looking for gaps, improper conveyances, and unreleased liens. If this is a foreclosure property, I’m verifying the power of sale in the deed of trust, that the substitute trustee was properly appointed and recorded, that statutory notices were given (21-day notice, posting, certified mail), and that the sale was conducted on the first Tuesday between 10 AM and 4 PM at the courthouse.

If there’s a bankruptcy in the chain, I need to verify: Was the automatic stay lifted before any transfers? Is the deed from a Chapter 7 trustee with court authorization, or a Chapter 11

debtor-in-possession with proper orders? Remember — discharge eliminates personal liability but liens survive. A creditor can still foreclose post-discharge.

Don't worry about formatting yet. Just capture the substance. You're recording your expertise, not writing code.

Step 3: Identify Your Decision Points

Every legal workflow has moments where judgment is required. Document them clearly.

Use this pattern: **IF [condition], THEN [action]**

Real examples from TX Residential Title Review:

If both spouses did not sign a homestead conveyance, flag immediately. Tex. Const. art. XVI, § 50 requires spousal joinder regardless of whose name is on title.

If the property was foreclosed, verify: Was it a home equity loan or reverse mortgage? If yes, judicial foreclosure was required (TEX. CONST. art. XVI, § 50(a)(6)). A nonjudicial trustee's sale on a home equity loan is void.

If bankruptcy appears in the chain: Check that the automatic stay (11 U.S.C. § 362) was lifted before any transfer. A transfer during an active stay may be void or voidable.

For each Schedule B-II exception, classify risk: LOW (standard exceptions, utility easements in expected locations), MEDIUM (easements affecting buildable area, restrictions limiting intended use), HIGH (access issues, major encroachments, unreleased liens, ownership disputes).

This is where your expertise shines. A junior attorney might not know that a constitutional mechanic's lien can prime a recorded deed of trust because it relates back to commencement of construction. Or that Texas has a NOTICE recording statute, not race-notice. Your skill file captures that knowledge explicitly.

Step 4: Define Your Standards and Positions

Write down the specific benchmarks, authorities, and thresholds you use:

Topic	Standard	Citation
Marketable title	Free from reasonable doubt	Standard 2.10
Recording statute	Texas is NOTICE, not race-notice	Tex. Prop. Code § 13.001
Homestead (urban)	Up to 10 acres for family	Tex. Prop. Code §§ 41.001-005
Community property	Acquired during marriage = presumed community	Tex. Fam. Code § 3.003
Nonjudicial foreclosure	First Tuesday, 10 AM-4 PM, 21-day notice	Tex. Prop. Code § 51.002
Bankruptcy stay	Transfers void/voidable during stay	11 U.S.C. § 362
Judgment lien	10 years from recording; cannot attach to homestead	Tex. Prop. Code § 52.003
Lien survival	Liens survive bankruptcy discharge	11 U.S.C. §§ 523-524

The TX title skill references the full Texas Title Examination Standards (Vernon’s Texas Statutes, Title 2—Appendix) as its primary authority.

Step 5: Specify the Output Format

What should the finished product look like?

TX Title Opinion Letter (for closing/foreclosure/bankruptcy):

1. DRAFT DISCLAIMER (required at top of every output)
2. Purpose and scope (closing, foreclosure review, or post-bankruptcy)
3. Documents examined (with recording info)
4. Legal description
5. Chain of title summary (with foreclosure/bankruptcy events noted)
6. Current vesting
7. Requirements for clear title
8. Exception analysis with recommendations
9. Texas-specific matters (homestead, community property, minerals)
10. Opinion statement (marked as DRAFT pending attorney review)

11. Qualifications and limitations

Requirements Checklist: Organized by priority — Must Clear Before Closing, Documents Needed, Payoffs Required, Affidavits/Certifications, HOA Items, Tax Items, Remaining Exceptions.

Exception Cure Recommendations: For each curable exception — issue description, specific cure steps, documents needed, responsible party, timeline.

Step 6: Format as a SKILL.md File

Organize everything into a structured text file:

```
---
name: tx-title-analysis
description: |
  Texas title examination for residential real
  estate. Covers closings, foreclosures, and
  bankruptcy-affected properties. Outputs DRAFT
  title opinion letters, requirements checklists,
  and exception cures for attorney review.
---

# Texas Title Analysis Skill

## Title Analysis Workflow
1. Identify Documents
2. Parse Commitment (Schedule A and B)
3. Analyze Chain of Title
4. Examine Exceptions (classify risk)
5. TX-Specific Review (homestead, community
  property, minerals, water rights)
6. Generate Outputs (opinion, checklist, cures)

## Decision Framework
- IF quitclaim in chain -> flag as red flag
- IF homestead, both spouses must sign
- IF foreclosure: verify notice, sale procedure
- IF bankruptcy: verify stay lifted, proper auth
...
```

That's the entire structure. Everything else is the substance of your expertise, written in your own words.

Step 7: Build Reference Files (Optional but Powerful)

For complex practice areas, break detailed guidance into separate files:

```
tx-title-analysis/  
  SKILL.md # Main skill (253 lines)  
  references/  
    tx-exam-standards.md # TX Title Exam Standards  
    tx-minerals.md # Mineral interest analysis  
    tx-water-rights.md # Water rights (dual system)  
    tx-probate.md # Estate/probate issues  
    tx-entities.md # LLC/corp/trust authority  
    tx-foreclosure.md # Foreclosure/lien priority  
    tx-survey.md # ALTA/NSPS survey analysis  
    tx-forms.md # TX title forms  
    tx-requirements.md # Common requirements  
    tx-exceptions.md # Exception analysis guide  
    tx-opinion-template.md # Opinion letter template  
    tx-quality-checklist.md # Pre-delivery verification  
  data/  
    title-analysis-schema.json # Data export schema
```

Claude only loads the foreclosure reference when a foreclosure issue appears, the bankruptcy guidance when a stay needs checking, and the minerals reference when a severance shows up in the chain. This modular approach keeps responses fast and focused.

Step 8: Test, Iterate, and Evolve

Test your skill file against real work — upload a title commitment for a recent foreclosure closing and compare the AI output to what you would have produced.

Your skill file grows with you. After each use, refine it. Did a new legislative change affect mechanic's lien deadlines? Add it. Did you handle a complex bankruptcy/foreclosure overlap that revealed a gap? Update your decision criteria. Tools like Claude Cowork and Claude Code make this iteration loop fast and accessible — you don't need a developer or an innovation team. You just need your expertise and 10 minutes.

Important: All AI-generated outputs are DRAFT work product. Every skill file should include clear disclaimers that outputs require attorney review before any use or reliance.

Where to Use Your Skill File

As a training document: Share with your team. A documented foreclosure review checklist with IF/THEN criteria is the most efficient onboarding tool you can create.

In Claude Cework (Desktop): Place your skill folder in your working directory. Claude automatically detects and uses it — following your process, citing your authorities. No coding required.

In Claude Code: Legal technologists can integrate skill files into plugins that work across an entire firm.

In other AI tools: Your SKILL.md is a plain text file. It works with Codex, ChatGPT, or any system that accepts structured instructions. You own it. You're not locked in.

The accessibility revolution: For the first time, solo practitioners and small firms have the same capability that used to require BigLaw technology budgets. You don't need a \$500K legal tech platform. You need your expertise, a text file, and a tool like Claude Cework that costs a fraction of traditional solutions. The playing field is leveling — and it favors the attorneys who actually know their craft.

The Bottom Line

You already have the expertise. The skill file just makes it visible, reusable, and scalable. It's not static. It evolves as your knowledge evolves. Every case you handle makes it better. Start with one task. The one you explain most often. Write it down. Refine it. Share it. You'll be surprised how much of your value you can capture — and how much more of it you can deliver.

Resources:

- The Complete Guide to Building Skills for Claude (PDF): <https://resources.anthropic.com/hubfs/The-Complete-Guide-to-Building-Skill-for-Claude.pdf>
- Legal Skills Plugin: <https://www.github.com/anthropics/knowledge-work-plugins/legal>
- Claude Skills Documentation: <https://support.claude.com/en/articles/12580051-teach-claude-your-way-of-working-using-skills>
- Community Skills: <https://agentskills.legal/skills>
- AI Template Library: <https://www.aitmpl.com/agents>