
The Cover Letter¹

by Deborah Howard

It is important that a cover letter be well-written and attention-grabbing. It is your first chance to make a favorable impression on an employer. Many employers read cover letters before they read the attached resume. If they do not like the cover letter, they may not read any further.

A cover letter is your chance to give an employer information about who you are and what makes you special. It must help an employer realize what is unique about you so that your resume will stand out in a large stack of other resumes. Time spent writing a quality cover letter is well worth the effort. This is especially true in a recession job market in which employers are bombarded with applications.

I. Preparation:

To write a quality cover letter takes a great deal of preparation and effort. Good cover letters are the product of soul searching and thought. To be able to convince an employer that you are special and unique, know what it is about yourself that makes you so. Know who you are and try to put a piece of yourself in your cover letter. Think about what you are looking for in a job and find a way to express that in your letter.

A. Self-Inventory:

To figure out who you are requires that you take some time to put together an inventory of your strengths, skills, and qualities. Think about adjectives that describe you. Also think about activities that you perform well (whether they are papers you have written, cases or projects you have worked on, ideas you have developed, even sports in which you excel), experiences you have had, and specific classes in which you have excelled. Then determine what skills those activities incorporate (ability to: write well, organize, be a team player, take initiative, etc.), how those experiences have affected you (i.e., you are sensitive, hard-working), and what expertise your classes represent. This exercise should serve not only to give you information about yourself that can be incorporated into a cover letter but can beef up your self-esteem and confidence as well. If you do not feel good about yourself, it is hard to convince someone else to do so.

Once you have developed your inventory list, synthesize this information into a paragraph detailing who you are and why you are special. Obviously, this paragraph will change depending on the needs of each employer.

B. Target List

Your next task is to develop a target list of potential employers. This too involves time and effort. Spend some time determining your interests. Knowing the area of law or practice in which you are interested can help you to decide on the types of employers to whom you should and should not apply.

Once you are able to focus your search, it is easier to develop a target list. If you have two or more areas in which you are interested, there is nothing wrong with developing two or more different target lists.

The easiest and less effective way to develop a target list is merely to write to every job listing in your area of interest. It is necessary, however, to go beyond this. Rather than sending out cold cover letters (letters to people with whom you have no contact), it is better to send warm cover letters (letters to people suggested by other people). A letter that starts with "I am writing to you at the suggestion of Mr./Ms. So-and-So" will get more attention and possibly better results than one that starts with "I am responding to your ad in The New York Times." The best method to develop a target list of warm letters is to network. See Chapter __ for more information on networking.

C. Research on Employers

To write a quality cover letter, you not only have to know about yourself, you also have to know about the employer to whom you are writing. The more you know about the employer, the more personalized your cover letter will be. Employers do not react favorably to receiving a cover letter that demonstrates an applicant's ignorance about their organization. For example, if the employer to whom you are writing is a law firm that specializes in tax litigation, a cover letter in which you discuss your experience and interest in admiralty law will make a very bad impression. Similarly, a letter to a legal aid organization that focuses on your prosecution experience but does not mention your advocacy skills and desire to provide defendants' with representation, will make a less than favorable impression.

See Chapter __ for more information about conducting research on employers.

II. Drafting The Letter

Now that you have completed your preparation by doing a personal inventory of yourself and by conducting research to obtain information about employers, you are ready to write your letter.

A. Why You Are Writing to This Employer

Your opening paragraph informs the employer why you are writing to them. In the case of a warm letter, mention the name of the person who referred you to this employer. If you are responding to an advertisement, mention the advertisement and the specific position to which you are applying (an organization can be advertising for more than one position at a time).

In the next paragraph, describe your interest in the employer. No one likes to receive form letters so you must tailor your cover letter for each employer to whom you apply. Thus, you need to be able to articulate in your cover why you are writing to this particular employer. This is where the research discussed above comes in to play.

To explain why you are interested in a particular employer, you need to know the kind of work they do. Then, state why that is of interest to you. For example, if you are interested in a firm because of their superior international law practice, mention this in your letter. Employers should not feel that they are just one of hundreds of employers to whom you are applying. A cover letter that sounds sincere and well-thought-out, will always make a better impression than a rote-sounding form letter for a mass mailing.

B. Out-of-Town Employers

If you are writing to an out-of-town employer, let the employer know why you are interested in that particular geographic area. Let the employer know if you have any ties to that geographic area (family, bar membership, intention to take the bar). Employers are wary of interviewing someone from out-of-town unless it is clear they are serious about relocating. Be sure that you have sufficiently demonstrated that your interest in the employer's geographic area is more than a passing one.

If you plan to be in the employer's city, let them know when you intend to do so. Just the fact that you will be in town may lead some employers to grant you an interview.

C. Why the Employer Should Be Interested in You

After you have informed the employer of the reasons you are interested in them, let employers know why they should be interested in you. This is where the time you invested in your personal inventory pays off. Tell employers about yourself. Sell yourself! Point out any special qualifications, strengths, experience or other skills that you may have and demonstrate to employers how these skills, strengths and qualities will be of use to them.

Sell yourself to each particular employer. Try to determine what the employer values in an employee and point out how you fit the bill. If you are applying to an organization in which attorneys carry a large caseload and work under short deadlines, let the employer know that you are hard-working and can handle pressure well. If you are responding to an advertisement, do not regurgitate the wording of the advertisement but do paraphrase the advertisement and indicate how you meet the requirements.

When writing to a small law firm, for example, you may stress your independence, and your ability to take initiative and work on your own. When writing to a public interest employer, on the other hand, you may stress your commitment to public interest and describe experiences that indicate such a commitment.

In addition to focusing on your skills, strengths and qualities, highlight any relevant work experiences and course work. Tell an employer who specializes in tax work about the A+ you received in taxation. Let an employer who specializes in environmental law know about your experience working for the Environmental Protection Agency.

D. Cross-over Applications

A strong cover letter is especially important for attorneys attempting to cross-over to a different area of practice or to a non-legal position. In making such an application, do not forget about your transferable skills. Transferable skills are skills you have developed in one context that can be put to use in a different context. For example,

skills developed in a legal setting that are applicable to a non-legal position (or vice versa).

Do not expect an employer to look at your resume and see the transferable skills. Use your cover letter to bring an employer's attention to these skills. If you worked as a banker before (or during) law school, highlight the skills you developed as a banker that would be applicable in a corporate legal setting. Similarly, if you are a corporate attorney applying for a non-legal business position, emphasize the business skills you have developed. Or, if you are a real estate attorney wishing to switch into the bankruptcy area, focus on the real estate financial restructurings you have conducted. And, if you have been out of work but have been active as a volunteer, discuss the projects you have worked on and point out the skills you have developed as a result.

III. What to Leave Out

Just as important as what to include in a cover letter is what you should leave out. A cover letter is not the place to bring up anything damaging or anything that weakens your application by making you appear less attractive as a candidate. For example, do not state that you are interested in working for an employer because you feel the experience will strengthen your existing skills. Do not lead an employer to think that any of your skills need strengthening.

A cover letter is your opportunity to sell yourself and present yourself in the most positive light possible. Thus, if your law school grades were terrible, do not attempt to explain this in your cover letter. Or, if you were laid off, the cover letter is not the place to bring up this fact. This kind of information, which requires explanation, is better left for an interview than a cover letter. Moreover, including such information may prevent you from getting an interview at all.

IV. What Else to Remember

It is important to remember that your cover letter is the first sample of your writing that an employer sees. It, therefore, must be as well written as possible. Make sure it contains no typos or grammatical errors nor any unrelated or inappropriate information. Write in a logical, smooth manner with appropriate transitions.

V. How to Address a Cover Letter

Whenever possible, address your cover letter to a specific person - the contact person listed in an advertisement, the person to whom you were referred, the hiring partner, or the recruitment coordinator.

VI. Closing

Do not end your cover letter with a statement that indicates that you assume you will be granted an interview. This can be viewed as presumptuous or somewhat pushy. You can accomplish the same purpose by merely stating the action you plan to take - that you will be contacting the employer in a week or so to follow up - or the action you would like the employer to take - that you look forward to hearing from the employer.

VII. Keep Records

Always keep copies of any letter you send to an employer and review the letter before going to an interview.



COVER LETTER FORMAT

Address

Date

Contact Name
Contact Title
Organization Name
Address

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

Opening Paragraph: Statement of Objective: state why you are writing to this person/organization.

Qualifications and Statement of Interests Paragraph: Statement of Your Qualifications and Why You Are Interested in This Organization: state why the organization should hire you; tell the employer about you, why you are special and unique, and how you will fit the employer's needs; describe your skills, experience, qualifications and strengths; explain what about the organization is of interest to you.

Closing Paragraph: Closing Statement.

Sincerely,

Signature

Printed Name

Deborah Howard is the Director of Career Services at New York Law School. She received her B.A. from Harvard University in 1979 and her J.D. from Northeastern University School of Law in 1982. While an undergraduate, she studied at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan in 1977. Fluent in Japanese, she also studied law in Japan in 1985 at Doshisha University on a fellowship awarded by the Japanese Ministry of Education.

Following law school, Ms. Howard clerked at the Alaska Court of Appeals and was an Assistant Attorney General for Alaska's Office of the Attorney General. She left Alaska to study law in Japan. Upon her return to the United States, Ms. Howard worked in private practice, in Washington, D.C. and also established her own consulting firm there, utilizing her Japanese language skills working with law firms and corporations doing business with the Japanese. Ms. Howard returned to her hometown of New York City in 1988 where she became an Assistant Corporation Counsel for City of New York after which she joined the firm of Smythe, Masterson & Judd as a legal recruiter.

Ms. Howard is admitted to the Bars of the States of Alaska and New York and the District of Columbia. She is a member of the Northeast BLSA Job Fair Board of Directors and a member of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York Committee on Minorities in the Profession and the New York State Bar Association Committee on Minorities in the Profession. Ms. Howard is also a black belt in Judo.

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