

Your Resume as a First Impression

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Attorneys often forget the importance of a first impression. As a law student, you are groomed for first impressions during the on-campus interview process. But somewhere between the time you land your first job and the time you start looking for your next, attorneys often overlook the significance of their resumes, which is the first impression a prospective employer gets of you.

Your resume is the first thing a potential employer will see in determining whether or not to bring you in for an interview. The resume, therefore, is crucial to your success in a job search. A resume should be solid, straightforward, and easy to read, highlighting your best achievements and accomplishments.

Presentation

Presentation matters. Whether you want to accept it or not, your resume should be pleasing to the eye. No grammatical errors, no misspellings, no mistakes-period. You should have easy-to-read headings guiding the reader through your resume (i.e., Education, Experience, Languages, Interests). You should have your education and work history listed with the most current position/degree first. And make sure your resume looks professional. Place your name in bold, centered at the top. Under your name, you should include your mailing address, your email address (an account other than your work email that you check regularly), and then your phone number (make sure you include a phone number other than your work number, with voice mail or an answering

machine). Keep it simple and consistent. Use one font (ideally, Times New Roman, 12-point); and strategically use italics, bold, and underlining. These tools will lose their effects if they are overused.

Substance

By and large, your resume should not include explanations of your past experiences or work history, and it definitely should not explain any red flags. This explanatory information is much better suited for the cover letter that accompanies your resume and should answer any questions that the potential employer might have after reviewing your resume. For example, if you have a gap of more than one year on your resume, you don't need to explain it in a footnote on your resume; instead, put the explanation in your cover letter. The cover letter is the opportunity for you to sell yourself beyond your resume. Your resume is the opportunity to grab the prospective employer's attention and let him/her know that you are a perfect fit for the job opening (explain why you are the perfect fit in the cover letter).

Education

List your education (undergrad to present) in a separate heading, including the school, location, degree, honors, activities/organizations, and date of graduation. If your GPA wasn't fabulous (and you know if it wasn't), then I would not include that on your resume. Remember, your resume is a reflection of the best of you; it doesn't have to include all of you. You will provide this additional information to the prospective employer in additional documents (cover letter, transcripts, writing samples, deal lists, case lists, etc.).

Experience

Your experience and background should be logically set up for the reader. If it is difficult to determine your experience, or your past or current employers, then the prospective employer is not going to enjoy reading your resume, and he/she will likely become frustrated and may decide to forgo it altogether. You should make every effort to avoid frustrating the reader.

This is not the opportunity to include everything you have accomplished from high school to the present. To the contrary, you want to include an accurate account of your legal experience and other experience that is relevant to your current job search. For some attorneys, this may include experience outside the law. For example, if you are a tax attorney and you previously worked as a CPA, you would want to include this in your resume. If you are one of the attorneys that wants to include more than just your legal experience, then I suggest you use headings like "Legal Experience" and "Work Experience" and always lead with the legal experience first. This is important because you don't want the reader to glance at your resume and see a long list of employers under "Experience."

Your work experience should be well thought out, and it is perfectly acceptable (and encouraged) to have more than one version of your resume where you highlight one area of work over another (i.e., corporate vs. real estate), depending on the potential employer to whom you are submitting it. Include your relevant work experience, including the firm/company, dates of employment, position held, and a description of your responsibilities. In addition, you should include clerkships with the judge's name, court, dates, position (extern/intern/clerk), and your responsibilities.

The description of your work responsibilities is crucial to a resume. You want to include the work experience that highlights the best of your time at the firm/company. For example, if you successfully drafted and argued a Motion for Summary Judgment (or any motion), you would want to include that in your description. And you absolutely want to include your trial experience and indicate whether it was as first- or second-chair. If it is an extensive list, it is always best to include a case list, which is a separate document listing your case involvement with the case name, date, your role (first- or second-chair), and your responsibilities. Deposition experience, particularly deposing expert witnesses and plaintiffs, is also important, especially for junior attorneys. Include the best. Now, you also want to include everyday stuff like researching and writing, drafting motions, etc.

Additional Information

You are encouraged to include skills and abilities that go beyond your work experience, such as foreign languages. If you speak a foreign language, you should include this under a separate heading for languages. If you have been fortunate enough to have worked on published cases, then definitely include these on your resume. Some people include their hobbies/interests on their resumes. If you are so inclined, I would suggest including something unique to you that makes you stand out (exotic travels, volunteer work, running a marathon, etc.). You also want to include your bar admissions. This is especially important if you are relocating from one state to another. Highlight your bar membership in the prospective state (if you are a member) under a separate heading for bar admissions.

Attorneys often include references on their resumes. I discourage this and suggest using a separate document with a list of references and providing it upon request. Also, many attorneys wrestle with keeping their resumes to one page. I do not think it is necessary, as it can often force an attorney to leave out important and useful information. That said, do not use more than one page if you can concisely and clearly include your relevant information on one page.

And remember, your resume is unique to you, and the above suggestions are just that-suggestions. I have seen many resumes that deviate from the standard format and some that are quite successful. I encourage you to review your resume and revise it because you only have one opportunity to make a winning first impression.