

Writing Samples

Your writing sample can be a crucial component of your application materials. Sometimes it is reviewed before the initial interview, at the offer stage, or both. A writing sample can make or break the deal for some employers.

How long should your writing sample be? Some employers will accept an entire piece, but others would like only an excerpt. A general rule of 5-10 pages is standard. If an employer does not specify a page limit, you may send the entire document. Err on the side of sending too much, because the recipient can always quit reading when he or she has had enough to judge your writing. Make sure you select a sample of your best legal work/writing that does not contain any grammatical or typographical errors.

How should it be formatted? Include a cover page with your resume heading and a brief explanation to give it context. For example:

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WRITING SAMPLE

The attached writing sample is an excerpt from a Brief in Support of a Motion for Summary Judgment created in the course of my employment with Smith & Smith. I submit it as an example of my writing with permission of Attorney James Jones. It has been excerpted to exclude a discussion of a breach of contract issue. The entire document is available upon request.

Be sure to put your name as a header on each page of the writing sample and paginate and staple (if mailing) the pages together.

Just because your sample has to be your own work does not mean you cannot go back and polish it yourself based on feedback received. Here is some good advice copied from a listserv discussion on the subject:

1. No matter how great the comments are that your professor wrote on the paper, submit a clean copy rather than a photocopy of the graded paper.
2. Proofread it again.
3. Edit it again, especially if it is a long paper and there are guidelines on how many pages they want in the writing sample.
4. Shepardize the cases to be sure they haven't been overruled.
5. Spend a moment with the Bluebook or ALWD Citation Manual double-checking your citations.
6. You can change some of the facts if you like. It is no longer a writing assignment, and you can get rid of those questionable facts that made readers raise their eyebrows at your analysis.
7. If the writing assignment used funny names, change them to normal names that won't distract the reader or remind them it was a writing assignment.

If you have a lot of potential writing samples, first choose your very best writing. Then, if you still have options, try to select something that is related to the work you would do in the job to which you are applying. Many employers tell us they like appellate briefs because they show that you can set forth facts objectively, and you can also advocate in the argument section. Remember, you may only submit something you did at work if you redact any identifying information and have the employer's permission (they may need the client's permission). If it's already a document of public record, your employer will be more likely to agree.