



## 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, and court documents. The purpose, audience, and scope of these projects will vary, as will the complexity of the law and facts involved. Handing in an impressive finished product will require you to understand these aspects of the project and your supervisor's expectations.

### I. Receiving an Assignment

Your first and best opportunity to understand exactly what your supervisor expects for a particular project is in your initial assignment meeting. Sometimes your supervisor or assigning attorney 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 project.

- **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. It is much easier to clarify your misunderstandings upfront than to turn in an assignment that you did not comprehend from the beginning.
- **Verify the scope 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 you will not second guess your understanding of the assignment later. If you are not comfortable doing this in person, send a follow-up email instead.

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Michele Steinfeld based on a 2005 handout written by Rebecca Carr, Danielle Gonzalez, Andrew Low and Dan McCall.

- **Bring a pen and paper.** It is important to take comprehensive notes about your assignment. This advice goes for all meetings and phone calls that you have throughout your summer job. 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.
- **Clarify the due date.** Even if your assignment is perfect, handing it in late will make you seem careless. Additionally, find out if the due date is flexible, in case you determine throughout the assignment that there is actually a lot more work than the supervisor expected. Check to see if your supervisor would like to see a first draft or if the supervisor would like you to direct your questions to a younger attorney before handing in the assignment. Not every supervising attorney or partner will want you to ask your questions directly to him or her, so be sure to find out if there is an intermediary attorney through whom you should screen your work. Asking questions at the beginning about how the matter is staffed and how the chain of command operates will save you confusion later on in the process.
- **Confidentiality.** Find out from your supervisor whether there is anyone with whom you should not discuss the project, especially if there are restrictions within your own organization that could affect how you discuss the assignment with your colleagues. For example, you may need to be vague in your use of billing codes and descriptions of your assignment. When in doubt, you should always err on the side of caution and not discuss the assignment with anyone other than your immediate supervisor. If you are confused about confidentiality issues, check with the younger associates and attorneys at your job who may be less intimidating to approach with these kinds of questions.

## II. Completing Your Assignment

- **Research process.** Make sure you determine if there is a seminal case on the issue you are researching, a famous treatise on the topic, or related issues that could affect your analysis. If your firm or organization has access to a help-line at Lexis or Westlaw, take advantage of that resource to help narrow down your research. However, be sure to know the limits of your firm or organization’s contract with Lexis or Westlaw and other databases so you know whether your searches are restricted more so than they are through your free student Lexis or Westlaw account. Cost control is an important issue to be aware of, and it will vary depending on the firm, nonprofit, or government organization.

- **Scope of the assignment.** Do not lose track of what you have actually been asked to research and 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. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind what jurisdiction your assignment is in, the precise issues you are meant to be researching, and whether there are any other resources beyond cases where you should be searching – such as law from an administrative agency. Do not be hesitant to expand your search beyond the usual Westlaw and Lexis resources.
- **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 a project without knowing in advance how much time and 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 there are no cases at all on the issue. 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.
- **Stay organized.** Keep track of your sources and make sure you have a good understanding of the important cases. 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 directly to them will save a lot of time and energy.
- **Use the resources at your job.** If there is a database of memos and documents to which you have access, determine if anyone else in your firm or organization has written a memo on a similar topic. Additionally, check to see if there are any memos or 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 and you can check with other attorneys who have worked with your supervisor to see if they have any advice.

### 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 – editing is just as important as the writing itself and often first drafts are used merely to get a handle on the law and the issue.

- **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 know this in advance and follow instructions. Additionally, be prepared to orally discuss the assignment with your supervisor, even if you have submitted your document electronically.
- **Follow-up.** Your supervisor likely will have feedback for you on your assignment and these comments will be helpful for future projects – 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).