



## WRITING SAMPLES FOR PUBLIC INTEREST POSITIONS: SPECIFIC TIPS FOR SERVICE-ORIENTED STUDENTS<sup>1</sup>

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For law students interested in working for the public interest, selecting a strong writing sample may be especially important and entail certain considerations. Many public interest employers review writing samples carefully and may ask about them in interviews. Additionally, while some public interest employers prefer traditional legal briefs or memorandum, others might prefer a sample that is more diverse or policy-oriented. Regardless of the type of writing sample an applicant selects, the writing sample should be the best and most accurate reflection of an applicant's writing.

The Writing Center provides general advice for selecting a writing sample in two handouts: (1) *The Top Five Things You Need to Know About Writing Samples*<sup>2</sup> and (2) *Choosing the Right Writing Sample*.<sup>3</sup> Students are advised to use those handouts during the application process. The Writing Center also provides more specific advice on assembling an array of writing sample options throughout law school in *Building a Writing Portfolio*,<sup>4</sup> which is particularly relevant to 1L students in strategically thinking about the various types of writing that students can engage in throughout law school. It also provides a helpful list of various opportunities available to law students during their 2L and 3L years that are likely to afford students the chance to develop their writing portfolios.

This handout expands on the above resources by emphasizing some key considerations in selecting writing samples for public interest positions and giving more targeted advice for public service-oriented students to utilize in assembling their applications. Students interested in public interest positions are also advised to meet with a career counselor at the Office of Public Interest and Community Service (OPICS) for further guidance on finding public interest opportunities and completing the application process for public interest positions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This original handout was written by Sara Blackwell in 2014. It was updated in 2025 by Michael Collins.

<sup>2</sup> Available electronically: <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/top5writingsamples.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Available electronically: <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ChoosingTheRightWritingSample2016.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Available electronically: <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/BuildingaWritingPortfolioSpring2010.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> OPICS hours of operation and services provided can be found at <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/your-life-career/career-exploration-professional-development/for-jd-students/meet-the-teams/office-of-public-interest-and-community-service/>. Students can make an appointment with an OPICS counselor through the online scheduling system at <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/your-life-career/career-exploration-professional-development/for-jd-students/make-an-appointmentstudents/make-an-appointment/>.

## **1. READ THE APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY**

While some public interest employers request writing samples upfront, others may prefer to wait until later on in the application process to receive them. Only submit a writing sample in your initial application if the instructions explicitly ask for one. Be sure to have one on hand at subsequent stages of the application process in case the employer requires one later on. These actions will demonstrate both your attention to detail by submitting only what is asked for by the public interest employer and your preparedness by having a writing sample ready if your potential employer asks for one at any point.

## **2. ASSESS THE NEEDS OF THE EMPLOYER**

Public interest work is diverse, meaning that the same writing sample may not be appropriate across your various public interest applications. While firms and judges may prefer formal legal briefs or memos as writing samples, this *may* not be the case with public interest employers. OPICS advisors can help you strategize around choosing the best type of writing sample for your particular application.

Public interest employers who engage in litigation may want to see writing that contains precise legal analysis on a strictly legal topic, like a 1L memo or brief. Some public interest employers, however, engage in a substantial amount of policy work and may want to see your ability to articulate strong, persuasive policy arguments on legal or non-legal topics.

First, research the public interest entity to which you are applying in order to get a better sense of the kind of writing you will be expected to do once you land the position. Is the potential employer primarily focused on litigation? Submitting a formal legal brief or memo may be the best route to take. Direct services? Motions, briefs, contracts, or other legal documents you have written as part of a clinic, internship, or externship might be more effective to submit. Policy and advocacy work? These potential employers may be more interested in seeing policy-based memos, reports, journal notes, seminar papers, position papers, or other non-traditional types of writing. If possible, look at the published materials that your potential employer puts out to see what you're likely to be asked to work on. From there, you can more effectively match the type of writing that you are presenting in your writing sample to the type of writing that the public interest employer does on a daily basis.<sup>6</sup>

Second, for 1L students who have not yet had the opportunity to participate in internships or other programs where policy writing may be more common, consider working with your Legal Practice professor, your Law Fellow, or the Writing Center to incorporate policy arguments into your 1L briefs and memos before using these as writing samples for employers who are more policy-oriented.

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<sup>6</sup> If in complete doubt about what type of writing sample the potential employer prefers, it is often best to ask the employer rather than missing the mark.

### 3. BE SELECTIVE WITH YOUR TOPIC

If you have a strong sample that showcases your writing abilities *and* aligns with the prospective employer's area of law, use it. Public interest employers are often interested in your passion for their work and substantive knowledge as well as strong analytical, organizational, and persuasive writing abilities. In contrast, firm positions and clerkships may be primarily focused on a demonstration of strong legal writing, regardless of the topic.

Your writing sample is a great place to showcase your interest and background (if applicable) in the work of a prospective employer. While it is not imperative that your sample meets this criterion, it is a great place to demonstrate your fluency in the employer's area of the law.

### 4. KEEP IT CURRENT

Unless you are a first-year student applying for a 1L summer placement, many public interest employers *do not* prefer a Legal Practice memo or brief as a writing sample. This non-preference is because your first-year work—while potentially very strong—often reflects only your initial familiarity with legal research and writing. Public interest employers want to see how your legal writing has developed since your 1L year. The more recent your writing sample is, the more assured your potential employer will be that the piece adequately reflects your current capabilities.

Moreover, public interest employers sometimes prefer a writing sample “from the real world,” as opposed to a journal note or seminar paper that may have been heavily edited and revised over a relatively long period of time. More likely than not, your potential employer will need you to produce written work under significant time constraints and with relatively little supervision. The amount of time and guidance spent on larger academic writing projects are sometimes seen as out of proportion to the time and resources available to produce a piece of writing in actual public interest practice. As such, the writing samples from a prior internship or externship may be preferred by some public interest employers because these may more realistically indicate what you are likely to produce in the employer's office. Remember to preserve confidentially and receive permission from prior employers if you are using former work product as a writing sample.<sup>7</sup> Again, OPICS advisors can help you strategize around writing sample selection.

### 5. USE YOUR COVER SHEET WISELY

Craft a strong cover sheet. Because the type of writing sample you submit may vary, the cover sheet is a great place to lend context to your piece, connect it to an item on your resume, and show how it reflects a specific aspect of your public interest experience. Consider briefing your reader on the topic that the writing sample covers and/or noting any limitations on the piece (e.g., the writing sample is an excerpt from a longer piece or was written under a

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<sup>7</sup> For more on how to use written work produced during prior employment (e.g., through an internship or externship) as a writing sample, see the first two Writing Center resources listed in the first paragraph of this handout (*supra* notes 2 and 3).

demanding timeline, demonstrating your ability to write efficiently as well as effectively). Also consider noting on your cover sheet whether the writing sample is purely your own work or if you received assistance from others in editing it. Make sure to keep your cover sheet short, however, limiting yourself to one to two paragraphs to give your potential employer a brief understanding of what your writing sample is about before they dive into the piece.<sup>8</sup>

## **6. STRONG WRITING REMAINS THE PRIORITY**

Despite the guidance above, strong writing—non-legal or legal—remains the most important quality of a writing sample. Avoid sacrificing strong writing to meet all of the criteria above. For example, if your writing sample does not align with the potential employer’s area of the law but nonetheless showcases your writing strengths and likely meets the needs of the employer, use it.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on how to select a public interest writing sample, as well as examples of writing sample cover sheets, go to <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/your-life-career/career-exploration-professional-development/for-jd-students/job-search-toolkit/writing-samples-transcripts-references-and-thank-you-notes/> (Requires GULC Login).