



Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we have ex-BigLaw recruiter Sadie Jones here with us to talk about writing samples. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically, I'm with Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. Together, we're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the career-related website [CareerDicta](#). I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the [contact form](#) on LawSchoolToolBox.com, and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're excited to have ex-BigLaw recruiter Sadie Jones here with us to talk about writing samples. So, welcome, Sadie.

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me back.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. Well, first off, when might people need a writing sample, and really what is it exactly?

Sadie Jones: So, you might need it for a job, a clerkship, an internship. Anything you're applying to as a law student or after law school, you might need it also. And it's really just a sample of legal writing that you've done. It's not just one exact thing; it could be sort of a variety of things, but it's just an example of some writing that you could show them.

Alison Monahan: Right, and you may need different length for different things. So, clerkships – sometimes they ask for a longer writing sample. I would say with typically jobs, they're looking for something fairly short. Do you think that's accurate?

Sadie Jones: Definitely. I don't think there's an exact rule on it, but I would say try to keep it to five pages, would kind of be my advice for a job, if you want someone to read it.

Alison Monahan: I agree. I was going to say four or five pages, and we'll talk later about how you get to that because probably you're writing longer things. But this does not need to be your Opus Magnum on some sort of legal theory. This is intended to be quick, short, can you write, that kind of thing. And I guess, what makes a good writing sample?

Sadie Jones: I think easy to read, polished, something you're proud of, something you feel good about. I think all of those things are sort of important. To be honest, not everyone's going to read it. So, you may be submitting it for jobs where they will never look at it, but obviously, that's not how you go into it. You go into it



assuming they are going to read it and they are going to think that it's well done.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think it's possible that someone in this process is probably going to at least look at this, and some people may look at it closely. So, you cannot just assume it's sort of like a cover letter. You can't just dial it in and assume no one's ever going to read it, because there are those people who I guarantee you, before they allow you to be hired, will definitely go through your writing sample. I think one of the key things here is you have to make sure it's absolutely clean. So, if you need to fix your citations, if you need to make your formatting consistent – those are the types of things that are going to jump out at people, more so than your exact logic or if you missed a case. They're not going to go look up case law to see if you were right, but they're definitely going to notice if you did not cite a case correctly.

Sadie Jones: And I will say, I think that the expectation is that it will be perfect, and that everybody's are perfect. And so, it's the kind of situation where most likely it's not going to be the deal-breaker for you getting called in or not, but it could be the thing that works against you. So that's something to keep in mind, in terms of what they're looking for. I would say they're looking for mistakes.

Alison Monahan: Right. Nobody is going to read this and be like, "Wow, this was such an amazing analysis of this first-year Legal Writing prompt, we have to talk to this person." But they are going to say, "Wow, there are three typos on the first page, and they don't know how to cite cases. We are absolutely not talking to them."

Sadie Jones: Because the thing about this is, it's something that you're working on ahead of time and submitting it to them. It's not something that they timed you in a room and made you write, where there could be mistakes, but this is something that you've had considerable time and decided to submit, so it's sort of like anything you're giving to them – your cover letter, your resume. It shouldn't have anything wrong with it because ideally, you've had other people review it and you've looked at it many times, and so you know there are no mistakes.

Alison Monahan: Right. I think this is kind of a test of, do you understand what this is for? And what it is for is basically the absolute best foot forward that you can possibly present. And sometimes people will say, "Oh, why should it matter if my citations aren't perfect?" That is the type of thing you will actually be doing in your legal job. And when you submit to a court, they expect these to be perfect. You can like that or not like that, but basically, anyone who's looking to hire you, they are looking for you to do this type of thing. So, if you send them a writing sample that has bad citations, you're not going to be hired, full stop.

Sadie Jones: Absolutely. And I think this is a situation where law students can kind of get tripped up on what we were saying, like making it the perfect piece of writing



and getting into the legal theory and all of that. And that's not actually what they're looking for here.

Alison Monahan: No.

Sadie Jones: So, you need to be focused on the details.

Alison Monahan: Right. It basically needs to be clean, easy to read, kind of flow, have appropriate headers, have appropriate transitions. Short, like we said, is generally better, unless they've specifically requested a certain length. It's absolutely fine to cut out sections of a longer document. We'll talk in a minute about where you can look for a writing sample. But you may have written a paper that's 30 pages and you might want to only send five pages – that's totally fine. You want to put it in context and kind of explain what's missing and what this is, but you definitely could just cut out pieces.

Sadie Jones: And I have seen many writing samples that are upwards of 15 pages, and that is a big turn-off.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. It just looks like you didn't try, or you didn't understand what this was about.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, and you don't want them to have to come back to you and say, "We need something shorter." I think that's bad.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think generally speaking rule of thumb, I think four to five pages is about right. Keep it pithy, something that someone can flip through in a couple of minutes – that's what kind of what we're looking for. But yeah, I think pithy, too. Don't send something where you're just droning on and on, because what they're really looking for is, is this a person who can write clearly, who can communicate well, and is this someone who, if they wrote something, I would be able to use it?

Sadie Jones: Definitely. And then you get the point, like you said, of what the assignment was, what they're looking for from you. We know that if you're starting as a 1L, you might have no idea what this is, so this is why we're explaining it and why you should maybe try to get examples or writing samples from other people, so you can kind of get an idea of what's being submitted, what's sort of expected of you.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, let's actually kind of switch topics to that. Where can people kind of look to find a good writing sample? And obviously, this is going to vary if you are a 1L versus if you're later on in your law school career. What would be appropriate?



- Sadie Jones: So if you're a 1L, most likely you're getting this from Legal Research and Writing class.
- Alison Monahan: You don't really have other options
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, most likely. I guess there might be somebody who's written something else, some other piece of legal writing, but that's probably where you're getting it from. And hopefully, it's something you worked on and you have kind of ready to go from that.
- Alison Monahan: Right. And if you feel like maybe you didn't do so well in Legal Writing, I think that's a situation where you need to evaluate, "Is there some piece of this that is okay that I can use?" You might even go talk to your TA or your professor about this and say, "Look, if I was going to use this as a writing sample, what do you think I should do?" And they may have suggestions about which pieces are stronger, you may have to do some editing – that's all totally normal. You're allowed to edit this. It doesn't have to be the exact thing you've turned in; you want to make it better than that.
- Sadie Jones: Definitely. And if you're going into 1L year now, this is something to think about going into it, that you're going to want to come out of it with a writing sample. And so hopefully, it's not a last-minute situation, which I think a lot of students get themselves into – they haven't really thought about it, and it's not ready, and you're waiting for comments. It's on you to go back and get it done.
- Alison Monahan: Right. And typically, your most standard kind of legal writing is going to be your first semester, so you have plenty of time to work on that. A lot of people, a lot of schools do moot court 1L second semester – that can also be a great place to get your writing sample. But you don't have a ton of options – that's just the reality.
- Sadie Jones: Right, you're going to get it from school.
- Alison Monahan: Right. Hopefully, when you're a 2 or a 3L, you've got more options. What are some of those?
- Sadie Jones: So, you could get them from your summer job that you had over your 1L summer, anything else that you did where you were writing, and other writing courses, clinics. I think you have usually more of a variety, where you can pick something that you think is best.
- Alison Monahan: Right. Frankly, your writing sample really ought to get better after your first year. And I think sometimes people don't think about that either; they just keep the same one that they had from their first semester. But hopefully, you've become a better writer by the time that you're graduating 3L. So I think you do



want to be thinking throughout your law school experience, again, where do you need to update your writing sample, right?

Sadie Jones: Definitely. And I think there's a chance to maybe show a few writing samples to somebody who can help you kind of pick. Maybe you've looked at them a lot so you need sort of an objective person to tell you, "No, you should definitely go with this one."

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think too, particularly when you're applying for things like clerkships, you want to be thinking about what message you might be sending with your writing sample, or for the topic. For me, for example, I ended up submitting what some people would have probably thought was a fairly controversial topic at the time, and I did think about, is this kind of the best? I liked the paper, I thought it was really well done, it was an interesting legal question. But I did think about what message this was sending to certain judges, and then I decided, frankly, I probably don't want to work for anyone who has a problem with this.

Sadie Jones: Good point.

Alison Monahan: Basically, it was about same-sex asylum cases. And so some people might say, "Oh well, you definitely shouldn't use that", but I was proud of the paper, I thought it was well done, and I also thought it was probably a pretty good filter. But I do think you want to think about the message you're sending and make sure you're okay with it.

Sadie Jones: Definitely. And I think that could apply at a law firm job also. And not necessarily that you get dinged for it, but you may be sending a message, so just make sure you're comfortable with what you're saying.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think if you are applying, say that you're applying at a large firm and all of your resume before this kind of screams, "I only want to do public interest work" – if you have a writing sample that maybe is on a topic that's less related to that, that might be better than sending one that is more related to public interest, because at some point people are kind of questioning like, "Do you really want to do this job or not?"

Sadie Jones: Definitely. And as we've talked about before, everything is part of your story and the story you're trying to tell. So, you may not think of a writing sample as fitting in as well with that, but it does.

Alison Monahan: Oh, for sure.

Sadie Jones: So, it's a chance to maybe balance things, like you said, if everything else screams "public interest".



- Alison Monahan: Right. But say you did a class or a clinic or something where you wrote a paper that was more corporate-focused or whatever – then it sends a signal like, "Oh okay, this person is probably actually serious about this job." Alright, let's talk a little bit more about getting writing samples from your work, because I think sometimes people don't think about some of the questions here; they just think, "Oh, I worked on this thing, and of course I can use it." But that's not really right, is it?
- Sadie Jones: It's definitely not right, and I've seen a lot of people get into hot water in this situation. And it is something that may be talked about in your orientation or something like that, or your mentor talks to you, or partner. But it may not be something that's emphasized, so it's possible you sort of missed what the rules are. But I would just always go back to, you need to get clearance to use anything. Even if it's something that you wrote, it's not yours.
- Alison Monahan: Right. You do not own this intellectual property.
- Sadie Jones: Exactly. And I think some law students do get confused about that. So, that's one thing to consider, is that you need to get permission, and make sure you're getting permission from the right person.
- Alison Monahan: And I would say probably get that permission in writing.
- Sadie Jones: Absolutely. So, it's great to send an email, just confirming. And it might be something that's a follow-up from you've already had a conversation, that they said like, "Sure." And then you always want to make sure that you've okayed the final version that you're going to submit with them. So, if there was stuff that you needed to redact or whatever it was, you want to make sure that they have approved that this is fine for the public.
- Alison Monahan: Right, because the issue here is you don't want to be sending out client confidential information. You don't want anything that's remotely identifiable. These are client documents, so you've got to think of client confidentiality and all these things. And obviously, your employer does not want some piece of work product that is very easily identifiable as a certain client to be out, being submitted to other places. It's just not a good look for anyone.
- Sadie Jones: You may have multiple things that you've done over the summer, so think about that when you're even deciding where to start to choose. There may be something that's kind of easier to adapt.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, for sure. If it's more sort of focused on a legal issue or something like that, I think that's probably better than something that's very, very highly fact-specific. I think that also, you've got to keep in mind this really needs to basically



be your own work and not something that's really heavily edited by someone else. And I think in that case, maybe you can go back to an earlier draft and work on that or something. But if you wrote, say, a first draft or something, and then it went through three or four other lawyers and it looks nothing like what you submitted, and then it gets submitted to a court and you want to use that as your writing sample – that is probably not appropriate.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, I think this is a situation where you can kind of tell if it's crossed the line. And so, if you're asking, then it probably isn't okay. You probably know if it's really your work. And that doesn't mean that somebody didn't sort of help you edit it or do a final read-through, polish it, that kind of thing; but the actual work should be yours.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think ideally, too, you want this to show some level of analysis and not just be something... People sometimes think, "Well, the only thing I worked on were discovery responses." That's probably not really appropriate to use as a writing sample, unless you were digging into some issue on those. But you're not just looking for like, "Well, here's what I did at work." You want this to show your legal thinking and your skills.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, because I think some of that is sort of just laziness, like, "I don't really want to dig deeper, find something else", or whatever it is.

Alison Monahan: Or just misunderstanding it.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, yeah. It's just like, you need to really think about this and think about what message it's sending, what it's showing about what you're able to do, that kind of thing.

Alison Monahan: Right. And do you think employers expect people or think it's okay if someone's gotten help to make their writing sample better?

Sadie Jones: I think that employers absolutely expect that somebody else has read it. So, I think that's kind of expected. But like we said, it should be your work. But that's one of the reasons that I sort of think that any mistake or any big issue with it is sort of looked at even worse, because they assume that other people have helped you with it, to some degree.

Alison Monahan: You're right. Yeah, I think you should think of this more as your resume and cover letter-type style document than you think of it as an exam or something you're submitting for Legal Writing. This should be as polished as you can make it, while still being your own work. And I think it's usually pretty obvious if somebody has totally changed everything for you. But in terms of making sure your citations are all correct and those kinds of things, your formatting is consistent – you definitely want other eyes on this.



Sadie Jones: Yeah, and that's completely the expectation. There are certain people who really put a lot of stock in writing samples and insist on reading all the writing samples for all the students. And then there are other people who would never even dream of looking at it, and you sort of never know who you're going to get. So, you have to assume that you're going to get somebody who cares about this.

Alison Monahan: Right. And also, this is a topic that can come up in your interview as well. I've definitely spoken with people about their writing samples. I've had people ask me about my writing sample. So you're also kind of setting the stage for something you might end up talking about in an interview. That's probably more likely if it's a paper topic than if it's just your 1L drafting of memo to the court about whatever. There are people who are probably not likely to talk to you about it, but they might. If you're casting around looking for things to talk to someone about, your writing sample is always a good way to kill a few minutes.

Sadie Jones: Definitely. They are just looking sometimes for things to say. And if it is something interesting, it may be something that they actually want to talk to you about.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think that's true if you're applying for a very... This is probably more later years, but if you're applying for a certain type of job, it's great if your writing sample can relate to that because then it is a topic you can talk about. It could also be your note, I guess, that you've written, other than, again, you get into a lot of editing issues. Obviously, your first draft polished up would be fine, but then if it's gone through multiple rounds of revision at Law Review or wherever it's been published, probably that's not necessarily the greatest option. But also at that point it probably doesn't really matter because you can just be like, "Here's my published note." And they're like, "Great."

Sadie Jones: I could have just seen that, yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you can include it. There, what I would probably do is include a piece of it and then link to where it's published, if they want to read the whole thing. But that would be a great thing to talk about, actually, in an interview.

Sadie Jones: Definitely. I also know that some students sort of have a shorter and a longer writing sample prepared, depending on what it's for. And so, that might be an idea that's definitely for... If you're a 2L, 3L, you probably have more things you're going to use it for, you're applying for, and then you have more to choose from. But that might be a good idea just to have that in your back pocket, if that's a possibility.



- Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think. And it's not out of the question that someone could come back and ask for a longer version, so you do want to make sure you have something basically you could put together in a day or so to send to them.
- Sadie Jones: Yes, definitely.
- Alison Monahan: Alright. What if people are like, "This is all great. I wish I had a note. I haven't done that. I'm only a 1L. I don't really know what to do"? What if people just can't come up with anything? Can I choose an exam answer, if I got an A on it? Is that okay?
- Sadie Jones: I think you could write something. I think that could be okay.
- Alison Monahan: I would generally not recommend this course of action, but...
- Sadie Jones: If you had to.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. Say you're absolutely bombed Legal Writing and you think that it's not something that you can renovate and get going – you may end up in a situation where you're just like, "Alright. Well, you know, this was an exam answer. I got an A on it. Maybe I can do something with this." It would definitely be unconventional. I think it would raise some eyebrows, but it's not out of the question.
- Sadie Jones: It's better than having nothing.
- Alison Monahan: Right, you have to have something. Sometimes people wonder too, "Well, can I just write something from scratch?" You could. I'm not sure if that would make much sense.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. I think you could if you were really out of any other options. With any of these sort of unconventional situations though, you're probably going to have to explain it. So, you're going to need the story about how you ended up just using an exam answer, writing something from scratch, or why you couldn't use what you wrote in Legal Writing. So, I think that's something you're just going to have to think about.
- Alison Monahan: Right. If I was going to write something totally from scratch, I think the way that I would frame it – whether this was completely true or not – is that it was a pre-submission draft of something I was planning on submitting to a Law Review.
- Sadie Jones: And something you were interested in or something.
- Alison Monahan: It could actually be something that you're planning to possibly submit, say, to a special teacher later on or something like that. I think that is completely



believable. It's a lot of work. I'm not sure I'd recommend it, unless you actually want to do it. But yeah, you're right. You're going to have to tell some believable story about why you can't just use your first year. Maybe your grade tells that story, but...

- Sadie Jones: Yeah. I guess you could have a story about how... Yeah, if your grades are particularly not great, you could talk about how you sort of improved and you've been working on your writing, or something like that. Maybe that would be the narrative.
- Alison Monahan: Right. But I think ideally, if you have any possibility of doing it, you probably just want to use your 1L Legal Writing work.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. And even if you need to fix it, I think that's probably better than the alternative.
- Alison Monahan: I agree. I feel like pick the one piece of that, say, 20-page paper or whatever you submitted that doesn't seem that terrible, and then clean it up, and then hopefully it's perfectly sufficient. It doesn't have to be the best thing ever; it just has to be in the realm of, this is not going to raise eyebrows and make people start asking questions.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah. And I think that's the biggest thing to keep in mind. I think sometimes people put too much pressure on themselves about what this needs to be. And so, it needs to not have mistakes, it needs to be coherent, but it doesn't need to be amazing.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah. Particularly, if you're applying for jobs just after 1L or during 1L, nobody expects you to have this amazing legal work. They just expect you to have a basic competence level and that's really what they're looking for. Hopefully, for almost everyone, your 1L work in Legal Writing, or moot court, or whatever it is second semester can be that paper.
- Sadie Jones: Yeah, or it can become that paper if it wasn't.
- Alison Monahan: Right, exactly. Yes, it can be shaped into something that is perfectly acceptable.
- Sadie Jones: And you could ask for help in terms of what you need to do.
- Alison Monahan: Yeah, and you should. If your Legal Writing experience was not great, you should definitely ask for help, whether that help is from your school, from your teacher, from someone outside. We sometimes look at people's writing samples for them and help them out with it. We sometimes help them pick if they're applying for clerkships and they're not really sure what would be better, which



of these is stronger. Someone needs to be that outside eye for you, but there're lots of options.

Sadie Jones: And a disclaimer here, because I have heard students say this before. So, for whatever reason you really feel like you can't use it, and the class did not go well and whatever it is – your story or your narrative can't be that it was the professor's fault, and they were terrible. I have heard a lot of students say that, and I'm not saying that they weren't terrible, but you cannot tell an employer that.

Alison Monahan: No, no. You need to take responsibility. Somebody in that class did okay and it wasn't you, so...

Sadie Jones: Exactly. So whatever happened, that's not what you can convey. You need to own it and have some other reason.

Alison Monahan: Right. If somebody asked you, "Why didn't you use your first semester Legal Writing work?" and you say, "Well, because I hated my professor and I thought they did a terrible job" – that is not what we want to hear.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, so let's stay positive.

Alison Monahan: Right. Just say, "Oh well, I thought this other thing was a better representation of the quality of my work." Fine, whatever. Again, no one really cares. You just can't say things that are going to raise eyebrows.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, exactly.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, we're about out of time on this. Do you have any final thoughts?

Sadie Jones: I think people should remember they need a writing sample prepared, whether or not they've been asked directly to submit one for a particular job, because you never know when you're going to need it. So I would always have one for any jobs that you're going to be applying for at any point in law school. So, after each year, you should have a really solid writing sample. It's not something that you should wait to see if someone might ask for.

Alison Monahan: That's a great point.

Sadie Jones: Yeah, let's just be prepared. Don't overthink it. It doesn't have to be a big deal, but it becomes a big deal if it's the night before and you need something.

Alison Monahan: No, I think that's a great point. I think it is something you want to be thinking about over time. Even at the end of each semester, kind of evaluate, "Okay, is there something I did? Is the work I did this semester that I was really happy



with, that maybe would be a better writing sample than what I have?" And if what you have is still your first semester Legal Writing memo, the answer to that question is probably "Yes". And so, you should spend some time doing a better upgraded version that is, again, not going to disappoint people when they look at it.

Sadie Jones: Definitely.

Alison Monahan: Alright. Well, thank you so much for joining us. Unfortunately, with that, we are out of time.

Sadie Jones: Thanks for having me.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. For more career help and the opportunity to work one-on-one with us, including on your writing sample, check out [CareerDicta.com](https://www.careerdicta.com). If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on your favorite listening app. We would really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website [contact form](https://www.lawschooltoolbox.com/contact-form) at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

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