

COVER LETTER BASICS

Cover letters are the first, and possibly only, opportunity that you will get to speak directly to an employer. Therefore, you want to highlight the skills you will bring to the organization, explain why you are interested in working for the employer, and demonstrate your ability to write clearly and concisely. This is your opportunity to advocate on your own behalf and distinguish yourself from the applicant pool.

Six Steps for Drafting a Cover Letter

Step 1: Recognize that your cover letter is a writing sample. Because your cover letter may be the only writing sample the employer reads, it should read like a professional letter and a legal brief. Take care to strike a professional business tone and demonstrate your attention to detail. Accuracy, content and skill are essential. Remember, almost all lawyers consider themselves serious writers and will read your writing with that in mind.

Step 2: Outline your claims. Look at the position description and the skills the employer is seeking. Consider your resume and identify your skills, subject matter expertise, experience in a similar practice setting and any geographic connections to the employer. Remember that your readers are attorneys and you must support your “claims” (i.e. research skills, writing skills, interest in the subject matter) with evidence. Use your academic and professional experiences to support your claims. Identify examples of projects you completed, papers you have written and subjects you have researched as evidence of your skills. Outline your claims so that they flow logically and do not read like a mere list.

Avoid generalizations. Write like a lawyer, be specific, precise and provide evidence to support your claims.

Step 3: State who you are. The first paragraph of your cover letter should generally begin with you telling the employer where you go to law school, what year you are in law school, and for what job you are applying. If someone in your network suggested that you apply or has some connection with the employer, indicate that in the first paragraph of the cover letter. Also, if you are applying for jobs in a different city, be sure to include your reason for wanting to work in that city. The following are examples of good reasons for wanting to work in a particular location: you are from that location; you went to college there; you are interested in X industry, which is based there; and your family moved there. The following are generally bad reasons for wanting to work in another city: you heard that the salaries are higher there; you have never been to the particular city, but you hear that it is nice; and you want to “try the city out.”

The following is sample introductory language:

“Dean Morant suggested that I contact you about a summer internship. I am a first-year student at The George Washington University Law School and am extremely interested in working for the New York office of the American Civil Liberties Union this summer. Having grown up in Suffolk County, I look forward to starting my legal career in New York this summer.”

Step 4: State why you want to work for the prospective employer. To generate a good reason why you want to work for a particular employer, 1) think about what you want to do and why and 2) research the employer, including the employer’s website and any recent cases or matters in which the employer has been involved.

Note – for government agencies and public interest organizations, it is extremely important that you indicate your interest in the mission of the organization. You can usually find this information on the organization’s website.

Good reasons do NOT include how much you hope to learn from the job. Avoid language such as “I am interested in x position because I want to improve my research and writing skills or learn more about x topic.” Cover letters should be about how you can benefit the employer, and not about how the experience will benefit you.

Ideally, you will write a unique cover letter for each employer. If you cannot do that, it is okay to categorize employers and have similar language that you use for each category of employer. For example, you may have one letter that you use for applying for litigation positions, another for corporate law positions, and another for environmental law positions.

The following is sample language indicating interest in the employer:

“I am a first-year law student from The George Washington University Law School and I am writing to express my interest in a summer internship position at the ABA Juvenile Justice Center. I believe the opportunity at the ABA Juvenile Justice Center matches my qualifications and career goals in child advocacy and juvenile justice.”

Step 5: State why you should be hired. This is the heart of your cover letter. It is your chance to set yourself apart from all the other law students who want to work for a legal employer. What makes you different?

The best way to approach this is to think about what skills and practical experiences (non-legal counts!) you have and how those skills and experiences might be useful to the employer. You need to do the work for the employer – it is not effective to just rattle off a few things without explaining why they would be useful to the employer. Similarly, you do not want to just recite your resume. Your cover letter should provide just enough detail about your skills and experiences to entice the employer to read your resume.

Resist the temptation to tell the employer what you hope to benefit from the position. Instead emphasize how you will add value to the employer. Remember above all else, the employer is hiring you to work.

Start off this section with a topic sentence:

“The research and writing skills I developed in my professional and academic experiences will allow me to serve as an effective intern at the ABA Juvenile Justice Center.”

From there, support your thesis by explaining each aspect of it in turn, using one or two brief, to-the-point sentences to get the point across.

“As a Research Associate at Compass Lexecon, I was responsible for managing up to fifteen Research Associates to offer precise research and data analysis against tight deadlines on multiple cases. In this role, I summarized my findings and drafted memoranda relied upon by Ph.D. economists testifying in court. In addition, as a volunteer coordinator at The Reading Connection, I regularly research factors affecting literacy rates amongst indigent populations and draft summary reports for the Executive Director.”

Step 6: Summarize and Conclude. Provide a short summary of your pitch and reiterate your interest. Don't restate information that can already be found in the header or in another part of your cover letter. Be strong in your closing, but do not demand or presume you will receive an interview. If you are applying to jobs in a different city and plan to be in that city in the near future, let the employer know that as well. Finally, if the job posting asks for specific information, such as your availability, be sure to include it in your cover letter.

The following is sample language for a conclusion:

“My academic preparation and my professional experiences have prepared me well to serve as a judicial intern. I have enclosed my resume, transcript, and writing sample for your review and I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

For additional tips and guidance in drafting your cover letter, register in CORE for a Career Center Cover Letter Workshop. A schedule and instructions for registering for a workshop can also be found on the Career Center website (www.gwlawcareers.org).