

Writing Samples

A writing sample is an important part of your application process. Most law firms, public interest employers, and agencies will not request a writing sample at the beginning of the application process, and you should not submit one until it is requested. Judges will typically ask that a writing sample be included with the initial application materials. Employers use the writing sample to see that you are capable of intelligent legal analysis; they also expect that your writing sample is free of grammar, spelling, and citation errors.

What should I submit as a writing sample?

Because legal employers are generally looking for legal analysis skill, a legal memorandum or a brief is preferred over a research paper. Memos and briefs written for your Legal Rhetoric class are entirely appropriate, even if the subject of the document is not relevant to the employer's practice area. Legal employers recognize that first year law students have limited choices for writing samples. Upper level students may submit a document that was created at the direction of an attorney or supervisor during an internship or externship. Be sure to ask permission to use such a document and be certain to redact any confidential information. Scholarly or academic work should be submitted only if specifically requested.

The writing sample should reflect your own work. If you have written a document with another writer (*e.g.*, your appellate brief for Rhetoric), omit the portions that the other writer drafted. If a section was jointly written, so indicate. Many employers will request an "unedited" writing sample. This means that the work must be substantially your own and should not have been edited by another person. You may personally edit any document, including one that was produced at a law-related job. If you are submitting a Legal Rhetoric assignment, you may incorporate changes based on comments you received on the graded paper. You should not, however, ask someone else, including Legal Rhetoric professors or Writing Fellows, to edit your work or to make substantial changes. To preserve the integrity of the process, the Legal Rhetoric Program will provide guidance and answer any specific questions you have about your writing sample, but will not edit or proofread. At all times, the Legal Rhetoric Program must give first priority to the concerns of current students and classes.

How long should the writing sample be?

Unless an employer specifies a page limit, five to ten pages is an appropriate length. If your potential sample is too long, you may excerpt a part: the Discussion section of an office memo, for example. Be sure that the excerpt illustrates your analytical skills and append a brief explanation to put it in context.

How should I present it?

Create a cover sheet for your writing sample. It can be the heading of your resume or cover letter and a simple centered title stating "Writing Sample." Use your cover sheet to give any necessary background information. For example, if you are using the closed memorandum from your Legal Rhetoric class, provide a note naming the class, describing the assignment, and explaining that the research was provided with the assignment. Keep it short—one or two paragraphs.