



REVISING AND PREPARING A WRITING SAMPLE¹

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1. **Choose a Piece of Writing:** Before you can revise or prepare a writing sample, your first step is to think carefully about choosing a piece of writing that you will use as your writing sample. Check out [Choosing The Right Writing Sample](#) on the Georgetown Law Writing Center’s “Useful Documents” webpage.
2. **Select a Timeline For Revising:** It is best to start the process of selecting and editing your writing sample early. If you wait until the night before your application is due, you will not have sufficient time to think about or edit your piece.
 - You may view the need to generate a writing sample as an opportunity to improve upon a piece you wrote, and, in doing so, to improve your own writing. As discussed below, revising can range from revisiting your research, rethinking your thesis, reorganizing your paper, to polishing your final product.
 - If you devote more time to revising your writing sample, you can take advantage of the fact that you are now more skilled at legal writing than you were when you wrote the paper.
 - If you have sufficient time, you should focus on the analysis, the organization and the details. In terms of organization, you can reconsider your large-scale organization, small-scale organization, legal analysis and topic sentences.
 - On the other hand, if you are pressed for time, make sure to at least read the piece for any grammatical, spelling, typographical, or citation (Bluebook) errors. Those mistakes will be particularly noticeable to an employer and are easy to fix. You may also want to ask someone else to proofread it for you.
3. **Strengthen Analysis and Organization:** You want to make sure that your writing sample outlines the law for your reader. You are the expert. The

¹ This handout is a compilation of several former handouts, some of which were written and revised by Hillary Coyne, Kristen Murray, Elizabeth Glasgow, Adam Briggs, Elizabeth Connelly, and Lauren Dolecki. This current version was compiled and revised by Celia Belmonte and Prof. Frances DeLaurentis in 2016.

prospective employer may know little about the law you discuss in your writing sample; therefore, it is imperative that you clearly outline it for him or her.

- To effectively do so, you should consider using tools such as roadmaps or point headings. Be sure that your analysis then follows that roadmap. For example, if you introduce two topics in your roadmap, your analysis should discuss those topics in the order introduced.
- Additionally, be sure to 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 the 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.
- One way to check the thoroughness of your analysis is to try to annotate your discussion. Ask yourself if you can identify where you state rules, explain the law if necessary, and apply the law. Can you actually identify the type of legal reasoning you use to apply the law to the facts? As you read, also consider whether there are any gaps in your reasoning or any place where you ask yourself the question “why.”
- A method for testing the organization of your analysis is to create a reader-based outline consisting of your topic sentences. You can copy and paste your topic sentences into another document. (Alternatively, you can write a one or two word description of the paragraph based on that topic sentence and compile those short descriptions into an outline.) This reader-based outline simulates how your reader sees your document. By looking at the reader-based document you can identify if your topic sentences fail to guide your reader or identify the substance of your analysis.

4. 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 and read your topic sentences and conclusions only. Additionally, for a reader who is unfamiliar with the writing sample’s subject or the law it covers, topic sentences and mini conclusions help guide the reader.

5. Redact: If you are using a piece of writing that you wrote for a past employer (such as a brief or memo you wrote during a previous job, externship, or internship) as your writing sample, you will most likely have to redact (remove)

certain types of information from the piece as you revise it. To do so, consider following these steps:

- **Contact Past Employer:** First, you will want to contact your past employer and ask for his or her permission to use the piece of writing as your sample writing. You will also need to ask him or her if there is any specific information in the piece that he or she wants you to remove before you begin redacting.
- **Identify What to Redact:** Information that may need to be redacted includes:
 - Background information relevant to the specific matter or case;
 - Sensitive information that should not be disclosed to a wide audience;
 - Your past employer’s information (name, office, address, position, etc.); and
 - Information regarding your past employer’s clients (both explicit references, as well as any descriptions that would enable a reader to identify the clients, such as their job titles).
- **Start Redacting:** When redacting, consider the needs of the prospective employer – the person who will read, and need to understand, your redacted writing sample.
 - Redacting by placing black boxes over the confidential information will be distracting for your reader. Instead, consider replacing sensitive information with fictitious terms such as Mr. Smith, “Plaintiff,” Jones, Inc., etc.
 - If too much of the piece has to be redacted, the essence of your writing could be lost, which would defeat the purpose of the writing sample. If so, you may want to think carefully about whether or not another piece of writing, which does not require any redacting, may be a better writing sample to use.
 - When you are finished revising and preparing your writing sample, be sure to copy and paste your original word document into a new word document and then save it in PDF format. Doing this will ensure that all metadata (hidden data and personal information) is cleared from the document.
- **Show Redacted Document to Past Employer:** Once you have redacted confidential information from your piece of writing, give your past employer the opportunity to review the redacted document. Ask your past employer if your redacting is to his or her liking. If it is, double check with him or her that you can use the document as your writing sample.
- **Inform Prospective Employer:** If you have received permission from your past employer, you must ensure that the prospective employer knows that certain information has been redacted from your writing sample. To do so, include a statement on your cover page that notes that names and places have been changed. Additionally, state that you have permission to use the document in a prominent location on your cover page.

- 6. Details and Proofreading:** Be sure that you devote plenty of time to thoroughly proofread your writing sample.
- Read your document over carefully to see if there are any grammatical, spelling, typographical, or Bluebooking errors. This may take more time than you think. Consider reading the document once for grammatical errors, once for spelling errors, once for typographical errors, and then once again for Blueboking errors.
 - You may be able to catch errors if you read the document out loud or by printing it out and reading it on a piece of paper rather than on your computer screen.
 - Remember, lawyers are picky! If you are applying for a job that draws many applicants, the prospective employer may just scan your writing sample. A grammatical error or spelling mistake will stand out far more than a good case comparison and could prevent you from getting the job. How does the writing sample sound after a thorough read? It is often the little things that count the most, and can make the strongest impression.
 - **Formatting:** Remember to save your document in PDF format to ensure that no unwanted modifications or changes occur to your formatting upon submission.
- 7. Modifications and Cover Page:** You not only want your writing sample to show your reader that you are a strong writer, but you also want to make sure that actually reading your writing sample is an easy experience for your reader. An applicant who follows the prospective employer’s formatting instructions and provides the employer with a cover page will stand out. Remember, lawyers are busy people! If you make their lives easier by giving them a nice, neat cover page that thoroughly explains to them what they are reading, they will look favorably at your application. If you do not, they may become frustrated because you forced them to take time out of their busy schedules to figure out what you are writing about.
- **Modifications:** Be sure to follow any specific instructions that the prospective employer has provided in your application. Additionally, keep the following in mind:
 - **Modify to Meet Page Limits:** If the prospective employer asks for a 10-page writing sample, but your piece of writing is originally 12 pages, you will need to remove or condense parts of your writing sample to meet the prospective employer’s application requirements.
 - *Do not* just cut the last two pages of your 12-page document and submit a writing sample that abruptly ends on the tenth page.
 - There are many options for what you can remove from a piece of writing. Consider removing the Table of Authorities and/or the Table of Contents. If you analyzed two issues, you can remove the weaker of your two issues. If you remove the discussion of one issue, make sure that

you remove the issue statement corresponding to that issue. You can also consider revising the Statement of Facts to address only the facts relevant to the one issue you keep. Alternatively, you may want to remove the Statement of Facts and instead summarize the facts in your cover page.

- Proofread the document to make sure your revisions did not create problems that did not exist in the original document. For example, if you decide to cut the first issue, be sure that a legal test, which may be described in the first issue, is moved to the beginning of the second issue that you keep. Additionally, as you revise, you may delete the full citation to a case so that only short citations remains later in the document. If that happens, make sure there is a full citation to that case in your revised document.
- **Cover Page:** A cover page is not the same thing as a cover letter. A cover page is simply a one-page document that becomes the first page of your writing sample. The cover page should include the following key factual information about the writing sample so that the prospective employer understands what he or she is reading:
 - **Heading:** Your heading should include your name, address, telephone number, and email address. Remember that whatever heading you put on your writing sample should be the same heading (same font, size, color, etc.) that you put on your resume.
 - **Source:** It is helpful for the reader to know where the piece came from. This may be a Legal Writing/Legal Practice class, an upper level seminar, summer job, or internship. The reader can better evaluate your writing if he or she knows when, for whom, and why the piece was originally written.
 - **Prompt, Assignment, and Background Information:** Include a short, one-sentence description of the prompt or assignment you were given for the original piece of writing. You may want to include some background information in the cover page if, for example, your professor purposely narrowed the scope of your assignment. You can explain in your cover page that certain legal issues were conceded and are therefore not included in your writing sample. If the piece was submitted as an exam, consider so noting on your cover page.
 - **Redactions:** Remember, if you are using a writing sample in which you redacted certain confidential information, include a statement on your cover page, which notes that names and places have been changed. State that you have permission from your past employer to use the document in a prominent location on the cover page.
 - **Note Modifications Made to Meet Page Limit:** After you have modified your writing sample to meet the prospective employer's

page limit, indicate on your cover page what you have removed or condensed in the document.

- **Honesty:** Be honest in your description. For example, only indicate that the document is unedited by others if that is truly the case.
- **Sample:** See page 6 for a sample cover page:

Jane Doe

Address: 600 New Jersey Avenue NW • Washington, DC 20001

Phone: (012) 345-6789 • **Email:** janedoe@law.georgetown.edu

Writing Sample

The attached writing sample is an appellate brief I drafted this spring for my Legal Practice: Writing and Analysis course. The appellate brief assignment entailed analyzing a fact pattern involving a short, possibly intrusive, police stop of Mr. Tom White and arguing whether White's Fourth Amendment rights were violated.

This 10-page writing sample begins with the "Table of Contents" and does not include the "Table of Authorities" found in the original appellate brief. The "Table of Authorities" has been omitted in this submission to reduce the sample's length.

- 8. Get a Second Opinion:** In addition to reviewing your piece of writing yourself, get an unfamiliar reader to read through the piece and give you feedback. This reader could be a friend or a Senior Writing Fellow in the Writing Center.
- When you get a second opinion, tell the reader whom your intended audience is so that he or she can put himself or herself in that mindset. Often, wording that makes sense to you might confuse a reader who is less familiar with the subject matter or law.
 - Do not feel obligated to take every suggestion offered to you but consider that your reader's thoughts or concerns are likely to be shared by a prospective employer.
- 9. Review Before Interview:** Do not underestimate the possibility that a prospective employer may ask you to summarize your writing sample during your interview.
- As you revise and prepare your writing sample, consider how you may explain your writing sample to an employer in a few sentences.
 - Think about possible questions employers may ask about your writing sample, and how you may answer them.
 - Most importantly, if it has been a long time since you last reviewed your writing sample, reread it before your next interview.