



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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How to Write a Legal Resume

Introduction

A good resume is an extremely important tool in the job-search process. Because firms are inundated with resumes, your resume must be able to get the attention of the hiring partner and create a good, strong impression at a brief glance. Your resume is your sales pitch to the hiring partner. It is not merely a recitation of your life's chronology. You need to make your value to the employer clear, and because your resume will likely only get about 30 seconds of the partner's time, you need your value to be emphasized and evident from a quick scan and cursory examination.

There are two styles of resumes: functional and chronological. Chronological resumes are useful when outlining your accomplishments and experience in relation to your past employment. Functional resumes break your accomplishments into areas of experience and are more useful when you have had many jobs or large gaps in your employment history. If you have had many jobs, all of which are relevant, the employer is likely to assume that you were unhappy or unsuccessful at your past jobs. Constant job migration is never a good indication to any employer. By emphasizing your knowledge and set of skills while downplaying your job-hopping, you can sometimes eliminate the stigma that employers will associate with your employment history. However, because many legal employers are interested in seeing a resume that paints a chronological picture of your advancing career through your past employment, the functional resume will appear confusing and will make the employer suspicious of your intentions. This article is designed to help both experienced and inexperienced job seekers design a resume that is effective and sure to leave a favorable impression with any potential employer.

This article consists of two sections that offer specific tips for improving the content and appearance of your resume. The article is followed by two appendices. [Appendix I](#) contains a list of several hundred Action Verbs, words that will energize your job descriptions and emphasize all your accomplishments properly. In [Appendix II](#), you will find a sample resume.

Content of Your Resume

Tell the truth. Lying on your resume will not help you. Employers are very familiar with employment verification and reference-checking services, and they do use them. Do not lie or stretch the truth on your resume. Don't even think about it. Absolutely every statement on your resume should be the absolute, verifiable truth. No exceptions.

Be proud of your extensive career. If you have been practicing law for many years and have many accomplishments under your belt, you do not have to be limited to a single-page resume. If your resume spills onto a second page, it should fill at least a half of that page. Be sure to put your name and contact information on the top of the second page as well.

Eliminate excess language. Your resume will be scanned by someone who has already scanned a hundred resumes that day and will still have to read a hundred more before the day's end. Saying "currently, I am actively involved in the day-to-day decisions regarding the antitrust division of my firm" will make the decision maker sick of reading it. Instead, you can say "supervised all daily decisions regarding antitrust cases" or "made key decisions for all antitrust cases."

You are not writing an essay. There is no need to use "I" or "my," and you should eliminate articles where appropriate. A better phrasing of "I reorganized the firm's billing practices, reducing our errors by 35%" is "reorganized billing practices, reducing errors by 35%." Short phrases and sentence fragments are the most efficient and effective methods for making your points.

Your accomplishments are more important than your responsibilities. Which sounds more impressive: the fact that you were "responsible for estate planning" or that you "structured trusts to minimize clients' tax liability"? Responsibilities are a passive description. Using Action Verbs (see [Appendix I](#)) will revive the active voice and energize each job's duties and accomplishments. Several important Action Verbs to keep in mind are enacted, performed, supervised, maintained, organized, and developed.

PAGE: 2

Avoid irrelevancies. It is important to exclude all irrelevant information. If you worked as a waiter during law school, it is not necessary to list that job. However, don't attempt to fill the gap by stretching your relevant employment dates. Instead, make sure you can give an honest answer if asked about it during an interview. Moreover, for legal resumes, an objective is unnecessary. It is assumed that you are applying for a position as an attorney.

Personal information other than your name, address, phone number, and email address is unnecessary. The employer does not need to know your birth date, height, weight, marital status, or hair color. This is a general statement that may have exceptions; if, for example, your spouse is well known in the field in which you are applying, you may consider disclosing your marital status and spouse's name. No matter how gorgeous you are, the hiring partner does not want a photo of you. Unless requested, you should not include a salary history, references, thesis, or other superfluous materials. With the amount of time given to each resume, do you want it spent gazing at your photo or reading your many accomplishments?

Give attention where attention is due. If your resume describes your most recent position as an attorney in only one line, but describes the paper you wrote for law review in four, you need to reassess your priorities. Accomplishments and experiences should get attention proportional to their importance. Generally, your current job as an associate is more important than your first-year summer internship, unless that internship gave you more relevant experience and skills.

Use job descriptions wisely. Because your job title may mean different responsibilities and skills to different employers, you should use descriptions to eliminate doubt and clarify your position. The responsibilities of a senior associate at some firms may be closer to the duties of an associate at other firms. While your job title may seem more impressive, employers may find it misleading. Explicit descriptions of your duties, responsibilities, and achievements can clarify the extent of your experience.

One exception is the summer internship. Unless you did more than perform research and draft memoranda, you should limit, and possibly eliminate, your description. Employers generally understand what work is done during a law student's summer. It is important to include where and how you spent your summers in law school, but you must consider the overall import of your work experience while you were in law school vis-à-vis your experience since.

Be creative and professional at the same time. This is possible. If you have a particular interest or hobby that may not parlay into a skill used in law, but it makes you stand out in a crowd, use it. Your resume needs to create an image of a person, not just a series of jobs and education. Your interests will let the employer know who you are as well as what you can do. You can have a section on your resume entitled "Personal" or "Areas of Interest." Be specific too. Instead of being "interested in sports and reading," you are an "avid skier and collector of Early American Literature." Personal interests and hobbies can be excellent ways to break the ice in an interview. However, you must use discretion. Keep in mind that if your resume makes it past the hiring partner's hands, it is likely to be read by many eyes. While some may find your interest in collecting Dukes of Hazzard memorabilia interesting, others may find fault.

Other categories that you can add are “Professional Affiliations” or “Community Activities.” These sections are good ways to show your level of involvement in the local professional or business community.

There is no need to record those abilities the employer will take for granted, such as computer skills. Every lawyer should have general computer skills and know how to research online; therefore, by listing those skills on your resume, you are identifying those as the most notable of your abilities. This will make you look average, not exceptional. Other sections can include “Writing,” “Public Speaking,” or “Languages.” If you speak a language, include that language and your level of proficiency. The employer has the right to know whether someone who lists Chinese as a skill has taken two years of Chinese or has lived in China for six years.

No grades are not good grades. Regardless what the old maxim says about “no news,” the omission of your GPA or class rank on your resume implies that your grades were very likely mediocre to below average. If you have any honors or an impressive GPA or class ranking, include them. As the years out of law school grow, your grades may grow less important; however, a senior attorney who graduated at the top of his/her class still has an edge over a similarly qualified attorney with poor grades. If you have mediocre or poor grades, omitting them will not get you off the hook. You should always be prepared to discuss your grades and position in your class.

Your Resume's Appearance

PAGE: 3

Don't use a scripted font. Scripted fonts may look fancy, but straightforward, easy-to-read fonts such as Times New Roman and Courier New are highly preferable.

Avoid small type. Eight-point font will make your resume illegible. While it may seem better to keep your resume to one page by using a smaller font, do you want the hiring partner to be forced to squint to read your resume? With the abundance of resumes coming in the door, it is easier to throw yours out and move on to the next one.

Leave enough white space, but not too much. Margins that are .2 inch wide will make your resume appear crowded, while margins that are 1.5 inches wide will present the impression that you don't have enough to offer to even fill a single page. You need to leave margins that are wide enough to eliminate a cramped feeling, while at the same time keeping your margins small enough to prevent the appearance of space-filling. An effective margin width would typically be around 1 inch.

Use bullet points wisely. There is no need to use a bullet point for every job; instead, use them to highlight important accomplishments of one or two particular jobs. Too many bullet points will eliminate their effectiveness in emphasizing aspects of your resume.

Walk the fine line between a slick resume and a “slick” resume. You may think that going to a professional printer and having your resume printed will make it an attention-getter. You would be right, but it would be the wrong type of attention. Professionally printed resumes will give the impression that you hired someone to do your resume for you because you cannot do your own work—an impression you certainly cannot afford to give. However, your resume must look professional. You should print your resume using a laser printer, with professional, heavy-stock paper that is a muted color.

Emphasize your job titles and experience. Your only priority should be making your achievements obvious in a quick scan. While the dates of your past employment are very important, the employer will not examine these carefully until you become a candidate for an interview. This only happens after the hiring partner has initially seen what you have to offer and kept your resume from the dreaded circular file. Do you really need to have “Employment” and “May 2001” in bold, or is it better to have “Associate Attorney, Corporate Division” in bold instead?

Proofread your resume. SpellCheck is a wonderful invention, but it cannot yet tell you that you meant to use “if” instead of “is.” There is a big difference between a “rabid” and a “rapid” typist. After spending all week writing your resume, you will be tempted to skim it. Resist this temptation or pass the resume on to a colleague or friend who will carefully read every word. The importance of language in the legal profession only heightens your responsibility to send an error-free document.

Keep it simple. With the popularity of the Internet, emailing a resume is very commonplace. If you have structured your resume using complicated columns and tables with a unique font in Microsoft Word, what will happen when your potential employer uses WordPerfect and only has three fonts? Keeping your resume a simple block of text with basic formatting and indenting will offer much better results with employers who use different software.

Conclusion

Your resume is not the key to a successful job. There are many components that work together, including the skill and credibility of your recruiter, your job search, and even being in the right place at the right time. However, you only get one chance to make a first impression, and by following these tips and avoiding the pitfalls, you can move one step closer to your new job. At BCG Attorney Search, our recruiters have been candidates like you, have reviewed resumes when serving on recruiting committees in major firms, and have advised hundreds of candidates in making sure their resumes accomplish the intended purpose of creating a good, strong impression on the hiring partner. If you are a candidate with superior academic credentials and solid legal experience, please call us.

[Appendix I: Action Verbs](#)

[Appendix II: Sample Resume \(PDF file\)](#)

Acrobat Reader is required to view PDF files and is available for free at www.adobe.com