

# **HOW TO WRITE A STANDOUT RESUME**

**A step-by-step guide for legal graduates**



So you're ready to find that ideal graduate role to kickstart your legal career. Now is the time to focus on the most vital piece of the job-seeking puzzle: *your resume*.

It will come as no surprise to you that law is a highly competitive field. It's a fact that has likely been mentioned by lecturers, peers and professionals you know already working in the legal sector.

And that means you will often be competing with countless applicants for those highly sought-after positions.

Your resume is your opportunity to showcase your worth – to highlight the most important benefits you offer a prospective employer. It's the first point of contact a potential employer has with you. Don't let it be the only point of contact they have with you.

The competition is tough, but by knowing what recruiters look for and pitching your skills and experience in their best light, you can make your resume stand out for all the right reasons.

# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Your legal degree and PLT have given you the foundation you need as an entry level lawyer. But guidance on how to land a foot in the door at that ideal legal firm is hard to come by. Getting your resume right is that first crucial step towards embarking on a successful legal career.

That's why we've created this guide: to equip you with practical tips for writing a resume that will stand out to future potential employers.

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# 1. THE BIG PICTURE

Before your fingers start dancing across your keyboard, slow your thought process down and take stock of the big picture. You want to ensure every section and word in your resume is intentional. This process starts with thinking about how you're going to make sure your resume is opened, read with interest – and creates a positive and lasting impression.

## KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

First things first: who will be reading your resume? It's likely to be one or a combination of these people:

- An in-house HR manager or recruitment manager
- Firm partners or other senior lawyers
- An outsourced legal recruiter
- Directors or managers

If you know your resume will be vetted by an in-house HR manager or recruiter, who doesn't have a legal background, your word choice is crucial. They will be looking for key terms to make sure you have the right skill level for the position.

HR Managers will also want to assess whether you are a good fit for the organisation. By researching their culture and values, you'll be able to highlight the relevant attributes that best align to the organisation.

## CONSIDER DIGITAL RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

If the above advice didn't convince you to nail your key words, then this sobering fact should.

Resumes submitted via LinkedIn and SEEK or on some employers' websites can be vetted by a machine before it makes it into the hands of a human being. That's because some recruiters now use artificial intelligence (AI) in the first stages of their screening process.

So, go through that job ad with a fine-tooth comb and note the key skills and attributes the recruiter is looking for. And align your resume as close as possible.

## TAILOR YOUR RESUME

The best way to get noticed as a candidate is to tailor your resume to the role you are applying for.

Customise your career overview, work history and skills to showcase your most relevant skills and accomplishments based on the keywords you highlighted.

A hiring manager should immediately be able to tell that you have relevant experience. If you have a long work history, this may mean you need to minimize or remove any positions that do not align.



### A word of advice:

Make sure your LinkedIn profile and resume are consistent. It's a major red flag for employers if key dates, job history and skillsets across the two are out of sync.

## 2. BREAKING IT DOWN

The information you're putting forward is only as useful as the context it's presented in. So, make sure you're using the format that best suits your career stage.

### MAKE YOUR RESUME FUNCTIONAL

For graduate job seekers, or those still studying and looking for work experience, the most appropriate format is a 'functional resume'.

This format places most importance on your marketable skills and education achievements. It also emphasises any industry experience you may have.

Follow the below structure and tips when formatting your resume.

### YOUR PERSONAL DETAILS

Provide your full name, best contact number, professional email address and LinkedIn profile URL.

Fortunately, the days of including your age, nationality, religion and marital status are long gone. You also don't need to provide your full address (a suburb, state and postcode will suffice).

Remember to stay clear of email addresses that feature a high school nickname, or anything else inappropriate. The email server you use also says a lot about you. Hotmail is dated and indicates lack of digital literacy. And a university email doesn't position you as a professional.

If the above applies to you, it is worth setting up a new, more work-relevant account. A good format to follow is your first and last name, i.e. firstname.lastname@gmail.com

A word on photos in your resume: Save your photos for your LinkedIn profile. Law can be a traditional profession.

### CAREER OVERVIEW

A career overview can be useful for those with extensive professional experience. It should be tailored to each and every role you apply for.

### PROFESSIONAL CAREER HISTORY

Recent relevant experience is the name of the game here.

While all employment is important, work in the legal profession should have its own section and come higher up in your resume. Each entry should feature the organisation's name and location, your job title and dates of employment.

Then provide a list of 3-4 bullet points on your key responsibilities and contributions. Use first person, active language and strong action verbs, such as developed, initiated or facilitated. And provide specific metrics where possible. Also include examples of your achievements to demonstrate your value.

See the following section on How to promote your skills for detailed examples.

### EDUCATION AND PRACTICAL LEGAL TRAINING (PLT)

If you've completed your PLT and have your Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice, make sure you list this at the top of your education history. This tells your potential employer that you are ready to work immediately. Also include your expected admission date if known.

Following this, list your tertiary qualifications including dates and the name of the institution.

You may wish to list your majors, outstanding grades and GPA where relevant to the role.

## PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS

Demonstrate practical examples of interest in the field and job readiness by listing any memberships you have to relevant professional associations.

It's highly recommended that all students join the young lawyer's section of their state law society. The student discount for membership makes it a particularly appealing to join.

If you have a clear idea of the field you want to practise in, take time to research the relevant associations and invest in a membership. For example, there is a Family Law Practitioners Association of WA – which is ideally suited to those pursuing a career in family law.

The Women's Lawyers Association is also a worthwhile professional body for women looking to network and build professional relationships.

## VOLUNTEER WORK AND INTERESTS

Volunteer work is also highly regarded by employers. It demonstrates that you're socially aware and passionate about championing the greater good. It also gives you the opportunity to promote any job-relevant skills you've acquired during your community work.

And don't forget to show that you're human by including your interests. Showcasing the activities you're passionate about reveals that you are an interesting and well-rounded person. But don't just give a shopping list – put some thought into how you word this section.

And give examples of how your passions come to life. Maybe you're a foodie and have your own breakfast review Instagram following. Or maybe you can't get enough of native birds and go hiking every weekend with your local bird watching group.

## OTHER WORK HISTORY

Use this section to highlight any transferable skills you've acquired during paid work.

While you may not think your five years in retail or hospitality is highly relevant to a legal role, it's still worth including in your resume because it shows commitment and professionalism.

Keep this section brief and don't go into extensive details on your tasks and responsibilities. Highlight any relevant achievements – such as highest sales for the month of February, or a new initiative you introduced.

The following section, How to promote your skills, will take you through how to position your employment history in the best and most relevant light.

## REFEREES

Sure, your Aunty Jan would give you the thumbs up, but she's not a credible professional referee.

Instead, find 2-3 people you have worked with in a professional environment (work related or academic) with no personal connection to you. Lecturers and managers are a good first port of call, as are former supervisors from legal internships as well as your non-legal work experience.

List their name, organisation, job title and contact details. Before you include them, ask their permission and let them know if you reach the interview stage on any job you apply for.



## 3. MAKING YOUR SKILLS SHINE

You need to convince the reader that you're the right fit for their role by drawing on your relevant work experience and transferable skills. And you need to promote your skillset with punch and authority.

### TALKING ABOUT YOUR SKILLSET

It's not enough to write 'Well-developed writing skills'. You need to briefly back up this claim and give it meaning. Each statement should be reinforced by a one - two sentence explanation of how you developed that skill.

For example: Well-developed writing skills (statement) developed through volunteering at the Community Legal Centre (explanation). The role involved undertaking preparatory writing for interviews, and I received high praise on the quality of my work (example).

### HIGHLIGHT YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS

Whilst sometimes it is an achievement to meet a goal, particularly in difficult circumstances beyond your control, it is also important to highlight where you have exceeded a target or had an exceptional outcome. Wherever possible, include metrics to back your achievements up and show the impact and result of what you did.

### DRAW OUT YOUR TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

An employer understands that legal skills such as legal research, drafting and advocacy are refined and developed over time. If you're applying for an entry-level or graduate role, the hirer won't be expecting you to illustrate all the key competencies from legal experience alone.

It's perfectly okay to highlight the relevant skills you've developed through your PLT, non-legal work, university studies and unpaid or voluntary work.

For example, you can also draw on your PLT work placement and highlight skills, such as real client presentations and drafting letters of advice. You will also be able to promote the experience you gained during this process, such as understanding how to appear in court and file an interlocutory application.

# WHICH SKILLS MATTER?

Legal skills fall broadly into the ten skills listed below. You can either list your skills as a separate section within your resume or embed them into your key responsibilities and achievements. Analysing your skills and preparing examples will also help you highlight your experience at interview when describing your work history.

When collating examples, draw out your most recent and relevant experience to the role, and the organisation, that you are applying for.

Also include metrics where possible to provide context, scale and scope of your achievements and experience.

## Critical thinking

You'll need to use strategy and creativity to think through and solve complex problems for your employer or their clients.

Potential examples:

- learnt how to analyse case law while studying 'Criminal law and procedure'
- improved processes and systems for a retailer which led to a 20% increase in sales
- wrote a briefing report for a government department which led to policy change

## Research

You'll need to use online resources such as legal databases, legislation, physical texts or when speaking to people with knowledge to find answers to legal questions.

Potential examples:

- developed research skills through writing my honours dissertation. This required accessing, contextualising and critically examining information from primary and secondary sources
- utilised legal databases to research case law for a legal matter resulting in finding a precedent that changed the outcome of the case
- researched and identified potential customers for a small business owner which led to an increase in leads of 50%

## Communication

You'll need to speak and write clearly so that specific audiences such as clients and stakeholders can easily understand complex legal concepts, cases or facts.

Potential examples:

- developed strong communication skills through customer/client relationships in a business, retail, hospitality environment
- presented a business case to colleagues and received positive feedback on ability to engage and influence team members
- participated in the Annual Michael Kirby Contract Law Moot, which involved presenting in front of a large audience and putting forward a convincing and legally astute argument
- adapted communication style to explain a complex legal matters to those without a technical background in a community legal centre

## Time management

Critical to working in a fast paced and high-pressure environment, you'll need to demonstrate the ability to juggle conflicting priorities and workloads.

Potential examples:

- efficient and effective at prioritisation, and having to frequently juggle multiple tasks when working as a team leader at a customer help centre
- adapted constantly to competing deadlines and changing priorities when working on matters for a law firm
- dealt with multiple orders and competing timeframes from customers when working in a hospitality/retail environment.

### **Client management**

Strong people skills are essential to working and building relationship with clients and stakeholders.

Potential examples:

- communicated empathetically and effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds, including those from diverse socio-economic areas, as shown during my time as an intern at the Magistrates' Court
- increased sales through a demonstrated understanding of the differing needs and objectives of customers/clients in a business, retail, hospitality environment
- liaised with different stakeholders when developing initiatives for a government department

### **Collaboration**

You'll need to work well as part of a team to ensure that legal projects or cases run smoothly, to time and to budget.

Potential examples:

- collaborated as part of a team with four other lawyers to achieve a positive outcome for a client in a lengthy case in the Supreme Court
- helped draft and enact new legislation as part of a team with internal and external stakeholders
- organised the end of year ball for students as an elected member of the University law society

### **Working autonomously**

You'll also need to be able to work independently with limited supervision and take initiative when required.

Potential examples:

- created an induction booklet for all new starters in a government department
- worked from start to finish with limited supervision on a parking infringement matter
- took initiative and recommended that different legal software be used by my employer. After conducting research, the software was adopted resulting in time savings for all staff.

### **Attention to detail**

As a lawyer, details like facts, spelling and numbers are important. You will aim to be accurate and spot mistakes and correct them before they become an issue.

Potential examples:

- discovered and corrected an incorrect lot number for a client's property which could have resulted in an adverse effect in a conveyancing matter
- uploaded multiple documents to the law firm's knowledge management system and ensured all details were correct
- commended by a number of customers for accurately explaining the financial details on complicated sales packages

### **Growth mindset**

You will need to be proactive, think positively, be adaptable and be a life-long learner.

Potential examples:

- took initiative to learn a legal project management tool, LEAP software
- enrolled in a Master of Business Law
- helped a business pivot into a new customer base during COVID, resulting in a 20% increase in sales
- took part in an organised legal mentoring program over six months leading to a better understanding of how the law operates

### **Subject matter expertise**

You will develop knowledge and understanding in the area/s of law that you are practicing and use that expertise to solve problems, provide advice and inform your practice.

Potential examples:

- developed expertise in migration law focusing on immigration applications from the UK whilst working at a boutique migration agent
- received a High Distinction for the subject Business Law
- assisted in developing policy on noise laws and regulations for local government

# 4. PRESENTATION & POLISHING

They say the devil is in the detail. This statement rings especially true for your resume. Carelessness can undermine all the hard work you've put in, so give yourself plenty of time for proofreading and finessing the layout.

## SELECT AN APPROPRIATE FONT

Use easy-to-read text in a modern font such as Arial or Calibri. Size 11 or 12 font are ideal.

## PRESENT IT PROFESSIONALLY

Make sure your resume is easy to navigate and inviting to read, with defined sections and ample white space. Apply clear headings and bulleted lists – and ensure everything is aligned. Make sure dates are easy to read, with month and year if possible.

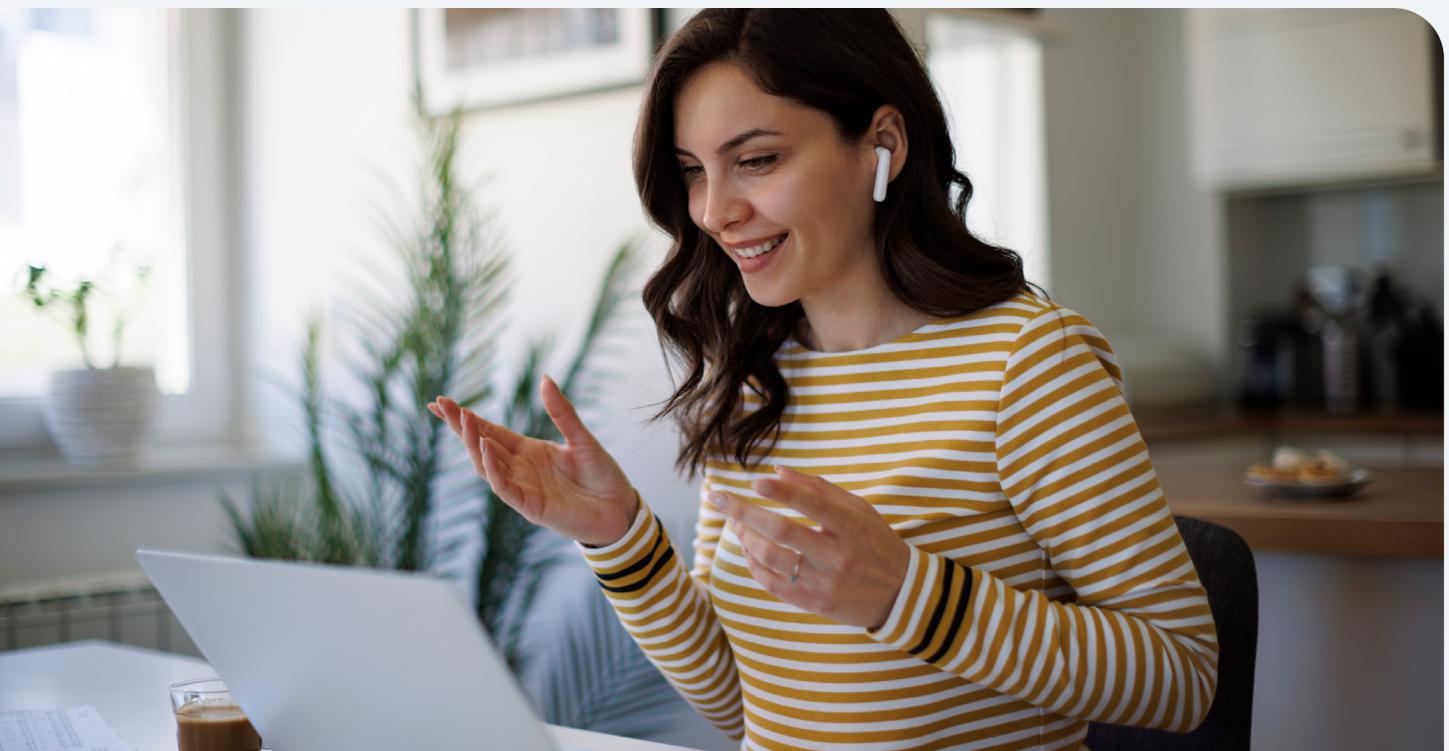
## BE SUCCINCT, MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT

When it comes to length, less is more. Two-page resumes are ideal. If that's not possible, aim for no more than three pages. Most importantly, follow the employer's instructions if they give set guidelines on length.

## PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD

Proofreading is one of the most important stages in creating your resume. A typo or misplaced apostrophe may be all it takes for the reader to decide you don't have the attention-to-detail needed for their role.

It's easy to overlook mistakes in your own writing. If possible, get a friend or family member to proofread your resume. Fresh eyes are much more likely to pick up grammar errors and spelling mistakes.



# 5. YOUR RESUME CHECKLIST

You've done the hard yards, now it's time to run through this list to ensure you have ticked all the boxes.

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Key words the recruiter is looking for applied throughout   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Any legal experience promoted first and foremost  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Education (outstanding grades, GPS, majors) and PLT   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Skills are included as either a separate section or are embedded into your key responsibilities. Don't forget to include transferrable skills particularly if you have had a previous career. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Achievements are supported with evidence such as promotions, awards, customer feedback, improved efficiencies or turnaround time  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Community contribution and interests  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Professional associations and memberships   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Other work experience (including volunteer work) that highlights your skills relevant to the role   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Two to three referees you are confident would speak highly of you   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Presentation is professional and document has been proofread, e.g. ensure consistent formats and fonts throughout   |

# 6. SAMPLE RESUME

## MARK FERGUSON

Middle Park, VIC 3206  
M: 0417 285 669  
E: markferg@gmail.com  
linkedin.com/in/mark-ferguson

### EDUCATION & QUALIFICATIONS

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Feb – Jun 2022

Practical Legal Training (PLT), The College of Law

#### **CPE component**

Completed all 10 units from the Legal Business Series (to receive my Certificate of Legal Business Skills). These included:

- Communicating effectively
- Facilitating good service and effective relationships
- Developing a commercial mindset

#### **Work experience component**

Completed a volunteer placement at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, where I:

- Worked with community members seeking advice as their first point of contact
- Assisted with research and preparation work for legal representation

Mar 2017 – Nov 2021

Bachelor of Laws, Deakin University

- Distinction average
- Student award for highest results in Commercial law and Contracts
- June 2020: International elective - Negotiation and Dispute Resolution, Berlin University

2016

VCE, Melbourne High School

- Captain of the Debating Team
- Member of Senior Performing School Band

### LEGAL EXPERIENCE

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Jul 2020 – Feb 2022

Legal intern, SNB Lawyers, Richmond

SNB lawyers offers a range of business specific legal services including business and corporate advisory matters, conveyancing, retail and commercial leases.

- Assisted with the preparation of Contracts of Sales, Purchase Agreements and lease documentation
- Opened, closed and maintained client files
- Liaised with clients to resolve queries

## **LEGAL EXPERIENCE**

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Apr 2018 – Nov 2019

Writer, Law Journal, Deakin University Law Student Society

- Sourced, edited and updated content for the university law journal
- Researched source materials and liaised with academics and practitioners in the legal profession

## **PROFESSIONAL/STUDENT MEMBERSHIPS**

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LIV (2018 – current)

Deakin Law Student Society (2017 – 2021)

## **OTHER EMPLOYMENT HISTORY**

2017 – 2020

Sales Assistant (Casual), Nike Store, Chadstone

- Served customers and promoted instore specials
- Learned about new products and key selling points/features
- Maintained store in order and ensured OH&S standards are upheld

Key Achievements:

- Nominated for Employee of the Month for outstanding customer service – August 2017, October 2018
- Invited to participate as part of a think tank monthly meeting to contribute to initiatives to increase store sales

## **EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

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Nov 2019 – Jan 2020

Edmund Rice Community Refugee Services

- Welcomed Melbourne's refugee community to Australia and assisted them to feel integrated.
- Provided English homework support to school-aged children every Sunday.
- Developed excellent skills to communicate with people from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

## **INTERESTS**

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International travel and foreign languages (French and Spanish), current affairs, politics and music.

AFL fanatic – both watching (Go the Bulldogs!) and playing. Embracing competition when playing socially with my local club every weekend.

## **REFEREES**

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# WHERE'S NEXT?

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