



Common Resume and Cover Letter Pitfalls

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As a resume counselor to attorneys from all types of practice areas and career levels, I am always surprised to see many of the same errors in my clients' original resumes and cover letters. The comparison has been made between legal jobseekers and snowflakes: No two are alike. Yet while it is true that in preparing a resume, the objective is to set oneself apart from the competition, the path to that winning document will often be the same. Here are a few common mistakes (and remedies) in preparing legal resumes and cover letters.

Resume:

Talk about your accomplishments. The responsibilities of one attorney to another are quite similar if you phrase them generally: legal research and writing, client counseling, contract negotiation, pre-trial and trial litigation, etc. Thus, it is imperative that you flesh out those details that will give your resume individual life, showing with active phrases the experiences that make you a compelling candidate. If you are a junior associate, you might expand on successful dispositive motions you drafted, deposition work you handled, or even legal research you conducted. As a more experienced attorney, you could describe favorable trial verdicts, transactions, or complex pretrial litigation, including the type of matter, the result, and your role in achieving it.

Learning to let go. While specific accomplishments are crucial to an effective resume, one should avoid the temptation to allow one's resume to become a professional or personal diary. Think of each experience and qualification as a stepping-stone, leading to bigger and better places on your career path. While that prestigious internship as an undergraduate may have helped you land positions during or before law school, it ceases to hold that same marketing power once you are an attorney. The image of an upside-down pyramid is useful here: A resume should become meatier and more specific towards the top.

Just as jobseekers must force themselves to let go of dated professional experiences, they must also part with interests or personal achievements that do not add to their candidacy. Commonplace interests such as "music, professional sports, reading, cooking, jogging" do not add anything to one's resume. If you have won an Olympic gold medal or published a book of poetry, including such distinguishing traits is certainly justified. Just don't let them outshine your legal qualifications.

Visual presentation and organization. Content is by far the most important aspect of your resume. Visual layout is the most underrated and underutilized component of legal resumes. Even in today's age of electronic submissions (and correspondingly drab formats), there are still several highly effective layout techniques:



- **Bar Status:** If you are a recent graduate or are relocating to a new jurisdiction, put that membership section right up top. It is a threshold issue that employers will want to see before spending more time on your documents.
- **Bullets vs. Paragraphs:** Use whichever helps you most. If you have paragraphs larger than eight lines long, do your reader a favor and convert them to bullets. A paragraph followed by a series of bullets can also be useful, especially when one has a mixture of general information (for the paragraph) and accomplishments (for the bullets.)
- **Employment Dates:** Sometimes you can't avoid harmful dates, and leaving them off can actually draw more negative attention. If employment dates might hurt your candidacy, use a format that minimizes their appearance. For more experienced attorneys, you can consider a hybrid format that succinctly lists the chronology later in the resume after a summary section and list of pertinent accomplishments.

Cover Letter:

Write succinctly and without fluff or typos. For those of us who read countless resumes and cover letters everyday, we know the letter is invariably read after the resume (contrary to popular belief). We also know that while a letter does have a useful role when well written, it is more likely to hurt you than help if you are not careful. Here is the logic for cover letters: If a hiring partner likes what he/she sees on your resume, this person will not disregard you because of a concise but confident, professional, and well-written letter. They might have second thoughts, however, if they see typos or are turned off by an overly verbose or pretentious letter. This doesn't mean you should write a boring letter; complex situations can benefit from a little more explanation. For the majority of attorneys, however, the following should be sufficient: three to four paragraphs describing your interest in the firm, your most pertinent experience and accomplishments, and any details about your current situation that would add to your candidacy.

Preparing an effective resume and cover letter is a crucial step for every legal jobseeker. Taking that step doesn't require rhetorical acrobatics or a Ph.D. in career marketing. But it does require fleshing out your most positive experience and presenting it in a well-organized, purposeful manner.