



THE “EDUCATION” SECTION OF YOUR RESUME

“Where did you go to law school?” This is probably the first question you’re asked after you tell someone you’re an attorney (that is, after you’re asked to provide free legal advice). Because the law is an academic discipline, a lot of importance is placed on an attorney’s academic pedigree, especially in the case of law students and recent graduates. Depending on where you got your J.D., it may be something you declare boastfully or something you are more apt to whisper. Law schools come in all shapes and sizes and all levels of prestige. This article will help you to decide how much emphasis you should give to your education and what you can do to make up for a less-than-stellar academic background.

How much detail should I give?

Depending on whether you’re a law student, a very experienced attorney, or somewhere in between, the education section of your resume can drastically vary in length. If you are still in law school or you recently graduated (within one year), your education is going to play a very large role in your candidacy. Therefore, you will want to flesh out your Education section as much as possible.

As you gain more experience, however, the details of your education will decrease in importance. Your degrees and the schools you attended will still be important, but less emphasis will be placed on extracurricular activities, clinic participation,

coursework, and class standing. If you graduated in 1978, your involvement in the Student Section of the ABA and moot court will have little bearing on your candidacy.

Let’s start with the basics. If you’re an attorney, you have an undergraduate degree and a law degree. In addition, you might have a Master’s degree, a Ph.D., and/or an LL.M. Your degrees should be listed in the order in which they were received, starting with the most recent.

Here are the things you must include:

1. Name of School
2. Location of School (city and state)
3. Degree

This is the bedrock of this section. Now, here are some things that you should also include, depending on your particular situation:

4. Month/Year of Graduation (just the year is fine if it's not recent)
5. GPA (if it's decent) and Class Rank (again, if it's decent)
6. Honors
7. Activities

One of the most popular questions asked is whether or not GPA and/or class rank should be included on legal resumes. Obviously, if you have a fantastic GPA/class rank, you will want to highlight that. Likewise, if you have a horrible GPA/class rank, you will want to hide that.

Most people, however, fall somewhere in between, and this is where the confusion comes in. Job applicants fear that if they don't include grade information, employers will think they did horribly. Conversely, they fear that if they include average grade information, employers will automatically disqualify them.

Both of these thoughts are valid. As a general guideline, if you are a law student or a recent graduate and your law school GPA is above 3.0 on a 4.0 scale, it should be included. Typically a 3.0 represents a B, and therefore anything higher is considered good. There are other factors to consider, however. In order to figure out what's best to do in your situation, you need to factor in the other items on your resume, as well as what your particular GPA means to your particular school.

More and more law schools are turning to unique grading systems that differ from the typical 4.0 scale. Even within the 4.0 scale, the curves can be drastically different. At one law school, a 3.6 could mean Top 10%, while at another, a 3.1 could mean Top 10%. For this reason, a GPA is not always the best indicator of your performance in law school.

If you did well in school, the best and clearest way to indicate as such is through your class rank. If you see 3/184 or Top 15%, you automatically understand that this person excelled in his/her studies in comparison to his/her peers.

If your GPA was only average, yet you won a few academic awards, excelled in moot court, and participated on a law journal, employers are going to assume that you did well in law school. Not including your GPA won't cause anyone to think you performed horribly, because it is clear that you excelled in certain areas. Therefore, if your GPA isn't very high, it is probably safe to exclude it. As an alternative to GPA, you can also list specific courses in which you received honors or high grades.

Great work experience can also make up for a less-than-stellar GPA. Maybe you didn't do so well in the classroom, but you tore up the legal clinic you participated in, and you come highly recommended from the firm you worked at as a summer law clerk. In that case, you might want to forgo the GPA in favor of fleshing out your Experience section as much as possible.

Bullet points are quickest way to convey any additional information associated with your education. If you have an extensive list of activities and honors, you may want to create a separate category for each. This format makes the Education section easier to navigate and draws more attention to each honor and activity.

In addition to the information described in 1-7 above, if you are a recent graduate, here are some other things you might want to include in the Education portion of your resume:

8. Relevant coursework (especially if you are interested in a particular legal area)
9. Courses in which you received high grades
10. Descriptions of seminars or honors courses that were notable or unique
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11. Study-abroad experiences

Listing relevant coursework on your resume can be a good way to compensate for lack of experience in a given practice area. A lot of students chose which practice areas to pursue based on their enjoyment of and/or performance in a particular course or type of class. If that's the case with you, it's a good idea to convey this on your resume. If you are interested in environmental law and an employer sees that you took five environmental law courses and received high grades in each, you will be a more attractive candidate. Don't wait until you are asked for a transcript to provide this information.

Don't be afraid to elaborate!

You may have participated in a unique program or an intensive course that provided you with great hands-on experience. For instance, some schools are known for having a rigorous trial advocacy program in which students spend a lot of time in mock courtroom settings. If your school has such a program, or another program that was renowned or very valuable, feel free to expand upon it. Unless the person reading your resume is familiar with your particular school, he/she has no way of knowing that you received this specialized training.

In addition, you may have been a member of an organization or activity that is not well known outside of your school. Or you may have won an award for an academic achievement. If you don't provide details about what you did or why you were honored, these things will be irrelevant to the employer. This is why it's a good idea to have someone who doesn't know you or your experience read your resume. An objective person will be able to tell you where things need to be explained or fleshed out. Sometimes, a few additional details make a decent candidate into a great one.

In addition to providing detail, make sure you always spell out acronyms. Even if you think the acronym is well known, it's better to be safe than sorry.

Junior College

There are two schools of thought with regard to the listing of a junior college degree on a resume.

- 1)** It shows perseverance. There's something to be said for ascending from junior college to passage of the bar exam.
- 2)** It shows that you couldn't get into a four-year college initially. Whether this is wrong or right, this is a fairly common perception that causes some people to look down upon those with A.A. degrees.

Whatever your reason for attending a junior college, you need to be aware of how it may be perceived. If your A.A. doesn't add anything to your candidacy, don't bother including it. Simply showing that you earned the degree won't matter to employers. They will be more concerned with your bachelor's degree and law degree. If, however, you feel it shows something about your character, your drive (perhaps you graduated first in your class), or your reasons for pursuing a career in law, then go ahead and list it. Say you received a degree in paralegal studies and then found that you loved the law so much you wanted to pursue a J.D. This is something that will be more understandable to legal employers than your getting an A.A. in something wholly unrelated to the law.

Should Education or Experience go first?

As a general rule, if you are a recent graduate, your educational information should be at the top of your resume. Likewise, if you've been out of school for over five years, your experience should take precedence. Keep in mind that these are general rules; in order to decide what to do in your situation, you need to assess what you feel to be your strength.

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If you went to a top law school and you have four years of so-so experience, or you haven't practiced law since you graduated, you will want to list your education first; it will be a stronger selling point than your experience. If you went to a lesser-ranked law school and have great experience, you should put your experience first, even if you're only one or two years out of school. Bottom line: whatever you feel will be most attractive to employers is what they should see first.