Cover Letter Guide

PURPOSE

The purpose of your cover letter, in combination with your resume, is to persuade an employer to interview you. The letter should not merely be a recitation of your prior experiences. Rather, your cover letter should highlight two or three particular experiences or skills, and relate those experiences or skills to the work of the employer or to the job description. Your cover letter is your opportunity to tell a potential employer why you would be a good fit for his or her organization.

RESEARCH

Before you begin writing your cover letter, educate yourself about the employer through simple internet research. Do a search on Google, Martindale.com, PSJD.org, LinkedIn.com, and the employer’s own site to learn the following:

- Where is the employer located?
- How many lawyers work there?
- What are the various practice areas?
- What, if anything, seems to be the focus of the practice?
- What, if any, is the employer’s philosophy or outlook?
- Do they have NYLS alumni on staff?
- What are some of the employer’s current or past projects or cases that you may want to reference in your letter?

MECHANICS

Your cover letter is one of the very few documents on which an employer will base the decision of whether or not to interview you. After you write your letter, you should read it out loud to yourself, and have your career counselor read it. There is no worse feeling than pressing “Send” to your dream job and realizing that you spelled the employer’s name wrong.

There is no absolute standard format for a cover letter, but you must be consistent. That is, you may use block paragraph form or indent the first line of your paragraphs; just make sure that every paragraph is in the same form. You should use the same margins, font size and font type as your resume; we recommend Times New Roman, Garamond, or Perpetua.

Your address – Your name, address, email address, and phone number should be at the top of the page. This header should be center-justified, and be identical to the one on your resume; this creates the look of professional letterhead.

Date - The date that you send the letter should be below your address. This should be left- or right-justified.

Recipient – Address each letter to a specific person. If a name is not listed on the job posting, conduct online research to find the name of the hiring partner, supervising attorney, or human resources contact.
Recipient's address – The recipient’s address should be below the date, left-justified:
Ms. Rebecca Smith/The Honorable Rebecca Smith (for a Judge)
Title
Company Name
Street Address
City, State Zip

If you are sending your cover letter as an email, and not by mail or fax, it is preferred that you both:
1) Send the cover letter as an attachment, separate from the resume. Many employers will appreciate being able to save and/or forward your cover letter as a separate document. Name your attached documents by your name, the employer’s name, and the document name, e.g. “Smith – NYC Law Dept. Letter.pdf.”
and
2) Use the letter as your email message. Start the email with the salutation, and include your contact information in your signature block.

Salutation – The Salutation should read, “Dear Ms. Smith:” or “Dear Judge Smith:” It is appropriate to address the person by their last name and to use a colon, not a comma.

THE BODY

Introduction
Let the reader know to which position you are applying. Examples:
1) I am a 2013 graduate of New York Law School, and I would be honored to be considered for your 2014 Fellowship.
2) As a recent graduate of New York Law School with a concentration in real estate law, I am writing to submit my application for an associate position with your office.
3) As an experienced family law litigator, I am excited to submit my application for an associate position with your law firm.

Core
Follow your introduction with one to three paragraphs, highlighting your skills, interests, and experiences. The relevant focus here is not necessarily what talents and experiences YOU value in yourself, but what talents and experiences the employer would value. To determine what the employer is looking for consider the following:

1) The language of the job posting – What does the employer explicitly state they are looking for? If the employer is looking for someone to do “legal research and writing,” it makes sense to open by discussing your experiences and skills in that area. If they are looking for someone who is committed to a cause, discuss your commitment to that cause. If they are looking for someone who can “assist with closings and multitask in a fast-paced environment,” it makes sense to discuss your transactional experiences/coursework, and to give an example of your ability to multitask. Consider the language and tone of the job posting. For example, if the posting says “we seek an eager graduate,” you might say something like, “I would love the opportunity to bring my energy and enthusiasm to your office.”
2) Your knowledge of the employer’s work. — Even when the job posting is thin and does not say more than the fact that they are seeking a lawyer, you can make an educated assumption about the skills and experience sought. For example, if you are applying for a job at the DA’s office, you can talk to a career counselor about what Assistant DA’s do (e.g., oral advocacy, investigation, witness interviews, motion-writing) and emphasize any skills or experiences you have in those areas.

Continually incorporate the employer

Your cover letter is not just about you. In order to get value out of articulating your skills, you should continually relate those skills back to the work of the employer. Thus, in discussing your writing ability, you might mention your high grade in Legal Writing, a prior internship where you did considerable research or your undergraduate major. But the final step is to remind the employer that you want to bring those experiences to his or her project. For example, “I would welcome the opportunity to apply these skills as a member of your firm’s commercial litigation group.” Be careful about starting too many sentences with “I” and “My,” and make sure you keep the focus on the employer’s needs.

Focus on the employer’s needs

Do not focus on what the position will do for you. The employer would MUCH rather hear how you will contribute to his or her practice. For example, avoid “A position with your office would enable me to build on my already strong investigative skills.” RATHER, “I am confident that my well-honed investigative skills would be a benefit to your firm.”

Closing paragraph

After reading your core paragraphs, it should be clear to the employer both why s/he should interview you, and why you would want to work for him or her. It is appropriate to close with an expression of appreciation and a reference to any enclosures or attachments. For example, “Thank you very much for your consideration. [Enclosed/attached] please find my resume, writing sample, and transcript. I look forward to hearing from you.”

Closing Salutation

Appropriate closing salutations include “Sincerely,” and “Regards.” If the letter is being sent electronically, type your full name and return address under the closing salutation. If it is being sent by mail or fax, sign the letter in ink, between the salutation and your typed name.
Dear Ms. Doe:

As a recent graduate of New York Law School, I am writing to apply for the Compliance Analyst position with Morgan Stanley. I am an excellent candidate for this position because of my strong academic credentials, my background in finance, and my law school internship experiences.

Prior to law school, I worked for Goldman Sachs as a Sales Assistant to a Senior Vice President broker. I maintained the client accounts of a team of five brokers, keeping clients up-to-date on the status of their accounts, and new investment products available to them. I conducted compliance tasks which involved monitoring and logging trading confirmations, maintaining compliance files, and handling Broker/Dealer mail in accordance with FINRA regulations. I also maintained master Broker/Dealer lists and organization charts, and reviewed all promotional materials for compliance as required by FINRA.

While in law school, I focused my upper-level coursework on areas of law that would help me to understand the legal aspects of the financial markets. My work experiences during law school have also further prepared me for this position. Through my internship with the New York State Attorney General’s Office I learned about the policy considerations involved in protecting investors’ economic rights. Later, I interned with an international business law firm located in Sao Paulo, Brazil. There I negotiated debt payment with American parent companies on behalf of Brazilian subsidiaries and wrote memoranda about the Brazilian version of limited liability companies. My current position with Women’s World Banking has broadened my research skills as I have examined the microfinance industry from a legal, finance, and policy perspective.

Thank you for your consideration. I welcome the opportunity to discuss my candidacy with you further. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Name
Dear Mr. Doe:

As an experienced personal injury attorney admitted to practice in New York, I am writing to apply to the mid-level litigation associate position at Park & Kelly LLP. I learned of this position through an associate in your New Jersey office, Jane Doe, whom I met at a New York Law School alumni event.

Since graduating from law school in 2008, I have worked as an associate at the law firm Aaronson & Rappaport, where I represent doctors and hospitals in complex medical malpractice and insurance defense litigation. I have managed over twenty personal injury cases, which involve writing pleadings and memoranda, taking and defending depositions, conducting settlement negotiations, and representing clients at trials. Through this experience, I have honed my legal research and writing skills, strengthened my public speaking ability, and gained a detailed understanding of personal injury litigation. I am excited to use these skills as an associate with your law firm.

I am particularly impressed with Park & Kelly's rapidly expanding business base in the healthcare field, as well as its national reputation as an industry leader in proactive compliance strategies. I understand that the Healthcare and Medical Malpractice Litigation groups have been on the cutting edge of new developments, providing clients with legal, economic and regulatory perspectives. I believe that my extensive experience defending healthcare professionals in complex state and federal litigation has equipped me to meaningfully contribute to the firm’s continued growth in this field.

Enclosed is a detailed resume that highlights my experience and education. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my interests and qualifications in person. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Alumni Name