

Tips on Writing a Legal Resume

By Vanessa Vidal

Legal resumes differ from resumes written for jobs in other fields. Legal resumes include sections and information that are specific to the industry, such as bar admission information, legal associations, and lists of representative cases and transactions that generally will not be found on other resumes. The key to writing a successful legal resume is to highlight your accomplishments and include the type of information that a legal employer will find relevant in deciding whether to invite you for an interview.

Start Your Legal Resume with a Profile.

If you have more than five years of professional legal experience, you should consider starting your legal resume with a profile. This profile should be a brief summary of your experience, skills, and accomplishments. This synopsis should be able to stand-alone and provide a potential employer with a succinct but effective description of your practice, experience, and skill level.

You should create a separate professional experience, or a work history section, to list your various employers and positions. When listing your various responsibilities, be sure to use bullet points. Bullet points make it easier for a reader screening your legal resume to quickly identify your legal experience, achievements, and skills.

Education on Top or Bottom?

One of the most common questions asked by attorneys who are writing their legal resumes is whether to include their legal education at the top of the resume. While there is no absolute answer to the question, there are some guidelines I would recommend you consider.

For instance, if you have been out of law school three years or less, you should consider placing your education at the top of your resume. You are still considered relatively junior in your practice, and your academic credentials will still be very relevant to a potential employer. If you have been out of law school three years or more, and your academic credentials are exceptional – i.e. you have graduated law school from Yale or Harvard, or *Order of the Coif* from a top 20 law school, your academics are still worth highlighting at the top of your resume.

If you are not sure, a good rule of thumb is to place your stronger selling point at the top of the legal resume. In some cases, based on your level or experience and employer, that may mean placing your work experience or your current job at the very top. This is especially true if you are working for a prestigious company or law firm that is instantly recognizable. When the inverse is true, you may want to consider placing your academic credentials at the top to garner more visual attention from the person screening your legal resume.

Including Your Bar and Dates of Admission.

You should include a separate “Bar Admission” section immediately following your work experience, and put the dates of your admission into various jurisdictions. This should not be folded with your education, but be provided with its own individual section. Do not forget to include the dates of your admission, as potential employers will want to know when you were admitted into a jurisdiction. This could have a bearing on determining whether you have the required level of experience for the position, or whether you will be eligible to waive into a jurisdiction or have to sit for another bar exam.

Listing Professional Associations, Publications, and Speaking Engagements.

While your education and work experience are the two most relevant portions of your legal resume, employers are also interested in candidates who are well rounded. Therefore, you should include a separate section on your legal resume to list any association you are a member of, especially if the association relates to your legal practice or practice focus, as well as any other work you've done within the legal community. This may include publications, articles, lectures and speaking engagements.

Keep the Personal Information Out Unless Relevant to The Position.

The key to crafting a successful legal resume is to effectively showcase skills and experience that are relevant to a position so that a potential employer can identify you as an ideal fit. A legal resume is not a biography. You do not need to include “everything” you have ever done or accomplished, only what is relevant to your aim, which is to find a legal position.

These days, many job seekers seem to be forgetting a simple rule of thumb when writing their legal resumes: only include “relevant” pieces of information that will qualify you for the job. Therefore, the fact that you enjoy acting as a hobby and appeared on a Mexican soap opera along side Erik Estrada from “Chips” may not be something you want to include on your legal resume, as one lawyer decided to do on her resume.

Opt For Traditional and Professional Formatting.

When formatting your legal resume, you need to opt for a format that is traditional and professional. First, make sure your fonts are readable. Do not use anything less than a 10-point font, and keep adequate (at least .5”) margins. This is particularly important if you will be posting or sending your resume electronically – you want to be sure it prints clearly for your reader. If you are mailing a paper copy of your legal resume, use a plain cream or white resume paper with matching letterhead and envelopes.