



## COVER LETTER OUTLINE

### Starting Notes:

- ❖ Use proper business letter format and make sure your address, phone number and email appear at the top of the page. For clear branding, it is recommended that you use the same header as your resume. This will convey the information as well as save some space on the cover letter. Use good quality bond paper (unless the cover letter is submitted electronically).
- ❖ Realize that employers will generally use this as the first writing sample. If your cover letter is poorly written, badly edited, and riddled with typos, it is unlikely they will finish reading the letter, let alone review your other materials and offer an interview.
- ❖ A cover letter should convey: 1) Why a student is interested in the employer, and 2) Why the employer should be interested in the student. One should not exclude, or overrun the other.
- ❖ Cover letters should be credible. Employers are put off by inflated, overblown rhetoric: “Yours is the perfect job for me.” And hype: “I am exactly the candidate you have been looking for.” And, most of all, bombast: “You can’t afford not to meet with me.” Students should be unpretentiously confident: “I have enjoyed success in...”
- ❖ Cover letters should be strictly positive: “My strengths are particularly well-suited to your practice because...” Students shouldn’t be defensive: “I know you get hundreds of resumes from top-notch applicants, but...”

### Overall Outline:

1. **Introductory Paragraph** (1 Paragraph)
  - Draw reader in, introduction and hook
2. **Body of the Letter** (1-2 Paragraphs)
  - Focused discussion of your specific skills that MATCH the position and concrete examples of the skills in action in past positions.
3. **Conclusion** (1 Paragraph)
  - Restate interest in the position/firm/practice area, welcome additional questions and thank reader for the time.

### **1. Introductory Paragraph**

Remember that this paragraph answers the questions:

- “Who are you?”
- “Why have you contacted me?”
- “Why should I be interested in meeting you?”

In other words, this paragraph immediately establishes your employment interest *and* generates interest in you. If you have a mutual acquaintance, or someone referred you to the individual you are writing, use that in your opening line:

[Name of referring party] recommended that I contact you.

Follow this with an explanation of what you are seeking, for example:

As a first year law student at the University of Wyoming College of Law with a strong interest in natural resources law, I am very interested in pursuing a law clerk position with your firm.

Or, something along these lines:

[Referring party] has described your practice in the area of intellectual property as cutting edge. As a first year law student at the University of Wyoming College of Law with a technical background and keen interest in patent law, I am very interested in clerking for your firm.

If you don't have a mutual acquaintance or referral, try to draw on something you learned from your research to explain why you are writing to this particular firm. You may also discuss your roots to the region. If you are a Wyoming native, or developing a fondness for the area, discuss that in the introduction.

#### Don'ts:

- ❖ Don't start the letter with, "Hello, my name is \_\_\_." This type of writing is too casual. Remember that the cover letter is professional correspondence, which means maintain business tone.
- ❖ Do not use contractions in professional correspondence.
- ❖ Don't start a sentence with "Because", or finish a sentence with a preposition. (e.g.: on, before, am, after, with)
- ❖ Avoid the use of first person narrative, "I am seeking a position..." "my goals are..."
- ❖ Don't say "I think". You're the author of the document, it's duplicative and unnecessary, not to mention it suggests some doubt with respect to your confidence.
- ❖ Stay away from calling yourself the "best" or "ideal" candidate for the job. Objectively, you don't know what the rest of the applicant pool looks like, so it would be presumptuous for you to state that you're the best. Rather, focus on what you do know about your qualifications for the job. Highlight your notable skills and illustrate how they would help you in this new role.

## 2. The Body of the Letter

In the words of Kimm Walton, author of *GUERRILLA TACTICS FOR GETTING THE LEGAL JOB OF YOUR DREAMS*, this section of the letter is where you "wheel in your big guns." Describe specific training, achievements or experiences that highlight your strengths and abilities and demonstrate the value you can bring to this particular employer.

Remember: don't simply repeat the information in your resume. Highlight items of particular relevance to this employer in this paragraph. Keep in mind you are answering the employer's unspoken question: *Why should I meet you?*

- In reading your firm's website, I see that your practice areas include natural resources law and oil and gas law. These are areas in which I have a great interest. This summer I had the opportunity to work on an article for the *WYOMING LAW REVIEW*. This experience honed my legal research and writing skills and I gained in depth knowledge on the topic area of carbon sequestration. In addition, the editing process for the *WYOMING LAW REVIEW* has refined my attention to detail while working on a strict timetable of deadlines. As a summer associate for your law firm, I bring the ability to complete tasks in a timely and accurate manner, as well as a developing interest in the practice area of natural resource law.

In the body of the letter, you also want to state why you are interested in that particular employer, what you know about the employer and why you want to work there. It is helpful to learn as much as you can about the employer through current and former employees or from the employer's website. In addition, you may want to look at recent decisions in which the firm has been involved or that the judge has written.

- In researching Holland & Hart LLP, I learned that the firm recently enjoyed a victory on behalf of farmers injured by the misuse and mislabeling of herbicide. Products liability is an area of interest to me. It would be an honor to work at a firm of your caliber on these types of issues.
- In reading your website, I learned that one of the areas of practice at Johnson and Johnson, LLP is global climate change. During my undergraduate studies, I wrote a paper focused on the effect of hazardous substances released in mining. Issues such as climate change and ground water contamination are profound and your firm's important work in this area is one of the reasons I want to join your team. Johnson and Johnson, LLP is making a difference, and I would like to be a part of that positive change.

In addition to doing research on the employer, be **responsive to the job posting** itself. If the job posting says, "Preference given to those with an interest in renewable energy," then you absolutely should state that in your cover letter. It is helpful to read the job posting and conjunction with drafting your cover letter to ensure you are addressing all the stated qualities the firm or organization has stated they are seeking.

**Examples of things you can talk about in the body of the cover letter:**

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| - <i>Research and writing experience</i> | - <i>Ability to work independently</i> |
| - <i>Advocacy skills</i>                 | - <i>Goal oriented</i>                 |
| - <i>Creative problem-solving</i>        | - <i>Time management skills</i>        |
| - <i>Team player</i>                     | - <i>Entrepreneurial Skills</i>        |

Do not just say you have certain qualities, give an example. You must draw specific examples to each attribute. Try to tell a story with your experience, and give the reader something to remember. This can also serve as a good starting point in the interview.

**3. Conclusion**

Restate your interest in the employer and then state your plan of action. This is where you tell the employer what *you* will do in terms of follow up. If you are sending out a 'cold' cover letter, state you will follow up within 10 days to see if an interview or meeting can be arranged. Thank the addressee for their time and consideration. Here are a few examples:

- I am very interested in working as a summer associate at Holland & Hart. I understand your firm is scheduled to come to the UW College of Law on September 6<sup>th</sup> for on-campus interviews. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview with you on that date. Thank you for your consideration.
- I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the possibility of summer employment with your firm. I will be in Washington, DC during my holiday break, December 15<sup>th</sup>- 31<sup>st</sup>. I will plan on calling you in the next two weeks to schedule an appointment. Thank you for your consideration.
- I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss how my background may fit your needs. I will contact you within the next two weeks to see if we might arrange a meeting. Thank you for your kind consideration.

If for some reason you are unable to follow up, close by saying:

- If my experience and background meet your requirements for a new associate, please contact me at the address or telephone number listed above. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your consideration.

### **Cover Letter FAQs:**

#### **How long should a cover letter be?**

- A cover letter is one page. If you find yourself going on to a second page, do not “cheat” by adjusting the font to a barely readable 10 point font or making margins 0.25 inches; simply go on to the second page. Just remember that the longer your cover letter is, the more opportunity there is for making mistakes. By keeping it to one page, you illustrate your editing skills and ability to be precise.
- It has been widely stated by employers they are unlikely to read beyond one page, edit your materials to the most potent information you have and keep it on one page.
- For some types of employers (public interest or judges) it is okay to go on to a second page.

#### **Can I use the same cover letter for different employers?**

- Yes and no. You can have a basic cover letter that you use as a starting point for each employer. But the cover letter should be tailored to specific employers. Employers can tell when an applicant has done his research on the firm.
- Make sure that you are changing references to the employer within the letter if you are using the same letter. For example, if the letter is to Holland & Hart, don't say in the letter, “I am very interested in working as a summer clerk for Hirst Applegate.”
- Additionally, know the practice area of the firm, it is a large misstep to state you want to practice transactional law, when the posting calls for a litigation attorney.
- Be aware of changing the nouns as necessary, for example don't say “firm” when applying to a governmental organization or to judge's chambers.

### **Additional Things to Think About:**

- Try not to overuse “I” in the cover letter. This is hard to do, but if every sentence starts with the word “I” it can sound stilted.
- Avoid contractions and casual speech. Keep the letter professional and in a business tone.
- Do not use exclamation points or emoticons.
- Do not use question marks (e.g., “Why should you hire me? I'll tell you why!” [this is bad, very bad]).
- Read your letter out loud. You will be able to spot typos this way and tell if you have omitted a word. It's an added benefit to print it and touch your pen to each word as you read it out loud, this will force you to slow down and hear the mistake, rather than your brain filling in the missing word.
- Give yourself time to edit and revise. Your first draft is rarely the best draft. If you allow enough time to read the letter several times or have others read it and also allow time for edits, then the chances of you making a mistake or having a typo in your letter are far less likely than if you are writing it at the last minute.
- DO NOT USE “To Whom It May Concern” or some other generic opening. Always try to get a name. If the employer has a relationship with the law school, then the Career Services Office may have the appropriate contact person's name. If you are applying to a firm in another state or country, do your research to find out to whom the letter should be properly

addressed. Sometimes this means you may have to call the receptionist at a particular firm to find out the name, but this shows that you took the time and care to find out this information. Generic openings can be a turn off to employers who then think they are just part of a mass mailing on your part.

- Always say why you want to be there or your connection to the area. This is especially important if you are applying for a job in another state or in a rural location. The employer wants to know that you are not just looking for “any job” but that particular job in that particular location.

As always, please know that you can contact career services at any time to read over cover letters and resumes or any other application materials. Your goal is to send out the most polished, professional, and error-free materials so that you can get the interview, which will hopefully lead to you landing the job.

*Credits:*

- Walton, Kimm; GUERRILLA TACTICS FOR GETTING THE LEGAL JOB OF YOUR DREAMS.
- James, David; 10 THINGS EMPLOYERS WANT STUDENTS TO KNOW ABOUT COVER LETTERS