

## Down to Brass Tacks – Applying for Legal Jobs

Okay, now that you know yourself better than Thoreau and have a Rolodex that Justice Roberts would envy, it is time to actually start applying for jobs. Your counselor can help you convey your experiences and skills in the best, most relevant way – but below are the basics about legal cover letters, resumes, writing samples, references and job interviews that you need to get started.

### Cover Letters

Long neglected in favor of their ostentatious cousin the resume, cover letters are making a comeback and with good reason – *they are the first (and possibly only) opportunity you will get to speak directly to an employer!* Just think of it – a chance to tell your dream employer why you are so interested in working for them and what you would bring to their organization – all the while demonstrating your ability to write clearly and concisely!

#### Four Steps to a Perfect Cover Letter

**Step 1: Tell them who you are.** You should open the letter by telling the employer where you go to law school, what year you are in law school and what job you are applying for. If someone in your network suggested you apply or has some connection with the employer, indicate that in the *very first sentence*. Also – if you are applying for jobs in a different city, be sure to include a reason you want to work in that city. Good reasons: you’re from there, you went to college there, you are interested in X industry, which is based there, your family moved there. Bad reasons: you’ve heard the salaries are higher, you want to “try the city out,” you’ve never been there, but you’ve heard it’s nice.

“Dean Lawrence suggested I contact you about a summer internship. I am a first-year student at The George Washington University Law School and am extremely interested in working for the New York office of the American Civil Liberties Union this summer. Having grown up in Suffolk County, I look forward to starting my legal career in New York this summer.”

**Step 2: Tell them why you want to work for them.** This should be an easy task for you if you have followed our suggestions up to this point. If you haven’t had a chance to commit the Career Guide to memory yet (*ahem!*), we’ll cut to the chase.

To generate a good reason why you want to work for a particular employer: 1) think about what you want to do and why; and 2) research the employer, including the employer’s website, reviewing recent cases or matters the employer has been involved in, etc.

*Note* – **for government agencies and public interest organizations**, it is extremely important that you indicate your interest in the mission of the organization! You can usually find this information on the organization’s website.

Ideally, you will write a unique cover letter for each employer. If you can’t do that, it is okay to categorize employers and have similar language that you use for each category of

employers. For example, you may have one letter that you use for litigation, another for corporate, another for environmental and so on.

“I would like to work for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) because I am interested in preserving the constitutional rights of all Americans by challenging unconstitutional laws and practices in court. I was excited to read about the ACLU’s recent efforts to preserve the due process rights of all federal prisoners, and realized that is exactly the type of legal work I want to perform.”

**Step 3: Tell them why they should hire you.** This is the heart of your cover letter – it is your chance to set yourself apart from all the other law students who want to work for a legal employer. What makes you different?

The best way to approach this is to think about what skills and *practical experiences* (non-legal counts!) you have and how those skills and experiences might be useful to the employer. *You need to do the work for the employer* – it is not effective to just rattle off a few things without explaining why they would be useful to the employer. Similarly, you don’t want to just recite your resume. Your cover letter should provide just enough detail about your skills and experiences to entice the employer to read your resume.

Start off this section with a *clear thesis*:

“I would be an asset to the ACLU because of my strong research and writing skills and my demonstrated commitment to civil liberties.”

From there, support your thesis by explaining each aspect of it in turn, using one or two brief, to-the-point sentences to get the point across.

“I developed my research and writing skills in both law school – where I received a B+ on my most recent legal research memorandum – and in college, where I completed a 360 page thesis analyzing the impact of gossip weblogs on celebrity diet and fitness regimes.

I believe my past experience defending civil liberties would also make me an asset to the ACLU. For example, I founded the first national celebrities’ rights organization, CHFT (Celebrities Have Feelings Too), at the University of the District of Columbia. Although no celebrities attended the University, I am sure they appreciated my efforts to persuade people that celebrities are no different than you or me and should be treated accordingly. I built the organization from the ground up, ultimately recruiting over 75 volunteers and securing funding through the University for an annual conference named in honor of Britney Spears, the poster child for the tragic effects of celebrity abuse.”

**Step 4: Tell them what you are going to do next.** Let the employer know that you look forward to hearing from them, appreciate their time and plan to follow up within two or more weeks. If you are applying to jobs in a different city and plan to be in that city in the near future, let the employer know that as well.

“For all of these reasons, I believe I would be a useful addition to the ACLU and I look forward to discussing my candidacy with you in person soon. I plan to be in the New York City area from December 12 through January 4 and will follow up with you to see if it might be possible to arrange to meet during that time. Thank you for your consideration, and please let me know if you need additional information.”

For additional ideas, please look at the sample cover letters in Appendix D.

## Resumes

The goal of your resume is to convey specific information to employers that will help them realize you are the best candidate for the job!

In most cases, **resumes should be one page** only.

**Resumes should be printed on white or cream resume paper** that matches the paper for your cover letter.

**The header on your resume should match** the header on your cover letter, cover sheet to your writing sample and references list (more on those in a minute).

You should present your education and experience in **reverse chronological order**.<sup>1</sup>

**Be specific and use action words** in describing everything on your resume.

**Use bulleted paragraphs.** This makes your resume more readable.

**Keep formatting consistent** throughout the resume (i.e., don't put some job titles in bold and others in italics).

**Margins – at least .8”;** **font – at least 11 point.** Choose a **conservative, professional font.** Recommended font styles: Times New Roman, Arial and Garamond.

**No typos or spelling errors.**

**Do not use the first person or personal pronouns** – phrase your resume language in the objective, impersonal point of view.

**Be honest!**

---

<sup>1</sup> *The exception to this is:* if you have experience that is relevant to a particular employer (i.e., you are applying to the General Counsel's office of Ford Motor Company and you worked on the production line in one of their factories), you should present that first, even if it means your resume will not be in "straight" chronological order.

### Three Steps to a Perfect Resume

**Step 1: Decide what to include.** Keep in mind that each job you apply for has its own perfect resume! That means that you should view your resume not as a static document, but rather one that you adjust based on the employer. Let's say you were a real go-getter in college and spent a lot of time involved in mock-trial, but you also served as Chief Student Officer of your University bank. On the resume you send to litigation employers, you should spend more time highlighting your mock trial work. For banking or corporate employers, you should highlight your experience at the bank (and consider listing it under the "Experience" section, but more on that below).

Particularly as first-year students, don't omit your non-legal work experience and other activities or community service, which are usually extremely relevant! Instead, include those experiences, but be sure to highlight one of the...

### Five Non-legal Skills Legal Employers Look For

Skill	Why It's Important	Where You May Have Picked It Up
<b>Research and writing</b>	Although legal research and writing is different from your past experience in this area, if it's something you excelled at or enjoyed previously, that bodes well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working as a research or lab assistant;</li> <li>• Writing your thesis or other significant paper.</li> </ul>
<b>Organization; attention to detail</b>	No matter what type of law you go into, the ability to be organized and stay on top of massive amounts of often-confusing detail is an essential skill.	These are skills that people develop by helping people manage information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing files, documents, accounts payable/receivable, correspondence;</li> <li>• Working in your college library;</li> <li>• Organizing a volunteer drive;</li> <li>• Serving as a teaching assistant.</li> </ul>
<b>Management</b>	Employers want to hire individuals that have the capability to advance within an organization. Prior management experience is an excellent indicator of that.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student group leader;</li> <li>• Manager/assistant manager of store;</li> <li>• Camp counselor;</li> <li>• Residential/dorm assistant.</li> </ul>
<b>Business development; outreach</b>	Legal employers want people who will not only be effective advocates, but who also will be able to bring in clients in the future. Any prior sales or outreach experience is helpful in this regard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership coordinator for student group;</li> <li>• Retail sales;</li> <li>• Customer service;</li> <li>• Fundraising.</li> </ul>

**Step 2: Decide how to include it.** Every single item on your resume should be designed to have an impact – do not waste any space with vague words, boring descriptions or excessively long entries. For suggested action words, please see Appendix F.

**Experience.** Let's say you worked for a judge over the summer and helped her with two cases: a breach of contract case and a medical malpractice case with a pending motion to dismiss.

Waste of space:

- Assisted Judge's clerks in researching and writing about legal issues.

Better:

- Researched legal issues and drafted memoranda to assist Judge in deciding a breach of contract case and a motion to dismiss.

Best:

- Researched Maryland breach of contract standards, including whether the doctrine of promissory estoppel applies in the absence of reliance; drafted a memorandum summarizing legal analysis for Judge; discussed legal conclusions and possible outcome with Judge and Judge's clerks.
- Analyzed whether the Judge should permit defendant to take discovery in order to support a motion to dismiss under Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6); drafted a memorandum analyzing legal standards for the Judge.

**Education.** Include schools attended, degrees received, graduation dates (or expected date), majors and other concentrations of study. Include GPA and class rank information where helpful. Note, for GW Law, be sure to represent your current GPA consistent with the Law School's Academic Recognition and Grade Representation Policy, available in Appendix L. Include academic honors and awards (*summa/magna/cum laude*, membership in national honor societies, nationally-recognized scholarships) under the school where they were earned. Include other honors as well – just be sure to provide a description, as some employers may not be familiar with them. Also, include relevant activities. Do not include high school information, unless you attended a well-known school, and you are hoping to make an alumni or geographic connection with the employer.

**Personal.** Highlight language skills, community activities, interesting travel, public speaking, unique hobbies, and military experience.<sup>2</sup>

**Professional Certifications.** If you are a CPA or have some other certification that is relevant, definitely include it.

---

<sup>2</sup> You should NOT include: date/place of birth, marital status, number/ages of children, height, weight, and health status. This information constitutes a very sensitive area of inquiry that may be used to restrict or deny employment to a protected group of people. Employers are obliged to base hiring decisions on job-related qualifications; therefore, an applicant's supporting credentials, as stated on the resume, should be oriented to skills necessary for effective job performance.

**Publications.** This information demonstrates your writing ability and many legal employers will appreciate it. If you have a long list of non-legal publications, in the interest of space and consistency, you may want to consider listing two or three of the most relevant publications and then indicate that: other “publications are available upon request.”

**References.** Include references separately (see next section).

**Step 3: Review your resume!** Make sure it has no errors and conveys exactly what you want it to convey!

For ideas, please see the sample resumes in Appendix E.

### Resume Checklist

After you have completed your resume, use this checklist to ensure that you have included (and excluded) information so that it can be as effective as possible.

#### Overall Appearance

- \_\_\_ Is your resume one page?
- \_\_\_ Is your formatting consistent? Have you used proper punctuation?
- \_\_\_ Have you carefully proofread? Have you double-checked that there are no typos?
- \_\_\_ Is your formatting consistent with one of the sample resumes in Appendix E?

#### Layout

- \_\_\_ Have you used a professional font, such as Times New Roman, Garamond, or Arial? Is your font no smaller than 11 pt?
- \_\_\_ Have you used different type faces (**bold**, *italics*, underline) consistently? Have you used them sparingly so that important items really stand out?
- \_\_\_ Have you turned off hyperlinks on your email address?
- \_\_\_ Have you avoided symbols and hyperlinks to prevent scanning errors?

#### Header

- \_\_\_ Have you included your name, current address, email address and phone number?

#### *Education*

- \_\_\_ Is EDUCATION your first section?
- \_\_\_ Have you listed your education in reverse chronological order?
- \_\_\_ Have you included graduation dates (not dates attended) for each degree?
- \_\_\_ Have you been consistent in writing out or abbreviating your degrees?
- \_\_\_ Have you included honors, papers and activities associated with each degree?
- \_\_\_ Have you listed coursework for each degree **that is relevant to the position you are applying for?**

### *Experience*

\_\_\_ Have you listed your experience in reverse chronological order?

\_\_\_ Have you included employer name, employer location, dates of employment, and job title for each experience?

\_\_\_ Have you listed your responsibilities using ACTION WORDS?

\_\_\_ Have you focused on legal experience (e.g., litigation skills, legal research and writing skills, contract drafting skills, etc.)?

\_\_\_ Have you identified experience in substantive areas of law **that are relevant to the position you are applying for?**

\_\_\_ Have you included any community service, pro bono, or volunteer work **that is relevant to the position you are applying for?**

### *Other Skills*

\_\_\_ Have you included any language skills and your level of proficiency?

\_\_\_ Have you excluded all computer skills and knowledge of document review software?

### **Integrity**

\_\_\_ Is your resume an honest representation of your education, experiences, and skills?

\_\_\_ Have you totally complied with The George Washington University Law School Academic Recognition and Grade Representation Policy in Appendix L and the CDO Policies and Procedures in Appendix M?

## Writing Samples

Some employers will request writing samples as part of the application process.

**The number one thing you should consider in selecting a writing sample is this: it should be the best example of your ability to write a clear, accurate legal analysis!** If you can use a piece that is relevant to the job you're seeking or something you created at a job or internship, all the better. But focus on the writing first!

**Writing samples should be five to ten pages long.** If the sample that best demonstrates your ability is longer, consider saving some space by cutting down the fact section or selecting only one aspect of the legal argument. If you do modify your writing sample in this manner, be sure to indicate that in the cover sheet and also provide a contextual paragraph to help the reader understand the excerpt. Note that some employers will not read your cover sheet, so be sure that however you edit your writing sample, it still makes sense to the reader.

**Writing samples should be your own work.** Do not use work that has been heavily edited by other people.

**If using a writing sample that you created for an employer/internship, be sure to:**

- **seek the employer's permission before you use it;**
- **redact any confidential or client information.**

**Don't send a writing sample unless requested.**

**Include a cover sheet.** For each writing sample, include a cover sheet (with the same header as your resume and cover letter) that explains the context of your writing sample. For an example, please see Appendix G.

## References

Many employers will also want a list of your references, which are professional or academic contacts that will speak highly of your skills and capabilities. References can include law school or undergraduate professors, former job supervisors, or other professionals with whom you have personal relationships or whom you know through participation in volunteer/other activities.

**Line up your references early!** Because you need to seek permission from all of your references before you can list them, you should start thinking about who you want to ask as soon as possible. When reaching out to potential references, be sure to include a copy of your resume and a note to remind them of all the wonderful things you did!

**More recent references are preferable to earlier ones.** For example, law school professors are better references than undergraduate professors.

**Pick people who know you well and can speak about you personally.** It may be tempting to ask the most senior person at your organization to be a reference, but if they won't even recognize your name when an employer calls, then what's the point? Often, it is better to use an adjunct professor for whom you did great work and whom you got to know personally, versus the more well-known professor in your constitutional law class who does not know you personally.

**Let your references know when you have submitted their names to an employer.** That way they will be "on alert" and ready to say wonderful things about you when the employer contacts them. It is also helpful to send them a copy of the application you sent so they can tailor their comments to the specific employer (and hopefully reiterate your cover letter).

**Some employers have a policy against giving references and will only verify dates of employment.**

**If a past employer has given you a glowing written recommendation, it is fine to include the letter when sending references, even if not specifically requested.**

**References should not be included on your resume;** nor is it necessary to write "References provided upon request" on your resume. (Employers know if they request references, you will provide them!).

For a sample reference list, please see Appendix H.

## Interviews

Interviews are our favorite part of the application process – it’s where you can finally let your personality shine through and be yourself! Now, when we say “be yourself,” we mean be your most professional, intelligent, detail-oriented and hardworking self!

There are two kinds of job interviews: screening interviews and call-back interviews.

**Screening Interviews.** Many employers conduct brief screening interviews to get a better sense about your skills, experiences and interest in the employer. These usually last 20-30 minutes and may be held near campus, at an employer’s office or over the phone.

**Callback Interviews:** These are the “main event!” Callback interviews are longer interviews where candidates usually meet with multiple attorneys in a series of back-to-back interviews. In addition to learning more about your skills, experiences and interest in the employer, the interviews are designed to assess how well your personality and demeanor “fit” with the employer. Sometimes these interviews include lunch or some other type of social interaction. Most call-back interviews take place at the employer’s office, which gives you a great opportunity to get a better sense of the employer’s culture and values.

### Three Steps to a Successful Interview:

**Step 1: Be enthusiastic!** Employers report that interviewees who display genuine enthusiasm for the position are far more persuasive than “flat” interviewees with stronger credentials or qualifications. The best way to generate this essential enthusiasm is to prepare for the interview:

- Research the organization, interviewer(s) and any recent developments in the practice area or industry.
- Prepare your “pitch” – decide which skills and experiences you are going to highlight in the interview. Here’s a hint – choose the most relevant and impressive ones and be specific!
- Rehearse answers to predictable questions – a good list is available in Appendix I.

**Step 2: Be conversational.** Interviewers’ number one complaint is that they get stuck doing all the work! Students have a tendency to sit passively like a Cheshire cat and wait for the interviewer to ask all the questions. Avoid this trap by being conversational and following up with questions to the interviewer throughout the interview (not just at the end!). An excellent list of suggested questions is available in Appendix J.

**Step 3: Follow-up!** After the interview, write down your immediate impressions about the interviewers and the employer (the back of the interviewer’s business card is a good spot!). Using this information, be sure to send a thank-you note via email within 24 hours of the interview. In today’s fast-paced environment, a hand-written thank you note sent through the mail is likely to arrive too late to be a factor in the hiring decision. A sample thank you note is attached in Appendix K.