

Cover Letters

The cover letter is just as important to your job search as the resume. A cover letter is your introduction to potential employers and provides you with the opportunity to draw the reader's attention to particular skills and experiences. It is your chance to illustrate to the employer how your qualifications make you the best person for the job. Employers expect that a resume be accompanied by a personalized cover letter.

If the purpose of a resume is to receive an interview, the purpose of the cover letter is to market your resume and convince the prospective employer to take an interest in you. Aside from making an introduction, the cover letter is also the employer's first exposure to your written work. Although a cover letter is not a formal writing sample, it is the first indication of how clearly and concisely you can express your thoughts and ideas on paper. Because employers look at your cover letter as a sign of your writing ability, it is imperative that your cover letter be well written and professional.

Writing Tips

Before writing any cover letter, you must research the employer. You should gather information about the firm or organization before you write a cover letter to them. You should then use that information when you write the cover letter to relate your background more directly to the specific needs of the firm or organization. Doing research allows you to personalize your cover letter and convince the employer that you have some knowledge of their firm, that you are truly interested in them, and that you have made an informed decision to apply for a position there.

Your cover letters should always exude enthusiasm, sincerity, and genuine interest. The employer will take more notice of the personalized letter specifically addressed to him or her than the generic cover letter addressed "To whom it may concern". Most generic letters/mass mailings are quickly discarded.

When writing your letter, keep the requirements of the job in mind and address them specifically. Remember, it's not what the organization can do for you; it's what you can do for the organization that counts. Your letter should be brief, easy to read, and should highlight your best and most relevant qualifications.

Presentation

Your cover letter should never be more than one page long. Once you include your return address and the firm's address, you do not have much space left! That is why you need to let the reader know why you are writing immediately. Try to make the best of the space you are given. Don't crowd your letter with too much material.

Printing your cover letter on good quality paper is best. Use traditional stationery such as plain, linen weave, or laid paper. Use white, ivory, or pale gray paper to give your cover letter a professional look. Avoid using paper with speckles or flecks and don't use darker grays or tan colors. Employers often make copies of resumes and letters for other colleagues to review; this style of stationery does not copy well. Use the same paper for your cover letter, resume, reference lists and follow up letters.

Paragraph 1

The goal of the first paragraph is to get the reader's attention. Tell them who you are and why you are writing the letter. The first sentence of your first paragraph must grab the reader's attention. "I am currently a second year student at the West Virginia University College of Law" does not compel your reader to continue reading. Compare that bland opening sentence to the following: "Professor Pat McGinley recommended that I contact you because of your expertise in environmental law."

Try something like: "I was intrigued by your profile in the August issue of the West Virginia Lawyer magazine" or "My extensive academic training in labor law and strong interest in that area may be an asset to your firm." Use something that you learned in your research about the firm to lead off your first paragraph or identify a personal connection between you and the reader.

Address your letter to a specific person. While finding the correct addressee might take some effort, it is well worth it. Look on the firm's web site, call the firm, or check with the career services office. This extra effort will impress employers.

Paragraph 2

Here is your chance to tell the employer why you chose to apply to them. Make it clear what attracted you to the employer and what about the position interests

you. You should write about any elements of your background that could be of use to the employer, such as past job experiences and the transferable skills that you have acquired. Your research of the employer comes into play here in allowing you to link your background with their law practice.

Articulate what separates you from other candidates. Be sure to emphasize your strengths, past achievements, leadership skills, and challenges you have faced. You may also include language abilities and other professional skills, when relevant. Back up an assertion of skills and abilities with examples. For example, if you assert that you have excellent research and writing skills, then provide your grade in legal research and writing, list your published articles, or discuss work experiences that have enabled you to hone your writing skills.

You may also wish to state your interest in the city where the employer is located. This may be very important to some employers. Many employers want you to identify your connection to a certain locale.

Paragraph 3

In the third and final paragraph, you should directly request a personal interview or meeting. Indicate what “next steps” you have planned. Make it easy for the employer to schedule a meeting. Specify times that are convenient for you and provide telephone numbers and an e-mail address where you can be reached. If you are applying out of state, tell the employer when you will be in the area and available for an interview. If you chose to state that you will make a follow-up phone call in a week or 10 days about the possibility of an interview, be sure that you follow through.

Always include a line of gratitude. For example: "I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the possibilities of a summer law clerk position. I will be in the Charleston area over the Thanksgiving break and would be available at your convenience during that time. Thank you for your consideration." There are endless ways to thank the employer for their time and consideration; just be certain that you do.

The closing paragraph is the place to respond to any requests for salary requirements or history. Salaries vary tremendously and are based on a number of factors: practice specialty (criminal, IP, entertainment etc.) type of organization (government, corporate, private, etc.) firm size, region of the country, etc. As a result if you are new to the field of law it is best to err on the side of caution. If you have some idea of salary ranges for that particular firm or job you might list a range but the safest bet is to simply state something to the effect of “My salary requirements are negotiable.” Basic salary information is available at the career

services office via such sources as the National Association for Legal Career Professionals (NALP) Annual Salary Survey.

There are an endless number of configurations for closing your cover letters. Use whichever format you feel most comfortable with. But remember, if you tell an employer that you will call them in a few weeks or on a specific date, you must do so! If you have not heard from the employer after waiting two weeks for a response, write to them again and repeat your interest, asking if you can provide additional information. Better yet, call the person to whom you wrote and ask him/her if you can come in and talk to them. If you are asked for a writing sample, offer to drop it off so that you have the chance to meet the prospective employer face to face.

Things to Remember

- No typos or grammatical mistakes - *proofread very carefully*. You must do more than a standard spell check.
- Don't address the letter to "hiring partner" - always send it to a specific person.
- If you know someone at the firm, use that contact. Send a copy to the person that you know. This is especially true for large firms that receive thousands of resumes. If someone can put a good word in for you, you may get more serious consideration.
- Limit your letter to 1 page - good legal writing is always concise -- your cover letter should be, too.
- Make it clear from your cover letter that you have researched the employer.
- Back up your assertions about your qualifications with examples.
- Employers want to know what you can do for them, not vice versa.
- Never point out negative things about yourself - don't apologize - accentuate the positive.