

THE JOHN MARSHALL LAW SCHOOL CAREER SERVICES JOB SEARCH GUIDE

IV. 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). Font size should range from 11 to 12 point and the overall letter should not exceed one page.

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

THE BODY OF THE COVER LETTER

As mentioned above, the body of a four-paragraph cover letter is described below. There is no rule that says a cover letter needs to be four paragraphs. However, good cover letter writing demands that regardless of length, the letter should 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.

THE JOHN MARSHALL LAW SCHOOL CAREER SERVICES JOB SEARCH GUIDE

Examples:

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

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 bring practical skills and experience to 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 name exactly as the firm uses it. 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 law firms 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

THE JOHN MARSHALL LAW SCHOOL CAREER SERVICES JOB SEARCH GUIDE

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 you 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) on (date) and would be happy to call and arrange for a convenient meeting time.

THE JOHN MARSHALL LAW SCHOOL CAREER SERVICES JOB SEARCH GUIDE

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.

SAMPLE COVER LETTERS

A NOTE OF CAUTION: You are being supplied with several samples. If you parrot any of these phrases word-for-word you are doing yourself a disservice. John Marshall students often send resumes and cover letters to the same employers. If a given employer receives two or more cover letters that use the same wording, he or she will know you copied the language or idea. This has happened several times in the past and it is embarrassing for both the student and the law school when employers call the Career Services Office to complain.

COVER LETTER FORMULA

Your Address
City, State Zip Code

Current Date

Individual's Name
Title
Firm Name
Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

State purpose of letter; who you are (e.g. a second year law student at The John Marshall Law School) and name of job for which you are applying. If someone has recommended you, mention the person's name. Tell how you learned of position if appropriate. Refer any ties you have to the employer of the city where the employer is located.

Give details explaining why you are interested in the job and/or the employer. Reasons could include type of employer (e.g., interest in public service organization), mix of practice areas, geographic location and specialization in a practice area. This needs to be genuine, not contrived or "boilerplate." Otherwise, leave it out.

Tell the employer why you should be considered for the position and list a few qualifications you feel are most likely to catch the attention of the reader. Either highlight main points from your resume or mention additional items not included in your resume (e.g. courses taken pertinent to the job). Items such as high grades, honors, strong work ethic, leadership skills, prior career, legal experience, and research/writing/analysis skills may all be relevant depending on the position.

Request an interview and state when you will be available. Provide a phone number where the employer may contact you and thank the employer for his/her consideration of your resume. If you have not done so previously in the letter, refer to your enclosed resume and any other materials you have included for review.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

Typed Name

Enclosure(s)

Christine L. Garcia

1842 Hoyne Avenue • Chicago, IL 60622 • (773) 886-4582 • 5garcia@jmls.edu

July 28, 2006

Ms. Sue Monette
Attorney Recruiting Specialist
Dawson Lupia & McBride LLP
2000 Courthouse Plaza N.E.
10 South Wacker
Chicago, IL 60606

Dear Ms. Monette:

I am currently a second year law student in the top 30% of my class at The John Marshall Law School searching for employment as a law clerk for next summer. I am especially interested in Dawson Lupia & McBride LLP because of its strong reputation in the legal community and its dynamic litigation department.

My work this past summer at the Illinois Court of Appeals instilled in me a strong interest in litigation and appellate work. By working at the Court, I was able to gain a better understanding of the procedural aspects of litigation and appellate procedure. I was also able to improve upon the strong writing base provided by the Legal Writing Program at John Marshall by composing various memoranda of law and drafting decision and final judgment entries. My writing ability and understanding of litigation was supplemented by my work as a research assistant for Professor Kevin Hopkins. Throughout the summer I helped Professor Hopkins compose a chapter on arbitration for an Alternative Dispute Resolution textbook. I now have a clear understanding of how litigation and alternative dispute resolution interact.

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you in person so that we could further discuss the skills and experience I could offer. I may be contacted at (773) 886-4582 and look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Christine L. Garcia

Enclosure

Charles Brown

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

October 10, 2006

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 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.

My academic background and experience would make me an excellent candidate to clerk for your real estate practice. In addition to the regular law school 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. Further, my experience has allowed me to develop skills relevant to your practice. As Program Chair for my fraternity I often had to coordinate multiple vendors and schedules, while managing records and files. This ability is useful for real estate closings and construction projects where attorneys, clients, lenders and other interested parties must be coordinated to complete high volumes of paper work. I am excited about an opportunity to use my legal and organizational 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, 2006

Ms. Maxine Winter
Manager of Lawyer Recruiting
Dorsey & Whitney, LLP, Suite 1500
50 South Sixth Street
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 2007 summer associate with Dorsey & Whitney. 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 in labor and employment law, litigation and alternative dispute resolution and its 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.

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 and gained familiarity with the courts where I assisted attorneys at trial by managing discovery documents. I also refined my legal writing skills by writing legal memoranda and drafting motions and orders. 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 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