

COVER LETTER ADVICE

PURPOSE

The purpose of your cover letter, in combination with your resume, is to *persuade* an employer to interview you. The letter should not be redundant to your resume; that is, it should not be a recitation of your prior experiences. Rather, your cover letter should highlight two or three particular experiences or skills that make you special, *and relate those experiences or skills to the work of the employer*. 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—Hubbell, PSLawNet, 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 a very few documents on which an employer will base the decision of whether or not to interview you. Accordingly, *it should be absolutely error-free*. After you write your letter, you should read it out loud to yourself, and have your career counselor read it over for you. 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. *Just 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 formal font as your resume; we recommend Times New Roman, Garamond, and Perpetua.

Your address – At the top of the page should be your name and address. This header can be left- or center-justified. You may want to use an identical header to the one on your resume; this creates the look of professional letterhead.

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

Recipient's address – Below the date, left-justified, should be the recipient's address:

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, you have two options:

- 1) Attachment: Write the letter formally, with the addresses above and attach the cover letter as well as the resume. If you do this, name your attached documents by your name, the employer's name, and the document name, e.g. "Smith – NYC Law Dept. Letter.doc."
- 2) Email Message: Start the letter 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. An example:

- 1) I am a 2010 graduate of New York Law School, and I would be honored to be considered for your Fellowship.

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 that 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

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who can “assist with closings and multitask in a fast-paced environment,” it makes sense to discuss your transactional experiences/coursework, as well as discuss your general ability to multitask. Consider the language and tone of the job posting. For example, if the posting says “we seek an eager recent 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 a prior position where you did considerable research. 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 as an associate 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 staff.”

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 a final expression of interest in the job and a reference to any enclosures. For example, “It would be an honor to work with you. [Enclosed/attached] please find my resume, writing sample, and transcript. I look forward to hearing from you.”

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Closing Salutation

Appropriate closing salutations include “Sincerely,” and “Very truly yours.” 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.

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