



UNIVERSITY OF  
NOTRE DAME

The Law School

# *Cover Letter Guide*

Career Development Office

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## PURPOSE AND FORMAT

A cover letter should accompany your resume whenever you submit it in response to a known job opening or as part of broader-based canvassing. The cover letter is an important supplement to your resume. It should indicate your reasons for applying, the reasons the employer should hire you, some background information about yourself and your availability for interviews. In addition, it should cover any pertinent information not presented in your resume and/or highlight an aspect of your resume to which you wish to draw the reader's attention.

A cover letter allows for flexibility, tailoring, and amplification which are not always possible in a resume. Personalizing each cover letter and making reference to the recipient's practice lends credibility to your request for consideration, reflects the time you have spent in analyzing the firm's practice, and states how your skills fit into that practice. The letter itself should be no longer than one page and no more than three (3) or four (4) short paragraphs.

A cover letter must be well-written and error-free. No letter that contains an error should ever be sent. Pay special attention to grammatical and spelling accuracy. If printing your letter, white resume paper is considered the most professional. A standard business format should be followed which means you need to use a colon to punctuate the salutation. Examples of cover letters are included at the end of this booklet.

Whenever possible, avoid mass-producing your cover letters. Better results are achieved if a specific letter is written for each employer in which you are interested. Portions of both the first and second paragraph should change in order to make the letter specific to a particular employer. In the first paragraph, indicate why you are applying. In the second paragraph, indicate why the employer should hire you and why you are qualified for the job that is available. Elaborate on items in your resume. Emphasize coursework or experiences that relate to the position to which you are applying. Add information that is not mentioned in your resume. Include information about yourself that is relevant to the specific employer and delete that which is irrelevant. Doing these things strengthens your message and distinguishes your cover letter from the literally hundreds of other cover letters the employer receives.

If multiple letters are sent using the same form, be certain that all the employers in a mailing practice the same type of law, have approximately the same number of attorneys and practice in the same geographic area. Write your letter to one specific employer and then make any minor adjustments necessary to make your letter appropriate for all other similarly-situated employers. Remember that mass-produced letters neither impress the employers nor encourage special consideration of your application. Every attempt should be made to make a targeted mailing to a group of homogenous employers appear as individualized as possible.

Always address each cover letter to a specific person, if possible – ideally to the individual who has the power to hire, to your contact, or to a Notre Dame (or college alma mater) graduate. If you are responding to a notice for an advertised opening, write to the person designated. When you are targeting your search to a specific geographic or practice area, consult directories that list the appropriate contact name. NALP's *Directory of Legal Employers*, together with other directory resources, can be found on our website in the Resource Center.

Conducting a targeted search on Martindale-Hubbell is also useful. When obtaining information derived from a resource such as Martindale-Hubbell, be certain to check each firm's website for the name of the hiring partner or recruiting contact. If you are unable to determine the appropriate contact person from an outside source, call the employer's office and ask the name of the hiring partner or recruiting coordinator, the spelling of that name (even Smith can be spelled different ways) and ascertain whether the individual is a Mr. or Ms. Sending a copy of your application materials to a Notre Dame alum at the employer can also be helpful.

## CONTENT

Cover letters should be brief and direct. Do not use flowery language, and do not simply restate information contained in your resume unless there is something in your background that would be of particular importance to the employer (e.g., if you grew up in that city, your family lives in the city, you have worked in the area). Your letter should supplement the information provided in your resume and highlight your particular skills and qualifications.

In your letter, state five important things in this order:

- (1) **why you are writing** (for a summer clerkship or associate position);
- (2) **why you are interested in the employer;**
- (3) **why the employer should hire you;**
- (4) **when you will be available to interview;**
- (5) **your telephone number and e-mail address** (remember to remove all hyperlinks).

In stating why the employer is of interest to you, give specific reasons why. Is it a substantive area of practice, the size of the organization, its location, someone who knows of your interest suggested you contact the employer, a job notice was posted on Symplicity, or some other reason? Your letter should focus on the employer and why that employer should be interested in you.

In telling why you are applying to a particular employer, include a reference to the person who recommended approaching them, especially if that person is known to the prospective employer. Such a statement implies that the person making the referral believes that you have qualities that merit consideration by the employer.

End your letter by reiterating your interest in the employer and expressing your availability to interview. If the employer is some distance away, inform the employer that you will be in the area during a certain time frame and would be available to interview at that time. If after two weeks you have not heard from the employer, you may follow-up by telephone or e-mail to confirm your materials arrived and offer to provide any additional materials that may be needed to help them evaluate your credentials.

## **SUMMARY**

The actual composition of the cover letter depends on the specifics of the particular employer and position you are applying to and your individual background and qualifications. Your cover letter should show that you are an ideal candidate for the position and that you have a genuine and measured interest in

working for the employer. Remember that your cover letter is an opportunity to convey that you are a distinct person who carefully chose this employer and that your application deserves a closer look.

Examples of cover letters follow to serve as guidelines. Read all of the examples thoroughly. One sentence in any of the letters may be applicable to you and may help you form your own cover letter. Remember, though, that these are examples only. You must carefully and thoughtfully draft your own cover letters to fit the employers you are applying to and your own unique background and qualifications.

***Feel free to contact a CDO counselor at any time for assistance with cover letters.***

## OUTLINE OF A COVER LETTER

Your Address  
City, State Zip

Date

Name of Contact Person  
Title of Contact Person  
Employer Name  
Address  
City, State Zip

Dear Mr. (Ms.) last name of contact person:

**First Paragraph:** Tell why you are writing – name the position for which you are applying and tell how you heard of the opening. If you have a personal referral or connection, mention it here. Indicate why you are interested in working for *this* employer. If you have ties to or lived in the area, mention it. Specify your interests in the type of work the firm does. Describe what is particularly appealing to you about the employer.

**Second Paragraph:** If you have had experience, courses, publications or clinic experience, be sure to point out what particular achievements you have accomplished that relate to the employer's field or type of work. Indicate why you are qualified for the job. Focus on what skills or experiences you would bring to the employer. Emphasize pertinent items on your resume and supplement with other details. Tie experience to tangible, transferrable skills. Convince the employer that you would be an asset.

**Third Paragraph:** Restate your interest in working for the employer. Have an appropriate closing to pave the way for an interview. Indicate your willingness to interview personally by stating when you will be in the area or by offering to make yourself available at the employer's convenience. Restate your contact information. Thank the employer for his/her consideration.

Sincerely,

*(leave 4 blank lines for signature)*

Your full typed name

Enclosure

**EXAMPLE OF LETTER FOR  
RECENT GRADUATE APPLYING FOR AN  
ASSOCIATE POSITION**

123 King Street  
San Francisco, California 94107

November 19, 2014

Ms. Allison Smith  
Smith and Associates  
456 Judah Street  
San Francisco, California 94122

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am writing to express my interest in an Associate position as posted on your firm's website. I am a 2014 graduate of Notre Dame Law School and have recently passed the July 2014 California bar exam. I expect to be admitted to the California bar within the next several weeks. Having returned to my hometown of San Francisco, I am exploring full-time opportunities that will allow me to apply my legal education with my interest in immigration law.

My strong interest in immigration law motivated me to seek opportunities that would expand my understanding of this practice area. This past summer, I was an intern at the International Institute of the Bay Area, where I provided legal assistance to clients pursuing petitions before U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services. I also assisted attorneys in drafting DACA petitions and conducted client interviews. I believe my practical legal skills and knowledge of immigration rules will enable me to make a meaningful contribution to your firm.

I have enclosed a copy of my resume for your review and I am available at your convenience for an interview. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Michael Wong

Enclosure