



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Carey Bertolet

It's Bathing Suit Season! Time to Trim the Fat on your Resume

While lawyers concerned about the best possible presentation on their résumés (as we all should be!) may agonize over formatting and fonts, the key to creating a powerful résumé is simplicity. Often, a résumé that leaves the best impression is one that's been edited to remove extraneous content, leaving the most relevant parts for the potential employer's review. Being concise, relevant, and punchy is generally wildly more effective than verbosity and superciliousness.

There are as many opinions on writing résumés as there are fish in the sea. While your résumé should look neat and cleanly formatted, the rule that must be followed when preparing your résumé for a law firm is this:

Résumés best tailored for law firm jobs are concise, chronologically organized, and streamlined. Do not distract the reader from your experience and your accomplishment.

There are specific elements of a résumé where lawyers tend to get trapped into providing information that really doesn't advance them in terms of convincing a potential employer to interview or hire a candidate. With the following exception, information that isn't relevant to a hiring decision should be carefully scrutinized before it appears on your résumé.

The major caveat to this rule is that employment history and educational history must be included in a résumé without exception. No one should read any part of this article to mean that they can or should exclude a previous or current employer from their résumé or fail to include any secondary educational institution from their résumé. It is always better to be accurate than concise.

In fact, once you've accurately accounted for your academic background and employment history, you should be skeptical about whether to include most other categories of information. What follows is a discussion of those categories that lawyers tend to include in addition to their employment and academic background, the usefulness of such category, and where lawyers can be more concise and effective.

Admissions: For lawyers, it's always important to identify the jurisdictions in which one is admitted. This should generally be one or two lines as simple as "Admitted in New York State." Relocating lawyers who have concrete plans to sit for the bar in their new state may put something like "Registered to sit for the July 2006 New Jersey bar."

Where can we trim the fat? I sometimes see a lawyer indicate their willingness to sit for a bar in the state where a potential employer is located. I (and often, employers) find this unnecessary, since it is assumed that one is willing to become licensed in the state where he or she intends to practice law. It may raise a more confounding question for the employer reviewing the résumé as they try to imagine a circumstance where it would be appropriate to hire a lawyer who is not willing to sit for the bar.

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There is generally no reason to indicate that you passed the bar examination on the first attempt. While it's something to be proud of, it doesn't really distinguish you from other potential applicants, and is highly unlikely to make the difference between getting or not getting an interview.

Interests: I imagine that the interests portion of résumés began when first-year associates longed for some way to take up space on a page because they did not yet have much experience and felt compelled to submit a résumé that filled an entire page. For whatever reason, the interests portion of résumés is quite common. I often ask myself why lawyers include this element on their résumé. It is certainly not required; and oftentimes, I see content under "interests" that either adds no value or interest (pun intended) or in some cases, takes away from the rest of the content.

One may be surprised to hear that most "interests" lines on résumés are virtually identical. To wit, many professionals enjoy reading, travel, and fine dining. I hate to be sarcastic about it; but, from the point of view of one who is constantly reviewing résumés, reading, travel, and other interests really don't do anything to raise one résumé over another. In fact, it sometimes comes across as trite. I raise these three particular interest categories for a reason. Many intelligent people love reading. It's a great pastime, but is it a relevant or distinguishing characteristic?

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Travel is another commonly stated interest. But again, it doesn't really say anything about you, or distinguish you. Most people like travel. It says nothing about who you are professionally (except that you are likely to use all of your vacation time). More to the point, and despite what you may think, it says nothing about you personally.

I have seen a résumé where an individual put down locations that he was hoping he would one day visit, which seemed an odd thing to include. While it is certainly understandable to want to convey a little personality in a résumé, telling a potential employer that you hope to one day travel to distant and exotic locations is probably going to be completely irrelevant to the practice of law. Moreover, there are lawyers who would look at this information and wonder why they would consider a candidate who is looking forward to being out of the office for substantial amounts of time to travel to a place where they will likely be completely unreachable. Again, this may be a cynical view, but why give a reviewing attorney the opportunity to disregard your résumé?

Where to trim the fat: Delete, delete, delete. Take the interests category out. Use the space to talk about your substantive work experience; or better yet, just save everyone the energy. Interviewing at law firms is all about who you are, and your personality is a huge part of that. However, the résumé doesn't need to be lavender-scented to show your personality, it needs to state how your experience will contribute to a particular firm's practice.

Of course, there is much to be said about making your résumé distinctive, and the argument for an interests category is to give people something to talk about at the interview. I don't necessarily disagree, but it needs to be a good use of space in order to be justified.

- A lawyer interested in sports or exercise is a dime a dozen. A lawyer who runs marathons shows discipline, accomplishment, and has distinguished himself or herself.
- A résumé that shows a preference for 'fine dining' isn't special (are there people that don't enjoy good food?). Someone who has taken courses in sushi making has added something unusual to their résumé.
- Avid readers, while generally a peaceful people, aren't necessarily fascinating. Someone who collects first-edition American literature would be interesting to many people.

There are two final points with respect to including interests. First, if you indicate that you have an interest in something, you need to make sure that you do. One of my favorite candidates included chess as an interest and ended up playing a game with his interviewer. Make sure you can walk the walk, so to speak. Second, remember that you don't know the audience for your résumé. While you understand that beer-making is an art, someone may not perceive it positively depending on their life experience. Think twice about anything that may not be appreciated in the way you intended.

Languages: On the same note, language ability should only be included where it is substantial. If you are learning French, that isn't likely to be relevant for any professional reason, especially if you are not far along. Indicate with honesty your level of proficiency. Fluent speakers of any language should be prepared to be interviewed in that language. Trust me; it happens.

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Where to trim the fat: Again, liberally use your delete button! Unless you are fluent in another language, or applying for a job where language skills would be relevant (i.e. the job is in another country, or the clients of the firm are located in a country where your language skills are relevant), rethink whether this section adds value to your résumé.

Skills: I remain somewhat confounded by the inclusion of a skills portion of the résumé. There may have been a time in the practice of law where facility with Westlaw and Lexis-Nexus, for example, were somewhat unusual. This is certainly no longer the case. I see lawyers including information on their proficiency with word-processing programs, and sometimes, the Internet. Again, there is nothing wrong with having any of these skills. However, to use space on a résumé to tell a potential employer that you are familiar with the Internet just doesn't make sense. Why tell an employer that you know how to surf the Web? It certainly comes in handy, but it's something that pretty much everyone does.

Where to trim the fat: Unless you have information to the contrary, there is no need to include computer-proficiency skills. Most lawyers have computers on their desks and have the skills to research, write, and communicate. Having these skills does not distinguish you from another candidate for a law firm position as an associate.

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What's the Final Weigh-In? A Concluding Note on a Résumé's Length:

There seems to be some confusion about when and whether a résumé needs to be one page. There is no definitive rule. While a résumé covering only half a page would probably strike most people as strange, many résumés exceed the one-page standard. As I intimated earlier, it appears that the substantive choices people make in drafting their résumés are often driven by some preconception about how long or short their résumé must be. Let the content drive your drafting.

If you follow the rules about being concise and you eliminate extraneous, irrelevant, and distracting information as discussed above, there is no reason that your résumé can't exceed one page. In other words, if you are using the space to convey only relevant information about your experience and academic background, then a lengthier résumé may very well be appropriate. If you go over onto a second or third page to tell your potential new employer that you enjoy travel and reading, then you are in danger of frustrating the person reviewing your résumé.