



## RESUME BASICS

### Creating a Strong Resume for Your Legal Job Search

The purpose of your resume is to highlight your knowledge in substantive areas and practice settings. Your goal is to convince prospective employers that you have the skills to get the job done. Remember, your resume is a summary of your skills, not a biography. Because a strong resume is one that is succinct and highlights your skills, it is appropriate to omit irrelevant information. With some exceptions, law students can and should summarize their relevant education and experience in a one page resume with reasonable margins and a font that is 11 points (or larger).

**Step 1: Focus on your skills.** Keep in mind that each job you apply for has its own perfect resume. This means that you should view your resume not as a static document, but rather one that you adjust based on the employer. For example, in college if you were involved in mock-trial, but you also served as Chief Student Officer of your University bank, on the resume you send to litigation employers, you should highlight your mock trial work. For banking or corporate employers, you should highlight your experience at the bank. Similarly, if your legal internship is with a local prosecutor's office and you are interested in criminal law, you will emphasize your experience in criminal law and procedure. On the other hand, if you are interested in commercial litigation, you should emphasize your experience in litigation generally, including courtroom practice and procedure.

Do not sell yourself short! Start by using the document titled "Skills Inventory Checklist for Resumes" on the Career Center's website ([www.gwlawcareers.org](http://www.gwlawcareers.org)). Review this list and check off all skills you have acquired through your academic and work experiences. Use this as a guide for the skills you wish to highlight and summarize on your resume. Remember also that if you used a skill in multiple positions, mentioning the skill once may be enough. Use the space on your resume to highlight and summarize other skills that you have to offer to the employer. The exceptions are research, writing, and analysis, which are the three most important skills legal employers desire, and are therefore worth repeating.

If you have no legal experience yet, do not omit your non-legal work experience. Instead, include those experiences, but be sure to highlight the skills that all legal employers are seeking.

## Key Skills That Legal Employers Look For

Skills	Why It Is Important	Where You May Have Picked It Up
<b>Research, writing, and analysis</b>	Although <i>legal</i> research and writing is different from your past experience in this area, if it is something you excelled at or enjoyed previously, that bodes well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working as a research or lab assistant</li> <li>• Writing your thesis or other significant research paper</li> </ul>
<b>Organization; attention to detail</b>	No matter what type of law you go into, the ability to be organized and stay on top of massive amounts of often-confusing detail is an essential skill.	<p>These are skills that people develop by helping people manage information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing files, documents, accounts payable/receivable, correspondence</li> <li>• Working in your college library</li> <li>• Organizing a volunteer drive</li> <li>• Serving as a teaching assistant</li> </ul>
<b>Management</b>	Employers want to hire individuals who are likely to advance within an organization. Prior management experience is an excellent indicator of that.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student group leader</li> <li>• Manager/assistant manager of store</li> <li>• Camp counselor</li> <li>• Residential/dorm assistant</li> </ul>
<b>Business development; outreach</b>	Legal employers want people who will not only be effective advocates, but who also will be able to bring in clients in the future. Any prior sales or outreach experience is helpful in this regard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership coordinator for student group</li> <li>• Retail sales</li> <li>• Customer service</li> <li>• Fundraising</li> </ul>

### Step 2: Resume Format.

**Education.** Because you are a current student, your “Education” section should appear before your “Experience” section. The name of the law school is “**The George Washington University Law School.**” Include schools attended, degrees received, graduation dates (or expected date), majors and other concentrations of study. Your counselor can help you determine how best to represent your grades on your resume, but in general, if your GPA starts with a “3” include it on your resume. Note: If you choose to include **GW Law grades**, you must do so in compliance with the Law School’s Academic Recognition and Grade Representation Policy, which is available on the Career Center’s website.

Include your academic **honors and awards** (*summa/magna/cum laude*, membership in national honor societies, nationally-recognized scholarships) under the school where they were earned. If you include other honors, provide a description, as some employers may not be familiar with them. If you wrote a thesis or significant research paper, this should be listed. Your counselor will also help you determine whether to include relevant **coursework**. Also, include relevant extracurricular **activities**. Finally, it is appropriate to include **study abroad** programs. However, if you attended such a program while enrolled in another degree-granting program, the study abroad program is typically listed under the degree-granting institution, rather than as stand-alone entry in the “Education” section.

Do not include high school information, unless you attended a well-known school and you are hoping to make an alumni or geographic connection with the employer.

**Experience.** In general, identify your work experience in reverse chronological order, and include your relevant experience, whether paid or unpaid. This is your opportunity to set yourself apart from other candidates.

Be specific. For each position description, identify the discrete tasks that you performed and the outcome/value added for the employer as a result of your work. Be detailed and specific, in order to show employers your depth of understanding and experience. Remember, employers will be hiring you for your skills, not for the name or work of your prior employers. Emphasize your accomplishments at your prior position and how your work advanced the project or mission.

Use active voice. Use action words and active voice. Refer to the document titled “Resume Action Verbs” on the Career Center’s website for suggestions. Avoid words like “assisted” or “worked with.” Instead qualify your work by stating “under the supervision of...” at the end of your bullet point.

Avoid using first person or hearsay. Describe your work with detail and let the outcome of the project define your success. Do not refer to yourself in the first person. Instead of writing “My responsibilities included reviewing and analyzing...,” state the action verb directly, “Reviewed and analyzed ....” Phrases such as “Supervisors commended my work” are hearsay and do not offer much value. Instead, use illustrative examples from your experience to demonstrate your skill set.

Tailor your resume. Keep your audience in mind and tailor your resume to highlight the skills and subject area knowledge you have that will complement the employer’s needs. For example, if you are applying to a commercial litigation firm and have experience working at a prosecutor’s office, focus on your knowledge and familiarity with the litigation process generally, such as motions practice, discovery and court room decorum, and downplay the fact that your experience was in criminal law.

**EXAMPLE:** Assume that you worked for a judge over the summer and helped her with two cases: a breach of contract case and a medical malpractice case with a pending motion to dismiss.

Waste of space/Too vague:

- Assisted Judge's clerks in researching and writing about legal issues

Better:

- Researched legal issues and drafted memoranda to assist Judge in deciding a breach of contract case and a motion to dismiss

Best:

- Researched Maryland breach of contract standards, including whether the doctrine of promissory estoppel applies in the absence of reliance; drafted a memorandum summarizing legal analysis for Judge; discussed legal conclusions and possible outcome with Judge and Judge's clerks
- Analyzed whether the Judge should permit defendant to take discovery in order to support a motion to dismiss under Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6); drafted a memorandum analyzing legal standards for the Judge

**Languages.** Include your language skills, but be honest in representing your skill level. See the Interagency Language Roundtable website for a self-assessment of your language skills ([www.govtilr.org](http://www.govtilr.org)).

**Professional Certifications.** If you are a CPA or have an insurance license, engineer's license, or some other certification that is relevant, include it.

**Publications.** This information demonstrates your writing ability, and many legal employers will appreciate it. If you have a long list of non-legal publications, in the interest of space and consistency, you may want to consider listing two or three of the most relevant publications, and use a heading such as "Selected Publications."

**Volunteer Work/Community Service.** You may choose to include volunteer and community service experience in its own section, in the "Experience" section, or as an extracurricular activity under your "Education" section (if the experience was associated with or sponsored by your university.) If you are unsure where this information should go, consult your counselor.

**Interests and Other Personal Information<sup>1</sup>.** You may include other unique information such as hobbies, travel, or other community service, but such information should be

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<sup>1</sup> You should NOT include: date/place of birth, marital status, number/ages of children, height, weight, and health status. This information constitutes a very sensitive area of inquiry that may be used to restrict or deny employment to a protected group of people. Employers are obliged to base hiring decisions on

professional and appropriate. For example, be careful of including references to alcohol as an interest. Your interests should reflect positive attributes such as discipline, confidence, dedication, or leadership ability. Also, be specific; if you are runner, this does not necessarily make you unique. Saying that you run sprints or marathons provides an additional level of detail that will add interest.

**Computer Skills.** Proficiency in word processing, the Microsoft Office Suite, Westlaw, and LexisNexis are presumed. Do not include these items on your resume.

**References.** These should not be included on your resume, but rather provided separately. See the Career Center's website for additional guidance on references.

**Step 3: Proofread your resume carefully and seek feedback.** Make sure that it has no errors and conveys exactly what you want it to convey. Remember that your resume will probably be read many times by many different individuals. Seek feedback from your counselor on ways to improve your resume. Use the document on the Career Center's website titled "Final Resume Checklist" to confirm that your resume includes all of the key components. Finally, remember that legal employers place a premium on strong attention to detail, so typos and formatting inconsistencies will undermine your application and may even disqualify you from consideration.

**Step 4: Are you an exception to the rule?** Although *most* law student resumes follow a standard format, your unique circumstances may require that you tailor your resume in a way that deviates from the standard format. For example, if you have numerous internships and activities that demonstrate a strong commitment to a particular practice area, it may be advantageous to create a two page resume. Students with strong public interest backgrounds often fall into this category. Similarly, experienced professionals with a significant prior work history may require a two page resume. See a career counselor if you believe you might fall into this category.

**Step 5: Consult a Career Center counselor.** Once you have a strong draft, it is always a good idea to meet with a counselor for a resume review.

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job-related qualifications; therefore, an applicant's supporting credentials, as stated on the resume, should be oriented to skills necessary for effective job performance.