



THE TOP FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WRITING SAMPLES¹

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PURPOSE: Most, if not all, prospective employers are on the lookout for strong legal reasoning and writing skills. To demonstrate those skills, you will often be asked to submit a writing sample. The guidelines below will help you begin to prepare an effective writing sample.

1) Strengthen Organization

Make sure the law is clearly presented to your reader – you are the expert!

- Ensure that you clearly outline the law for your prospective employer, as they may know little about the issue you are discussing.
- Tools like roadmaps and point headings can help you effectively lay out the law.

Effective organization stands out.

- The reader may only have time to quickly skim your writing sample. Organization is a strength that can be demonstrated to a reader who does not have time to dive into the analysis.

2) Refine Topic Sentences and Conclusions

Positions of Emphasis.

- Strong topic sentences and conclusions are particularly important for a prospective employer who may only skim the document.
- Create an outline of your analysis composed exclusively of topic sentences and conclusions. If your outline does not clearly express all of your arguments or does not present a complete argument, work on rewriting some topic sentences and conclusions to achieve this goal.

3) Review Analysis

Spell out your analysis as explicitly as possible.

- Strive to rely on varied forms of legal reasoning to demonstrate your extensive analytical skills to your prospective employer. Consider rule-based, analogical, and policy-based reasoning.

¹ Original handout prepared by Elizabeth Glasgow, Adam Briggs, and Elizabeth Connelly (2005). Revised by Jessica Barriere and Erin Stewart (2020).

- Remember that your reader should not have to fill in the blanks to understand how you reached your conclusion.
- Have a friend or family member read your sample and ask if they were able to follow the reasoning and/or if any points were unclear.

Ensure any rewrites remain consistent with the analysis.

- If you omit any facts or issues from your sample, ensure they do not appear in other portions of the document (i.e., brief answers, conclusion sections, question presented), as this will cause unnecessary confusion for your reader.

Be prepared to talk about it.

- A prospective employer may ask you questions about your writing sample during an interview. Consider how you might explain your writing sample to an employer in a few sentences.
- An employer may also ask you to consider if and/or how the analysis of your sample would change based on new, changed or added facts. The more familiar you are with your writing sample at the time of an interview, the more well-equipped you will be to answer such questions.

4) Omissions and Redactions

Staying within the page range.

- Employers typically look for a 5 to 10-page writing sample.
- Consider omitting portions of the sample to keep it within the page range—do not just delete the last few pages of the document. You may omit less important sections of the document *or* you may omit a less controversial element or issue.
- If you omit less important sections such as the conclusion, issue presented, statement of facts, and/or brief answer, ensure this information is clearly and concisely presented to the reader in the cover page. This way, the reader knows what the facts and issues are before jumping into the analysis.
- Another option is to concede or omit an issue from the memo entirely. For example, if your document analyzes a three-part test, you might consider conceding one of the prongs to shorten the sample. If you choose this option, ensure the omitted facts or issues are left out of all other sections of the memo.

Permission and confidentiality.

- If the document was prepared for an internship or externship, ensure you receive permission from your supervisor to use the piece as a writing sample, and redact all confidential information.
- If you are submitting a writing sample from a real-life case or transaction, it is important to remove the names of all parties and/or clients, any other sensitive or confidential information, and any unique information that might give the reader insight into who the parties were/are. Be cognizant, however, that including too many “black boxes” that take the place of redacted information is not reader friendly. If you begin having to redact more than half of the document, you may consider choosing another writing sample.

5) Details and Proofread

Attach a cover page that gives details about the sample. A cover page should provide:

- Details of the assignment and whether it was an objective memo or a persuasive brief;
- A summary of the factual scenario, legal issue(s), and doctrine presented in the sample;
- An explanation of whether and how the sample was critiqued by your professor during the drafting process and the nature of the feedback (i.e., did you receive general feedback or line edits?); *and*
- An explanation of any omitted sections of the full memo or brief, if applicable.

Keep it relevant.

- Ensure the sample is a piece of writing that demonstrates your legal analysis and reasoning skills (or any other skills you may need to employ at the particular job for which you are applying).
- Ensure the piece is a recent sample of your writing.

Make sure your formatting is professional and reader friendly.

- You should abide by any requirements provided by your prospective employer, but if there are no specific requirements, we recommend a basic font, 12-point type, double-spaced with one-inch margins

Print the document before proofreading.

- You are likely to catch more errors on paper than on the computer screen.
- Check for typos, grammatical errors, and incorrect Bluebook citations.

Additional Resources:

- **Building a Writing Portfolio:** <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/BuildingaWritingPortfolioSpring2010.pdf>
- **Choosing the Right Writing Sample:** <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ChoosingTheRightWritingSample2016.pdf>
- **Government Cover Letters:** <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ChoosingTheRightWritingSample2016.pdf>
- **Revising and Preparing a Writing Sample:** <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ChoosingTheRightWritingSample2016.pdf>
- **Writing Samples for Judicial Clerkships: Some Helpful Tips From Chambers:** <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/In-Chambers-Effective-Writing-Tips-for-the-Judicial-Interns-and-Law-Clerks.pdf>
- **Writing Samples for Public Interest Positions:** <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Blackwell-Public-Interest-Writing-Samples.pdf>