

Top 20 Legal Resume Writing Tips

By Karen Anderson

What makes a legal resume stand out? There are many elements necessary to make a legal resume successful – too many to cover in just one article. However, there are some simple tips to follow when crafting your legal resume that you should keep in mind. Here are 20 legal resume writing tips to improve your legal resume:

1. Have a Clear Objective

Your legal resume should have only one objective: to help you land an interview. There is a difference between landing an interview, and landing a job, but most candidates do not draft their legal resumes with this aim in mind. Once you land the interview, then you need to focus on the information that can land you the job – not the other way around.

2. Prove Your Claims

Most resumes include long, and often boring lists of qualities and skills (e.g., detail-oriented, hard-working, problem solver etc.). Rather than simply list your qualities, provide concrete real life examples that demonstrate exactly how those qualities have been applied. In other words, you need to prove your claims with actual examples; otherwise your purported qualities will just sounds like bragging.

3. Use Keywords

Organizations are increasingly relying on databases, including resume-scanning software, to assess attorney resumes and identify candidates for their open positions. Therefore, it is crucial that your attorney resume contain keywords. See “Selecting Keywords For Your Attorney Resume” on how to select and incorporate key words in your legal resume.

4. Include Titles

While a title is not always indicative of the type of work and/or level of responsibility of a particular position, it is nevertheless an important marker for employers to be able to examine on your legal resume. It may show an upward trend, highlight a lateral transition, or give one a better sense of where you are operating within a larger matrix. The lack of titles on your legal resume will not only force an employer to guess your level, but also make them wonder about your progression or lack thereof.

5. Proofread It Again and Again

I cannot emphasize enough the important of proofreading your resume. Of course there are no typos in my legal resume! Are you sure about that? Nearly 9 out of 10 legal resumes I read every day contain at least one typographical error. When it comes to a legal resume, that's not something you want to take lightly. Spell-

checkers can be your best friend and your worst enemy. In other words, they miss a lot of errors. So before you send out your legal resume, be sure to give it a 'once over' with a spell-checker, and give it a second and third old-fashioned personal review. Print out a copy of your legal resume, and read it carefully word by word. When it comes to typos, you can never be too careful.

6. Use Bullet Points

Did you know that the average resume reader spends 30 seconds glancing at your resume? When it comes to your legal resume, there is nothing like making a good first impression. That includes making the information on your legal resume easy to access and read. Few employers have the time or the patience to read through long paragraphs of text. Using bullet points can help your resume reader get to the relevant information quickly and efficiently.

7. Put The Strongest Information On Top

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. 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 strongest selling points at the top of the legal resume.

8. Keep It Legible

There are a couple of rules of thumb you should keep in mind in terms of formatting and editing your legal resume. You want your legal resume to be noticed, but you need to keep it professional. You should use a traditional black 12-point font, either Times, Arial, or Verdana. While you may be trying to cram twenty years of experience into two pages by using miniscule font sizes, sometimes it's best to make it three pages and keep the font to at least 11-point.

9. Only Include Relevant Information

These days, many job seekers seem to be forgetting a simple rule when writing their legal resumes: only include "relevant" pieces of information that will qualify you for the job. 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 land an interview for a legal position.

10. Be Honest

While it may be tempting to stretch the truth, just a little, to make your resume sound better than it is, it's not a good idea. Even if it seems like a small lie, or innocuous stretch of the truth, you should never resort to using these tactics on your legal resume. Apart from the fact that it is wrong, employers engage in extensive background checks, and the last thing you need is for your credibility to come into question. So stick to the facts and keep your resume honest.

11. Tailor Your Resume

Most legal professionals tend to send the same form resume to all the positions they are applying to. That's a mistake. If you are planning to apply to more than one position, your legal resume should be drafted specifically for each position you are applying to. Granted this will take more time than mass mailing the same resume over and over again, employers can tell the difference between a form resume and a tailored resume. The true value of the legal resume resides in its specificity vis-à-vis the position.

12. Include Your Bar and Dates of Admission

You should include a separate "Bar Admission" section immediately following your work experience, and include the dates of your admission(s). 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.

13. Include All Relevant Experience

If you are a law student and you've never had any real working experience, you should nevertheless include your summer jobs, volunteer, or *pro bono* work. If you don't have a degree yet, treat your experience the way a professional would on his or her legal resume. Provide the name of the organization you worked with, your title, and the date you worked. As long as your experience is relevant to the job in question, it should be included in your resume.

14. Use Active Verbs

One of the tools of the trade in designing a professionally written legal resume is to use active verbs. The right use of active verbs allows you to create sentences that exude confidence, energy, and results. They are designed to engage the reader in a positive manner. At the end of the day, this is the type of reaction you want your legal resume to elicit. You want the person reading your legal resume who has been tasked with hiring for the position to feel positive and energized when reading your legal resume, and to contact you to schedule an interview. See "Using Active Verbs In Your Legal Resume" on how to select and use active verbs in a legal resume.

15. No Hobbies

Unless your hobbies or activities relate to the position you are applying to, leave them out, no matter how interesting they might appear to you. These are better off addressed during an interview rather than on a resume. However, if you are a member of an association that relates to your legal practice or practice focus, include it in the resume. This may include publications, articles, lectures and speaking engagements.

16. List All Your Roles

If you have worked for the same company for over 10 years, it is a good idea to list all the different positions and roles that you had during this time separately. You probably had different responsibilities and developed different skills with each role – this will show progression, something that employers will be interested to know about you.

17. No Legalese or Abbreviations

Your legal resume is the first, and sometimes the only, writing sample an employer will see from you. Therefore you should avoid shortcuts like abbreviations, or the use of legalese or other jargon. When using legal or technical terms, you should not assume that the employer knows what you are talking about. The last things you want to do is sound pompous or alienate your resume reader, so keep the legal jargon to a minimum and stay away from abbreviations.

18. Beware of Resume Templates

A template can often be a great place to begin the initial information collection process; however I would caution candidates relying solely on them for layout, structure, wording, content, and particularly the end product. There are many websites that offer free resume templates, including our own. If you think they are easy to find and use, you are not alone. Imagine a recruiter who is required to sift through hundreds of resumes on a daily basis, looking at similar resumes based on the same template. The last thing you want is for your legal resume to look like everyone else's. So beware of using templates.

19. Keep it Simple

This is no time to get too creative by using colorful paper, exciting graphics, or stylish fonts. Your legal resume should be on neutral tone paper, either white or ivory, with a matching envelope. Make sure to stick to the basics and keep it simple.

20. Consider Using Professionals

If you are having a hard time creating your legal resume, or if you are receiving no response from your resume, you should consider hiring a professional resume writing service. In today's competitive legal job market, a professional legal resume is the single most important tool in getting your foot through the door. You will

most likely find that the investment of working with a professional resume writer is worth every penny.

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