Preparation for an On-Campus Interview with a Law Firm

The first step you have to take for attending interviews on campus is to know how to write a cover letter and resume. Research law firms by speaking to practicing attorneys, using resources such as firm literature, and reading up on associate satisfaction. This research will help prepare for your interviews.

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Cover Letter and Resume

Even though you are in the beginning stages of your law career, you have probably worked before and have developed an idea of how to write your cover letter and resume. Yet go through the following list of rules:

1. Use matching fonts. This includes your envelope.
2. Use Serif font. Serif fonts have curvature on their letters like the typeface in this book or in magazines and newspapers. Garamond is serif and Arial is not.
3. Use substantial bond paper in either off white or ivory. Any other color is unprofessional.
5. Keep your resume to one page.
6. Don't be unnecessarily verbose.

A basic rule to follow goes against general advice often given by many. Don't try to make your resume "stand out." Prospective employers are well versed in the perusal of cover letters and resumes. It may seem unjust, but your transcript, your law school, and your work experience are what they will want to see, in this order of priority. Do not try to make your application stand out with pink paper and zany fonts; these are not your transcript, your law school, and your work experience, so do not use them. These types of distinctions will make people laugh at your resume rather than make them think that you are a "neat" candidate. You are applying for serious positions and you want to stand out for serious reasons. If your personality has a unique flair, this will reveal itself in your interviews; you do not need to flaunt it in your cover letter and resume.

Cover Letter

Before you sit down to write your cover letter, understand this little-believed fact: nobody ever got a job because of his or her cover letter. For example, some law schools send firms a pile of resumes of an entire class, and in these cases, either the cover letters are immediately stapled onto the back of the resumes and not read at all, or they are thrown away to keep the piles smaller. Some law schools highlight the insignificance of cover letters by choosing not to send them altogether.

Firms would visit up to thirty law schools. That's a lot of piles of resumes, and firms work to pare these down by removing the cover letters completely so they can focus on what's important: your resume. The more impressive the resume, the shorter is the cover letter. Candidates whose resumes reflected good experience, through education or through work, were less inclined to crowd their cover letters with useless information such as, "I will apply myself energetically." At this point in your career, the reader of your cover letter should take this for granted and frankly, it sounds a little overzealous. If you are sending a cover letter and resume, it is obvious to the recipient that you are applying for and are eager to find a job.

While you are reminded that a good cover letter never got anyone a job, a bad cover letter can hurt you enormously. The most humorous (but worst) cover letter begins like this: "An avid watcher of Court TV, I ..." This sort of aberration in a pile of typical cover letters will definitely catch the reader's eye in the most negative way. Using a television program as a credential is a sure way to get yourself a "no" letter. A more usual example of a sentence in a cover letter goes something like this: "I am an enthusiastic self-motivator." This information is gratuitous.

It is customary to include a cover letter on an application, so you have to write one. Try to follow this rule: if you are getting anxious about your cover letter, you are spending too much time on it. You are applying to a place where the people considering you are busy. The truth is that your cover letter may get tossed in the recycling bin, so keep it short and simple.
An introductory sentence, a short paragraph for the body, and a final sentence that includes a thank-you is sufficient. Your merits, as shown on your resume and transcript, should stand on their own. Unnecessary use of big words will make you look stupid. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who you felt was being deliberately verbose? It's easy to tell, isn't it? Good lawyers are masters of language and all its subtlety. They spend years studying, writing and revising. They will be able to tell if you are overcompensating by using fancy words.

For example, do not use French accents on the word "resume." Both spellings are correct, so people will not think you are particularly impressive or unimpressive if you choose to forgo the accents. In fact, using the accents may be mistaken for pretension. The English language has borrowed the word for such a long time that we can use it as we please. If you doubt this, look up "resume" in a reputable dictionary. Two items of information you should mention in your cover letter are

1. a major location change along with a good explanation for it and
2. the name of a contact, if you have one.

Resume

You are not an objective reader of your resume, so it may be difficult for you to decide what information you should strike. To help with this, you should show your resume to as many people as possible. For the experience you choose, keep your descriptions short and to the point. There is a lot riding on your resume, so make sure there are no grammatical or spelling errors. Lawyers are at worst seasoned and at best expert grammarians, so mistakes are unacceptable.

By now you already have a good idea of what your resume should look like. Don't highlight your personal flair with pink speckled paper. When reviewing your resume, attorneys will try to find a conversation piece, be it your school, the classes you are taking, work experience, or a hobby or interest. Assume that the people examining your resume are a conservative bunch. While they are educated, cultured and diverse, they are probably not as ironic as your law school buddies. You do not want these attorneys to find something in your resume that they think is strange. One student whose resume listed "lip synch and bar stunts" as hobbies on his resume. They are meaningless. Keep the lip synching and bar stunts off your resume and in the bars.

Your resume should be no longer than one page.

On the subject of resumes, one attorney says, "A rule of thumb is if you are trying hard to squeeze your resume on to one page, it is probably too long. Consider eliminating entire sections; for example, your summer job between your freshman and sophomore years of college is filler, or unnecessary at this point." You can minimize the font in sections, but do not reduce it too much; your resume will be too crowded.

See 6 Things Attorneys and Law Students Need to Remove from Their Resumes ASAP If They Want to Get Jobs with the Most Prestigious Law Firms for more information.

The staff of your school’s career services office is enormously helpful in aiding you to improve the look and tone of your resume and to decide what should stay on your resume and what can be left out; these are professionals who often have years of training in the resume business. You should also run your resume by your classmates, siblings and parents — all the better if they are professionals. Have many opinions and eyes on your resume. Sometimes it will take showing it to three people to find one silly typographical error, and as insignificant as it may seem, these typographical errors are totally unacceptable. Lawyers reviewing your resume will catch these. You are sending your resume to people who are trained to proofread, so do not be bashful about asking friends for criticism. It is better to be criticized by friends now than to risk looking foolish to a possible interviewer.

Listing the name of your high school on your resume is not necessary in most cases. If you attended one of the best high schools in the country, you may consider putting this down. List the name of the school, your grade point average (if it was good), and honors (if you received them). Your high school, if you should choose to put it in, should take up very few lines. It may sound elitist to have you list your high school under the condition that it is one of the best, but if you attended a high school that no one has ever heard of, it is another example of filler, or something that wastes space on your resume. If you worked between college and law school, you probably have little room for your high school anyway. List your pre-law school work experience, whatever it may be. Try and make sure the experience you list is made up of places where you were employed for a respectable amount of time. While floating around from job to job looks flaky, this is something many of you may have done. In this case, choose a few of your former employers to list, in order of the most valuable experience for you. Listing all of them will crowd your
resume. You may want to obfuscate your dates of employment by writing "Fall — Spring 2000" rather than, "November — February 2000."

If you are having trouble with very general layout questions, there are terrific resume-writing programs for computers. For these, you simply enter your information and the computer lays it all out for you. Many students use these programs and they do a really nice job.

**Personal/Interests Section in a Resume**

Some of you may want to include a Personal or Interests section on your resume. Your interests are topics you probably like to talk about, so they are good fodder for interviews. One thing you should absolutely mention is if you speak or are proficient in a foreign language. Do not lie; if tested, you stand to be humiliated.

While cultural literacy is a good thing to mention in the Personal or Interests section of your resume, be careful of how you phrase things. Avoid looking pretentious. If you like German opera, for example, list it as "opera" on your resume. The same goes for your reading habits. If you read only literary theory and philosophy books, call yourself a "non-fiction enthusiast." You can emphasize the particulars if asked during your interview. In his "Personal" section, one student wrote, "avid reader of The Economist." Sure this was true, it looked and sounded pretentious on his resume. A better way to say it would have been, "avid reader" or, "politics." Look over your resume for its general themes. Often a partner would say, "This person is too public interest-minded. From looking at the resume, I wonder why he is applying here." Or, "This woman had many successful years in the advertising industry. At this point in her career, I wonder if she is genuinely interested in switching over to law."

Students who hope to devote their lives to public interest, interview at law firms to hedge their bets all the time. Public interest experience is extraordinarily valuable; this is where most nascent lawyers get their first "real" work experience and you should emphasize this function on your resume. If you are applying for work in both the public and private sectors, I suggest you write two resumes, one for law firms and one for the public interest jobs. On the law firm resume, soft-pedal your emphasis on public service and highlight it on your public interest resume.

If your resume says anything other than you are intelligent, eager students willing to work hard and be shaped into a great lawyer for your firm, then be careful.

**How to Research Firms**

There are a few very basic questions you need to ask yourself to help narrow down your search.

**Question 1 : Where do I want to live?**

This is a pretty easy question. If you are having trouble with this, try and keep your interviews focused on two or three cities or towns. The more firms and cities you have to choose from, the more difficult your decision-making process will be. When it comes time to make your final decision, you want to make it as easy on yourself as possible.

A note on location: Keep in mind that firms in what are considered popular cities are sensitive to this; they will be wary of people who may be looking to spend only a summer in their fun cities rather than the rest of their lives. Be prepared to have a good explanation as to why you want to live where you say you want to live.

**Question 2: Do I want a large, mid-sized or smaller firm?**

This is not such an easy question because of hearsay. You will hear all kinds of generalizations about firm size. For example, you may have heard that smaller firms and satellite offices provide a better quality of life for associates. This is not necessarily true. Try not to listen to too many of these generalizations; learn to trust your instincts and to draw your own conclusions. Following are two examples of generalizations that were untrue in many cases.

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**Myth A : Large firms are 'impersonal.'**

While this sounds like it might make sense, upon closer examination, it does not. To begin with,
“impersonal” is a sloppy word to use with regard to your professional development. What does this use of “impersonal” mean? And just how personal do you want your career to be anyway? If “impersonal” is a negative, then is “personal” a positive? It's a poor word choice, but you will hear rumors like this a lot, so let's define and debunk the myth.

By using “impersonal” here, the speaker seems to fear becoming a cog in a wheel at a huge place among hundreds of other associates. “Impersonal” seems to say that one would get lost and would feel sort of anonymous, perhaps even unappreciated.

The fact is that large firms comprise hundreds, and in a few cases thousands, of associates — so the generalization sounds like it makes sense, but life at a large firm does not always work this way. The size of a firm's population does not denote nor does it promote anonymity. For example, large firms are made up of smaller departments that often have sub departments within them. In these smaller departments, your work experience can get very intense and professionally rewarding. You will be working with handfuls of associates and partners who are often experts in their fields; you will learn from them and get to know them quite well. Large firms are well aware of their perception as “impersonal” and often take great pains to work against this stereotype by implementing mentor programs in which senior associates are assigned to look out for you and lend an ear if need be.

In terms of your daily experience at a big firm, you will have an office and desk with neighbors and support staff with whom you can chat every morning if you want. While you may not know the names of anyone six floors up from you, wherever you sit, you will see all kinds of familiar faces who can make your daily experience as personal as you want.

Myth B: Smaller firms have a better "quality of life."

You will hear the expression "quality of life" in reference to firms again and again while you go through the recruiting season. "Quality of life" basically comes down to one thing: billable hours, or how many hours associates bill to clients of the firm throughout the year.

In a smaller firm, competition is as tough among associates as it is anywhere. There are fewer people to compete with, and your work, good or bad, will stand out. Also, support staff can be limited at a smaller firm. The support staff is made up of the people who help make your life easier — secretaries, people who work in the mailroom, etc. If there is more support staff, you will have more help with the minutiae of the job. You will not have to make your own copies, fill out Federal Express labels, and so on. These are some examples of fine print to consider before believing that your "quality of life" will be better at a smaller firm, You can verify this claim by looking up some small firms in the National Association for Law Placement's Directory of Legal Employers, The Insider’s Guide to Law Firms, or the Vault Guide to the Top 100 Law Firms. Each firm's entry lists the average number of hours billed by associates for the year. You will see that there may be negligible difference from small to mid-sized to large firms.

The moral here is that many generalizations you hear need to be examined thoroughly before you choose to believe them. Throughout your interviewing process, you will find people who started out at larger firms and moved to smaller firms and are happy with their decision, and vice versa.

Question 3: Where do I want to be in five years, and what type of firm will help me to accomplish these goals?

Do you want to help people who cannot afford your help by working in the public sector? Choose an organization that interests you and set up informational interviews with attorneys working there. When you meet, ask them if they hire people from law firms. If so, which firms? What pro bono work should you do to make yourself attractive to them?

Do you hope to go to the local U.S. Attorney's office? Find out from which firms Assistant U.S. Attorneys in your area have come and interview with them. Do you want to work at an investment bank? Find out which firms have the best corporate departments and the most impressive investment banks as clients. Do you want to serve the public? Look for firms with significant pro bono practice. There are some firms that value pro bono work more than others. For example, some consider hours spent on pro bono assignments as important as billable hours; at these firms, pro bono work is held in the highest regard.

Speaking to Practicing Attorneys

One of the best ways to go about finding out what sort of firm is right for you is by speaking with practicing attorneys from a variety of firms. This can be an arduous task, but it is one well worth your time. Go to your
law school's career services office and ask for the names of five alumni working at firms in the city where you hope to begin your career. Make sure that this group represents different sizes and types of firms. Do not feel as though you are "bothering" these people or wasting their time. If your career services office gives you the names and phone numbers of these attorneys, then they volunteered to be available to speak with students like you. They are there for your questions and will speak frankly about what they do and about their quality of life. You can either call or email these people. Calling is the more friendly way to do it, but emailing may actually be the most convenient for both of you. Lawyers are busy, and dashing off a quick email may be easier for them than finding half an hour to talk to you.

Ask modified versions of actual interview questions (examples of these are listed in the next paragraph). Before you pick up the phone to speak with one of the attorneys on your list, remember to relax. This is not an interview. I found many students were so nervous and preoccupied that they forgot to listen to what the attorney was saying to them. A little listening goes a long way. Can you tell when someone is distracted and is not listening to you? The lawyers can, too, and this is a disaster. Since you will be speaking with a complete stranger, before you get to the questions, begin with friendly small talk. Explain who you are and that you are looking for advice; lawyers are counselors who enjoy being asked for advice, especially about something like what they do for a living. Remember, you can be a lot more direct here than you would be in an interview. This time you are not on the hot seat: it is quite the contrary.

Following are eleven examples of questions that will get you valuable information:

1. In what department do you work?
2. Do you like your job?
3. Did you spend your summer at your present firm? If not, how did you come to work here?
4. How many hours did you bill last year? Give a disclaimer on this one — say something like, "not to sound lazy, but I am curious.
5. Do you plan to stay?
6. If you plan to leave, why? Is working here a good stepping-stone to help you accomplish your long-term goals?
7. (If he or she left another firm) why did you leave blah and blah firm?
8. What is a typical day like for you?
9. How is the support staff?
10. How are the other associates? Do you have friends at the firm?
11. What would you say is your least-favorite aspect about working for the firm? Do you feel the firm listens to your concerns if you choose to voice them?

The more specific your questions are, the more you will glean from your research.

Firm Website and Firm Resume

The firm website is probably the most important resource for you because it is something you will definitely peruse. The firm website acts in the same way a college brochure does, by providing a cursory overview of the firm and its practice. For example, if a firm specializes in government bond work, you will learn this from reading the firm website.

There will be a brief history of the firm since its inception, which is good background information for you. Firms that have been around for a long time will probably continue to thrive. In the case of a firm with specialties in many areas of law, there will be a section on each of its departments. Here each department provides an overview of itself, sweetened with the firm's most impressive acquisitions, mergers, victories and restructurings. Study these highlighted cases carefully, for these are the cases of which the firm is most proud.

Obviously you should read up on the departments that interest you; however, I would also advise you to read up on the other departments as well; you will likely interview with attorneys from various departments. The firm website will list the attorneys at the firm, and here you can find out who shares your law school or alma mater.

In addition to the website, most firms produce a hard copy of information about the firm in the form of a booklet, or what is called a firm resume. It is standard for firms to have two versions of this, one for prospective students and one for prospective clients.

At any time during the year, you can call a firm's recruiting department and ask to have a firm resume sent to you. Although you may find a lot of the same information that you see on the firm website, I suggest you do this. Also, always ask for a client list and a list of representative transactions because some firms will
include them automatically while others will not.

A client list and deal sheet is usually an addendum because clients and deals change sometimes while general firm resume information changes less frequently. Here you will see the entire list of the firm clients and the last few deals the firm has closed. This is great information to know for your interviews and for help in making your final decision. You may love fashion and discover that a firm represents Kate Spade; this is the type of information that will often sway you one way or another.

**The Insider’s and Vault Guides**

Something to consider when deciding at which firms you will interview the satisfaction of a firm’s associate population is. There are books available to help you find out if a firm's associates have a quality of life that is acceptable to you. The two best publications that focus on this are The Insider's Guide to Law Firms (available at amazon.com or infirmation.com, to name a few) and the Vault Guide to the Top 100 Law Firms (available at vault.com); you should be able to buy these guides at your law school bookstore or online. Your library and career services office should have them also.

These books get their information from research teams that send questionnaires with excellent in-depth questions about life at their firms to associates nationwide. From these questionnaires they develop a composite description of the associate experience.

In addition to information on associate life, the Insider's and Vault guides provide firm statistics including salary, average billable hours worked by associates, percentages or numbers of minority and female associates, how many people made partner in the past few years, etc. Look up the firms you plan to meet in these books. The more information you have, the more informed your decision will be.

**The American Lawyer Summer Associates’ and Mid-Level Associates’ Surveys**

It was always a tense time of year for the firm when the summer associates and mid-level associates filled out these surveys. Partners are concerned with how the associates view the firm and if they are having a good work experience. Also, from a public relations standpoint, firms understand that prospective associates will be reading the surveys to learn about the firm.

The American Lawyer surveys ask good questions. Some are humorous; associates can tell some pretty funny tales. While these make for good reading, be sure to step back and look at the whole picture of a firm; the most important issue these surveys give voice to are work experience and the quality of the work the associates do or have done. For the sake of your career, you should make sure that the firms in which you are interested take their associates seriously and give them good work.

**Books and Surveys on Firm Life Are Not the Bible**

Take their information with a grain of salt. These books and surveys will not always give the most accurate depiction of firm life. In my role as the firm recruiter, I was responsible for distributing surveys to associates and collecting them when they were complete. After passing them out, I would ask associates about them. For example, when an associate was asked, “So, did you have a chance to fill out the associate survey for the Insider's Guide? He or she would often respond with something like, “Katy, I like it here and I have been really busy. Why would I waste my time filling that thing out?” On the other hand, an associate who was unhappy at the firm, he or she might say something along the lines of, “I can't wait to fill out the Insider's Guide survey.” Some associates viewed these surveys as a time-consuming nuisance or as a way to air their gripes, so the picture they painted of the firm was not always a fair one.

Use the books and surveys as a resource, but try to draw your own conclusions from many different sources. Learn to trust yourself; in the end, you are the one accountable for where you choose to work.

**Setting Up On-Campus Interviews**

After having done all your reading up on firms and having spoken to practicing attorneys, develop a list of firms you want to meet during on-campus interviews. The method by which you sign up for your on-campus interviews will vary from school to school. Your school will familiarize you with its program during your first year, and some of you will do some interviewing as a first-year student. Before you begin, you need to know how your school runs its on-campus interview program. Here are some methods by which your school may organize its on-campus interviews:

1. Lottery
Some law schools leave the entire process up to a lottery, which is totally random. If your school uses a lottery program, you are matched randomly with firms and may never meet with your top choices. In this case, you can try to badger these firms into meeting you anyway.

2. Sign-up

Some schools use a sign-up program, which is just the opposite of a lottery. Here you have a lot of control because you will meet the firms you list, no matter what.

3. Firms choose you

In this case, before you begin your second year, the resumes and transcripts of your entire class are sent to firms that conduct on-campus interviews at your school. From these piles, the firms decide who they would like to meet.

4. Combined methods

Some schools were of the opinion that methods I through 3 were unfair to students. In an effort to even things out, they divided things up. In this case, part of the on-campus interviews are setup by lottery and part by student sign-up, or the firms choose a certain percentage of students they would like to meet and the school chooses the remaining students.

In all cases except for number 2, there is a possibility you may not get your first choices. In this case, read “What to do if you do not get an on-campus interview with your favorite firm,” later in the chapter.

Career Services Office

In addition to facilitating on-campus interviews, this office has a lot of responsibility. You may notice that your law school runs all sorts of programs year-round for students with information about interviewing and about being a lawyer in general; the career services office likely had a hand in setting these up. When used properly, these programs will help you to make the transition from nascent legal student to a career-minded professional with specific goals. One program that many schools run is a general question-and-answer session with a panel of attorneys from various firms. This is a terrific forum for questions, albeit slightly less personal than if you call people up and speak with them directly.

As a law student, you are probably beginning to gather that the career services people are busy with many more responsibilities than the administration of on-campus interviews. While it may seem general, the focus of the career services office is quite specific and is aimed at you, the aspiring attorney. They are there in large part to protect and help you; because of this, you must walk into the career services office at your school and introduce yourself to the people there. If you feel shy, remember their function as counselors for law students (that's you). There is no need to emphasize the importance of your relationship with the career services office enough. They are a well-connected bunch; after all, they have been placing students in positions for years and will have kept in touch with the many who are active in your school's alumni program. The career services staff can also be very helpful to you with insider information about firms. Firm recruiters are their colleagues, and they speak and correspond with them often, so they can pull strings for you.

Once you are friendly with the people at your career services office, turn to them with questions you are afraid to ask anyone else. Trust me: they have heard and seen it all before.

Your career services office is also an excellent place for feedback on your cover letter and resume. Aside from being professionals in the business, many people working there have advanced degrees, including J.D.s, so they are great people to ask advice about proofreading and comments. These people really know what they are doing and can be tremendously helpful to you. In addition to personal and professional advice, the career services office has an extensive library with information about firms that includes the Insider's Guide, the Vault.

Reports Survey and the American Lauder surveys

You Were Not Granted an On-Campus Interview with Your Favorite Firm.

This is something with which your career services office can help you. Explain your situation and ask for their help. In a few cases, when prodded by a career services professional from a law school, my firms
skipped the on-campus interview process altogether and signed up a student for a callback immediately.

The following method is seen more often; this requires some gumption on your part, but it works, so try it. Let's call your favorite firm Maher and Giavelli. Unfortunately you have not been granted an on-campus interview. Find out from your career services office or by calling Maher and Giavelli's recruiting department on what day they will interview on campus and in what office, classroom, dorm room, or hotel room they will conduct interviews. Show up a few minutes before any of the interviews begin and knock on the door. If the interviewer is there, explain your situation, that you did not get an interview with Maher and Giavelli even though it is your first choice. Hand the interviewer a copy of your resume and transcript. Tell him or her to call you (a cellular phone is preferable for this) if any breaks in the schedule come up or if he or she is willing to add you onto the end of the day. If he or she is unavailable, stick your nose in during the lunch break or at the end of the interviewing day to check if he or she has time to squeeze in a meeting with you.

A disadvantage to being "on call" with a firm is that you must be ready to interview at the drop of a hat. The advantage is that I have seen this "squeaky wheel" method work for many students. Nearly every interviewer my department sent on campus would meet a handful of students who were not on his or her original schedule.

Pound on a couple of doors during on-campus interviews. The worst someone can say is no, and in this case you have not lost anything, not even time.

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See the following articles for more information:
- 21 Major Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs
- The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews
- How to Talk About Other Interviews in Your Interviews
- How to Answer the Tell Me About Yourself Interview Question
- How to Answer the Do You Have Any Questions for Me Interview Question