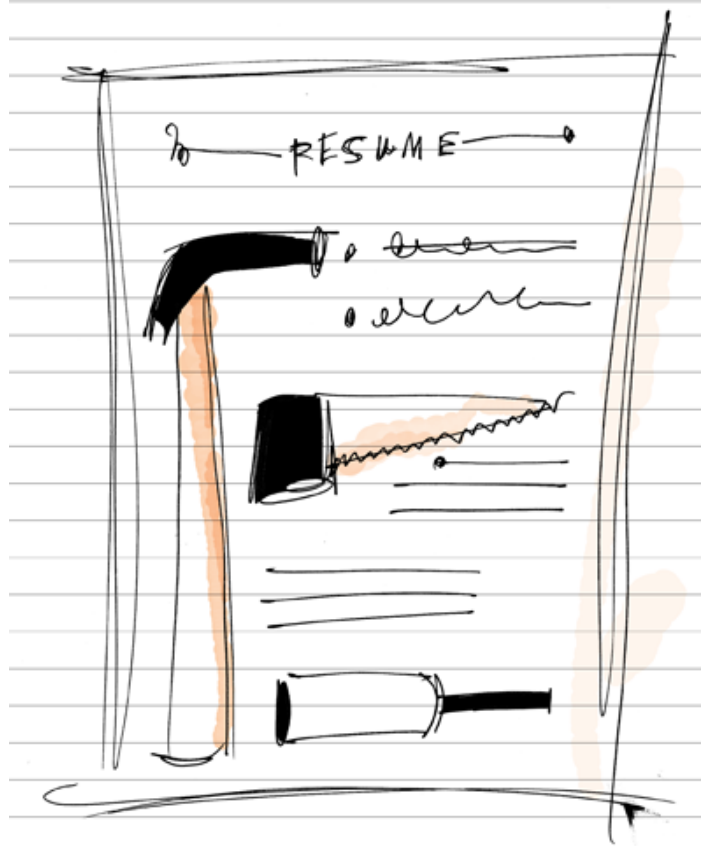


**THE "EXPERIENCE" SECTION OF YOUR RESUME**

In Whether you are a new or an experienced attorney, the "Experience" section of the resume is the toughest section to write. If you're a new attorney, it's tough because you often have to make a few menial tasks sound impressive. If you're a veteran, it's tough because you have to encapsulate years of experience in a few short paragraphs or sentences and your perception of your experience will change with each passing year. Deciding how to present your experience requires a good amount of brainstorming. Make sure you don't rely on the stock job descriptions given to you by your employers. This might seem like a perfect solution—all you need to do is cut and paste. But merely listing your employer's version of what you do takes away from the entire purpose of a resume, which is to present your experience from your point of view.

**What is experience?**

The definition of "experience," according to The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, is "active participation in events or activities, leading to the accumulation of knowledge or skill."

Experience doesn't necessarily have to come in the form of a paid position. When you begin evaluating your experience, make sure you take into account

each and every aspect of your background that has contributed to your accumulation of knowledge or skill. Also make sure that you take a forward-thinking approach. The resume functions to describe what you have done in the past. Yet, while describing the things that you have done in the past, you must constantly be thinking about your future. As you begin drafting your resume, you should continually ask yourself: *How do my past achievements/experiences make me qualified for what I want to do now?*

Before you begin writing your resume, you should get a good feel for the requirements of the type of job you want. Visit online legal job boards and read job descriptions—as many as you can. See what kind of language they use and what kind of skills they're asking for. Print out several advertisements that describe your ideal job and refer to them as you draft your resume. Having a goal in mind will make the task of describing your experience much easier.

**Do I need to include my entire work history?**

No. When deciding how much of your work history to include, you need to take into account the relevance of the positions you've held to the position you are trying to get. Every time you take on bigger and better responsibilities, your older responsibilities become less important. Your resume needs to reflect that.

There is a general rule that says you only need to include 10 years' worth of experience. Like all general rules, however, there are many exceptions.

For instance, Marcia worked as a real estate developer for 10 years before entering law school. After graduating from law school, she decided to work in the public sector in order to gain solid litigation experience. She found that she really liked it and consequently spent six years working as a district attorney. Then she decided she was ready to shift gears and combine her experience in real estate with her legal skills by practicing real estate law. Obviously, she would not delete her real estate experience from her resume, even though it was 10 years old. In fact, she might want to highlight this experience by mentioning it in a summary section.

On the other hand, Jamie worked at a makeup counter at Macy's for three years prior to entering law school. She graduated from law school four years ago. While her Macy's position was fairly recent, it has no bearing on her abilities as an attorney. Even though excluding it leaves a gap between her graduation from college and her matriculation at law school, it is better to focus the resume on her legal experience because that is what would appeal to employers. To compensate for the gap, she can simply label the experience on her resume "Legal Experience," indicating that it was not her only experience, just the experience that was relevant to the position she was seeking.

Often, resumes need a dose of tough love. Going through an old resume can be like going through your closet. When it comes to evaluating what belongs on your resume, you need to be harsh with yourself. Those people who hang on to the jeans that they vow to fit into again "someday" are those same people who have trouble eliminating "Winner of 1969 Wichita County Elementary School Spelling Bee" from their resumes.

Sometimes it's just old information. Yes, the internship you scored might have been extremely impressive. Perhaps only the top 10 in your class had a shot at it, or perhaps you were working under one of the best attorneys in your city. But if that all happened in 1978, people may not care. Just as it's hard to throw out that \$300 what-was-I-thinking neon yellow cashmere sweater because "it was so expensive," it's often difficult to erase years of work from your resume because "they were so hard to get through." This is why an objective friend/professional writer can be of valuable assistance.

Nothing should stay on your resume because of nostalgia, because it was impressive "at the time," or because it was difficult (unless it is universally known by other people to be so).

## **How much description should I give?**

The simplest answer we can give to this question is this: Describe your position until you feel that it fully conveys the breadth and depth of your experience. In some cases, this can be done in two simple sentences. Other times, it requires more detail.

Don't be afraid to elaborate! While you don't want your resume to read like you think the person viewing it is uneducated, you also don't want to assume that the person reading your resume has insight into what you've done. There are zillions of jobs in the world, and no two are exactly alike. Two people given the same title and job description are still going to contribute their own uniqueness to the position.

Give as much detail as you need to ensure that the person reading your resume will understand your achievements for what they are. You could be vice president of an organization that consists of two people, or you could be president of an extremely prestigious 200-person organization that requires an IQ of 280 and membership in Mensa. You could have earned an internship that was highly competitive and only given to 2 out of every 700 applicants, or you could have spent the summer sweeping the floor of your dad's law office. Unless you describe your experiences in detail, employers will never know the difference.

## Order of Description

As with virtually all things on your resume, the various facets of each job description should be listed in order of importance. You do not need to put them in the order of what you did most, what you did longest, or what your employer thinks is most important about your job.

For example, if you divided your time between intellectual property and corporate work and you want to focus solely on intellectual property in your next position, go ahead and focus your job description on your IP experience. This doesn't mean you should exclude your corporate work altogether, but you should minimize it in relation to the IP work you've done.

If you feel that the things you want to highlight aren't representative of your overall position, you may want to start with one general description that encapsulates your responsibilities. Then you can follow that with a bulleted breakdown of your accomplishments.

## Dates

When giving the timeframe of your work experiences, you do not always have to include the months with the years. If you've been in the workplace and/or held a position for a long time, it will make your resume look cleaner if you include years only.

Use your discretion when deciding if it's appropriate to exclude months. For instance, if you held a position from December 2002 to January 2003, saying "2002-2003" would be misleading. However, if you were an associate at a firm from September 1981 to January 1992, simply saying "1981-1992" is clearer and more concise.

## Alternative Headings

While "Experience" or "Professional Experience" is the norm for this section, there are some alternatives that can also be effective. Obviously, "Legal Experience" would be a likely choice. This heading is particularly effective if you have significant non-legal experience and you want your legal experience to stand out.

If you have experience that is not in the legal field, you can either name the non-legal section "Other Professional Experience," or you can name it after the type of field. For instance, if you worked as a professor for a period of time, you can label that work "Academic Experience"; if you worked in the business world for a while, you can name that section "Business Experience." This can be useful if you're applying for legal jobs in which a background in another field is an asset. For instance, if you're applying for patent or IP attorney jobs and you worked as a research scientist for a number of years, having a section labeled "Scientific Experience" will highlight that relevant part of your background. In addition, it will break up the list of jobs so that it is more easily digestible to the person reading your resume.

Having separate categories also allows you to play with the chronology of your positions. Perhaps the chronology of your legal experience is broken up by non-legal work. Creating a separate "Other" heading allows you to place your most relevant positions consecutively when they otherwise wouldn't be.

Another option is to use the heading "Relevant Experience." This heading is useful if you have some positions that you'd just rather not include, as it will compensate for the gap you'll leave by deleting them. Maybe you took a few years off to deliver pizzas because you needed a break from law firm life. Rather than include "Pizza Delivery Boy" between law firm positions, you're better off leaving the gap and having the employer simply think you did him/her a favor by only including the experience that is relevant to your candidacy.