

Georgetown University Law Center

**Office of Public Interest &
Community Service**

**Guide to Public Sector Legal Job
Applications**

OPICS GUIDE TO PUBLIC SECTOR LEGAL JOB APPLICATIONS

What materials do you need for a public sector legal job application? Depending on the recruiting method—a job fair, an interview program, a Symplicity Job Posting, a personal referral—the employer(s) may request only a resume or require a cover letter and resume; regardless, you should be prepared with a resume, a cover letter that can be adapted for different positions, an unofficial transcript, a list of references, and a writing sample. Each of these materials is discussed below.

In addition, this guide discusses when and how to follow up on an application, how to prepare for an interview, and how to professionally accept or decline an offer.

RESUMES

Your resume introduces you to potential employers and serves as the first writing sample they will see. A successful resume is grammatically correct and well-organized, and quickly highlights the skills and experiences you want to market. The unique goal of a public sector resume is to demonstrate your commitment to public service and to the employer's mission. Passion and commitment are as critical as skills and credentials.

Format:

Your resume should have a header with your name, address, email address and phone number (if your email address or your voicemail message is not professional, change it!). Use both your “current” and your “permanent” address if your permanent address reflects a connection to the employer's location.

Education:

The education section is the first section beneath your name while you are a student. Put Georgetown University Law Center first with your expected graduation year (i.e., Juris Doctor Candidate, May 2010), Honors, and Activities. Transfer students should include their previous law school with “Completed first year coursework, 2006-2007.” Other graduate work comes next, if applicable, and then college, with your major, your thesis if relevant, honors, and activities.

You may include your law school GPA if you choose (as well as your college and graduate school GPAs). Because there is wide variation in how much emphasis different public sector employers place on grades, research each employer before evaluating your chances. Note that public interest and government employers tend to place less emphasis on grades than private sector employers, in that they greatly value prior work experience and interest in their issues.

If you include your GPA, DO NOT round up or down; list your GPA as it appears on your transcript. At the conclusion of your first year of law school, you may indicate if you are in the top third, top 15% or top 10% of your class if you have received confirmation that you fall within the particular category. Note that these percentile cutoffs apply *only to your first year grades*. At the conclusion of the 2L/3E year, percentile cutoffs are released for those students who are cumulatively in the top 10% after two years. Upper division students on Dean's List are in the top third of their class for that academic year only, and upper division students should never estimate their class rank.

Experience:

The Experience section will vary widely, depending on factors such as whether you worked between college and law school. In most cases you should list your experiences in reverse chronological order and include each employer's name, city and state (or country), your title, and the dates you worked at the job (include months or write "Summer 2007," etc.).

Tips:

- Highlight your community service and volunteer work. These entries can be included under "Experience" or combined to create a separate "Community Service" section.
- Detail pro bono experience and the skills you may have learned, such as client interview skills, working with litigation documents, or drafting pleadings.
- Format your resume to highlight extensive experience in one area by creating a sub-heading such as "Environmental Advocacy."
- Focus the employer on your relevant experience and qualifications; avoid a "laundry list" of jobs and academic honors. If you had significant law-related internships years before law school, you may choose to emphasize your "Law Related Experience" in an independent section of your resume.
- Craft dynamic, detailed job descriptions that will capture the employer's interest and provide a clear snapshot of your work responsibilities. Use action verbs.
- Emphasize relevant skill development and responsibilities, such as research, writing, and policy analysis, in your non-legal job descriptions.
- Create a "Language" subheading if you are fluent, proficient, or conversant in a language other than English. Specify your level of knowledge; you may choose to break down your abilities into speaking, reading and writing if these vary significantly.
- Include travel or interests that illustrate your commitment to the employer's mission, such as "extensive travel throughout Asia." Be specific about your interests: "Reading historical fiction, college basketball and cooking French food" will spark more conversation than "Reading, sports and cooking."
- While a one-page resume is the norm for most resumes in the private sector, you may choose to have a longer resume when applying for public sector positions, particularly if you have substantial public service and volunteer experience. Do not leave out relevant public sector experience in an attempt to keep your resume to one page.

DO make sure to use:

- A clear font that is not too small or large.
- Consistent abbreviations and punctuation (e.g., commas or semicolons, periods or no periods, J.D. and B.A. or Juris Doctor and Bachelor of Arts).
- White or off-white 8½ x 11 heavy bond-quality paper.

Do NOT include the following in your resume:

- Job objectives (*include in your cover letter*).
- Basic computer and legal research skills (e.g., *word processing, Westlaw*).
- LSAT scores.
- Personal information (*health, marital and/or parental status*).
- First person pronouns (“*I*” or “*my*”).
- References (*create a separate References page; see below for an example*).

Click here to see Sample Resumes.

COVER LETTERS

In your cover letter to a public sector employer, you want to explain your direct or indirect background in the employer’s issue/practice area and/or a demonstrated commitment to public interest “ideals” through your undergraduate major, internships, prior and current work experience, coursework, community service, campus activities, etc. Remember, passion and commitment are as critical as skills and credentials. However, do not be intimidated if you lack experience in an employer’s practice area. Focus your cover letter on transferable skills and enthusiastically explain why you are interested in the employer’s work.

Contact Information:

Your address and the date should be at the top of the letter, followed by the employer’s name and address. Do not use a “header” like the one on your resume.

First paragraph:

Address your letter to a specific person if possible. Introduce yourself as a (first year, second year, etc.) law student at Georgetown and state your interest: in an internship for the summer of 2008; in the opening for an entry-level attorney posted on the PSLawNet.org; in the part-time position described on the organization’s website; etc. If you have a personal contact, mention it here.

Examples:

- I am a first year law student at Georgetown University Law Center and a 2003 graduate of Brown University. I am writing to apply for a summer 2009 internship with _____. I came to law school to acquire the tools to become a more effective advocate for _____ and this summer, I hope to work with an organization that _____.
- I am a second year law student at Georgetown University Law Center and I would like to apply for a summer 2009 position with _____. I believe that my educational, volunteer, and professional background will help me contribute to your goals.
- Ms. Eleanor Jackson, a staff attorney in your office, encouraged me to send my resume to you in reference to a post-graduate opportunity with your organization. I am a third year student at Georgetown

University Law Center, and a position with your organization is of particular interest to me. I am dedicated to a career _____.

Second or middle paragraphs:

Now that you have introduced yourself and stated the reason for your letter, the middle of the letter is the appropriate place to go into some detail about how your past experiences relate to the work of the organization (skills, background knowledge, etc.) and how your experiences have shaped your public interest beliefs, aspirations, values, etc. You should stress your most relevant jobs, internships, community service and leadership activities. Do not merely restate your resume or discuss how the target job would be perfect for *you*; explain how you have the skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm that will benefit the *employer*, citing examples from your resume.

First year students, note that highlighting particular skills is not always as important in a 1L cover letter as describing where your passion comes from, because employers recognize that your legal (and other employment) experience may be limited.

Examples:

- Representing clients in the Criminal Justice Clinic has solidified my desire to become a public defender.
- As a volunteer at a homeless shelter in college, I had the opportunity to see firsthand the great need for attorneys committed to indigent legal assistance.
- My longstanding interest in social justice work stems from my experience as a community organizer.
- My academic and professional experiences have reaffirmed my belief that the practice of law should be used as a means to protect the legal rights of all people.

Third paragraph:

Conclude with a short, direct statement requesting an interview to discuss your background and experience. Mention any geographic availability, such as: I will be in New York City from January 2nd through the 5th and can meet with you at your convenience. Include your name and email address, such as: I may be reached at 202.662.9655 or at sallysmith@law.georgetown.edu.

Examples:

- I have enclosed my resume for your review. I appreciate your time and hope that we can arrange an opportunity for me to speak with you when I am home over winter break from December 22nd through January 4th.
- I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss my background and qualifications in greater detail. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Tips:

- Avoid using corporate or private firm language in reference to the positions you're seeking (i.e., summer associate, first year associate, law clerk, etc.). When seeking a summer or academic year opportunity with a public sector employer, we suggest you use the term *internship* or *intern* unless an internship announcement states the position title differently. When applying for a post-graduate opportunity in the

public sector, the term *staff attorney* or phrases such as *entry-level attorney position* or *position in your Honors Program* may be appropriate.

- DO NOT write, “I am interested in working for your firm this summer.” Although “firm” is considered a synonym for “company” in the corporate world, it is absolutely taboo to use the term when applying to a nonprofit or government agency.
- Vary the structure of your sentences to avoid repeated rhythm and do not start every sentence with “I”.
- Make sure that the cover letter flows smoothly and that your transitions make sense.
- Proofread every document carefully – do not rely solely on spell check, as it does not catch every mistake. When possible, have someone else proofread your work as well. The counselors at OPICS are happy to review your application materials.

Click here to see Sample Cover Letters.

TRANSCRIPTS, WRITING SAMPLES AND REFERENCES

Transcripts:

Most employers will accept an unofficial copy of your transcript, which you can obtain from Student Access+.

Writing Samples:

Your writing sample should be a 6-10 page example of your **best legal writing**. If the strongest example of your legal writing is longer than 10 pages or the employer’s requested page limit, you may submit an excerpt with a cover sheet that explains the greater context of your work. If you are using work product from an internship or job, obtain your employer’s permission and redact where necessary.

References:

When asked for references, provide a list of three to five people who will provide **strong** recommendations on your behalf. You may assume a list of references is appropriate unless an employer asks specifically for letters of recommendation. Generally, public interest employers prefer work references, but some will ask for at least one academic reference. Clinic professors and professors for whom you’ve worked are often the best references for public interest positions. You must contact each reference and obtain permission to provide his or her name to prospective employers before you give your list of references to any employer.

Click here to see a Sample List of References.

FOLLOW UP

Follow up with the employer 7 to 10 days after you send your application materials, to confirm that your application was received and reiterate your enthusiasm for the position. You may choose to follow up by email or phone.

Examples:

- Via email:

Dear Mr. Wagner:

I am a second year student at Georgetown University Law Center and I am writing to follow-up on my electronic application to your agency, dated October 10, 2009, for your Summer Intern Program. I am extremely enthusiastic about joining your agency this summer and would greatly appreciate having an opportunity to meet with you to discuss my background and skills.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Chin-Hwa Lee

- By telephone:

“Hello, Ms. Kumar. My name is Rebecca Newman. I’m a first year student at Georgetown University Law Center and I am calling in reference to a cover letter and resume I sent you on January 15. As I mentioned in my letter, I have a background in environmental law, and I am very excited about the possibility of a summer internship with Earthjustice. I would sincerely appreciate the opportunity to meet with you; would you have any time within the next week when we could speak in person?”

INTERVIEWS

Preparation is the key to a successful interview.

Know the Employer:

You want to know as much as possible about the employer and, if you can obtain his or her name prior to the meeting, your interviewer(s). Various resources on the OPICS website will be useful, depending on the type of employer: check the Job Search Publications & Public Sector Resources link on the homepage and you will find information related to a number of practice areas; see the Government Honors Program link for information about federal government agencies; and utilize the Public Service Law Network (pslawnet.org) under Additional Public Sector Job Postings to research non-profit and government employers. Google the employer and interviewer for recent news and information about both. Check the Alumni Network Binder in the OPICS office and, if available, the employer’s online staff directory to see whether alumni are working for the employer; if so, feel free to contact them to get additional information.

Know Yourself:

While this advice seems obvious, we recommend taking the time to think about how your interests, skills and background mesh with the employer and position, so you can articulate clearly and effectively why you are the right person for the job. *Know your resume:* if your college thesis is noted, be sure you can remember enough to speak articulately about the topic; be prepared to discuss any memoranda and research projects listed on your resume; for each “experience” on your resume, know one or two “stories” you can tell that will highlight your skills.

Take notes about your accomplishments and experiences and how they suit the job in question. Think of three to five key qualities about yourself that you hope to convey to the employer, and for each quality, have an anecdote or example to highlight how you have displayed that quality. *Practice your responses out loud.* Come into OPICS for a Mock Interview with one of our counselors (call 202.662.9655 or email opics@law.georgetown.edu to schedule an appointment).

Click here to see Sample Interview Questions.

Know What To Ask:

Most interviewers will close the meeting by asking the interviewee, Do you have any questions for me? Though you will have done your research on the employer and interviewer, be prepared to ask questions that reflect your understanding of the job and interest in learning more. However, if you feel that you have asked sufficient questions during the interview, don't feel like you have to ask another question. Simply say that you think they have answered all your questions.

Tips:

Before the Interview

- When you are invited for an interview, respond within 24 hours.
- Know that, in contrast to many private sector legal employers, government and non-profit employers will not pay for your expenses, such as plane tickets, taxis, or meals. Employers recognize that students have limited budgets, however, and often will schedule phone interviews. In-person interviews are generally preferred when possible, though. As discussed above in the "Cover Letters" section, alert employers that you will be in their area ahead of time so you can try to arrange an in-person meeting.
- Occasionally an employer will make an offer "on the spot." Think ahead of time about whether you would accept or, instead, would respond by expressing your excitement and inquiring as to the date by which the employer would like you to make a decision.

At the Interview

- Wear a suit. If you do not own a suit, wear a blazer with pants or a skirt.
- Get to the interview 10 minutes early; arrive even earlier for government employers, in case you have to pass through a slow security line.
- Turn off your cell phone and any other electronic devices.
- Bring multiple copies of your resume, transcript, writing sample and list of references.
- **Stay positive:** do not criticize classes, people, or prior employers. If you have difficulty addressing a topic sensitive to you (grades, a job experience that did not work out, etc.), make an appointment with a counselor at OPICS and we will work together to tackle the issue.
- Smile and make eye contact.

Click here to see Sample Questions to Ask an Interviewer.

After the Interview:

- Send a thank you note right away. If you met with more than one person, send each person an individualized thank you note.
- Unless an employer specifically states that students should not initiate further contact, follow up 7 to 10 days after your interview to reiterate your interest in the position and inquire about the hiring timetable.

Click here to see a Sample Thank You Note.

OFFERS

Following an interview, respond to any voicemail or email from the employer within one business day, even if you are unsure as to whether you would accept an offer. Should you get the person's voicemail, do not accept or reject the offer; instead, leave your name and number and request that the person return your call.

When you receive a job offer, feel free to accept immediately. If you have other outstanding offers and/or are waiting to hear from additional employers, you may ask for time to decide: contact the employer by phone; express your enthusiasm; and inquire as to the date by which the employer would like you to make a decision. Generally a decision should be made within ten days of receipt of an offer.

Legal employers in both the public and private sectors hire throughout the year, and students are sometimes required to make decisions without full knowledge of all their potential offers. We encourage you to contact an OPICS counselor to discuss both how to broach the issue of a decision-timeline with an employer and how to make a decision when your options are unclear. A student may request that a private sector, law firm employer extend its deadline to accept the offer until as late as April 1 if the student is actively pursuing positions with public interest or government organizations, and the employer is encouraged to grant the request. See http://www.nalp.org/content/index.php?pid=24#pub_int.

When rejecting an offer, do so by phone, and graciously express the difficulty of your decision.

The counselors at OPICS are happy to meet with you individually to discuss your application materials and your decision-making process. Do not hesitate to stop by our office (McDonough 212) or contact us via email (opics@law.georgetown.edu) or phone (202.662.9655) to make an appointment.