

The John Marshall Law School

2005

Cover Letter Guide



Cover Letters

A well-written cover letter encourages the prospective employer to look at your resume and bring you in for an interview. You should personalize and target your letter to a particular employer and convey your enthusiasm for the employer and position. A cover letter should state your employment objective, unlike your resume. It can also convey information that did not fit on your resume or was not necessarily appropriate for a resume. The goal of the cover letter is to tell the employer why they should hire you.

Getting Started

As with your resume, a cover letter should be professional in tone, short, concise, and error-free. Remember, you are selling yourself to the employer in your letter and not merely expressing your interest in working for them.

There is no “best” way to write a cover letter, though set forth below are overviews of the paragraphs in a four paragraph cover letter. If for any paragraph you find it difficult to start writing, one suggestion is to ignore all conventions of business writing and format – simply write out what you wish you could say. Getting your thoughts on paper is the first step; once your thoughts have been written, you can re-phrase them so that they are organized and appropriate for a cover letter.

Cover Letter Presentation

A cover letter is a professional business letter. The paper should be the same quality as your resume. Similar to your resume, you should use a simple font such as Times New Roman, Arial or Century Schoolbook (use the same font as on your resume). Point size should range from 11 to 12 font and the overall letter should not exceed one page.

Cover Letter Format – The Basics

Heading

The cover letter should include a heading at the top of the page. The heading should include the date, your address and the name, title and address of the employer, and contact person. Because you will attach a resume to the cover letter, it may make sense to use the same heading on the cover letter as on the resume

Address

At risk of stating the obvious, you need to address the letter to an individual. Identify the actual person to whom the letter should be sent (either through a job posting, the office’s website, or even calling the office and asking).

Always address the cover letter to a specific person rather than “Hiring Partner.” Call to identify the appropriate person or to verify that you have the correct information.

In addition to the hiring partner or recruiting coordinator consider sending your resume to a John Marshall alumnus at the office, or the head of your desired specialty area.

Cover Letter Format – The Body

As mentioned above, the body of a four-paragraph cover letter is described below. There is no rule that says a cover letter need be four paragraphs, however good cover letter writing demands that regardless of length, the letter be individualized and specific to the employer. We cannot stress enough that a generic form cover letter will fail to distinguish you and your resume from other applicants.

Paragraph One – “This is Who I am”

Paragraph One needs to catch the reader’s attention. It introduces you, your interest in the employer, and how you came to send this employer your resume.

Example:

- * I am a second year law student at The John Marshall Law School and am writing to express my interest in working at Smith & Jones, LLC as a summer associate.

As you are no doubt aware, it is not proper to have a one-sentence paragraph. Accordingly, use the second sentence to specify why you are writing to this employer. The single best way to do this is to have a reference or specific reason why you are contacting the employer.

Examples:

- * Professor Marshall suggested I contact you regarding opportunities your firm.
- * I am following up with our conversation from the CBA Labor Law Committee meeting regarding a possible clerkship with your firm.

If you do not have a personal connection, emphasize your professional or academic credentials as they may relate to the particular position. You can even stress your commitment to the office’s legal community:

Examples:

- * I am responding to your ad for a law clerk. As a first year law student with two years of paralegal litigation experience, I believe I would fit in well with your firm’s litigation group.
- * I am writing you because your work with the environment interests me tremendously.

- * As a lifelong Chicago resident, I am very excited about beginning my legal career in the community.

This is a short paragraph and need not go into great detail. Your goals are to entice the reader to continue reading and to sell yourself.

Be sure to type the employer's full name. Common mistakes include omitting commas or adding extra commas. Additionally, the first time you mention the employer, use the full name (e.g. Tarkenton Foreman & White, LLP). Thereafter, you may use a shorter version of the name; most employers have commonly used shortened versions of their name which can be found by looking at how they refer to themselves on their own website (e.g. Tarkenton Foreman).

Paragraph Two – “This is What I Like About You”

Paragraph Two is your opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of and interest in the employer. Since, in many ways your cover letter is a writing sample, here you have a chance to show your research skills.

Note: Recognize that for some employers, particularly small firms and sole practitioners, you simply will not be able to find enough information to write a solid Paragraph Two. Rather than include a generic paragraph, you may want to add a simple sentence at the end of Paragraph One stating your interest in the employer and otherwise skip Paragraph Two.

Why is it that you are writing to this particular employer? Other than the fact that they offer an opportunity for paid employment, why have you sought them out? Take the time to learn about the employer so that you can tell them what it is that makes you want to work for them. Begin by providing a solid introductory sentence and then highlight the specifics that have attracted you to this employer:

Examples:

- * My interest in labor law greatly aligns with Smith & Jones' history of union representation.
- * I am particularly excited about Kramer Young's summer associate program, through which I would be exposed to several areas of law during the course of my summer experience.

The key is to highlight those aspects of the employer that resonate with you, and express your interest in such aspects while also (if possible) giving a plug for your own skills!

This paragraph need not be more than three or four sentences. But it should be specifically tailored for each employer – if this paragraph looks exactly the same for a

large law firm as it does for a government agency, then you probably have not put in enough effort at making it employer specific.

Paragraph Three – “This is What I Can Do For You”

As indicated by the heading, Paragraph Three needs to answer the employer’s question, “What can you do for me?” In Paragraph Two you addressed why you want to work for the employer; now the employer needs to know why they should hire you.

Step One: Identify Your Strengths

Determine certain skills and attributes that you would like to stress to the employer. One way to do this is to look for themes within your resume – read it several times and rather than looking at what you did in any particular job, look to see what skills you acquired through all of your jobs and other experiences. For example, if you performed economics research as an undergraduate, worked as an insurance investigator, and most recently conducted legal research as a summer law clerk, it would make sense to stress your research skills.

Step Two: Focus on the Employer’s Interests

Look at the job posting or research the employer to determine what your responsibilities might be. Decide which of your strengths identified above best align with what the employer is seeking.

Step Three: Begin Writing

Apply your information and knowledge from Steps One and Two and write an argument on behalf of your number one client – you. Begin with a strong introductory sentence and then present “arguments” about your various skills and attributes you have to offer and how they fit the job description.

Focus on one to three accomplishments or skills that would be of particular interest to the employer. Do not simply repeat what is on the resume, but expand on the skills or talents mentioned. Further, synthesize across the resume, supporting assertions about your skills with evidence from all areas on your resume. Doing so will have a much greater impact than moving from resume item to resume item and describing what skills relate to each.

This is also a good place to incorporate information that did not fit on your resume but may still be applicable. Avoid conclusory statements (i.e. “I am a hard worker.”) unless you are able to provide supporting evidence. State the facts and let the employers draw their own conclusions.

This should be the longest paragraph in the cover letter, but should not exceed five or six sentences.

Examples:

- * Having spent several of my summers assisting my mother in her medical practice, I developed a substantive understanding of medical issues. This understanding grew into a desire to be a summer law clerk for a small medical malpractice law firm.
- * My academic achievements demonstrate that I am motivated and can produce quality work. My GPA places me in the top 20% of my class.
- * I have developed strong public speaking skills, not only through my participation in Moot Court, but also during college, working part-time in the admissions office and conducting tours for prospective students.
- * I am comfortable supervising others. As manager of the Student Activities Office at Loyola University, I delegated many projects and tasks to 10 student employees. My supervising skills were further strengthened while working as a branch manager for LaSalle Bank.
- * I am continuously developing my writing skills. Many of these skills were honed while writing for my college newspaper and further strengthened as a member of The John Marshall Law Review.
- * I have always taken pride in my strong organizational skills. Even as a summer camp counselor, I volunteered to plan staff outings, including five evening and two weekend excursions.

Paragraph Four – “This is How I Will Proceed”

Paragraph Four is the easiest to write. Acknowledge the inclusion of a resume, thank the employer for his/her consideration, indicate an availability to meet at the employer's convenience and if the organization is out of town, let the employer know when you will be in the area. End on an upbeat note.

Examples:

- * Enclosed for your review is my resume. I welcome the opportunity to discuss my experience and qualifications with you.
- * Thank you for taking the time to review my resume. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

It is okay to be aggressive in seeking to establish an interview, as long as you are polite.

Example:

- * I will be in (city and date) and would be happy to call and arrange for a convenient meeting time.

Cover Letter Do's and Don'ts

- * Sending out mass mailings to every employer in a city is often a tempting (and very ineffective) option for students. Bear in mind that a very low response rate is common for mass mailings.
- * A better approach, if you are sending out numerous cover letters without a personal contact, is to send targeted mailings. Identify firms by their practice areas, size of firm, geographic location, reputation for hiring John Marshall alumni, or any other factor and structure your cover letter to reflect strengths the employer will appreciate.
- * Keep track of all employers to whom you have sent resumes and letters. Include names, dates, etc. Keep the list by your phone – that way, if you receive a phone call from a person whose name you do not recognize, you can scan the list and refresh your memory. Knowing the date that the letters were sent will help you in following up in a timely fashion.
- * Follow up all correspondence, unless the employer specifically states “no phone calls.”
- * Employers want to see that you have done your research. When an employer receives hundreds of unsolicited resumes, a form cover letter is easy to spot. Be original with your words.
- * When including a resume and other documents, be sure to include the word “Enclosure” or “Enclosures” (as appropriate) at the bottom of the page so that the reader knows to look for additional pages.
- * Cover letters should always be mailed unless otherwise directly specified by the employer.

You are more likely to stand out if you personalize your cover letters.

Charles Brown
123 Schultz Lane
Chicago, IL 60640
(773) 555-1234
5brown@stu.jmls.edu

October 10, 2004

Mr. Mike Ditka
Hiring Partner
Ditka & Jauron
1000 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60614

Dear Mr. Ditka:

I am a third-year student at The John Marshall Law School, and I am very interested in real estate law. I am writing in response to the law clerk position ad that was posted by Ditka & Jauron with The John Marshall Law School Career Services Office.

I have developed a considerable amount of theoretical background in real estate law through my studies in law school. In addition to the regular Property courses, my coursework includes a class on residential real estate transactions and an LL.M. level course in construction law. Also, I am seeking admittance into the joint J.D./LL.M. degree program in Real Estate at John Marshall. I am very computer literate, as I have worked as a computer lab aide during my undergraduate studies, and I enjoy working with computers as a hobby. I am very excited about an opportunity to use my theoretical knowledge and skills in a practical setting.

Enclosed for your review are a resume, writing sample, and references. I would appreciate an opportunity to meet with you or others in your office to discuss the possibility of employment. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Charles Brown
Enclosures

Matthew L. Blair
530 Bloomington Way
Chicago, IL 60640
(773) 595-9595 · 5blair@stu.jmls.edu

August 25, 2004

Ms. Maxine Winter
Manager of Lawyer Recruiting
Dorsey & Whitney, LLP
50 South Sixth Street, Suite 1500
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402

Dear Ms. Winter:

I am a second year student at The John Marshall Law School and am interested in obtaining a position as a summer associate with Dorsey & Whitney for the summer of 2004. As a Twin Cities native, I intend to return to Minneapolis upon graduation from law school.

I am interested in Dorsey & Whitney because of its outstanding reputation and well-crafted summer associate program. The opportunity to rotate through different practice groups, gain hands-on experience and work on pro bono cases is intriguing. Additionally, your firm's commitment to Continued Legal Education is a mark of distinction.

My research shows that Dorsey & Whitney seeks summer associates with strong academic and professional performance, participation in extracurricular activities and work experience. I exhibit such qualities. As a law clerk, I analyzed legal issues in business litigation, gained familiarity with the courts and refined my legal writing skills. I will further sharpen my writing skills by participating in The John Marshall Law Review in the fall and spring semesters. In my prior advertising and marketing career, I developed the relevant skills of teamwork, client relations, and organization. I genuinely enjoy the study and application of law and appreciate the rewards of hard work. I also maintain a similar commitment to personal and social growth. I would contribute the same hard work, dedication and enthusiasm to Dorsey & Whitney.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my experience and qualifications for your summer associate program. I have enclosed my resume for your review. I will be in Minneapolis from September 17 to September 19 and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at that time. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Matthew L. Blair
Enclosure

References

Create a separate reference sheet with the names, addresses, and phone numbers of 3 - 4 references. The reference sheet should have the same heading (name, address and phone number) as your resume and be on the same paper stock. Bring the reference sheet to your interviews.

Choose references that can speak to your ability to perform well in a legal job. Professors, former employers, and supervisors are good people to ask for references. If you are in your first year, undergraduate professors are acceptable references.

Personal references, such as family friends or relatives are not appropriate references.

Ima Student

315 South Plymouth Court
Apartment 405
Chicago, Illinois 60604
(312) 987-1402

References

Professor Abraham Lincoln

(Legal Writing Professor)
The John Marshall Law School
315 South Plymouth Court
Chicago, IL 60604
(312) 427-2737

The Honorable Ben Franklin

Cook County Circuit Court
Daley Center, Room 1107
Chicago, IL 60602
(312) 123-4567

Ms. Outta Paper

Burrie Them & Paper
77 West Wacker Drive
Chicago, IL 60601
(312) 411-0999

Transcript

At some point before you are hired, an employer will probably ask for a law school transcript. An unofficial transcript is fine unless the employer specifically asks for an official transcript. Patent law students should also expect to be asked for their undergraduate transcripts.

An unofficial John Marshall transcript costs \$5.00. To get a copy, fill out a transcript request form available in the Records Office (3rd floor). Allow 72 hours at the beginning and end of a semester and 48 hours during other times.

You may also obtain copies of your transcript in the Career Services Office during the fall semester. Once you have an unofficial copy, you may make as many photocopies as you wish.

Writing Sample

Similar to being asked for a transcript, it is likely that during the interview process an employer will ask you for a writing sample. A writing sample should highlight your legal reasoning and analytical skills. Keep in mind these points when choosing a writing sample:

- * A Writing Sample should highlight your legal reasoning and analytical skills. This is your opportunity to demonstrate your legal abilities. In the end, your goal is to provide the best evidence of the skills you possess.
- * Unless an employer indicates otherwise, a Writing Sample should be 5 -12 pages long. Often first year students use a memorandum from their legal writing class which is usually longer than 12 pages. Employers understand that first year students may not have shorter writing samples available yet.
- * You may include a Cover Sheet that provides to the reader context regarding the sample.

Matters to address on the Cover Sheet include:

- * Original purpose of the Writing Sample
 - * When and for whom the sample was originally written
 - * If the Writing Sample is an excerpt, the nature of the larger document and the context of the excerpt
 - * If confidential information has been redacted, explain the nature of what was redacted (e.g., all party names have been redacted)
-
- * You may want to use a recent Lawyering Skills memo/brief or a moot court brief; current works will most likely reflect your best legal analysis and writing skills. Ideally, your Writing Sample will be less than two years old.

- * **Typos, poor grammar, incorrect citation form, and inaccurate citations can and will be used against you.** Your Writing Sample should reflect your best writing ability in all ways. Use the law school's excellent Writing Resource Center for any assistance you seek regarding writing issues.
- * You may find that to best demonstrate your legal writing and analytical skills, you need to excerpt the legal analysis section of a larger sample. When doing so, remember to describe the nature of the larger document on the Cover Sheet, as well as the context of the analysis.
- * If you use a brief or other writing taken from a job or externship, you must obtain permission from your supervisor and redact any confidential information (including blacking out party names). The Cover Sheet should note that information has been redacted.
- * If using a Writing Sample from Lawyering Skills or from any other source where comments may have been added, do not submit a copy with comments on it. Rather, make revisions, proofread, and then submit.
- * When possible, provide to the employer a Writing Sample that demonstrates your ability to practice law in an area of interest to the employer. For example, if you are applying to work for the Environmental Protection Agency, a writing sample concerning environmental law may be useful.
- * Some employers have specific Writing Sample guidelines, either described in their job posting or on their website. Make sure the Writing Sample you submit adheres to such guidelines (e.g., The City of Chicago, Department of Law has its own specific guidelines)
- * Do not use a Writing Sample that was co-authored.

Remember: Your Writing Sample is an employer's first impression of the work product you will provide.

Sample Writing Cover Sheet

Sally Student

123 W. Generic Avenue, Chicago, IL 60640, 773.555.5555, 5student@stu.jmls.edu

The attached writing sample was originally written as the final appellate brief for Lawyering Skills II. The argument presented was in support of Senior (the appellee) that summary judgment was proper when it is clear and free from doubt that Junior (the appellant) failed to satisfy his unconditional obligation to pay a demand note to Senior.

Senior and *Junior* entered into a lease agreement for an auto body shop that Senior owned and operated. The lease further provided that Senior would loan \$500,000 to Junior without interest for a five-year term. The lease was amended to indicate that Senior loaned an additional \$250,000 to Junior for a total amount of \$750,000 and to be payable on demand. Disputes arose between Senior and Junior as to the lease agreement. Senior made written demand for the payment of \$750,000. Junior's failure to make that payment was the subject of this lawsuit.

The attached excerpt of the appellate brief addresses the following positions :

- * Summary judgment is proper where it is clear and free from doubt that the demand note was an unconditional obligation that Junior failed to satisfy;
- * There was no genuine issue of material fact that the demand note and lease agreement were separate obligations; and
- * Junior's affidavit in response to summary judgment was improper under Illinois Supreme Court Rule 191.

Thank You Letters

A short thank you letter should be mailed within 24 hours of an interview to every person with whom you interviewed. If this is not practical (you interviewed with 10 people) at least send a letter to the contact person., the hiring attorney, the partner you would be reporting to if hired, and any other person who made a special effort to help you get interviewed (e.g., a John Marshall alumnus). Vary the wording if you interviewed with several people since each letter will end up in your file. Also, be sure to personalize the letter and try to mention topics you discussed with the person during your interview. The thank you letter is a final way to sell yourself to a future employer and to confirm your continued interest in the position.

Thank you letters can be typed or handwritten (provided you have good, legible handwriting and it is put on a simple, professional card). Do not send your thank you letter via e-mail.

And do not forget to proofread, proofread, proofread!

315 S. Plymouth Court, #405
Chicago, Illinois 60604

September 14, 2004

Ms. Hope Keeler
Keeler & Waite
Sears Tower, Suite 1213
Chicago, Illinois 60601

Dear Ms. Keeler:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you concerning your employment needs. I enjoyed learning the facets of your firm's services and functions. I think that my knowledge and understanding of the many areas of taxation and interest in the market economy would enable me to contribute substantially to your firm's service to its clients.

If you need transcripts, a fall class schedule, more writing samples, or recommendations, please feel free to contact me. I remain very interested in the position and would be able to begin as soon as October 1st. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ima Student