



Career Strategies Office Cover Letter Guide

Cover letters must be written well to get the reader's attention. Cover letters that
are bland
are too long-winded
contain grammatical errors
contain typos

➡ ***INSTANT DEAL BREAKERS!***

Hiring attorneys consider your cover letter as the first example of your writing and may evaluate your writing strengths based solely on the cover letter. ***The WORST mistake to make is to follow a template when writing a cover letter ----- they should be written in your own voice!***

Here are eight rules for writing effective cover letters.

1. Keep it to one page.

Law student cover letters should be limited to one page. Taking the time to craft a careful, concise letter shows respect for the employer and consideration for the reader's time. By contrast, a loosely-written, verbose cover letter with densely packed paragraphs sends the message that you are inconsiderate of the employer's time and that you are not capable of thoughtful edits.

2. It's about what you can do for the employer, not what the job or the employer can do for you.

Your cover letter should never talk about what *you* want out of a job or how a job would benefit you. Avoid at all costs the theme of "...this job would be an excellent step for me because...". The firm likely does not care why the job would be good for you; it cares about what skills and experience you would bring to the firm. Write your cover letter from that perspective and you will distinguish yourself from other applicants.

3. Answer specifically the following questions: why do you want to work here, and why would you be valuable to our practice?

Generally, cover letters are structured in two paragraphs, plus a closing:

First paragraph: Introduce yourself and what you are looking for. DO NOT use your name here as if you are in conversation (e.g., don't write: "*Hello, my name is John Case, and I am a first-year law student . . .*"). Instead, simply write: "***I am a first-year law student at Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law and would like to be considered for a law clerk position with Dutchess & Snow for the summer of 2010.***" You may stop after this first sentence or you may choose to add another sentence about your interest in, or connection with, the particular firm, agency, or attorney to whom you are applying. For example:

“As an intern with the Honorable Linda Seton last summer, I watched several Dutchess & Snow attorneys argue motions on a case involving Cattenbach, Inc., and was very impressed with the quality and effectiveness of their advocacy.”

-or -

“Wanda Richards, a former supervisor of mine, suggested I contact you because of my interest in environmental law.”

Second paragraph: This paragraph is the hardest one to write; it should be a concise, powerful, well-written narrative highlighting your strengths and experiences that are relevant to the position for which you are applying. You should not simply recite verbatim from your enclosed resume. Write this paragraph using the same principles of paragraph construction that you learned in your Legal Methods class—that is, begin with a thesis sentence and then use specific examples to demonstrate that thesis. Follow up with a conclusion that draws upon the specific examples you just set out to demonstrate how you would be of value to the firm or position for which you are applying. For example:

“I am particularly interested in international business law and believe that my academic background, along with my foreign language skills and international experience, will help me serve the interests of corporate clients, both domestic and foreign. I graduated with honors from Georgetown University with a major in Science, Technology, and International Affairs. During my tenure as a teaching assistant for Professor Carl J. Dahlman, I led several classroom discussions on the economies of China and Mexico. I spent my junior year studying at Nanjing University in China where I became fluent in written and spoken Mandarin. In my first year of law school, I received one of only four Outstanding Oral Advocate awards in my Legal Methods class. Moreover, in addition to taking a full course load throughout the academic year and summer, I currently serve as the president and founder of the Drexel International Law Society. Through all of these experiences, I have gained not only doctrinal knowledge of the law, but also professional skills that I believe will help me become an effective lawyer, including assuming leadership and mentoring roles, writing and public speaking experience, and organizational and time management skills.”

Closing: Close your cover letter simply and graciously. Do not tell the reader that you will be contacting her soon to follow up (lawyers are busy and already have more emails and phone messages than they can manage)! Instead say,

“Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you should my qualifications fit the needs of [name of firm.]”

End with **“Sincerely,”** or **“Respectfully.”**

4. Be Specific and Concrete. Avoid Vapid Abstractions.

The writing style for a cover letter should use specific and concrete word choices. See the example above which specifically describes the writer’s experiences and achievements. Avoid word choices

that are simply unverifiable empty labels—e.g., NOT: **“I am a hard worker and a quick learner, and I will be an asset to your firm.”**

5. Carefully Personalize Your Cover Letter.

Each cover letter should be addressed to a specific person. You should never write: **“Dear Sir or Madam,”** or **“Dear Hiring Coordinator.”** If you do not know the name of the person to whom you should be sending a resume, then call the firm or agency and ask for the person’s name. Make sure you get the correct spelling and gender of the addressee, if the gender is not immediately apparent. You should also refer to the firm or agency by name throughout the text of the cover letter, rather than calling it **“your firm,” “your organization,”** or **“your office.”** Once you have identified the full name of the firm or agency once in your letter (e.g., **“Montgomery McCracken Walker & Rhoads”**), you can refer to it by its shorter, familiar name thereafter (e.g., **“Montgomery McCracken”**).

Be careful to excise any references to other people or other firms. An easy mistake to make when you are cutting, pasting and printing out dozens of cover letters at once is to miss a reference in your salutation to the person to whom you wrote your last cover letter to, or calling the employer a “firm” when you are applying to a government agency. These mistakes are legendary and can doom even the most qualified candidate.

6. Use Good Document Design Principles.

Just as you pay attention to the font, margins, and proportion of white space in a resume, you should also consider these features important in your cover letter. Use the same font as your resume, and print your cover letter on the same paper. You should consider using the same letterhead as your resume as well. Structure your paragraphs so that they are not too lean and not too dense. Make the letter easily readable.

7. Use your cover letter to address the tough issues. If your GPA is low because you were dealing with a specific situation, now is the time to explain. If there is a huge gap in your resume between college and law school, make sure to articulate the reasons why in the cover letter. This is the chance to answer the questions that would make the interviewer disregard your resume prior to meeting with you.

8. Use an Electronic Signature When Sending Letters Via Email.

To create your electronic signature, visit Krystal Lespinasse in the CSO. After you sign your name on a blank piece of paper, Krystal will scan it and send it to you.