

# How to Prepare a Writing Sample

Explore this Article ■ **Choosing from Your Existing Work** ■ Writing a Sample from Scratch  
■ Formatting Your Sample for Submission ■ Questions & Answers ■ Tips and Warnings ■ References

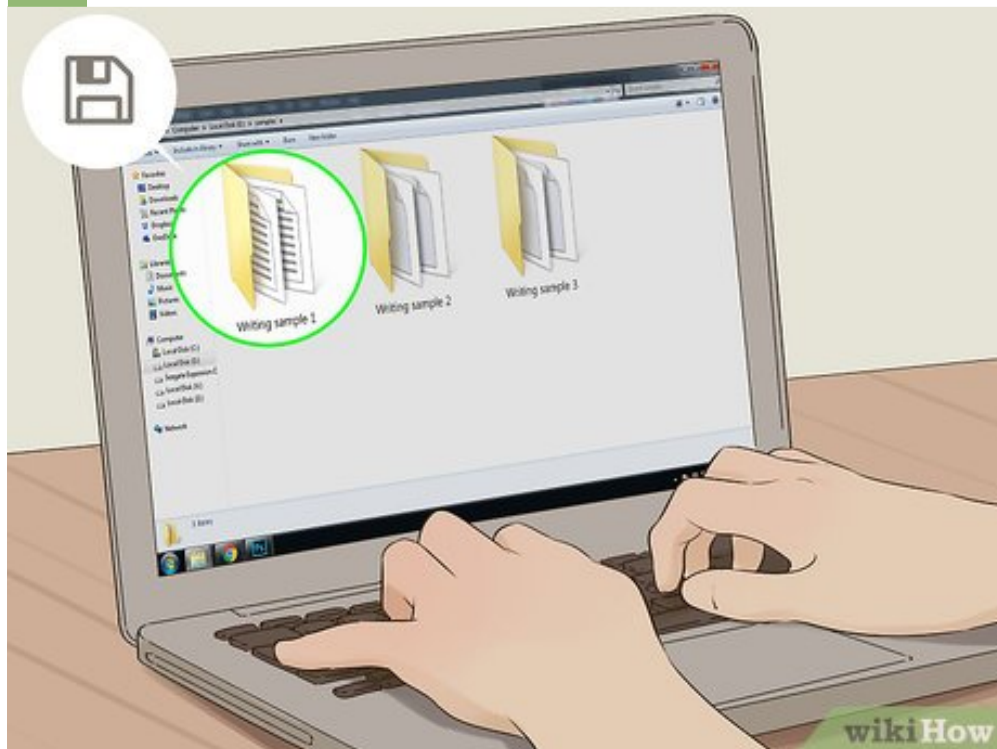
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Last Updated: August 4, 2021

Writing skills are an essential part of many jobs. Across a wide variety of professions, up to 20 percent of a new employee's duties may involve writing. Because of this, many employers require applicants to prepare a writing sample regardless of the position they are applying for. By choosing the best writing sample and submitting it the proper way, you can make sure your writing sample will strengthen any application you submit.

## Method 1

### Method 1 of 3: Choosing from Your Existing Work



**1 Save examples of any good writing you do as potential samples.** If you're a high school or college student, a recent graduate, or someone who writes as part of their job, make sure you save particularly good pieces of writing that you've done and keep them somewhere accessible. You never know when they might be suitable for an application!<sup>[1]</sup>

- A good plan would be to save any examples of good writing in a folder on your computer and label it "Writing Samples."
- Choose samples of your writing that showcase a broad range of skills, including summarizing and conveying complex ideas, presenting original research, or writing persuasive materials.



**2 Select a writing sample that is relevant to the application.** The type of writing sample you submit should relate in some way to the position you're seeking. If unsure about what kind of sample to send, research the position further to get a better understanding of the kind of work you'd be expected to produce.<sup>[2]</sup>

- For example, for a technical writer position, sample topics from a help file or procedure manual would be appropriate. For a marketing position, advertising sample copy would be a good choice.
- If you have several prospective samples to choose from, choose the most recent sample unless an older sample better showcases your capabilities with respect to the position.
- In some cases, you may want to send more than one writing sample, notably if the position calls for the ability to write various types of pieces and you want to showcase your abilities in all the areas listed.



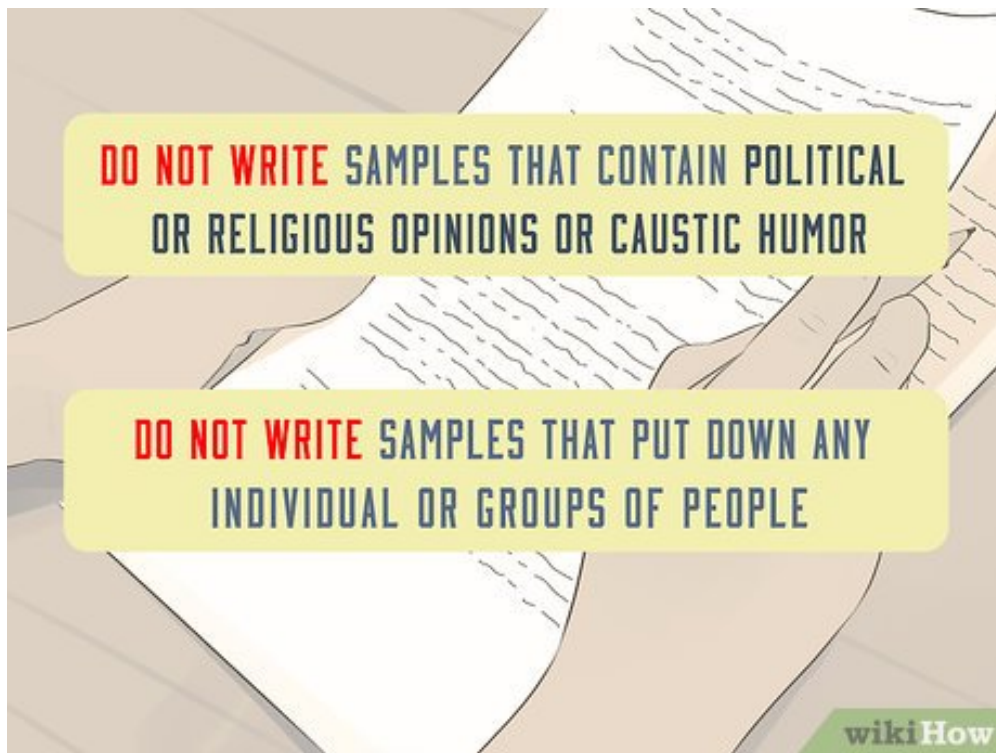
**3 Keep your writing sample to an appropriate and reasonable length.** Employers and schools will often stipulate how long a writing sample should be. If there are no guidelines regarding length, 1 to 4 pages is usually a good amount. If you have any doubts about the appropriate length, ask!

- Often, a job posting will include the prescribed length of the requested sample. Never submit something longer than the requested length. Edit the content of your piece to fit the sample requirements, whether that be a page count or a word count.
- In some cases, the type of writing will dictate the length of the sample. For example, blogs and press releases typically run from 300 to 500 words, while legal memoranda should run 5 to 10 pages.
- You can take an excerpt from a larger piece of writing, but if you do, include a note that explains this and summarizes the parts that were omitted and why you omitted them.



**4 Follow instructions or guidelines as closely as possible.** Remember that the writing sample you submit is not only a reflection of your skills as a writer, but is also part of the evaluation of your overall candidacy. The person who reviews your application will use your writing sample to gauge how well you follow directions and understand the requirements of the position.<sup>[4]</sup>

- Only provide a writing sample if specifically asked for one. Even if the position you're applying for requires a great deal of writing, you may not be asked to provide a sample right away. Providing a sample too early in the interview process may torpedo your chances of getting the job if it isn't a good sample.
- If you fail to correctly follow the application instructions when submitting your writing sample, this may lead reviewers to reject your application outright if the position is highly competitive.



**5** **Avoid writing samples on inappropriate or controversial topics.** Unless the position calls for it, avoid sending writing samples that contain political or religious opinions or caustic humor. You may inadvertently offend a reviewer and sabotage your entire application as a result.<sup>[5]</sup>

- For example, if you wrote an opinion piece for a civics class on whether or not abortion should be legal, you should probably think twice about using it as your writing sample, since this is a particularly controversial topic in the United States.
- In no case should you send a sample that puts down any individual or groups of people.



## Method 2 of 3: Writing a Sample from Scratch



**1** **Write the type of sample most relevant to what you're applying for.** Ideally, you should choose an already-written sample. If you don't have strong or relevant past writings, though, you may have to start from scratch. If you're going to write a totally new sample, your first concern is making sure that it strengthens your application. To do this, write something that demonstrates the types of skills you'll need to succeed in the position you're applying for.

- For example, if you're writing a sample as part of a graduate school application, consider writing an essay that demonstrates your ability to use and cite evidence to support an academic argument.<sup>[6]</sup>
- For media-related jobs, consider writing a journalistic piece or a faux press release. For a marketing position, you might write an analysis of the use of social media to promote products.
- If you're unsure of what sort of sample would be most relevant to the position you're applying for, consider simply writing a clear, descriptive article on a topic that isn't controversial.



**2 Try to write on a topic from a unique angle.** When researching the topic you want to write on, see if you can find a way to write about it that others who have written on the topic have not thought of. If your sample demonstrates your ability to come up with unique ideas, it will significantly help you stand out as a candidate.<sup>[7]</sup>

- For example, if you're writing a research paper on a historical topic, consider using an analytical framework that other historians haven't used to examine the topic before.
- Your writing sample, like your application overall, should partially be an effort on your part to emphasize what you want reviewers to remember about you.



**3 Match your tone and style to other writings put out by the institution.** If you're applying for a job at a company, read over the company's website, blog, and marketing materials and write with a style and tone that fits with the company's culture. If you're applying for a position with an academic institution, read what other people at that institution have written and shape your sample accordingly.[8]

- For example, if writers at the institution you're applying to tend to use formal and professional language in their writing, writing your sample in a snarky and informal tone will make reviewers think you don't belong at their institution.
- The nature of the company or institution you're applying to will also determine your use of particular writing techniques. For instance, if you're applying for a job with a marketing firm, you may want to incorporate strong imagery in your writing that will appeal to readers' senses.



### sample introductory paragraph

Please see below for a press release I wrote in June 2016 to promote the launch of a new product. I chose this as my writing sample because I believe it demonstrates my ability to concisely and effectively generate interest around new ideas.

-[www.themuse.com](http://www.themuse.com)



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**4 Include an introductory paragraph on the nature of your sample.** You'll want your reviewer to know the reasoning behind the type of sample you wrote and what you were hoping to achieve by writing it (e.g., demonstrate your research skills to a professor). Add an introductory paragraph that explains the purpose of your sample and why you chose to include it in your application.<sup>[9]</sup>



**do not write a  
personal essay  
or an essay  
about why you  
are the best  
person for  
a position**



**write  
samples that  
are relevant  
to the job  
at hand**

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**5 Avoid writing an essay about you as a candidate.** In general, unless otherwise stated, you should avoid writing a personal essay as your sample. Furthermore, an essay about why you are the best person for a position comes across as self-serving and doesn't reflect any relevant skills.<sup>[10]</sup>

- You don't want your writing sample to directly be about you as a person. That is a personal essay, which is a different genre than a writing sample. Instead, it should be a reflection of your skills as a writer and/or researcher.



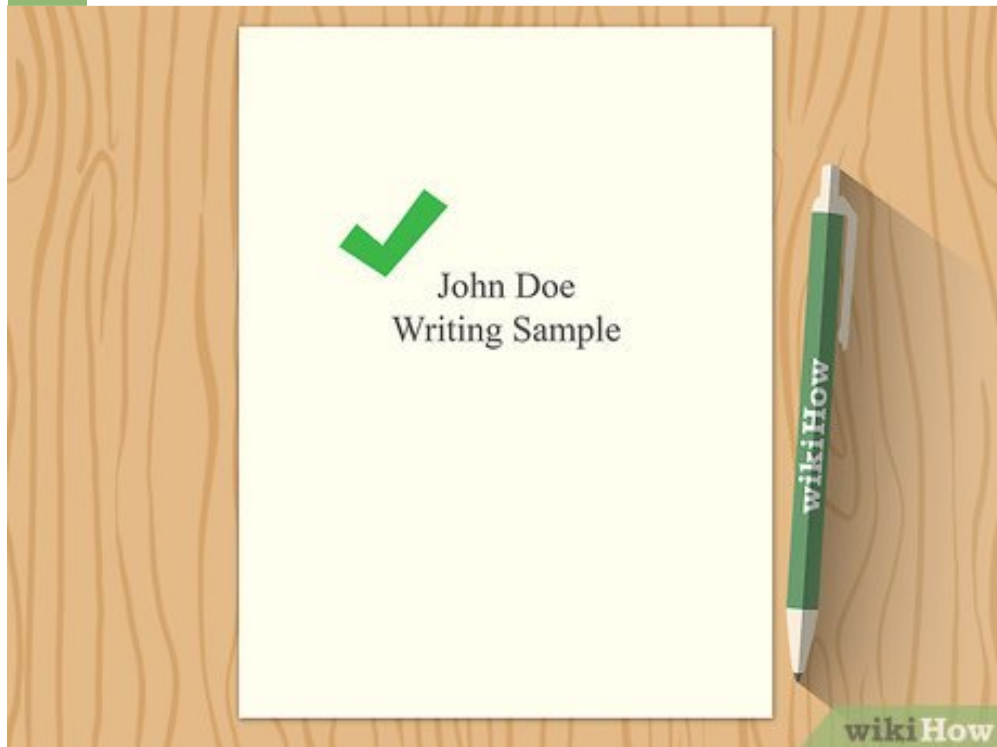
**6 Don't be afraid to ask what sort of sample to write.** If you're not sure what type of writing sample would be most relevant to the position you're applying for, be willing to ask your reviewers what they think you should write about. They will appreciate the initiative you've taken to write a sample from scratch.<sup>[11]</sup>

- Note that you should only do this if there are no guidelines on the application for what to use as a writing sample. If there are writing sample guidelines that you ignore or don't notice, asking what you should write about will reflect poorly on you as a candidate.



**7 Revise and polish your first draft.** Once you've finished the first draft of your writing sample, read through it again and revise it as necessary. Fix any grammar or spelling errors, tighten up awkward or verbose writing, and add or delete writing as necessary. Remember, you want your writing sample to be as strong as possible.

### Method 3 of 3: Formatting Your Sample for Submission



- 1 Make sure your writing sample is identifiable and your name is included.** When you go to submit your writing sample, make sure it's properly identified in your cover letter or email. Be sure as well that your name is written somewhere on the document.<sup>[12]</sup>
  - Unless other instructions are included on the application, consider simply labeling the document that contains your sample as "Writing Sample" or "[Your Name] Writing Sample."
  - You may want to also include a running header of "[Last Name] Writing Sample," on each page so that all your pages can be kept together if printed and distributed.
  - If your writing sample contains information from previous assignments or jobs, make sure to rewrite it in a new document so that this information doesn't carry over to your application.



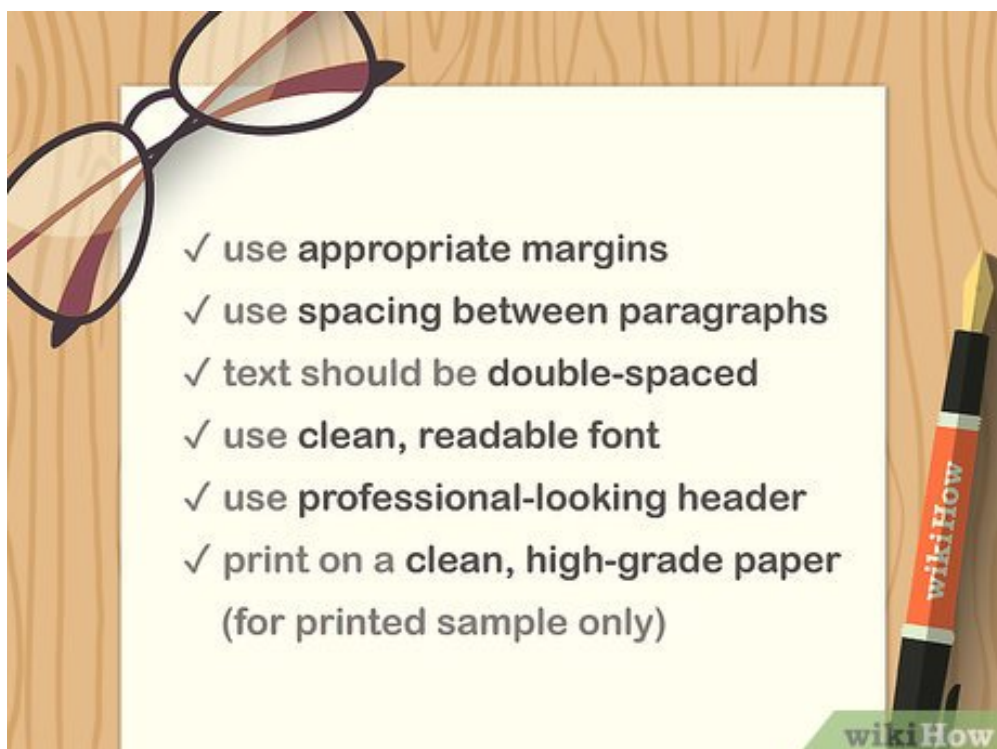
**2 Proofread the sample carefully before submitting it.** Just as you want your resume and cover letter to be perfect, your writing sample should be free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors. Look it over carefully yourself and have a knowledgeable friend look at it if necessary.<sup>[13]</sup>

- Edit your sample even if it got a good grade from a teacher or professor. Just because you earned a good grade for it doesn't necessarily mean your writing sample is error-free.
- If you're submitting a paper you wrote for a class, make sure the version you submit doesn't have any markings from your professor on it.





- 3 Edit out any confidential information that needs to be protected.** If your writing sample contains private information, such as names, home addresses, or phone numbers, be sure to remove this information before submitting your sample.<sup>[14]</sup>
- You can often remove confidential information by simply rewriting parts of your sample. For instance, instead of writing "When I worked at Ray's Hardware in Conway," simply say "When I worked in a small-town hardware store."



- 4 Format your writing sample so that it's easy for reviewers to read.** Use adequate margins and spacing between paragraphs. Text should be double-spaced and should appear in a clean, readable font, with your name in a professional-looking header on the first page and on each subsequent page.
- If you're sending a printed sample, print it on clean, high-grade paper.





**5 Include a brief note about the context of the writing.** You'll want your reviewer to know the circumstances behind the sample you wrote and what you were hoping to achieve by writing it (e.g., demonstrate your research skills to a professor). Add an introductory paragraph that explains the context of the sample and why you chose to include it in your application.<sup>[15]</sup>

- This is especially important if you choose to submit an excerpt from a longer piece, as it will be particularly difficult to understand the excerpt if you don't explain what the longer piece is about.
- It will definitely be necessary to explain why you chose the sample you did if it doesn't immediately appear relevant. For example, if you're applying for a job at a fashion magazine and submit a writing sample from your biology class, you'll need to explain your reasoning.



**6 Keep a physical copy and bring it to your interview.** Even after you submit a writing sample with your application, you'll want to keep a copy with you and bring it to any follow-up interview you go through in case your reviewer wants to discuss it. Bring several copies just in case other people are present.<sup>[16]</sup>

- Even if the application didn't require a writing sample, consider bringing one to the interview anyway. It may become relevant at some point during the conversation.



## Community Q&A

### Question

**Can I send a psycho-social assessment as a writing sample for a case manager position?**



**Samuel C. King**  
Community Answer

This will depend mostly on the actual position you're applying for and what sort of skills the employer is looking for, but generally speaking, yes, a psychosocial assessment would seem relevant to the position of a case manager.

Helpful 2 Not Helpful 1



## Tips

- It's a good idea to set aside a folder on your computer for writing samples you'll use most frequently.
- It's also a good idea to compile a list of writing you've previously published. You can use this list as a supplement to your resume or review it to help you decide which writing samples are most appropriate for the position to which you're applying.

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Co-authors: **7**  
Updated: **August 4, 2021**  
Views: **76,705**

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