



THE TOP FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WRITING SAMPLES¹

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All employers use writing samples for different reasons, but a few rules always apply:

1. Proofread!

Always check repeatedly for typos and bad grammar. This is the most important step in preparing your writing sample for submission. If you are competing with hundreds of applicants for a handful of openings, an obvious error in spelling, punctuation, or grammar could prevent you from getting the job, regardless of how brilliant your ideas are. Run spell check but be mindful of less obvious grammar problems as well. The book Legal Writing: Getting it Right and Getting it Written by Mary Barnard Ray and Jill J. Ramsfield is a useful guide to look through while proofreading. Topics in Ray & Ramsfield's book that are particularly helpful when proofreading are: Polishing, Parts of Speech, Sentence Structure, Verbs, Tenses, Modifiers, Parallel Structure, and Punctuation.

Have a friend look over your writing sample after you have checked it but before you submit it. Often, wording that makes sense to you might confuse a reader who is less familiar with the subject matter.

2. Refine Topic Sentences and Conclusions

Make efficient use of positions of emphasis or "power positions." Topic sentences and conclusions are in powerful positions (the reader will always be more focused on the first and last sentence of a paragraph) and are tools that a writer can use to easily guide a reader through an entire legal argument. Topic sentences and conclusions that clearly summarize your argument are particularly important for a writing sample reader who may only skim the document, possibly reading only the topic sentences and conclusion. To be sure that you are maximizing the value of your "power positions," create an outline of your analysis composed exclusively of your topic sentences and conclusions. If your outline does not clearly express all your arguments or does not present a complete argument on its own, some topic sentences and conclusions may need to be rewritten to achieve this goal (reminder: be sure any rewrites remain consistent

¹ By Elizabeth Glasgow, Adam Briggs, and Elizabeth Connelly

with the analysis in the paragraph).

3. Strengthen Organization and Analysis

First, outline the law for your reader. You are the expert. Because your prospective employer may know little about the law you discuss in your writing sample, it is imperative that you clearly outline it for them. Seriously consider using tools such as a roadmap or point headings to effectively lay it out for them.

Second, spell out your analysis for the reader as explicitly as possible. One of the main reasons that employers ask for writing samples is to determine whether students are capable of legal reasoning. Take this opportunity to demonstrate your extensive analytical skills to your prospective employer. Strive to rely on varied forms of legal reasoning such as rule-based, analogical, and policy-based reasoning. Remember that the reader should not have to fill in the blanks to understand how you reached the conclusion that you did.

4. Be Prepared to Talk About it

Do not underestimate the possibility that an employer may ask you to summarize your writing sample during your interviews. Consider how you may explain your writing sample to an employer in a few sentences. Think about possible questions an employer may ask about your sample, and how you may answer them. Most importantly, if it has been a while since you last reviewed your writing sample pull it out and re-read it before the next interview!

5. Redact

Steps for Redacting:

- If you are using a memo or brief written for an employer, get permission to use it as a writing sample.
- Remove the employer's information, as well as that of the client (both explicit references, as well as any descriptions that would enable a reader to identify the client, such as their job title).
- When redacting consider the needs of your writing sample reader – redacting by placing black boxes over the confidential information will be distracting for your reader. Instead consider replacing sensitive information using generic terms such as Mr. Smith and Jones, Inc. To guarantee that your reader knows that the information has been redacted include a statement on the cover page that the names and places have been changes.
- State that you have permission to use the document in a prominent location on the cover page.

- Give your employer the opportunity to review the redacted document.