



Legal Writing Beyond the Classroom: What Law Firms Expect

The Client-Focused Shift: It's Not About You Anymore

The biggest adjustment you'll make is shifting from academic writing to client-focused communication. In law school, you wrote primarily to demonstrate your understanding of legal concepts to professors. In practice, you're writing to solve problems, persuade opponents, and communicate with clients who may have zero legal background.

This means ditching the lengthy theoretical discussions that impressed your Constitutional Law professor. Instead, you'll need to get to the point quickly and clearly. Partners don't want to read three paragraphs about the historical development of contract law before you explain why the client's agreement is enforceable. They want the bottom line first, followed by the reasoning that supports it.

Your new mantra should be: "What does this mean for my client?" Every piece of writing should answer this question clearly and concisely. Whether you're drafting a memo, a motion, or a client letter, the client's practical concerns should drive your analysis, not your desire to showcase every legal theory you've learned.

Speed Meets Precision: The Billable Hour Reality

In law school, you had weeks to craft the perfect brief. In practice, you might have hours. The billable hour structure means that efficiency isn't just appreciated – it's essential for firm profitability and your own survival.

This doesn't mean sacrificing quality for speed. Instead, it means developing systems and templates that help you work more efficiently. Smart associates create banks of well-written paragraphs for common legal issues, maintain style guides for different types of documents, and develop checklists to ensure they don't miss crucial elements under pressure. You'll also need to master the art of iterative writing. Rather than trying to perfect every sentence on the first draft, experienced legal writers focus on getting their ideas down quickly, then refining through subsequent drafts. Learn to write "good enough" first drafts that hit all the key points, then polish them into excellent final products.



1-800-232-3444



www.ceb.com

The Hierarchy of Legal Writing: Know Your Audience

Law firms have complex hierarchies, and your writing style needs to adapt accordingly. A memo to a senior partner requires different treatment than an email to a junior associate or a letter to opposing counsel.

When writing for senior attorneys, be direct and comprehensive. These readers want thorough analysis but presented efficiently. Use clear headings, bullet points for key takeaways, and executive summaries for longer documents. Remember that partners are often reading your work between meetings or during brief breaks – make it easy for them to find what they need quickly.

For client communications, simplify without condescending. Avoid legal jargon when plain English will do, but don't shy away from necessary technical terms – just explain them clearly. Clients appreciate lawyers who can make complex legal issues understandable without making them feel stupid.

Document Types You Never Learned in School

Law school exposed you to briefs, memos, and maybe some contract drafting. But law firm writing encompasses a much broader range of documents, each with its own conventions and purposes.

Client advisory letters require a delicate balance of legal accuracy and accessibility. You need to explain complex legal developments in terms that business clients can understand and act upon. This often means providing practical recommendations, not just legal analysis.

Demand letters and settlement correspondence require persuasive writing skills that go beyond what you learned in appellate brief writing. You're not just making legal arguments – you're negotiating, which means understanding your audience's motivations and crafting messages that move them toward your desired outcome.

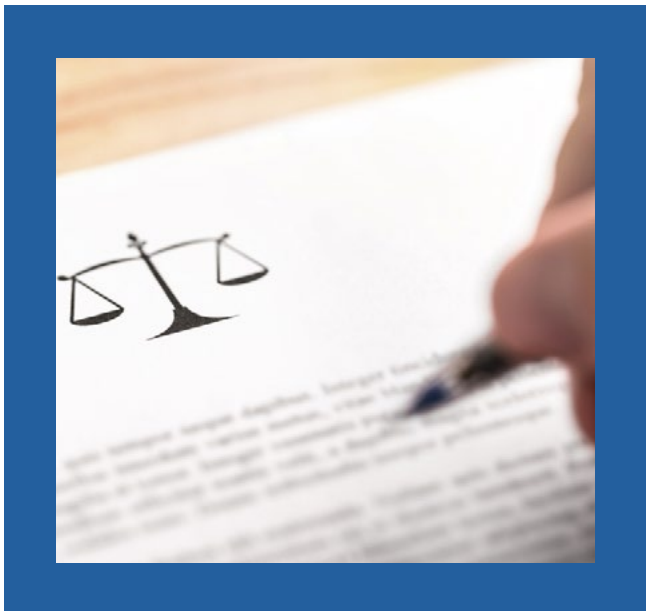
Due diligence reports, disclosure documents, and regulatory filings have their own technical requirements and industry-specific conventions. These documents require precision and attention to detail that makes law school bluebooking look simple.

The Art of Strategic Omission

One of the hardest lessons for new lawyers is learning what not to include in their writing. Law school trained you to be comprehensive, to address every possible angle and counterargument. In practice, strategic omission is often more powerful than exhaustive analysis.

This doesn't mean being dishonest or ignoring adverse authority. It means understanding that different documents serve different purposes. A motion to dismiss doesn't need to address every possible defense – it needs to focus on the strongest grounds for dismissal. A client advisory doesn't need to explore every theoretical risk – it needs to highlight the most likely





and consequential scenarios.

Learning to edit ruthlessly is crucial. Every sentence should serve a purpose. If it doesn't advance your argument, clarify a point, or provide necessary context, consider cutting it. Your readers will thank you for your brevity.

Technology and Collaboration: The Modern Reality

Legal writing in practice is rarely a solo endeavor. You'll be working with multiple attorneys, paralegals, and support staff, often simultaneously editing documents and incorporating feedback from various sources. This requires mastering collaborative tools and developing systems for managing multiple versions and conflicting suggestions.

Most firms use document management systems that track changes and maintain version control. Learning to use these tools effectively isn't just about technology – it's about understanding how to incorporate feedback efficiently while maintaining document integrity and your own sanity.

You'll also need to adapt to different partners' writing styles and preferences. Some want detailed analysis; others prefer bullet points. Some love footnotes; others ban them entirely. Successful associates learn to adapt their writing style to match their supervisors' preferences while maintaining their own voice and accuracy.

Building Your Professional Voice

While you're adapting to firm expectations, don't lose sight of developing your own professional voice. The best legal writers find ways to be clear, persuasive, and efficient while maintaining their authenticity.

This means finding the balance between formality and accessibility. Legal writing doesn't have to be stuffy to be professional. The most effective legal writers use active voice, clear sentence structure, and logical organization to make their points powerfully and memorably.

Practice writing regularly, even beyond your required work. Volunteer to draft client newsletters, contribute to the firm blog, or help with business development materials. These opportunities help you develop versatility and build relationships within the firm.



1-800-232-3444



www.ceb.com

The Continuous Learning Curve

Legal writing in practice is a skill that develops over time. Don't expect to master it immediately, but do expect to improve continuously. Seek feedback actively, study exemplary writing by senior attorneys, and pay attention to what works and what doesn't in your own practice.

Remember that effective legal writing serves your clients' interests and advances their goals. Every document you write is an opportunity to solve problems, prevent disputes, or achieve favorable outcomes. When you keep that purpose at the center of your writing, the technical skills will follow naturally.

The transition from academic to practical legal writing isn't just about learning new formats – it's about embracing a new mindset where clarity, efficiency, and client service drive every word you write.

Your CEB AccessLaw™ Program membership gives you access to CEB's Practitioner™ unlimited library - a \$650 monthly value - for *free*!



1-800-232-3444



www.ceb.com

