



BACKING UP YOUR CLAIMS WITH EVIDENCE

An attorney once sent us a sample cover letter that he'd been using for almost a year. He felt pretty confident in it and expressed bewilderment that it hadn't resulted in any interviews. Here is what it said:

Dear Hiring Partner,

In two years, my experience as a litigator far surpassed that of most junior associates. As my resume reflects, I have interacted successfully with all the parties relevant to any practice; clients, opposing counsel, and judges.

What sets me apart from other candidates is my writing ability. Because of my schools advanced writing curriculum, I have written at a much higher level than most of my peers.

What I learned most in my two years is that the people with whom you work is vitale to any success. If called to interview, I can demonstrate both the legal acumen, and personality to continue your firms success.

Sincerely, L.J.

After making sure he wasn't joking, we explained to him that not only was his letter filled with grammatical and typographical errors, but it made a point of highlighting his "excellent" writing skills. Anyone reading it was sure to think he was the least self-aware person in the world.

As all attorneys know, a case can't be made without evidence to support it. The same goes with the case you are making for yourself as a job candidate. While you need to sell yourself, make sure that the statements you make are supported by actual events on your resume and are not just overblown hype.

Look at this section taken from a resume:

Qualifications: Excellent organizational skills, effective communicator, enthusiastic, adept multitasker, ability

to prioritize, detail-oriented, team player, loyal, self-motivated, dependable, hardworking, dedicated, reliable.

Have you ever seen anyone describe themselves as lazy, shy, a poor communicator, closed-minded, boring, disorganized, or clueless in a resume? Of course not. If aliens landed on earth and were given only our resumes to judge us by, we would be deemed the most hardworking, organized, creative, problem-solving, multitasking, insightful, experienced, detail-oriented, and innovative society ever.

But what do these words really tell you about a person?

One bit of writing advice that is frequently touted by writing instructors is “Show, don’t tell.” This advice is applicable to resumes and cover letters as well as creative prose.

In the interest of selling themselves, legal job seekers often include a lot of buzzwords in their resumes and cover letters: “Hardworking,” “detail-oriented,” “multitasker,” “good communicator,” “team player,” and “proven achiever” are some of the most frequently used. These types of words and phrases have become so overused that their meanings have become almost void. Additionally, without any evidence to back them up, these words don’t really say anything substantial about the person they’re describing.

If you write “I have fantastic research and writing skills,” you need to provide evidence of this. If you were on a law journal, you earned an A in your Legal Research and Writing course, or you were published, then employers will see that there is substance behind that statement. If there is nothing to support the statement, however, it will just be dismissed as fluff.

Look at this example:

1) I am hardworking and committed to excellence. 2) My work ethic is demonstrated by the fact that I worked 20 hours a week while attending law school full time, participating in moot court, and serving as an editor on Law Review without sacrificing the quality of my work in any of these endeavors.

Here’s another one:

1) My communication and interpersonal skills are top-notch. 2) I have excellent interpersonal skills. During law school, the Editor-in-Chief of the Intellectual Property Journal asked me to serve as Subscriptions Editor because she felt that my outgoing personality would be an asset in bringing in new subscribers. Likewise, as Treasurer of the Women’s Law Student Organization, I strengthened the organization by recruiting virtually every female law student on campus.

In both of these examples, #2 makes a much stronger impact by backing up the statement with evidence. Once, a client asked us, “How do I convey my intelligence in my resume and cover letter?” Obviously, you can’t state “I am intelligent,” or you will seem pompous. A high GPA might convey intelligence, but not everyone who is intelligent gets great grades (and vice versa). Finally, we realized the answer was simple: If you present a well-written and well-thought-out resume and cover letter, that alone will convey your intelligence. This is an important, intangible benefit of these documents. In addition to selling yourself based on what you’ve done, the mere fact that you are presenting well-crafted materials will send a message to the employer that you are a smart person.