

Can You Be Terminated for Refusing to Do Something Legal but Unethical?

Yes. In an “at-will” employment relationship, an employer may generally terminate an employee for refusing to perform a legal task, even if the employee considers it unethical. That said, there may be exceptions, for example, where a collective bargaining agreement or an individual employment contract limits the duties you can be required to perform.

- **At-will employment:** In most at-will arrangements, an employer may terminate employment for any reason—or no reason—provided the reason is not unlawful (for example, discrimination or retaliation prohibited by law).
- **Legal vs. ethical considerations:** Employment protections typically focus on refusing to engage in unlawful conduct. If the requested conduct is not illegal, though it may be unfair, dishonest, or inconsistent with personal or professional ethics, refusal may not be legally protected.
- **Safety-related protections:** You may have protection if the task is unsafe. For example, certain [OSHA](#) rules protect workers who refuse work under hazardous conditions.

If you are an at-will employee and believe an assigned task conflicts with your moral or ethical beliefs, you may choose to raise the concern with your manager or HR, seek reassignment, or resign. In general, the strongest legal basis for refusing an assignment arises when you are being asked to do something unlawful, unsafe, or outside the scope of an applicable contract or collective bargaining agreement.