

## EFFECTIVE COVER LETTERS

Writing effective cover letters is critical to a successful job search. A well researched and written letter that is individually tailored to the employer and to the position being sought can persuade the employer to consider your resume seriously. To maintain an employer's interest, your cover letter must possess the qualities of effective legal writing. It should be well written, persuasive, and free of typographical, grammatical, and spelling errors. Your cover letter should be one page, and it should be printed on bond paper to match your resume.

When writing your cover letter, keep in mind that it is your first writing sample. It is in your best interest to make a favorable first impression. If your cover letter is not well written, persuasive, and concise, the employer need not bother to read your formal writing sample. Express yourself clearly. Language and sentence structure must be kept simple and clean. Obviously, typographical errors and spelling errors are unacceptable and will likely disqualify you from being considered a serious applicant. While most word processing systems have a spell check capability, you should not rely solely on it. Many people have a difficult time seeing mistakes in their own writing, so it is helpful to have someone else proofread your cover letters before sending them. It is also a good idea to read your cover letter aloud, slowly and word by word. Every time you make a correction, read the whole document again.

Your cover letter is usually your first opportunity to express your interest in a position and describe your qualifications. It is important to emphasize what you can bring to the job; too often, cover letters merely emphasize what a candidate is hoping to get out of the position. While you want to convey why a position appeals to you, you must be able to communicate what you can contribute to the employer. Before writing the letter, you should research the employer and understand its employment standards. Your letter should establish that you have the skills the employer is seeking, by elaborating on your educational and professional experiences and providing concrete examples of your accomplishments. Rather than repeating the entries on your resume, your letter should supplement your resume and pique the reader's interest. Ultimately, your cover letter should entice an employer to want to interview you.

Performing research on a prospective employer and incorporating this information into your cover letter demonstrates your sincerity and genuine interest in a specific position. Generic letters will not generate any employer interest in you. If a cover letter is broad enough to be sent to almost any employer, it is unlikely to be effective in helping you obtain an interview.

### ***Salary Requirements***

Occasionally, a job advertisement asks you to include your salary requirements in your cover letter. If possible, it is best to avoid answering this question. You might want to say, for example, *“I am sure we can come to an agreement about salary, if you decide I am the person for the job.”* Giving a specific salary requirement may either price you out of a job or allow an employer to offer a salary lower than what he or she may have been willing to offer. If you believe that it is necessary to provide a salary requirement, give as general a range as possible (“in the \$50,000s”). Incorporate this information in the last paragraph of your cover letter.

### ***Correspondence Via E-Mail***

In recent years, it has become more common for employers to request that cover letters and resumes be sent via e-mail. While you may use casual and informal language and formats in e-mails to friends, in cover letters it is important to display professionalism and follow the customary formalities. Because the reader’s software may not be the same as yours, follow these simple guidelines.

- Format text of your e-mail using left-justified headers and four-inch wide lines in your paragraphs. This should prevent your e-mail message from awkwardly wrapping text around the screen when opened.
- Avoid using text enhancements including bolding, bulleting, or underlining. Instead, use capital letters or dashes to provide emphasis where needed.
- When including your resume as an attachment, mention the particular program used to create it, *“I’ve enclosed a resume written in Microsoft Word 2000.”*
- Save a copy of everything you e-mail either by bcc’ing yourself or by keeping a copy in your sent mail folder.
- If you are going to draft a lengthy e-mail, consider drafting it with your word processing software and posting it into your e-mail application.
- Wait until you are completely finished writing and editing your e-mail before filling in the “to” field with the recipient’s e-mail address. This prevents you from accidentally sending the message before it is ready.

Follow any e-mailed correspondence with hard copies via “snail mail.” Sending a hard copy of your application serves two purposes. It gives your resume a second look—or first look in the unlikely event that a computer glitch rendered your e-mail inaccessible. Mailing a hard copy also makes it easier for your cover letter and resume to be passed around an office for review. To avoid any duplication of work on the employer’s side, it is important to include language indicating that you have already e-mailed the same information. You can relay this information by either including a second cover letter that restates who you are, your accomplishments, and a statement such as, *“I recently e-mailed you my resume and I’m following up with this hard copy.”* Another option is to clearly state on your cover letter that it was sent “VIA E-mail.”

## *General Format*

Your Street Address  
City, State Zip Code

Date

Contact's Name and Title  
Firm/Agency  
Street Address  
City, State ZIP Code

VIA E-mail (if applicable)

RE: (job title)

Dear Mr./Ms. [SALUTATION]:

First Paragraph [INTRODUCTION]:

Second Paragraph [SUPPORTING PARAGRAPH(S)]:

Third Paragraph [CONCLUSION]:

Sincerely,

Your Signature

Your Name, Typed

### Notes

\*\* You may use your resume heading in place of an inside address.

\*\* A block format may also be used.

## *Salutation*

Always address your cover letter to a particular person (e.g., the hiring attorney or recruitment coordinator) and be certain to spell names correctly and to include proper titles. Never write "To Whom it May Concern" or Dear "Hiring Attorney." You should always find out who the hiring contact is and personalize your letter. When you aren't interested enough to find out the proper person to whom to submit your resume, employers will treat your omission as evidence of a lack of particular interest in their firms. Contact information may be found on a firm's website or in the NALP Directory. If you have an address, phone, or fax number, but no company name, try a reverse directory, such as the online GTE Superpages (<http://superpages.gte.net>), which lets you trace a business by either its address or phone number. Once you obtain contact information, call the employer's receptionist to verify your data. Be polite, verify your information, and say thank you.

## **Introduction**

Approximately 90 percent of all business letters start with “I” and most begin with “I am.” Be distinctive by placing the focus of your introduction on the employer rather than yourself. Begin with the word “you” or “your” or use the name of a contact. For example, you may start with a sentence regarding how you learned about the employer: “*Your law firm recently participated in a panel discussion, Careers in Tax Law, that I attended at Suffolk University Law School.*” If you were referred to the employer by a mutual acquaintance, be sure to use that person’s name in your introductory paragraph: “*Douglas Stevens suggested I contact you. I am applying for an associate position with Hogan and Hartson.*” Establish that you’ve researched the firm and include information in this paragraph about the firm’s accomplishments, history, status, or leaders.

Your first paragraph should introduce yourself, including your year in law school, and explain why you are writing to the employer: “*As a second-year student at Suffolk University Law School, I am interested in a summer associate position with Loeb and Loeb.*” The goal of this paragraph is to demonstrate that you are a worthy applicant and to entice the employer to read further.

The introductory paragraph may also be used to establish geographic ties to a particular region. Explain your genuine interest in relocating and describe your relationship to the city. It’s not much of a leap for an employer to believe that you are willing to live where you have lived before or where your family or friends live. If you do not have direct ties to a city, provide other reasons for your interest—perhaps you have visited the city or are looking forward to certain cultural aspects of it.

## **Supporting Paragraphs**

Your supporting paragraphs should begin with a strong topic sentence and have a central theme. You should convey your interest in the particular organization, highlight your strengths, and persuade the employer that you are particularly well qualified for the position. This may require more than one paragraph, but be brief. Elaborate on the experiences outlined on your resume that are most relevant to the position. Back up statements with specific examples of your prior work. “*My clinical work experience representing youth offenders would make me a strong addition to The Children’s Law Center.*” Mention any connection or prior experience that you have with the employer.

Information that might not seem relevant in a general resume, such as courses you have taken or where you grew up, may also be included if they are relevant to a particular position. Keep your letter positive. Do not try to explain gaps in employment or poor grades.

## **Conclusion**

Indicate your availability for an interview and that you look forward to hearing from the employer soon. Always thank the employer for considering your application.

If you have a trip scheduled to the employer's city or can easily take one, include this information. While employers may not be able to pay your travel expenses, they might be interested enough to take a free look.

### ***Effective Cover Letter Do's and Don'ts***

#### **Do's**

- ✿ Address your letter to a particular person.
- ✿ Be brief.
- ✿ Provide examples of your experiences.
- ✿ Relate your experiences to the employer's needs.
- ✿ Use clear language.
- ✿ Sound confident.
- ✿ Use transitional phrases.
- ✿ Use quality bond paper.

#### **Don'ts**

- ✿ Send your letter "To Whom it May Concern."
- ✿ Ramble on.
- ✿ Be vague.
- ✿ Generalize.
- ✿ Use convoluted language.
- ✿ Sound arrogant.
- ✿ Use "I" to start every sentence.
- ✿ Use ordinary copy paper.

### ***Before you seal the envelope, ask yourself:***

- ✿ Does my cover letter say enough to get me past the initial screening process?
- ✿ Does it relate my skills to the employer's needs?
- ✿ Does it clearly state the reason for my interest in the firm/position?
- ✿ Did I thank the employer for considering my application?
- ✿ Did I perform a thorough spell check?
- ✿ Did I carefully proofread?

If the answer to these questions is "yes," go ahead and mail it!

**FULL BLOCK FORMAT**

Your Street Address  
Your City, State Zip Code  
(one space)  
Date  
(two spaces)

Recipient’s Name  
Recipient’s Title  
Recipient’s Organization  
Recipient’s Street Address  
City, State Zip Code  
(two spaces)

Dear Mr./Ms./Judge/Justice\* Recipient’s Last Name:

XX  
XX  
XX.

XX  
XX  
XX  
XX.

XX  
XX  
XX  
XX.

XX  
XX.

Sincerely,  
(three spaces)

Your Name  
(two spaces)

Enclosure(s)

*\*Use “Justice” for judges in the jurisdiction’s highest appellate court, and “Judge” for all other judges.*

**SEMI BLOCK FORMAT**

Your Street Address  
City, State Zip Code

(one space)

Date

(two spaces)

Recipient's Name  
Recipient's Title  
Recipient's Organization  
Recipient's Street Address  
City, State Zip Code  
(two spaces)

Dear Mr./Ms./Judge/Justice Recipient's Last Name:

XX  
XX  
XX.

XX  
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XX  
XX.

XX  
XX  
XX  
XX.

XX  
XX.

Sincerely,

(three spaces)

Your Name

(two spaces)

Enclosure(s)

*Note: In this format, the first line of each paragraph in the letter's body may be indented.*

# SAMPLE COVER LETTERS

*Warning: DO NOT COPY SAMPLES!*

## *Sample 1:*

33 Bromfield Avenue  
Boston, MA 01222

March 4, 2006

James Smith, Esq.  
The Children's Law Center of Massachusetts, Inc.  
P.O. Box 710  
298 Union Street  
Lynn, MA 01903

RE: Summer Internship

Dear Mr. Smith:

Susan Wood suggested I write to you regarding your summer internship program. She speaks highly of your organization and suggests that I would be well suited to work for you because of my strong interest in child advocacy. I am currently a first-year student at Suffolk University Law School and am very excited about the opportunity to work at The Children's Law Center this summer because of your work in directly representing indigent children. I have enclosed my resume for your review.

Through my experiences working with children, I developed a strong desire to attend law school with the goal of becoming a child advocate. Last summer, I worked at Connecticut Legal Services, where I helped attorneys prepare their family law and delinquency cases. The case work of these attorneys was very compelling and led to my senior thesis entitled, *Meghan's Law: Does it Protect Constitutional Rights?* Now, I look forward to the opportunity to combine my enthusiasm for this practice area, along with the strong research and writing skills which I am developing in law school, during a summer internship at The Children's Law Center. In addition to strong legal skills, my ability to speak Spanish fluently is an asset that I would bring to a summer internship with your organization.

Thank you for your time and consideration with regard to my application. I hope to have the opportunity to speak with you about my qualifications in the near future.

Sincerely,

Emily Rhodes

Enclosure

cc: Susan Wood, Esq.

**Sample 2:**

230 Tremont Avenue  
Boston, MA 01222

March 10, 2006

The Honorable Robert S. Jones  
Massachusetts Superior Court  
County Courthouse, 13<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Three Pemberton Square  
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Judge Jones:

Due to my strong interest in gaining the best possible foundation for my legal career, I would very much appreciate an opportunity to work in your chambers as a judicial intern this summer. I will complete my first year at Suffolk University Law School this May and am available as a full-time volunteer for the summer. Enclosed please find my resume and writing sample for your review.

Through my legal education, as well as prior work experiences, I have developed strong research and writing skills which I believe would make me an excellent judicial intern. First, I was awarded the Best Brief Award in my section of the Legal Practice Skills class this year. Second, while a senior at Cornell University, I completed an honors thesis entitled, *An Economic Analysis of the Death Penalty's Use in New York State*. Third, while at Cornell, I assisted Professor George Gammell with research for a paper he presented at the 2006 New York State Environmental Law Conference.

Additionally, I have developed practical experience and skills by working for the law firm of Smith and Smith during the summer before beginning law school. My exposure to civil litigation as a law firm clerk has made me very excited to gain more practical experience through the opportunity to observe and engage in courtroom procedure as a judicial intern. In turn, I believe that my collective skills and experience would make me an effective judicial intern in your chambers.

I look forward to meeting with you to discuss the possibility of summer employment and am available for an interview at your convenience. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

John R. Thomas

**Enclosures**

*(Use "Justice" for judges in the jurisdiction's highest appellate court, and "Judge" for all other judges.)*

*Sample 3:*

5 Charles Street, Apt. #2  
Boston, MA 01222

February 1, 2006

Susan Rupert, Esq.  
Hours & Rupert  
125 Tremont Street  
Boston, MA 02108

RE: Summer Associate Position

Dear Ms. Rupert:

Your law firm recently sponsored a panel discussion at Suffolk University Law School on intellectual property law that featured John James. The presentation was impressive and prompted me to contact you regarding a summer clerkship with Hours & Rupert. As a second-year student at Suffolk University Law School, I am focusing my studies on the intellectual property area and plan to graduate with a certificate in the Intellectual Property Law concentration.

As you can see from my resume, I have considerable experience in the area of intellectual property law. Before law school, I spent two years as a paralegal at the boutique firm of Jones & Jones, where I gained substantial training in legal research and writing. In this position, I also gained substantial client contact experience. I left this position to begin law school full time and chose to attend Suffolk University specifically because of its Intellectual Property concentration. Through this program, I have taken numerous classes, including Patent Law and Drafting Patent Claims. Last summer, I returned to Jones & Jones and gained additional practical experience researching legal issues, responding to client inquiries, and drafting legal memoranda. During this school year, I am assisting Professor Jamison with research on The Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act. The combination of my work experiences and legal education, with my sincere interest in intellectual property law, would make me a valuable member of your summer program.

Hours & Rupert is renowned for being a wonderful place to work. The prospect of working with talented attorneys in a firm with such a large Intellectual Property department genuinely excites me. I am confident that my extensive experience and strong writing skills would allow me to be an asset to your firm. I have enclosed a copy of my resume and look forward to meeting with you. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Herbst

Enclosure

*Sample 4:*

254 Beacon Street, Apt. #9  
Boston, MA 01222

March 30, 2006

Julia Hynes, Esq.  
Hynes & Hynes  
13 Center Street  
Houston, TX 77002

RE: Real Estate Associate Position

Dear Ms. Hynes:

Your recent job posting in the Texas Bar Journal for an associate presents an exciting opportunity for me. I was raised and attended college in the Houston area and am looking forward to returning there to practice law upon my graduation this spring from Suffolk University Law School in Boston. Working at Hynes & Hynes appeals to me because of your firm's well-known real estate practice. Accordingly, enclosed please find my resume, transcript, and writing sample for your review and consideration.

Throughout law school, I have focused on developing experience in the area of real estate law, both in the classroom as well as through summer internships. My coursework has included Real Estate Litigation, Real Estate Mortgages and Conveyancing, and Property Law Special Issues. Last summer, I began working at a small real estate firm where I have continued to work during the school year. During the course of my work, I have gained extensive experience with all aspects of residential closings while honing my research and writing skills. Working one on one with clients, lenders, and attorneys, I have developed excellent interpersonal skills.

I will be in Houston the week of March 5, 2007 and am available to meet with you during that period if you are interested in discussing my qualifications in person. Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Laura Johnson

Enclosures

*Sample 5:*

152 Marlborough Street, Apt. #4  
Boston, MA 01222

August 24, 2006

The Honorable James R. Thomas  
Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court  
County Courthouse, 13<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Three Pemberton Square  
Boston, MA 02108

RE: Judicial Clerkship Position for 2007–2008 Term

Dear Justice Thomas:

Your ten years of experience on the bench has been widely praised and I would be honored to clerk for you following my graduation this May from Suffolk University Law School. I have thoroughly enjoyed and excelled in my legal research and writing courses, as well as the practical litigation work I have completed. I would now like to delve into the inner workings of the court system by working as a post-graduate judicial clerk for the Supreme Judicial Court. I have enclosed my resume, transcript, writing sample, and list of references for your review and consideration. Professors Robert James and Sandra Bowl will send reference letters directly to you.

Through my legal studies, work experiences, and extracurricular activities, I have developed strong research and writing skills. I have excelled in the classroom, placing in the top 5 percent of my class and am currently participating in Suffolk's Voluntary Prosecutors Clinical Program. As a 3:03 certified student attorney, I have represented the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in misdemeanor cases under the supervision of an Assistant District Attorney, handling my own caseload and working with defense attorneys, judges, and victims.

I was a summer associate at Hughes & Hughes last summer, where I gained valuable practical experience in the litigation department. I wrote several legal memoranda and a summary judgment motion, and helped attorneys prepare for an insurance defense trial. I received a permanent offer of employment from Hughes & Hughes and plan to return after completing a clerkship.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to further discuss my qualifications. Please let me know if you need further information. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Melissa Blanchet

Enclosures

*(Use "Justice" for judges in the jurisdiction's highest appellate court, and "Judge" for all other judges.)*

**Sample 6:**

**Janine Turner**  
15 Allwood Road, Quincy, MA 02116

March 16, 2008

RE: Confidential Posting for Summer Law Clerk Position

Dear Hiring Committee: *(use "Hiring Committee" when you cannot identify addressee)*

In response to your confidential posting on the Suffolk job posting database, enclosed please find my resume, writing sample, and reference list for your review in application for your law clerk position.

According to your posting, your organization specializes in sports law and management of major and minor league teams. I have the practical experience in business law and negotiations you are looking for. Based on my legal and non-legal experience, I have the ability to work well in a team environment and in a fast-paced setting.

I am finishing my first year of law school at Suffolk University Law School and am doing extremely well in my Contracts class. I have already registered for courses offered in Sports and Entertainment Law and Negotiations for the fall semester.

Also relevant is my Bachelor of Science in Sports Management from Merrimack College and my work with the Lowell Spinners last summer as an intern. During my internship with the Spinners, I worked on marketing initiatives and assisted in the management of the team and facilities. In addition, I am a member of the American Bar Association's Sports & Entertainment Law Section and Suffolk's Sports Law Association, of which I am President-Elect. I am extremely interested and excited about the prospect of working for an organization such as yours, and I firmly believe that, if given the opportunity, I would make a valuable contribution as your summer law clerk due to my enthusiasm, work ethic, and academic and practical experience.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope to have the opportunity to discuss my qualifications and the position with you in person in the near future.

Sincerely,

Janine Turner

Enclosures

*Sample 7:*

CAROLINE A. SIMON

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313 Mockingbird Road, Southbridge, MA 02195

January 28, 2008

The Honorable James T. Taylor  
Hampshire County Superior Court  
152 Main Street,  
Northhampton, MA 01234

Dear Judge Taylor:

I am a first-year student at Suffolk University Law School and am interested in obtaining an internship in your chambers for this summer. Having been a lifelong resident of Hampshire County, it would be an honor to work for the judiciary of my community. Enclosed please find my resume and writing sample for your review and consideration.

My professional goal is to practice as a criminal trial attorney in Berkshire County. I am extremely interested in working as your intern because of your [work, approach, interests, etc.]. I am confident that a judicial internship in your chambers would provide me with broad perspective on the challenges facing both judges and attorneys that I will need to be a skilled practitioner.

I understand you are looking for an intern with strong research and writing skills. As an undergraduate student at University of Virginia, I gained significant experience in research and writing through the Honors Tutorial program. This program entailed intensive writing assignments, including weekly papers and a thesis. I have further honed my research and writing skills during my first year coursework in law school.

As a legal secretary for the firm of Smith & Smith, I became familiar with the litigation process. My experience, combined with my demonstrated skills in interpersonal communications, organization, and critical analysis, as outlined in my resume, provide me with the background to be a beneficial addition to your chambers.

I am very interested in meeting the challenges afforded by a judicial internship and welcome the opportunity to discuss my qualifications with you further. Thank you for your consideration.

Very Truly Yours,

Caroline A. Simon

Enclosures

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