

HOWARD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW
EQUAL JUSTICE PROGRAM
TIPS FOR DRAFTING PUBLIC INTEREST RESUMES & COVER LETTERS

PUBLIC INTEREST RESUMES

Resumes serve as your key marketing tool. They are a way for employers to quickly assess your qualifications. Errors on resumes will result in a direct trip to the trash can. Thus, it is essential that you review your resume and have a friend or colleague check it for errors as well. Public interest resumes will not vary greatly from your standard legal resume, but there are a few things to keep in mind.

1. Keep your format simple.

Your resume should contain two standard sections: “Education” and “Experience”. You will list all work experience (including volunteer and unpaid internships) in the Experience section in reverse chronological order. Don’t try to stand out using different fonts and colors. Your skills and experience will ultimately get you the interview, not your creative use of WordArt.

2. Take the time to draft detailed job descriptions.

It is not enough to say “Researched and drafted legal memoranda.” Be specific! What issues did you focus on? What type of document did you draft? Was there a positive result reached based on your work product or will it be used at the organization to further a certain purpose? Remember to start each sentence with an action verb. There are lists of action verbs available on PSLawnet (link provided in resources section). Consult the lists for fresh ideas and avoid being repetitive.

3. Include community service experience.

Unlike your standard legal resume, when applying to public service jobs you should include community service activities from college sometimes high school (if the service was substantial). You can include this information under your respective academic institution, or break out a separate “Community Service” section at the end of your resume. It is best to pull out your most substantial activities and provide a brief description, rather than just listing all of your organizations.

4. Highlight leadership positions and memberships in relevant groups.

Non-profits are often understaffed and are looking to hire self-starters and people who can work with little supervision. Play to these qualities by highlighting leadership positions in student organizations during your undergraduate and law school career.

5. Showcase summer funding awards as fellowships.

If you are awarded a summer fellowship grant, be sure to list that grant in either an honors section under law school, or next to the internship for which you received the grant. For example, “Legal Aid Society for the District of Columbia, Law Clerk, Howard Public Interest Summer Fellow (\$3000)”.

6. Keep resumes concise, generally no longer than one page.

Most first year students should have a 1 page resume. The rare exceptions will be those students with prior relevant work history. Some third year students may move to a second page, again only where they are including relevant legal work such as summer and academic year internships.

PUBLIC INTEREST COVER LETTERS

Submitting a well-drafted, specifically tailored, cover letter is essential to securing a public interest position. Your goal is not to regurgitate your resume, but rather to highlight your personal skills and interests which will make you the right fit for that particular organization. Try to set a personal, yet professional, tone in your cover letters that adds a sense of who you are as an individual.

1. TAILOR! TAILOR! TAILOR!

Unlike the private sector, using one standard cover letter for multiple employers is utterly unacceptable. Because non-profits vary greatly in their mission and services, you must draft tailored cover letters which address each individual organization's focus and highlight your interest in that particular position. Some of your paragraphs in the body of the letter may be reused, but the introductory paragraph should certainly be tailored to each organization's mission.

2. Letters should be three or four paragraphs and one complete page in length.

Your cover letter should be one complete page in length, but should not exceed one page. Your first paragraph will begin with an introduction and include the position for which you are applying. You should not begin with "My name is", but rather "I am a first year student at Howard University School of Law with a developing interest in criminal law." You will also include a sentence or two on why you are interested in that particular issue area or that organization. Your middle paragraph(s) will contain the relevant skills you can bring to the position. You may also wish to include a story that demonstrates how you became interested in this particular issue area or organization. Your final paragraph will thank the employer, state what documents are enclosed, and provide your phone number.

3. Guidelines to follow when sending your materials.

Both cover letters and resumes should be printed on "resume" paper. Writing samples should be printed on regular white copy paper. If you choose to email materials, be sure to save each individual document with a standard professional title, such as "Jackson Resume", "Jackson Cover letter", "Jackson Writing Sample". You will attach each document to the email. Never copy the cover letter or resume into the body of the email. The body of the email should contain a concise paragraph which states that you are attaching application materials for a specific position.

RESOURCES

There are many resources for students seeking to navigate a public interest career path. It is essential that you take an active role in your job search because public interest recruitment is much more self-directed than the private sector. Most non-profits do not have the resources to participate in OCI. Instead, they attend a few national career fairs and post job opportunities on-line. It is up to you to seek them out, apply early, and demonstrate your interest and commitment to their cause.

1. Office of Career Services

The Office of Career Services (OCS), located on the 2nd floor of Notre Dame, coordinates several public interest programs, including the mock interview program and public interest career fair each year. They also house a library of resources for student use. OCS maintains Symplicity, the online jobs database, which every student should become familiar with after November of their 1L year. Ms. Conti, Director of Career Service, is an invaluable resource for students. She has decades of experience in the legal recruitment sector and a vast network of contacts. Be sure to stop by OCS and take advantage of the public interest programming at the law school.

2. Equal Justice Program

The Equal Justice Program, located on the ground floor of Notre Dame, is part of Howard's Clinical Law Center. The Equal Justice Program Coordinator provides individual counseling sessions for students who are interested in pursuing public interest career options. Please email craj@law.howard.edu to set up a counseling appointment.

4. PSLawnet (www.pslawnet.org)

PSLawnet is your number one public interest online resource. The site is password protected, but Howard pays for all students to receive a free membership. You just need to log on to the site and create a username and password. The Career Central link contains boatloads of useful job search information. Click on "Career Central" and "Job Search Fundamentals" to access tons of great information about resumes, cover letters, and interviewing. Links to sample cover letters and resumes are also available from this site. In addition, PSLawnet contains two separate searchable databases: one for internships and jobs and the other for public interest organizations. Scroll down until you see the yellow "User Options" box on the left side of your screen to access either database. You can then do a search for internship opportunities nationwide. This site can also be used to locate externship placements.