

5 Writing Tips for Attorney Rankings and Awards

Chambers season is around the corner – and of course, rankings for other lists happen all year long. For attorneys, client service is always top priority, but to win clients in the first place, they have to invest in marketing and business development. After all, clients hire attorneys who stand out from the rest of the competition. They want someone whose knowledge and skills they trust.

Yelp and Google help everyone find restaurants and hair salons. In the legal field, rankings and awards give attorneys the chance to set themselves apart. Different lists have **different criteria** to distinguish lawyers, but the ones carrying the most clout with legal spend management demand a lot of work, including comprehensive details in submissions, rock-solid client references and positive feedback from peers.

You can't control client feedback or what other lawyers say, but you can write strong submissions that attract a reviewer's attention. A lawyer's fortune in the marketplace can rise with the attention of one research analyst, making rankings submissions a golden marketing opportunity. Yet many lawyers squander this potential with lackluster, dry, generic or thoughtless submission entries.

At Jaffe, we have helped countless attorneys win awards and rise through the ranks of prestigious lists such as Chambers. Here are some of our top tips to help attorneys easily improve their submissions and capture the attention of that critical gatekeeper, the research analyst.

1. Know Your Audience

The first general rule of writing applies to legal rankings submissions: Write for your audience. Lawyers often fall into a pitfall – they write about cases in submissions as if they are writing for a judge or opposing counsel. That means a lot of hedging, alleging and unneeded prepositions.

Some attorneys are fabulous writers, and some lawsuits could make titillating beach reading – believe it or not – but when lawyers write like lawyers, their matter summaries drown in watered-down sidesteps and qualifiers. Research analysts and reviewers aren't opposing counsel or judges. Often, they aren't lawyers at all. They read hundreds or more of legalese-laden submissions that all sound the same. Stand out, be memorable and demonstrate to the reviewer why the attorney is one of the best in this practice area and market. This is the most important principle to remember, and the foundation for all the others.



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2. Make It Move

Here's an example of a case summary based on many from attorneys that I've edited. The lawyer will write something like, "The firm was engaged by a bank client for litigation related to liability concerning certain fees allegedly payable to certain agents." Snooze.

Attorneys and the people who write for them should always be accurate in marketing materials, including submissions and nominations. Accuracy is beautiful – sharp, concise and direct. The above example is anything but sharp, concise and direct. It's bloated, stagnant non-information.

One of the easiest ways to correct lifeless writing is using active words – verbs – to create action in a sentence. Avoid passive voice and use active verbs, which force the writer to consider the most important elements of a story: the actor, the action and the object of the action.

In the above example, tell it like it is: "The firm represented one of the region's largest banks in litigation from agents who sued for fees from preparing PPP loan applications during the coronavirus pandemic." Now we have a lot more pizzazz, and none of it sensationalized. The firm is showcasing the caliber of its clientele, giving the conflict (tension sells), and tying the matter into one of the most salient issues of the past couple of years.

A client sues and a firm represents. Use words that convey action – embezzle, conceal, fight, deceive. Use the word "allegedly" as a security blanket if you need to, but breathe life into the story with action.

3. If It Bleeds, It Leads

Contrary to some belief, law is interesting, and not just litigation. In any practice area, lawyers can illustrate why particular matters involved quick thinking, unusual strategies, or weird details. Spotlight complexities, interesting details, obscure or novel areas of law, or quirky personalities or circumstances.

Rankings submissions give attorneys the opportunity to showcase the caliber of their practices. Each case summary should tell that story.

For real estate transactions, that could mean describing developments that change the social fabric of a neighborhood, such as mixed-use developments or affordable housing. For bankruptcy, that could mean highlighting complexities or the need to keep peace among contentious creditors. For transactional commercial lawyers, it could mean setting up an exciting startup or assisting businesses that are representative of the local economy. Matters could highlight national trends, savvy strategic moves or tenacious discovery that uncovers evidence to flip the momentum of a case.

In other words, give the who, what, when, where and why – why it mattered to the client. Then discuss what the attorney did to assist the client that would set her apart from others in the market.

4. Your Lawyer Baseball Card

Some lawyers seem to think they need to fit into a mold to get anywhere in rankings submissions – but portraying a lawyer with boilerplate lawyerisms is the easiest way to be forgotten. To shine, every case summary and biography should portray the lawyer as a human being and how she approaches her practice. A lawyer’s baseball card should highlight major victories, achievements and impact on the legal system, but even quotidian work can illustrate an attorney’s particular strengths, skills and approaches to her practice. As a reviewer reads the submission, a character should form in the mind – a memorable and likeable character.

A submission’s strength lies in coherence. When I draft submissions, I begin with case summaries to get a sense of an attorney’s practice, achievements of the past year, strengths and personality. Then I take a bird’s-eye view of the career, including major achievements, involvement in changes in law, extracurricular activities, pro bono and charitable work, education, and formative experience, such as challenges faced as a woman or attorney of color.

The biography and [firm overview sections](#) provide an opportunity to introduce the attorney as a character and introduce the rest of the content, summarizing key achievements, strengths and high points. When approaching these sections, and everything else in the submission, it’s worth reiterating the key point – remember your audience. While the firm’s website is crafted for potential clients, rankings submissions are meant to capture the attention of the reviewer or analyst, and show why your firm and attorney stand out.

5. Keep It on the Down-Low

Marketing can conflict with confidentiality, a primary concern for attorneys. Many rankings submissions honor confidentiality, including Chambers. Nonetheless, many attorneys are reluctant to name clients, even in the confidential section of a submission. There are ways to describe confidential elements of matters carefully and still illuminate the caliber of the client or the matter. Describe the client’s industry, and position the industry within the economy. Does the client have an international presence? Is it a leader in the sector or region? Give the size of the client, and check its ranking on the Fortune 500 list.

Say a firm represents Google but doesn’t want to name the company. It could say something like, “The firm represents a Fortune 50 global technology company.” Fortune 50 telegraphs the size and prestige of the client, but continues to protect confidentiality.

When it comes to confidential monetary amounts, many attorneys are comfortable with ballpark estimates – the plaintiff sought eight figures in damages, or the attorney secured a confidential settlement for a small fraction of sought damages.

Details can help a submission come alive despite confidentiality limitations. Remember that these [case studies](#) aren’t about the client; client and case descriptions provide context for the real focus, which is the lawyer’s skills and experience. Show how the

attorney set herself apart from other lawyers practicing in the area. That's what matters.

Interested in more writing tips for rankings submissions? Reach out to me, Ada Kase, at ajkase@jaffepr.com, or my colleague Eryan O'Keefe at eokeefe@jaffepr.com.