

10 Things Employers Want Students to Know About Cover Letters

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Most law students have a lot of room for improvement when it comes to writing cover letters. Students know their resumes are important, but most give their cover letters short shrift, treating them as mere transmittal letters. Law students should know that cover letters should be individually tailored, well researched, and well written.

❶ Students should carefully craft their cover letters. To do justice to what they have to offer, students must make their cover letters examples of their best work. When students write a mediocre cover letter, they diminish their resume and everything else they enclose with it. Hiring attorneys evaluate cover letters as the student's first writing sample. If students want their writing samples to be read, they need to favorably impress hiring attorneys with well-written cover letters. To impress hiring attorneys, cover letters must possess the qualities of effective legal writing. Writing well will set students apart from most applicants.

❷ Cover letters should not be so general that students could simply change the addressee and send them to any employer. Because many applicants know nothing about the employers to whom they are sending resumes, their letters simply say, "I want a job. My resume is enclosed." When it appears that a student's principal interest is in having a job, that student will lose out to someone seen as genuinely interested in the employer. Since job seekers seldom write to only one employer, there is a natural tendency to draft generic cover letters. Generic cover letters focus on the writer and all but exclude the employer. The most common first word in cover letters (and other business letters) is "I." Students can signal their focus on the employer by starting with the word "Your," as in "Your firm..." or "Your job announcement..." Students should follow through with other references or allusions to the employer.

❸ Students should purge their cover letters of telltale signs that the cover letters are generic. The most flagrant sign of a generic cover letter is the inadvertent remnant of an earlier letter to another employer. I often receive letters addressed to me but with another person's name in the salutation, or another employer's name in the body of the letter. I also see more subtle remnants, such as references to "firms" instead of my government agency. When students are facing keen competition, it matters a lot when they fail to attend to detail.

❹ Students should research employers and parlay that research into individualized cover letters. Students should research employers to figure out which ones are hiring applicants with credentials like theirs. When they discover which employers ought to be interested in them, they need to gather information for their cover letters. The most cursory research will reveal, for example, the name of the person the employer wants applicants to write to. When students aren't interested

enough to find out whom they should be writing to, employers won't be much interested either unless the student's credentials are more than competitive. Students need to show a credible interest in the

employer—not simply in having a job—by showing they know something about the employer.

⑤ Students should use cover letters to explain two things: why they are interested in the employer and why the employer ought to be interested in them. Properly done, cover letters supplement students' resumes. Many students don't address either of these questions, and many others address only why they are interested in the employer. Simply establishing that the student feels an employer's law practice is attractive isn't enough. Cover letters are the students' briefs on why hiring attorneys should interview them. Students should carefully frame their credentials to give employers concrete reasons why the employers ought to be interested in them.

⑥ Students should face the facts: sometimes well-crafted cover letters are not enough. No one meets the standards of every legal employer. If, for a given employer, students don't have the right credentials—their grades are too low, or they don't have the right experience—they need to be realistic. Students need to target most of their cover letters and resumes to employers that are real prospects.

⑦ 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..."

⑧ If ties between the student and the employer's city are not readily apparent from the resume, the cover letter should establish those ties. Employers want to know that applicants are genuinely interested. Establishing ties to the employer's city reinforces the student's credibility. Students who have no ties need to state that, despite having no ties, they're interested anyway: "Though I haven't any ties to [your part of the country], I know that your region has much to recommend it, particularly because I like to [ski, hike, or whatever else]. I would happily relocate for the opportunity to work with you." Students who have trips planned to the employers' cities, or are thinking about making trips, should mention that in their cover letters.

⑨ Students should show they are concise and considerate by keeping their letters to one page.

⑩ Students should always include cover letters when distributing their resumes. By piquing employers' interest and providing compelling information, properly crafted cover letters give students an advantage.

Students who follow these recommendations will gain a competitive edge. Standing alone, resumes simply present facts. Well-crafted cover letters do more; they persuade.