

WRITING SAMPLE GUIDELINES

ABELSON LEGAL SEARCH

Most legal recruiters suggest applicants include the phrase, “Writing Sample Available Upon Request” on their resumes, and applicants be prepared with a writing sample when they interview. At some time in the interview process, most potential employers will expect to see a sample of applicants’ written work. These employers want to assess candidates’ actual writing skills (especially “The 3C’s” – clarity, conciseness and cohesion) and candidates’ analytic abilities, including thoroughness in terms of analysis and research of case law. Unfortunately, some applicants give little thought to writing samples and, as a result, often do not submit either the best or most appropriate example of their work.

Better prepared applicants, who have given thought to their writing sample, often ask: “Should I select something long or something short?” “Should it be something recent or can it be something I did in law school the professor really liked?” “Can I submit more than one sample?” The best answer we can give is to be sure materials are really good. But, then the question becomes defining “really good.”

We at Abelson Legal Search have a few general suggestions about writing samples and always are delighted to work with you on specific selections of your work:

1. Be certain your sample is relatively recent (*i.e.* within the last one to two years) and is an actual work product. Recent, real work most accurately reflects your current abilities. If, as a student, you had a significant piece of work published, you may very well wish to include it, or offer it to the employer, but it is not really what most employers want to see. They want to see what an applicant can produce in the office, under “real world” time and billable hour constraints.
2. Only if the position you are seeking is primarily a drafting one will you need more than one, correctly selected sample.
3. Select samples of work now are in the public record, or submit a research memorandum, which does not contain confidential information and which has no client name(s) or other identifying material. Of course, you will be certain every possible item that might be a breach of confidentiality is removed. Most employers have no problem with the neat and judicious use of a “white-out” substance, if the materials cannot be electronically redacted.
4. If you need to obscure factual information, insert a phrase such as “Client A” or “the plaintiff” wherever it might be difficult to follow the argument without identifying names.
5. If you cannot ask your current employer for approval to submit certain samples of your work, make your selections especially carefully. Be very sure nothing you submit could be seen as revealing any type of firm or company confidence, business secret or way of doing business.
6. Check any sample work both grammatically and typographically. While this advice may seem unnecessary, unfortunately, experience has shown it is not. If proof-reading is not your greatest strength, ask someone else (including Abelson Legal Search professionals) to review the materials. Computer systems are wonderful, and spelling check systems useful, but they don’t indicate the use of a wrong word, if it is spelled correctly. Don’t rely on a machine to do your proof reading. Our favorite mistake - a “trail” lawyer, rather than a “trial” lawyer.
7. Another seemingly common sense suggestion is one also frequently overlooked. Be sure your presentation is attractive and well identified. Every page should be numbered; every page should be well reproduced. If you cannot reprint materials on a word processor, be certain photocopies are the best possible. Some sort of clip, folder or binder will help keep materials together and keep them from being wrinkled in your briefcase. You don’t, however, want your work to look like a college term paper.
8. Of course, be certain your submission is completely your own work or as much your own work as possible for younger associates. If relevant, indicate if data, etc., were compiled or analyzed by anyone else. A simple statement at the end of the work – “presented to and reviewed by

senior attorney” generally will suffice. With today’s work processing equipment, it is easy to use a different typeface for work prepared by someone else with a footnote to indicate whose work this is. Better yet, make another selection – of something totally your own work product.

9. Give some thought to your selection: Is it relevant to the job I am seeking? Will it also give me something to talk about in the interview? Am I comfortable answering questions about every aspect of this case? If I were asked to write this again, is there anything I would do differently? Review the facts, history and resolution of the case in your writing sample and be prepared to discuss it during the interview.
10. Ask us to take a look at what you think you might like to use. We can evaluate most writing samples for legal content, grammar and style. And, then, read it again yourself. There is no such thing as too well proofread.
11. In business areas, especially corporate, contract and real estate law, indications of good drafting skills probably are the single most important example you can use. In these areas of practice, more than a single example, especially if small, could be submitted.
12. For litigation samples, it is more difficult to suggest a single type of appropriate document. Different types of firms have somewhat different emphases and will look for different kinds of materials at different levels of professional experience. It is helpful if you tell us what kind(s) of things you have and let us check with the firm to see what is most helpful for them.