

A Guide To Writing A Good Lawyer Cover Letter

By Karen Anderson

Why Do I Need a Cover Letter?

Your lawyer cover letter is as important as your resume because it is often read first, it can fill the gaps of your resume, and convince an employer that you are the right candidate for the job. In other words, it is an important tool in your quest to secure an interview.

A lawyer cover letter is not like a fax transmittal sheet. It is a document that, when done well, takes time to craft. It is also another writing sample for employers to consider. Therefore, it needs to be drafted professionally, thoughtfully, and error-free. You can send your resume without a cover letter. However, you could also be selling yourself short. A well-drafted cover letter can convince a reticent employer to give your resume a second look, or persuade him or her to meet with you in person.

What Kind of Cover Letters Are There?

There are three (3) main types of cover letters. The standard application cover letter, the customized cover letter, and the prospecting cover letter.

1. The Standard Application Cover Letter

These are generic cover letters where the content stays the same, regardless of the position, except for the name and address of the employer. If sent “as-is,” they generally have a very low success rate of getting interviews. A standard application cover letter should ideally be used as a base for the most effective type of lawyer cover letter, which is the customized cover letter.

2. The Customized Cover Letter

Customized cover letters are the most effective cover letters. These letters are either tailored specifically to an open position, or sent to people you have met or with whom you have a mutual acquaintance. In any event, the content of these cover letters change according to the position and the organization the applicant is sending the letter to. A customized cover letter should incorporate the information you have learned through your research about an employer, and show how your skills are a fit to the particular position. While they require more work, they are the most likely to get a response.

3. The Prospecting Cover Letter

These are generic cover letters that are designed to elicit informational interviews and expand your network. Not every position is advertised, and one of the most effective methods of finding a position usually involves networking. These letters do not always accompany a resume, but rather provide information about you and your background in an attempt to solicit informal meetings to learn more about an

organization. While they don't generate "interviews" per se, they are good tools to help you grow your network and make you visible for positions that you would otherwise not have known about or been considered for.

How Do I Format My Cover Letter?

Lawyer cover letters follow a standard professional format, which is akin to a business letter. Simple rules to follow include: avoiding abbreviations, including your name, mailing address, telephone number, and email at the top, including a date, and identifying any accompanying documents (i.e. "enclosed" if sent by mail, or "attached" if sent via email). Finally, your cover letter should never exceed one page.

You should also include the full name of the person the letter is being address to, their position, the name of the company or firm, and the mailing address (if mailed). Always aim to write to an individual by name, not "To Whom May Concern," "Dear Sir or Madam," or "Dear Recruiter." Most companies and law firms have contact information available directly on their website. Otherwise, pick up the phone and obtain the proper contact information. If you are responding to a job posting, then address your letter as it is instructed.

What Do I Include In My Cover Letter?

1. First Paragraph

This should include a basic statement about who you are, and why you are writing. When drafting your lawyer cover letter introduction, be sure to provide a quantitative description. For instance, rather than writing, "My name is John Doe," briefly provide an indication of your level of experience. For example, "I am an associate general counsel with more than ten (10) years of experience focused on the representation of healthcare companies."

The objective of this paragraph is to entice your reader to read the entire cover letter. If you don't have a personal connection, then use your research to convey your knowledge of the organization. The goal is to make a connection – do this briefly and specifically. Sweeping and generalized statements will not work.

2. Body Paragraphs

An effective lawyer cover letter is one where you are "selling" " your experience and qualifications to the employer. These are the "why I'm qualified" paragraphs of your cover letter. You have to call attention to something that substantiates your interest in this particular employer. These paragraphs should also highlight your most relevant experiences, skills, and qualities as they relate to the position.

Also, be sure to include specific examples to support the experiences, skills, accomplishments, or qualities you are mentioning. Whatever you do, never just regurgitate what is already included in your resume. This is an opportunity for you to add to the resume and establish a connection. Therefore you need to create fresh content.

3. Closing Paragraph

The last paragraph of your lawyer cover letter should thank the employer for his or her consideration, and re-emphasize your interest in the position. If you are an out-of-town applicant, let the employer know when you plan on being in town and state your interview availability. You should also refer to your enclosed legal resume, and let the employer know if you plan to follow-up. Of course, if the job posting indicates "no phone calls," then follow their direction. However, if you indicate that you will be calling or following-up within a specified time period, be sure to follow-through.

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