
COVER LETTERS

Office of Career & Professional Development
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Your cover letter is the first impression a potential employer gets of your writing skills. Make a great first impression!

Guidelines:

Grab the reader's attention from the outset. Avoid sentences such as, "I am writing in response to your listing..."

Tailor your letters for each position. Put yourself in the reader's shoes: would you be more inclined to read a mass-produced mail-merged letter or one written specifically to you which articulates an honest interest in your organization and specific skills that would be of value to you and your clients? Research a potential employer before you write your cover letter so you can relate your background directly to the employer's needs and specific law practice.

Always accompany a resume with an application or prospecting cover letter. The only exception to this rule will be during the Early Interview Program or On-Campus Interview process, but even then, many employers will request a cover letter.

Always address letters to a specific individual. Put that person's name in the first line of the address block as well. Avoid "Hiring Partner," "To Whom It May Concern" and the like. The only exception is when you are responding to a blind listing (e.g., Craigslist). **Note on salutations:** There are two options for salutations: (1) "Dear John" or (2) "Dear Mr. Smith"—only use the first option if the person you are writing to knows you well or if you have been told to address him/her on a first name basis. Never use "Dear Mr. John Smith."

Focus on what you offer the employer-- not what the employer offers you. Explain why you are writing to this particular employer. Showcase what you offer this employer. Avoid phrases such as, "I am excited to work for you because I want to learn more about..." How will you add value to the employer's business?

Provide specific examples from your experience. Don't restate your resume. Elaborate on it and draw attention to the experiences and skills that an employer would find relevant. Claims of personality traits or skills ("I have great research and writing skills,") unsupported by specific evidence, are less useful than specific factual statements ("I independently researched and drafted a Motion to Dismiss in a construction defect case, which was granted in part by the Alameda County Superior Court. The case settled two weeks later.")

Vary sentence structure. Are you starting all your sentences with the word “I”? Find a creative way to avoid that trap and avoid the passive voice at all cost! Use action verbs (see the **Crafting a Law Resume** handout for examples.)

Keep letters to one page.

Use the same letterhead and font on both your resume and your cover letters. Use the same color and type of paper and the same font and size for both your cover letter and resume for a professional look.

Edit. Avoid forms of the verb “to be” as they are vague and general. Avoid subjective statements that you would not use in a letter to a client, court or opposing counsel, such as “I feel,” “I believe” or “I think.” Avoid long phrases and run-on sentences. Avoid empty words that are inserted at the front of the sentence merely to have the sentence not start with “I” (e.g., “furthermore”).

To correct these common weaknesses, circle the offenders. Circle subjective statements (and delete them). Circle single word phrases at the beginning of sentences (and delete them).

If you circle all sentences that begin with “I” (including those with non-descriptive introductory words, such as “Moreover” before the “I”) and find there are too many, ask yourself: How can I vary the sentence structure? Introductory phrases are fine, when they are descriptive.

If you circle all forms of the verb “to be” and find they are frequent, use another strategy: substitute more descriptive words; change another word in the sentence to a verb; rearrange the sentence, particularly when the original sentence is of passive construction; combine sentences using details in a following sentence to tighten the point being made.

Proofread! Ask the Career Office, professional contacts, family or friends to review your letter for spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Employers assume the quality of your cover letter indicates the quality of work you will produce.

Keep handy copies of all correspondence so you can access them quickly and have a record of what you said when called upon to discuss the opportunity further. **Tip:** keep an updated resume on HCO at all times! This helps Career Office staff direct leads your way, and means you always have a back-up in case your hard drive fails.

Content of Application & Prospecting Letters:

First Paragraph: Grab the reader’s attention and use powerful language.

The basics: Introduce yourself (without restating your name), your class year (1L, 2L, or 3L), and why you are writing (for a summer/spring/fall position).

The hook: If a personal contact referred you to the employer, mention that person's name at the outset. For example, "Edward McCaffrey suggested that I contact you regarding a summer position." If you have not been referred by someone, try to establish a connection between yourself and the employer (your interest in one of their practice areas, their location).

Demonstrate a *specific interest in that employer*. Show them that you aren't looking for just any job. If you do mention the employer's name, use the complete version. After you use the full name once, use the shortened version of their name that is most commonly used—check their website to see how they refer to themselves.

Answer their question: Why should we interview this person? Your answer to that question could be a sentence in the first paragraph that sets up the argument in the body of your letter.

Second/Third Paragraphs – Show the employer what you have to offer.

This is the meat of your letter. Why are you qualified for the position? Why are you best able to do the work that the employer needs done?

Link your background, experience, and skills with the employer's practice. Highlight and expand on things mentioned in your resume such as grades, work experience, relevant course work, etc.

Do not repeat what is in your resume; instead tell the story of what you know, what transferable skills you have, and what traits you bring. Use the facts of the experiences cited in your resume to prove these points. Emphasize transferable skills and your enthusiasm for the organization's work. Back up statements with proof. Anyone can say, "I will be valuable to your organization." Explain why you would be valuable ("My clerkship with Judge Hand sharpened my research and writing skills.").

Final Paragraph - Mention your interest in discussing the position in person. For out of town employers, indicate if you will be in the area for an interview, or suggest an initial phone or Skype interview. Finally, thank the reader for his or her time and consideration.

PRACTICAL TIP: FOLLOW-UP IS ESSENTIAL

Be proactive and persistent in following up on letters! Calling within a week to confirm receipt and to clarify hiring needs connects your name with your voice and often prompts an employer to pull up your materials. The additional contact also helps you stand out as a persistent advocate—exactly what legal employers are seeking!

A NOTE ABOUT STYLE AS YOU PROGRESS THROUGH LAW SCHOOL:

The closer you are to graduating and becoming a member of the Bar, the more employers will read your letters as examples of how you will write to and for their clients.

A letter that may get a first year student a summer job may not get a third year student an associate job. Update your cover letters throughout your law school career!

- Attached are some sample letters to give you an idea of what they could look like. They are only samples and ***should not be copied*** word for word. Some may be fine for a first or second year summer job, but not fine for a post-graduate position. Others may be fine for a post-graduate position, and include experience you may not have yet. These samples are merely to guide you. Your correspondence should reflect your own personality and style. You want to stand out!

MAKE AN APPOINTMENT WITH A CAREER COUNSELOR TO DISCUSS OR REVIEW DRAFTS OF ANY OF THESE LETTERS.

Sample Application Letter

Lisa Simpson

100 McAllister Street • San Francisco, CA 94102

(415) 555-1212 • lsimpson@uchastings.edu

(Note: Use the same header format on your resume and cover letter for a professional look)

August 18, 2015

Keith Bishop, Esq.
California Teachers Association
999 Education Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Mr. Bishop:

I was very excited to see the law clerk posting for the California Teachers Association. As a former teacher now in my second year at UC Hastings, I have always been interested in labor and union issues. In fact, I am pursuing a law degree with the hope of combining these interests with my experience as a union member to advocate in the employment law arena.

I first developed an interest in the labor problems facing our educators while working as a high school teacher. That interest brought me to law school, where this past summer as an intern at the Employment Law Center, I confirmed my interest in labor and employment law. I interviewed and counseled clients of diverse backgrounds regarding unfair labor practices, sexual harassment issues, and wrongful termination. To develop litigation skills, I enrolled in a Trial Advocacy program this fall. Through this program, I will represent an indigent client in an Unemployment Insurance appeal from the initial interview through the administrative hearing. These skills and experiences would benefit me as a clerk in your office.

Enclosed please find a copy of my resume and a letter of recommendation from my supervisor at the Employment Law Center. Please feel free to call me if I can answer any questions or provide additional information in support of my application. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

NOTE *Lisa identifies background relevant to this particular organization & the skills she expects will be of use to the employer. She should follow up with the employer in about a week to determine interest in her application.*

Lisa Simpson
Enclosures

Sample Application Letter

Luke Skywalker
100 McAllister Street • San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 555-1212 • lskywalker@uchastings.edu

March 18, 2015

James T. Kirk, Esq.
Investigators 'R Us
007 Spy Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Mr. Kirk:

I am writing to apply to the position of Investigative Assistant. Han Solo, Esq. has used your services successfully on several occasions and he told me of your firm's reputation as one of the top private investigation firms in San Francisco. I will graduate from UC Hastings in May, 2016, and I am looking for an exciting career which will enable me to use my legal training in a unique and creative way. The skills I have developed at UC Hastings make me a strong candidate for the position.

The clinical courses I have taken at UC Hastings sharpened my interviewing and fact-finding skills. In addition, as a law clerk at Spock and Bones, I regularly propounded and responded to discovery requests. In this context, I took a proactive role with my clients as they often gave insufficient answers to interrogatories. These experiences honed my ability to extract information from individuals who might not be ready or willing to divulge that information. Through my work at the Immigration Resource Center, I developed strong interpersonal skills in one-on-one counseling sessions with people from a multitude of backgrounds. Finally, my work as a Research Assistant for Professor Chu Bocka provided me with extensive experience in both legal and non-legal writing and research.

I have enclosed a copy of my resume for your review. Please contact me if I can answer any questions or provide additional information in support of my application. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

NOTE *Luke mentioned a mutual contact and enthusiastically expressed interest in a particular position. He also identified relevant skills he'd bring to the position.*

Luke Skywalker

Enclosure

Sample Prospecting Letter

Ugeth Urbina
100 McAllister Street • San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 555-1212 • uurbina@uchastings.edu

September 1, 2015

Richard Barnburner, Esq.
Barnburner, Cropduster and Bannerflyers
800 Airport Road
Oakland, CA 94816

Dear Mr. Barnburner:

As the holder of a B.S. in Aeronautical Engineering from Skidmore College, a commercial pilot for the past eight years, and a second year student at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law, I am naturally drawn to aviation law. Barnburner, Cropduster and Bannerflyers' reputation in the industry is renowned among both pilots and students of aviation law. I am particularly interested in Lindburgh v. FAA and have been following it closely.

I hope that you would consider me for a 2016 Summer Associate position. In addition to my aviation background, I bring strong analytical and writing skills. As an intern for Judge Davis last summer, I regularly reviewed and analyzed motions filed with the court and drafted court orders and bench memoranda. My background and skills would supplement the strengths of your office, thus making me an ideal candidate.

My resume is enclosed. Please contact me if you have any questions or would like additional information. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ugeth Urbina

NOTE *Ugeth captures the reader's attention in the first paragraph and explains why he has targeted this particular law firm.*

Enclosure

Sample Prospecting Letter to an Organization

Bernie Sanders
100 McAllister Street • San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 555-1212 • sanders@uchastings.edu

December 18, 2015

Donald Trump
Sierra Club
123 Forrest Drive
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Mr. Trump:

I write to you as a grassroots activist, a current law student, and as someone who is passionate about environmental law. I would relish the opportunity to put my respect for nature and my excitement for the law to good work as a summer intern for the Sierra Club.

My passion for environmental law began prior to law school when I volunteered for Greenpeace. I used my communication skills to obtain the signatures of over 1000 San Francisco voters in support of a ban on Northern European whaling operations. That activism gained a more academic perspective when I joined the University of California, Hastings College of the Law Environmental Law Journal, WestNorthwest. I have further honed my legal analysis and writing skills this semester while drafting legal memoranda on the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the Clean Air Act. In addition, my experience as a Congressional intern gives me a strong foundation for understanding the political arena. This combination of skills would be valuable to me as a clerk with the Sierra Club.

My substantive and practical knowledge of environmental law, and of the federal political scene, make me an excellent candidate for this position. My resume and writing sample are enclosed. I look forward to an opportunity to demonstrate my commitment to environmental justice and the goals of the Sierra Club. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

NOTE Bernie's enthusiastic description of what draws him to his work, as well as his articulation of relevant skills employed in the past and the results obtained.

Bernie Sanders

Enclosure

