



## HOW TO APPROACH AN ASSIGNMENT AT YOUR SUMMER JOB<sup>1</sup>

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At your summer job, whether you are at a law firm, government agency, court, nonprofit organization, or some other practice setting, you may be asked to write memos, briefs, client letters, court documents, contracts, emails, PowerPoint presentations, and more. The purpose, audience, and scope of these assignments will vary, as well as the complexity of the law and facts involved. Regardless of the type of assignment, handing in an impressive finished product will require you to understand these aspects of the assignment and your supervisor's expectations.

### I. Receiving an Assignment

Your first and best opportunity to understand exactly what your supervisor expects for a particular assignment is in your initial meeting. Sometimes your supervisor will tell you everything you need to know about an assignment, but other times the scope and purpose of the assignment might be vague. This checklist will help you gather essential information so that you can develop an effective plan for each assignment.

- **Prepare for the meeting.** Sometimes your supervisor will provide you with initial documents to review prior to the meeting. This material might include the research that has already been done on a legal question or it might include a precedent contract that will be used as the basis for your assignment. Make sure to review these documents closely before the initial meeting and write down any questions you have.
- **Bring a pen and paper, a tablet, or a laptop.** It is important to take comprehensive notes about your assignment. There may be important details that you will not remember – such as a billing code or your supervisor's phone number – and your supervisor will appreciate that you came prepared to the assignment meeting. In fact, you should aim to keep a notetaking tool on you at all times while working, in case any important information arises during any other meetings, phone calls, or informal conversations.

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- **Gather crucial information.** For any assignment, you should make sure to have the following information from the supervisor before getting started:
  - the due date and if the due date is flexible in case you determine throughout the assignment that there is more work than the supervisor expected;
  - to whom you should direct your questions;
  - whether your supervisor would like to see your first draft or if it should be reviewed by another attorney first;
  - the form of the deliverable (e.g., research outline, contract, formal memorandum) and its ideal length;
  - how to deliver the deliverable (e.g., email, hard copy);
  - if there is a precedent document you should use as a starting point;
  - if you should use tracked changes or include a redline<sup>2</sup> of changes if you are using a precedent document as a starting point;
  - whether there are any confidentiality restrictions within the organization (i.e., colleagues you should not discuss the assignment with);
  - billing codes (if relevant); and
  - the preferred form of communication of the supervising attorney.

This is a non-exhaustive list of questions, and you will likely need additional information based on the customs and expectations within your organization and role.

- **Ask questions.** Though we all want to appear intelligent and capable, it is likely that your assignment will be out of your comfort zone or based on an area of law that you have never dealt with before. Your supervisor does not expect you to know everything and likely wants you to ask questions. In addition, you might receive an assignment that is broad and amorphous, so you will want to ask questions about the scope of the assignment. It is much easier to clarify your misunderstandings upfront than to turn in an assignment that you did not comprehend from the beginning.
- **Verify your understanding of the assignment.** Make sure that you know exactly what the supervisor is looking for and, more importantly, what they are not looking for from you. Repeat back to the supervisor a summary of your understanding of the facts, issue(s), scope, and anything else you discussed – it might feel silly at first, but it will make a huge difference in that

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<sup>2</sup> A redline is similar to tracked changes. It is a document that shows what has changed between one document and another document, and where those changes have occurred (e.g., what words have changed, how the organization has changed, how the formatting has changed).

you will not second guess your understanding of the assignment later. You should also tell your supervisor the first step you are planning to take, so you can confirm that you are on the right track.

## II. Completing Your Assignment

- **Use the resources at your job.** If there is a database of memos, contracts, and other documents to which you have access, determine if anyone else in your organization has drafted something similar to your assignment, such as a memo on a similar topic. You can use these precedent documents as a starting point for your own assignment. Your supervisor may or may not be able to provide this, so it is important to figure out how to find these documents yourself. Additionally, check to see if there are similar documents that others in your position have written for your supervisor – that way you can see if there is a certain format that your supervisor prefers. You can also check with other attorneys who have worked with your supervisor or your supervisor’s secretary or administrative assistant to see if they have any advice.
- **Research process.** Not all assignments will require you to conduct research, and the assignments that do require research will differ in the types of research needed. For example, a litigation issue might require case law research, a transactional issue might require research on similar deals, and a tax issue might require you to delve into the tax code. If you are not doing case law research, it is important to use databases that your organization has available beyond the usual Westlaw and Lexis, such as Bloomberg Law. You may also want to consult different databases on Lexis or Westlaw than you might have used in school, such as Practical Law. If your organization has access to a helpline at Lexis or Westlaw or a librarian, take advantage of those resources to help narrow down your research. However, be sure to know the limits of your firm or organization’s contract with research databases so you know whether your searches are restricted more so than they are through your free student account. Cost control is an important issue to be aware of, and it will vary depending on the organization.
- **Scope of the assignment.** Do not lose track of what you have actually been asked to produce for your supervisor. Make sure that you keep in mind the legally significant facts and, when in doubt, use “who, what, when, where, why, and how” as your guide. Remember the relevant jurisdiction and any instructions with respect to scope of work.
- **Stay organized.** Keep track of your sources and search terms (i.e., Boolean phrases or key words), and make sure to save versions of your assignment as you update it each time. If you are conducting case law research, you should save PDFs of your cases as you read them and see if your supervisor would like copies (electronic or hardcopy) of the cases. Sometimes another attorney or someone else in your position will take up the assignment later and

providing the cases or search terms directly to them will save a lot of time and energy. In addition, it can be helpful for another attorney to reference previous versions of your assignment, in case they need to revert any changes, such as on a contract or a brief.

- **Reporting back.** It is important to keep your supervisor up-to-date throughout the assignment. If you discover issues or questions during your assignment, it is better to let your supervisor know as they arise, so you can clarify them before it is too late. Often a supervisor will assign an assignment without knowing in advance how much time and/or research the assignment will entail – it is your job to let the supervisor know, for example, if the case law says something different than expected or if you discover a red flag as you conduct due diligence for a merger and acquisition deal. Your supervisor will appreciate knowing that you are working diligently on your assignment as opposed to disappearing between receiving the assignment and submitting it. However, when you do ask questions, make sure they are educated questions, in that you should research the question first to see if there is an obvious answer out there or at least to be better prepared for understanding your supervisor’s answer. If you anticipate having multiple questions, try to group your questions together rather than asking them at different points in time.

### III. **Handing in Your Assignment**

- **Proofread.** Be sure to proofread your finished product, even if it is expected to be a draft. Check to see if it is permissible to have a coworker review your document and, if possible, read your document out loud – this is the easiest way to find simple errors that your eyes might otherwise glaze over. First drafts should be for your eyes only, even when your supervisor asks for a draft. First drafts are often written to learn the law, familiarize yourself with the issue, or engage with a new type of document. After the first draft, you should revise to turn your document into a reader-based document. Then, polish and proofread.
- **Hand your assignment in on time.** If you end up needing more time, and your supervisor has indicated that the deadline is flexible, make sure you ask for more time as soon as possible and not hours before the assignment is due.
- **Form of the final product.** Be sure to hand in your assignment to your supervisor in the correct format. For example, if your supervisor asked you to email the assignment in an informal manner or deliver a hardcopy of the assignment, make sure you follow the instructions. Additionally, be prepared to orally discuss the assignment with your supervisor, even if you have submitted your document electronically. You should also be prepared to answer any questions that your supervisor may have, complete follow-up assignments such as additional research or fixing errors on a contract, and present your assignment to additional individuals.

- **Follow-up.** Your supervisor may have feedback for you on your assignment, and these comments will be helpful for future assignments – even if you do not work for that supervisor again, it is likely that he or she will have global comments about your writing and process that will help you going forward. If your supervisor is not forthcoming with advice, take the initiative to ask for feedback (but make sure to respect that your supervisor may be busy and unable to give you detailed comments or any feedback at all). For example, you can ask if your supervisor has time for a brief feedback meeting or ask for feedback over an email.
- **Writing samples and memorandum of your work.** If you want to use your assignment as a writing sample for future positions, you want to ask your supervisor for permission, in case there are any confidentiality issues. In addition, you may want to create a running memorandum of each of the assignments, with a brief description, that you complete over the summer. Your supervisor can use this memorandum for recommendation letters, and you can use this memorandum for your resume or future employment conflict checks that might ask about past client matters. Be sure to check with your supervisor that you are not including any confidential information on your resume or conflict checks.