



## **BUILDING A WRITING PORTFOLIO<sup>1</sup>**

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Whether you are applying for a summer associate position at a firm, looking for a job in public interest, or interviewing for a clerkship with a judge, you will almost certainly be asked to provide a writing sample to your prospective employer. Different types of employers will ask for different types of writing samples. For example, a law firm and some types of public interest employers may want to see a memo or brief with legal analysis. On the other hand, a congressional or lobbying employer will want to see a writing sample that is more policy-based. A judge may want a seminar paper. Employers may not give you much warning when requesting a writing sample, so you will be in a better position to provide good sample if you have already built a writing portfolio.

This handout covers some general tips about developing a writing portfolio, including: when to start, the types of pieces you should consider including in your writing portfolio, and ways to produce the actual written work for your portfolio.

### **When to Start**

Begin developing your writing portfolio as soon as possible. If you are a 1L, consider devoting extra time to perfecting your written pieces from Legal Research & Writing. After you have submitted your final exam, you can continue to revise it by bringing it to the Writing Center or having your professor give you further feedback.

You can also begin developing a writing portfolio as a 2L or 3L. Dust off past written work and update it to reflect your current writing skills. You can look to LRW documents, written work from internships, and seminar papers among other sources.

Once you put a piece of writing into your portfolio, you should look at it periodically to make sure it reflects your current abilities. As you continue to write, your skills will develop. You can revise older pieces of writing to reflect the improvements you have made to your abilities over time.

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<sup>1</sup> By Megan Woodhouse, Senior Writing Fellow, 2010

## **What to Include in Your Portfolio**

- **Memos and Briefs:** The core of any legal writing portfolio is the memo and the brief. Both show your ability to analyze case law and organize a piece of legal writing. Fortunately these are documents that you produce during your first year of law school, but you should revise and update them as you progress through your schooling and your career.

There are two types of legal memos that are each suited to different types of employers. The legal memo is more suitable for law firms and public interest or government jobs that may focus on litigation. On the other hand, policy based memos are more suitable for working on Capitol Hill or for a lobbying organization. Talk to your prospective employer to find out which type of memo is preferred.

One of the most important rules of writing samples is “Know your audience.” Consider what type of work you would be doing at a particular job and what skills are required for such work. Then, choose a writing sample that fits the job description. When building your portfolio, consider a variety of career paths that interest you and try to include pieces of writing that would be suitable for jobs of interest.

- **Seminar Papers and other Academic Writing:** Longer pieces of academic writing are an important component of your portfolio. Spending extra time to perfect a seminar paper and get feedback from professors and peers can position you to use such a paper as a writing sample for judicial clerkships. Additionally, polished seminar papers can be submitted for publication. Published written work can add further value to any portfolio.
- **Other Documents from Legal Practice:** You may encounter a variety of other useful written documents in the course of your legal practice. If you have the opportunity to write motions, briefs, contracts, patents, or other legal documents during the course of an internship or externship, ask your employer if you can add some of this work to your portfolio. Ask for opportunities to draft different types of documents if you can.
- **Samples of Varying Length:** Some employers will want a shorter writing sample, and other may want a longer writing sample. You can prepare yourself for this by including samples of different lengths in your portfolio, but also think about how you can alter a 10-page writing document to create a 5-page writing sample. Also consider using one section of a seminar paper as a shorter writing sample and including a cover letter with a short description of the larger piece and why you chose that excerpt.

## **Where to Develop These Pieces of Writing**

- **Clinics at Georgetown:** Visit <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/experiential-learning/clinics/> for information about the types of work done in different clinics. Apply for one or more that will give you

experience in an area of interest for you. Contact the clinic directors prior to applying to find out what specific writing opportunities are available in each one.

- **Law Fellow Program:** The law fellows work with 1L LRW classes and are required to write a bench memo in the Spring semester. The bench memo could serve as a piece of writing for your portfolio.
- **Senior Writing Fellows:** Senior Writing Fellows staff the Writing Center, study composition theory, pedagogy, effective writing tutoring, and have the opportunity to draft a seminar paper that is presented and critiqued at a workshop.
- **Journals:** Many journals require staff members to submit a note before they graduate. A well-written student note can serve as an excellent part of your portfolio and may even be published. Many journals have specific subject matter. You may consider choosing a journal that matches your career interests so the topic of your note will be similarly matched to your career interests.
- **Write-On Competition:** If you do well on the Journal Write-On Competition, you could consider revising your write-on piece and using it as a sample. Because the write-on competition has a significant time constraint, be particularly careful about revising this piece. You may also choose to inform your prospective employer of the original purpose of this piece.
- **Barrister's Council:** Visit <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/your-life-career/activities-organizations/barristers-council/> for more information. The Mock Trial, Moot Court, and Alternative Dispute Resolution teams may give you further opportunities to develop your writing.
- **Course Clusters:** Course clusters group many Georgetown courses into particular areas of the law. If you have an interest in a certain area, read the course descriptions in that cluster and look for a course that will allow you to produce writing samples. For example, the Intellectual Property Legislation Seminar is taught by two adjunct professors who are lobbyists in the copyright and software industries. Instead of writing one 30 page paper for this class, you write 5 to 6 shorter papers that are modeled after memos written by congressional staff and “leave behinds,” or position papers, written by lobbyists for members of Congress. For more information on course clusters, visit <https://curriculum.law.georgetown.edu/jd/>. Courses in negotiations, advanced legal writing, or trial practice may help you develop writing samples in those areas.
- **Internships & Externships:** Do you have an interest in Environmental Law? Spend a semester working for the Environmental Protection Agency. Do you want to be a legislative director on Capitol Hill? Go work for a senator or a committee during the school year. Georgetown offers a limited amount of externship credit for externships completed during the semester. Additionally, the experiences gained by completing an externship are so valuable, that you may want to pursue more externships than Georgetown will give you credit for. When you use a writing sample you developed for

another employer, be sure to check with the employer first and redact any confidential information.

- **Pro Bono Pledge:** If you want to work in public interest, start now. The OPICS office can help you find opportunities to volunteer, get quality legal work experience, and build contacts in the public interest community while earning pro bono pledge credit.
- **Writing Competitions:** Georgetown keeps a current list of ongoing writing competitions at <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/student-portal/writing-competitions/>. Consider participating in one of these competitions and informing prospective employers if you have received a prize or other form of recognition.

Remember, you can visit the Writing Center to receive feedback on any of these pieces of writing. Consistent effort to update your writing portfolio will help you be prepared to present a writing sample tailored to the job you want and will help your writing skills to grow as well.