Choose a writing sample that demonstrates your legal research and analysis skills in a clear, concise, and coherent writing style.

As you gain more legal experience, you will have a number of examples of your writing from which to choose. When possible, choose a writing sample that addresses a topic of interest to your prospective employer.

Your writing sample should include citations to cases and/or statutes.

Possible writing samples include memoranda, briefs, course papers, or Law Journal articles.

Your writing sample should be between 5-10 pages in length; be in finished form (no typos, no corrections, no handwritten notes or grading marks); and be on white paper.

Prepare a cover sheet for the writing sample indicating when and for what purpose it was written. If the writing was done in cooperation with others, clearly identify your contributions.

If you use work product from a job, obtain permission from your supervising attorney. Demonstrate your concern for client confidentiality by masking names in internal memoranda. This is not necessary in briefs or other pleadings that have been filed with a court, since they are matters of public record.

Re-read your writing sample before an interview because the interviewer may wish to discuss it with you.

Do not believe that employers do not read writing samples. Some firms use the writing sample to make the final decision as to which candidate should receive an offer.
Writing Sample Basics
Developed by
Yale Law School Career Development Office

When is a writing sample necessary?

If you are sending your resume to employers, you should only include a writing sample if specifically requested. Most law firms and public interest organizations do not want writing samples at the initial stage of the application process. However, nearly all judges require a writing sample with the initial clerkship application materials. Many public sector employers will request a writing sample after they determine that they are interested in hiring you. While some law firms will request a writing sample at that time as well, others never request one.

When signing up for employers during the Fall Interview Program, you can check the RIPS website to see if the employer has requested that you bring a writing sample to the initial interview. Very few employers make that request. However, if you have a writing sample ready, you may wish to bring it to your interviews in case it is requested during the interview.

Even if a writing sample is not specifically required, you should realize that your cover letter, resume, and every piece of paper you submit will be viewed as a writing sample. Everything should be technically perfect - no spelling or grammatical errors - and as well-written as you can make it.

What is an appropriate writing sample?

Legal employers would rather see legal analysis; something like a memo or brief is preferred over a research paper, and something on a legal topic is preferable to a non-legal paper. The ultimate criterion, however, is the quality of the writing; if you are convinced that no legal memorandum or brief comes close to the quality of one of your research papers, choose your best writing. In addition, less outside editing is better, which is why previously published pieces are not automatically at the top of the list. Remember, if you are using document prepared for prior employer, you must get the employer’s permission and make sure you have made all necessary modifications and redactions to preserve client confidentiality.

The topic of the writing sample is not much of a concern for law firms. Public interest organizations naturally would be more interested in something written about the area of their work. It offers an additional indication of the applicant’s interest in the subject; however, a writing sample on a different topic is not disqualifying (and legal employers recognize that first-year law students have limited choices for writing samples). Judges also generally don’t care about the topic of the sample.

Most first-year students use one of the writing projects prepared for their small section. Because these assignments often contain forced limitations (the type of research you are allowed to conduct, the side of the argument you are required to take, etc.), it is a good idea to provide an explanation of those limitations on a cover sheet to your writing sample.

How long should the writing sample be?

Although there is no definitive ideal length for a writing sample, 5-10 pages typically serves the purpose of demonstrating your writing ability. If all of your potential writing samples are much longer, consider using an excerpt (e.g., one argument from a longer brief) and providing a brief explanatory note.
How should I package it?

Create a cover sheet for your writing sample. It can have a simple heading—just your name centered at the top of the page and “Writing Sample” centered underneath it. You can use your cover sheet to give any necessary background information about your writing sample. For class assignments, give the name of the class and a brief description of the assignment. If you were assigned to a specific side or you had specific restrictions placed on your research (e.g., not permitted to use Lexis or Westlaw, or confined to designated cases), you should explain them. If you are excerpting from a longer document, add whatever background is necessary to make the excerpt understandable. If you are using a document prepared for a former employer, explain that you have obtained the employer’s permission and made all necessary modifications. The typical cover sheet explanation is two paragraphs; do not exceed one page. You do not need to use “resume-grade” paper for your writing sample or cover sheet.