



**ANTONIN SCALIA
LAW SCHOOL**

Cover Letters: Guidelines and Checklist

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LEARN. CHALLENGE. LEAD.

Purpose of Cover Letter:

Your cover letter is often your first introduction to an employer. It is your chance to showcase your qualifications and professional skills, as well as to demonstrate your interest in the employer and convey a sense of your personality. Your letter should convey not only why you stand out amongst other applicants, but also why the employer stood out to you from among other opportunities. The letter should accomplish the following:

- Introduce yourself and state what position you are seeking;
- Tell a narrative about your professional path and specific interests;
- Highlight significant, relevant achievements, especially those beyond or different from what is immediately obvious on your resume;
- Demonstrate specific interest in the position and employer;
- Display your writing ability and attention to detail;
- Persuade the reader that you should advance in their hiring process.

Structure of Cover Letter:

The cover letter should be a concise, well-written business letter that, at a minimum, introduces you, conveys your interest in a specific position, and requests an interview. Three or four paragraphs, including the introduction and conclusion, are usually sufficient to accomplish these goals.

Salutation: The letter should always be addressed to a specific person, never to a generic title, like "Hiring Partner," "Legal Recruiter," or "To Whom It May Concern." In the recipient address block, use the name and title of the contact person listed in the job posting, and use that person's (last) name in the salutation. If no contact is identified, look online or call the employer's main office to identify the firm or organization's Hiring Partner/Lawyer or Managing Partner/Lawyer.

Titles matter. If the letter is addressed to an attorney, and he or she chooses to use "Esq." after his or her name, you should not include a prefix when stating the name in the address block. John Smith, Esq. is correct, but Mr. John Smith, Esq. is not correct. In the salutation line, you would address the individual as Mr. Smith.

Introductory Paragraph: Begin by introducing yourself, stating your class year (and, if you are an evening student, your evening status) and law school affiliation. Clearly indicate the specific position for which you are applying. Use the exact title or term used in the job posting (*ie*, "summer law clerk," "summer intern," "summer associate," or "entry-level attorney"). When in doubt, use the phrase "summer position" for summer jobs and "law clerk" for school-year jobs. If the employer has asked that you specify a particular office or division, do so here. If you have a specific connection to the employer or geographic location, mention

it in this paragraph. If a specific individual referred you to the employer, you can specify that here. See Sample Letters B, D, and F for example phrasing.

Industry Terms: Most large law firms refer to their summer positions as “summer associates.” Smaller firms, government, and non-profits may use this phrase, but more typically refer to summer positions as “law clerk” or “intern” positions.

Body Paragraph(s): The most significant part of the letter, this is also often the most difficult to write. For most students, one paragraph will be sufficient; if you have a longer employment history or a unique background, two paragraphs may be appropriate. Ultimately, the body paragraph(s) should answer two important questions: (1) “Why are you interested in the job?” and (2) “What skills, experiences, and/or qualifications would you bring to the job?” Though the order or way in which you answer those questions will vary, this paragraph should always tell a story about yourself that draws a connection between what you have done (your skills and experiences) and why you are interested in the job. Think carefully and creatively about the narrative that you will tell, and consider the following questions:

(1) Why are you interested in the job?

You should demonstrate enthusiasm for the employer and position, and your reason for wanting the job should be something more than simply stating what the employer can give you (*i.e.* legal experience). Consider these questions:

- Why did you go to law school?
- What common themes exist when you describe what you did before going to law school (such as cultivating a life-long interest in the environment or spending many years volunteering for a specific cause)?
- What caught your eye when you saw the job posting?
- What type of environment or practice setting is offered by the employer (such as an in-house legal department within a larger organization or a small firm)?
- What are your long-term career goals and how does this position move you forward along that path?

(2) What skills, experiences, and/or qualifications would you bring to the job?

When describing your skills and experiences, give specific examples that *illustrate* what you learned from a previous experience; don’t simply recite what is on your resume. Focus in particular on experiences that demonstrate strong analytical skills, research, writing, and/or leadership.

- Do you have strong research and writing skills, demonstrated by an undergraduate thesis, an article you published, or an appellate briefing competition?
- Have you concentrated on some area that is relevant to the job (like litigation skills, criminal law, tax work, etc.)?

- Do you have work or volunteer experience that demonstrates an ability to think quickly on your feet while under pressure (such as working in a restaurant) or manage others (such as managing a retail store or leading an undergraduate student group)?
- Have you invested time and energy into a particular cause/organization that meshes with the employer's mission or otherwise demonstrates a commitment to public service?

Do not worry if it is too early in your legal career to demonstrate experience in a particular practice area or even any prior professional work experience! Most first-year law students have no prior legal experience, and many have no professional experience at all. Your experiences working and volunteering before attending law school are still valuable, so consider what you learned and accomplished, and convey those achievements to the employer. Highlight skills and experience that any employer would appreciate (*i.e.*, legal writing or research skills, oral communication skills, management skills, etc.) and your interest in private practice or public service.

Later in your legal career, when you have multiple legal employment experiences on your resume, make sure you are being judicious about what you include in the cover letter. If an experience does not clearly relate to your theme, do not include it in the letter. Instead, select only the most relevant and significant experiences to highlight and describe in your letter.

Practice Areas: How much interest you express in a particular practice area may vary by type of employer. For cover letters for summer associate positions at large law firms with multiple practice areas, think carefully before emphasizing your interest in one specific practice area. In some large law firms, some practice areas are hotter, more active, or more competitive than others – or they may be declining in importance. Unfortunately, it may be difficult to tell which practice area is growing, which is bringing in less revenue, or which already has too many associates. Therefore, students may want to highlight a few of the firm's practice areas in which they have an interest at the beginning of the third paragraph of the letter to show why they are interested in the employer, but also appear flexible and willing to work in other practice areas.

In contrast, students applying for positions at government agencies, small to midsize firms, and advocacy organizations should express an interest in the area(s) of law in which those employers specialize. Generally, those employers have a limited number of practice areas and will want to know if applicants have an interest in those fields.

For public service employers (government and nonprofits), demonstrate an interest in public service or government work, if applicable.

Closing paragraph: Conclude your letter with a short paragraph that accomplishes several goals. Reiterate your interest in the employer/position. State that you would welcome the opportunity to meet with the employer to discuss or learn more about the position. If you are applying to employers outside of the D.C. area and will be in a particular city over a school break, you should indicate this fact in the closing paragraph as an enticement to schedule an interview. Describe what materials you have enclosed (resume and a list of references, for example). For each employer, check to make sure that you have actually enclosed the materials requested by the employer and listed in the letter, as requirements vary from employer to employer. Note: You are NOT enclosing a "COPY of your resume"; you are enclosing your actual resume. If you are enclosing materials with your letter, note "Enclosures" or "Attachments" below your signature block, at the bottom of your letter, flush with the left margin.

Finally, thank the reader for his or her time and consideration.

Format and Appearance:

Letterhead/Heading: Include your contact information (name, address, email, and phone number) as a header at the top of the letter, in effect creating your own stationery. Use the same heading on your resume, cover letter, and list of references.

Other Addresses: If you have a permanent address in a geographic area in which you would ultimately like to work, you can list both your school address and your permanent address. Doing so is an easy way to demonstrate your connection to the area. If you want to stay in the DC metropolitan region, list only your present address.

Professionalism Tip: Make sure that your contact information is professional and business-appropriate. Avoid email addresses that are not recognizably related to your actual name; if in doubt, use your GMU email address. Make sure that your voicemail greeting is clear and professional. Check your email and voicemail regularly.

Electronic Documents: When submitting your cover letter electronically, either through Symplicity or via email (depending on the employer's preference), always submit the letter, as well as all of your documents, in pdf format, rather than as a Word file.

If submitting your application by email, attach the letter to the email. The body of the email should include a basic transmittal message conveying what you have attached (Example: "Attached please find my application materials for a summer law clerk position with the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office.") Pay attention to whether the job posting specifies that you use a particular subject line in the email and whether you should email the application to someone besides the person to whom the cover letter is addressed.

It is fine to submit each document as a separate pdf file, each attached to the transmittal email, unless the employer specifies otherwise.

Paper: If you are submitting an application in hard copy, print your cover letter on white, off-white, or very light gray bond paper. Use the same paper for your resume and list of references.

Tone:

Your letter should be personal, engaging, and professional. You should discuss your qualifications and experience in a confident manner, but avoid statements that imply that you are exactly what the employer are looking for (Recommended statements include: “I am confident my experience would serve your firm well” or “My skills and experiences will make me a great fit for your practice group”). The goal of the letter is to provide the reasons for the employer to reach that conclusion on their own.

Use action verbs and the active voice. Avoid clichés and overblown adjectives. Convey genuine enthusiasm for the job and/or employer.

Proofreading and Grammar:

The letter should be, of course, free from errors. If possible, have someone proofread your letters for you. If you must proofread your own work, try reading it aloud. Make sure to italicize the name of any law journals, books, or magazines you mention.

COVER LETTER QUICK CHECKLIST

General

- ___ **Contact info.** Include your name, address, telephone number and e-mail address (and LinkedIn address) at the top of the letter, in the same format used on your resume.
- ___ **Recipient.** Address the letter to a specific person, using the correct spelling, title, and prefix.
- ___ **Employer name and position.** Use the same job title used by the employer. Double check your spelling of the employer name.
- ___ **Business letter format.** Use correct business letter format, including a colon in the salutation, rather than a comma.
- ___ **Length.** Your letter should be between three (typical) and five paragraphs, and no more than one page in length.
- ___ **Tone.** Your letter should be confident and engaging, as well as professional.
- ___ **Error-free.** Make sure your letter is free from errors in spelling, grammar, and formatting. Check that you have spelled all proper names correctly.

Introductory Paragraph

- ___ **Introduce yourself.** State your class year, law school, and, if applicable, evening status.
- ___ **Position.** Use the exact position name used in the job posting. State the time frame (summer, fall semester, etc.) for which you are applying.
- ___ **Connection or referral.** If someone referred you for the position or you have a connection to the employer and/or geographical region, mention that information.

Body Paragraph(s)

- ___ **Narrative or theme.** Develop a theme about yourself that connects your skills and interests.
- ___ **Skills/qualifications.** Give specific examples of your skills and qualifications, drawing on your previous experiences.

— **Interest in the employer.** Be sure you convey why you are interested in this particular position and/or employer.

Conclusion

— **Request to meet.** Indicate that you would like to interview for or meet to discuss the position.

— **Application materials.** Note which materials you have enclosed. Check that you are submitting every document requested by the employer. Note “Enclosures” or “Attachments” below your signature block and aligned at the left margin.

— **Thank you.** Thank the reader for his or her consideration.