



UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS

SCHOOL OF LAW

Office of Career Services

“Drafting Cover Letters”

Revised November 9, 2011

COVER LETTERS

The cover letter should be a well-crafted piece of business correspondence that serves multiple purposes. As an initial matter, the cover letter should state who you are and what you want. It should encourage the potential legal employer to carefully review your resume by highlighting significant, relevant achievements without simply repeating the resume. Finally, your letter should persuade the reader to want to speak with you in person.

At the same time, the cover letter is also a writing sample that should display your writing ability, communication skills, and attention to detail. In three or four carefully crafted paragraphs, you need to state your purpose for writing and create a positive impression. In the end, your cover letter should answer two critical questions for the potential employer: What do you bring to the table? Why should the employer want to interview you?

A. Format & Style

A cover letter should be succinct and to the point, generally not exceeding one page. Your cover letter should be consistent with the format and style of your resume, e.g., use the same 10- to 12-point font and one-inch margins. Use the same paper as you used for the resume. Cover letters should be written in a traditional **business letter format**.

In the page set-up, you can use either the block style, with all information justified to the left margin, or the modified block, with certain items indented. See the Appendix for examples of business letter formats. The text of the letter should be single-spaced with one blank line between each of the paragraphs.

The typical cover letter consists of the following elements.

1. Heading

You want the cover letter to look like a traditional piece of legal correspondence, so lean toward a **conservative style**. Many people use the header of their resume on the cover letter as a personal letterhead. Be cautious in using this approach if your resume header uses a font size over 14-point, or involves a number of lines or symbols. You can create a personalized letterhead for the cover letter itself, but make sure it is consistent with and complementary to the style of your resume.

It is also acceptable to simply put your complete mailing address, phone and e-mail address in the upper left hand corner, flush with the left-hand margin. See the Appendix for examples of various placements of the heading.

2. Date

List the date you plan to mail the letter out directly below your address. If your letterhead is centered, center the date beneath it. If your address is flush left, put the date flush left. If you need to save space, you can put the date immediately below your address (or letterhead), but it is more conventional, and pleasing to the eye, to skip at least one line. If the body of the letter is short, you may wish to skip three or four lines to balance the text on the page.

3. Address Block (Addressee’s Name, Title, Firm and Address)

The address block of the recipient, consisting of the addressee’s name, title, court, firm or organization, and mailing address, is placed two lines beneath the date, and should be flush with the left margin. Whenever possible, address your cover letter to a person rather than a position. Even if you send the letter to the wrong person, it has a better chance of making it to the correct person than sending it to a position that may or may not exist within the prospective employer’s organizational structure. The exceptions to this rule are when the prospective employer directs applicants to send their materials to a position, such as a “Hiring Partner” or “Recruiting Coordinator,” or if all reasonable efforts to identify the intended recipient have failed.

Do not send your materials to “To Whom It May Concern.” What does it tell the potential employer about your research skills and your level of interest if you cannot even take the time to determine to whom you should direct your application materials? Moreover, it may make your carefully crafted, individualized cover letter seem more like it is part of a generic mass mailing.

Determining whom to send your application materials to at smaller firms and government agencies can be difficult. One route is to call the firm or agency and ask the receptionist to whom your materials should be directed, asking for both the person’s name and title. You might also check with individuals in your network to see if anyone knows who handles hiring for a particular firm or agency. If neither of these approaches is feasible, you can send your materials to one of the named partners, a partner working in the practice area you are interested in, or a School of Law alumnus. Again, even if the named recipient is not the “correct” person, he or she is much more likely to pass on a personally addressed cover letter.

Be sure you have the **exact name of the legal employer**. Law firms can be very particular about the use of “PLLC” versus “LLC,” or “PA” versus “P.A.,” or “and” versus “&.” While your local store may be a “Walmart,” the corporate entity is still “Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.” Your cover letter is another writing sample and you want it to be error free, especially in the address block.

If the letter is addressed to an attorney, and you choose to use “Esq.” or “Esquire” after his or her name, you do not include a courtesy title when stating the name in the address block, i.e., “Ms. Rosie Putman, Esq.” is *not* correct; “Rosie Putman, Esq.” is correct. When addressing a judge or

justice, the correct form in the address block is “The Honorable Maxwell Zunker,” regardless of whether the individual is a judge or justice.

Following are classic examples of the legal address block:

Norman Wolf, Esq.
Smith & Jones, P.A.
1234 Center Street
Fayetteville, AR 72703

The Honorable Jane Felix
Arkansas Supreme Court
Justice Bldg.
625 Marshall St.
Little Rock, AR 72201

Ms. Terry Pendleton
Recruiting Coordinator
White & Jancovich, LLC
Morning Tower, Suite 234
1163 Capitol Avenue
Little Rock, AR 72201

4. Salutation

Salutations are placed two lines below the recipient’s address block, flush with the left-hand margin. In modern usage, “Dear Ms. (or Mr.) Smith:” is the preferred form of salutation for most individuals. Do not use “Mrs.” Or “Miss” unless you have specific knowledge that the individual prefers that form of address. Do not include the first name in the salutation. Do not include “Esq.” in the salutation. Because the cover letter is formal correspondence, you use a colon rather than a comma after the salutation.

For judges, use “Dear Justice Smith:” for judges in the highest appellate court, and Dear Judge Smith:” for all other judges. Academics may be addressed as “Dear Dean Smith:” or “Dear Professor Smith:” in the salutation.

5. Body

As a general rule, the body of the cover letter consists of three paragraphs, each of which serves a different function. The **opening paragraph** typically introduces you to the prospective employer and states your reasons for writing. If you are using a letterhead which includes your name, you need not restate it in the first paragraph, but you would typically include your year in school and the name of the law school. Name the position for which you are applying, e.g., summer position, summer clerk, summer associate, judicial extern, law clerk, etc. If you are responding to a job posting, use the terminology of the posting. If appropriate, you might mention how you heard of the opening.

If you have been recommended to the employer, always include the name of the mutual acquaintance in the first paragraph, if not the first sentence, e.g., “I am a second-year law student at the University of Arkansas, and Judge Milton Standish recommended that I contact you about a summer clerkship with your firm.” If you have specific geographical ties to the area where the employer is located, mention them in the opening paragraph, especially if you are applying to an

out-of-state employer. Employers want to hire individuals who will stick around, so strong local ties are a real selling point.

The **body** should consist of one or two paragraphs that serve to convince the employer to review your resume and interview you. This is where you have an opportunity to be persuasive. Highlight those abilities and experiences which will appeal to the specific employer, but avoid simply repeating your resume. Focus on transferable skills and experiences that legal employers would value, e.g., research and writing skills, management experience, client service, etc., and your interest in or “fit” with the particular employer, e.g., private firm, government agency, public interest organization, etc. If the employer has provided a job description, tailor your letter to track the language of the description.

Do not be concerned if it is too early in your legal career to demonstrate a precise fit with a particular practice area. Many employers will value an individual’s willingness to be flexible and work in a variety of practice areas. However, if a firm or agency only practices in a particular area, e.g., environmental law, children’s rights, criminal defense, you will want to express your interest and highlight any relevant skills or experience you have in the area.

The **closing paragraph** serves multiple functions. If you have not already done so, you want to mention that your resume and any other materials are enclosed. You want to thank the employer for taking the time to consider your application. You want to express your interest in obtaining an in-person interview. If you are going to be in the employer’s city at a particular time, say so and express an interest in meeting.

Several sample cover letters are contained in the Appendix. Please use these examples as a starting point for developing your own letter rather than as a verbatim template.

6. Complimentary Closing

The traditional closing for formal, business correspondence is “Sincerely.” Other acceptable complementary closings include “Yours truly,” “Sincerely yours,” and “Very truly yours.”

7. Signature Block

Beneath the complementary closing, skip three or four lines and type your signature. You will sign your name in blue, black or blue-black ink in the block.

8. Enclosures

Two or three lines beneath the signature block, you will want to indicate that you have enclosed materials with your cover letter. There are several ways to do this. The simplest way is to type “Enclosure” or “Enclosures,” flush to the left hand margin. You can also indicate the number of

enclosures as “Enclosures (2),” or you can identify the enclosures as “Enclosures: Resume, Writing Sample.”

B. General Guidelines

Do not become “paralyzed by perfection.” Cover letters can be challenging to write. But do not get so bogged down in trying to draft the “perfect” cover letter that you fail to apply timely to employers. Get some basic templates worked out, and then just tweak them for specific employers.

Do not rely on spell check and grammar check. Your computer cannot tell the difference between “trial practice” and “trail practice.” Proofread your cover letter very carefully, and then ask someone with strong editing skills to review it for you.

Do not apologize for perceived weaknesses, e.g., “Despite the fact that I received only a C+ in Contracts”; or “Although I have never worked in a firm.” Lawyers often have to work with “bad facts” and you want to show that you can make the argument in a positive light, e.g., “I enjoyed my course in contracts and it sparked my interest in transactional work”; or “I look forward to broadening my legal experience by working in the private sector.” Emphasize your strengths.

Do not be conclusory. Do not just assert that you have “strong research and writing skills”; point to specific evidence, e.g., grades in LRW classes, writing an honor’s thesis, work as a research assistant, relevant undergraduate major, etc.

Do not be cocky. You want to come across as a confident professional, rather than as smug or arrogant. Focus on the evidence of your accomplishments rather than comparing yourself to others. Avoid overuse of adverbs and phrases such as “I think,” and “I feel.” Let your abilities and experiences speak for you. Genuine and informed enthusiasm for the employer is the best way to distinguish your candidacy from others.

Do not engage in puffery. As with the resume, everything in your cover letter should adhere to the facts. There is too much downside risk in inflating your experiences, especially in a small market state like Arkansas.

Do not rely on mass mailings. Many legal employers receive hundreds or even thousands of applications in a given year, and those with generic cover letters are rather easily weeded out. If you do use a mail merge function to fill in contact information and firm specifics, be sure that *all* the fields have populated correctly.

Do not forget to keep a copy. You will want to keep copies of all correspondence so that you know what you said to each prospective employer, and know when to follow up.

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE COVER LETTERS

NAME
Address
City, State ZIP
Telephone
E-mail address

Date

Name of contact person
Title of contact person
Name of firm/organization
Street Address
City, state, ZIP

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

I am a first-year law student at the University of Arkansas School of Law, and would like to work as a summer clerk for Sith, Jones & Porter. I grew up in Springfield, and have a keen interest in returning home to Missouri to live and work after graduation. I am drawn to Sith, Jones & Porter because of its strong litigation practice.

I believe that my academic and practical experience make me well suited for a position with your firm. I have strong research and writing skills, as evidenced by the “A” I received in Legal Research & Writing, and the successful completion of an honor’s thesis in history. Last fall, I successfully competed in the Negotiations Competition, making it to the round of eight. Prior to law school, I worked my way through school as a waiter, so I am also accustomed to the demands of a client service profession and the challenges of a dynamic work environment.

I appreciate your consideration of the enclosed resume and would welcome the opportunity to interview with you in person. I will be in the Kansas City area the week of February 2-6 and would be available to meet with you at that time. If another date would be more convenient, please contact me and I will alter my schedule accordingly. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

/written signature/
Your Name Typed

Enclosure

University of Arkansas School of Law – Cover Letters

Name
Address
City, State, ZIP
Telephone
E-mail address

Date

Name of contact person
Title of contact person
Name of firm/organization
Street Address
City, state, ZIP

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

Professor Tommy Thompson suggested I contact you about a summer clerk position with the Sterling Law Firm. I am a first-year law student at the University of Arkansas School of Law, and I am excited about the prospect of working for a well regarded general practice firm where I can gain exposure to a diverse practice.

For the past three years, I have worked as accounting specialist with Acme Corporation in Memphis. My work required strong research and analytic skills, strict attention to detail, and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively to a range of audiences. In addition to my work experience, I have further developed my research and writing skills through the legal research and writing curriculum. I also have worked to improve my client skills by participating in both the Negotiation and Client Counseling Competitions.

Having enjoyed the variety of the first year coursework, I have a strong interest in a general practice. I would be pleased to discuss my qualifications in an interview and have enclosed for your review my resume. I very much appreciate your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,

/written signature/
Your Name Typed

Enc.

NAME
Address
City, State ZIP
Telephone
E-mail address

Date

Name of contact person
Title of contact person
Name of firm/organization
Street Address
City, state, ZIP

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

I am writing in response to the job listing posted with the University of Arkansas School of Law. I am strongly interested in the advertised position and enclose my resume.

I am a [first-year law student], and completed my first semester in the [Top Third] of my class. I would be available to work between [10 – 15 hours] a week, and would be willing to [work some weekends]. I worked part-time throughout my undergraduate career, and am quite able to balance the demands of work and school. Importantly, I also have a strong interest in [intellectual property] and a strong academic background in [science].

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future and hope to discuss the possibility of my employment with Sanders & Pike, LLC. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

/written signature/

Your Name Typed

Enclosure: Resume

NOTE: Items in brackets ([]) reflect items mentioned in the job posting.