



WRITING SAMPLES FOR PUBLIC INTEREST POSITIONS: SPECIFIC TIPS FOR SERVICE-ORIENTED STUDENTS¹

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Selecting a strong writing sample for a potential employer can be one of the most challenging parts of the application process. For law students either newly interested in working for the public interest or continuing in their commitment to public interest work, this challenge may be particularly daunting since the types of writing samples a potential employer might require or desire can at times be more diverse than the traditional legal brief or memorandum often accepted or expected for a law firm or clerkship application.

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*² and (2) *Choosing and preparing the Right Writing Sample*.³ Students are advised to utilize 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*.⁴ This handout 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 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.⁵

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² Available in hard copy at the Writing Center or electronically at <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/top5writingsamples.pdf>.

³ Available in hard copy at the Writing Center or electronically at <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ChoosingTheRightWritingSample2016.pdf>.

⁴ Available in hard copy at the Writing Center or electronically at <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/BuildingaWritingPortfolioSpring2010.pdf>.

⁵ 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 <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/your-life-career/career-exploration-professional-development/for-jd->

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 application instructions explicitly ask for one. At the same time, if a potential employer does not ask for a writing sample initially, make sure to have one on hand at subsequent stages of the application process just in case the employer requires one later on. In short, demonstrate your attention to detail by submitting only what is asked for by the public interest employer, but exhibit 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. Much like firms and judges, public interest employers – especially those who engage in litigation – may want to see writing that contains precise legal analysis on a strictly legal topic. However, some public interest employers conduct 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 in your writing sample as well. 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.

As with any employer, make sure to research the public interest entity you are applying with 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, patents, 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.⁶

3. BE SELECTIVE WITH YOUR TOPIC

[students/make-an-appointment/](#) by calling (202) 662-9655, or by visiting the OPICS office at McDonough Room 212.

⁶ When in complete doubt about what type of writing sample the potential employer prefers, it is often more graceful to simply ask the potential employer rather than miss the mark or submit multiple writing samples in the hopes of covering any and all bases.

Public interest employers are often interested in your experience in and passion for the specific area of the law or type of advocacy that the employer is focused on. In contrast, firm positions and clerkships may be primarily focused on a demonstration of strong analytical and organizational skills within your writing. In addition to this difference, public interest employers may have a preference in terms of the topic of your writing sample and may look more favorably on writing samples that demonstrate substantive familiarity with and a passion for the legal topic or advocacy issue that they are focused on. While it may not be imperative that your writing sample meets these criteria, your writing sample is a great place to demonstrate your fluency in the employer's area of the law or advocacy and your prior interest in that kind of work.

4. KEEP IT CURRENT, KEEP IT REAL

Unless you are a first-year student applying for a 1L summer placement, most public interest employers *do not* prefer an LRW memo or brief as a writing sample. This is because your first-year work—while potentially very strong—often reflects only your initial familiarity with legal research and writing. Public interest employers often want to see how your legal writing has developed since your 1L year and are often more interested in who you are as a legal writer today. Thus, the more recent your writing sample is, the more assured your potential employer will be that the piece adequately reflects your current capabilities and your own confidence in your present writing abilities.

Moreover, public interest employers sometimes – though not always – 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 since these writing samples may more realistically indicate to the potential employer what you are likely to produce in their office. Just remember to preserve confidentially and receive permission from prior employers if you are using former work product as a writing sample.⁷

5. USE YOUR COVER SHEET WISELY

Since the type of writing sample you submit as part of your public interest application may vary depending on what kind of work your potential employer is focused on, it is beneficial to spend time crafting a strong cover sheet to go with your writing sample when applying to public interest jobs. The cover sheet is a great place to lend context to your piece, connect it to an item on your resume, and show how the writing sample 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 demanding timeline, demonstrating your ability to write

⁷ 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).

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 writing or revising 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.⁸

⁸ For more on how to select a public interest writing sample, as well as examples of writing sample cover sheets, go to <http://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).