

“For the purposes of internship which is basically a research associate job, we ask for writing samples to evaluate: 1) clarity of writing style, 2) evidence of research capability -- multiple sources, good analysis, etc and 3) good citation skills.”

- Doug Brook, Center for Defense Management Reform

Writing Sample Guidelines

Employers often ask for writing samples as part of the application process. Writing samples provide insight into the way candidates organize their thoughts, form arguments and utilize resources. While some employers are clear about the kind of sample they want to see (e.g.: a 3-page policy brief on low-income housing in Chicago Metropolitan area), others do not elaborate. If the application directions don't specify what the employer is looking for, here are some general guidelines to follow:

A good writing sample is:

- 3-5 pages long
 - If your best-written piece is a larger paper, extract several pages from it and explain the context to the reader.
- Accessible to the reader:
 - Avoid submitting samples that require the reader to have special knowledge of the topic (e.g. Jargon and acronyms used in a policy brief might not be comprehensible to readers in private sector consulting)
- Recent:
 - Your writing style evolves and writing ability improves as you advance through graduate school. The more recent the work, the more accurate impression of your writing skills.
- Individually written:
 - Avoid submitting results of a group project, where possible
- Relevant to the writing required in the job.
 - If possible, match the type of writing in your sample to the type of writing you'll be doing at that job (e.g. for a job that requires quantitative analysis, include such analysis; for a research position, include excerpts from a research paper, etc.)
- Of high quality:
 - The sample should produce the best impression of your writing. Evaluate several pieces that you've written based on the quality, and go for the best-written one as opposed to the one of lesser quality, but of a more relevant topic.
 - Concise (conveys meaning in as few words as possible)
 - Check for grammatical and spelling errors
- Does not distract the reader:
 - In general, try to avoid controversial subjects in your sample, even if you think that the employer might subscribe to your views. Controversial topics and arguments can distract the reader from focusing on your writing skills.
 - If you do use a position paper you wrote for a class, be sure to indicate that the particular position was assigned to you for the purpose of the assignment.
- Is clearly labeled with the student's name and page numbers.

“The subject of the paper need not be relevant to a specific policy area, but it should address some public policy issue, broadly defined. Writing samples can be policy briefs, a section of a larger piece, or even the executive summary or introduction to a paper. We also find it helpful when the piece includes findings and recommendations and some description of the quantitative methodology employed.”

- Larry Castro, California Legislative Analyst's Office