

Four Rules Of Legal Cover Letter Writing

By Vanessa Vidal

If you are an attorney, law student, or paralegal, a legal cover letter plays an important role in the job search. The legal cover letter provides a personal touch to your application, and shows prospective employers that you are a serious and professional candidate. If done correctly, it can substantially improve your ability to compete for jobs and generate interviews.

A well-written legal cover letter also demonstrates your written and organizational skills, and establishes you as the type of candidate that is willing to go the extra mile. In this highly competitive legal job market, a legal cover letter can give you a much needed edge over thousands of other legal job seekers by describing how your specific skills and accomplishments uniquely qualify you for the job.

Here are four rules for legal cover letter writing:

Rule #1: Meet All Of The Requirements

In this competitive legal job market, it's easy to become anxious about finding a job, and to start to apply to as many positions as possible. You could easily send out thousands of resumes and legal cover letters and never get one positive response. Why? Because chances are you are not sending your resume or cover letter with the employer's needs in mind, but rather your own. The key to a successful job search is not in the numbers but in the quality of your application. In other words, you need to carefully read an employer's job posting, and make sure that you meet **all** of the requirements of the position before sending your resume and cover letter.

To meet a requirement does not just mean that you are capable of doing a task or developing a skill, but rather that you have prior experience conducting that particular task, or have used that skill in the past. You need to specifically describe what you can do for the employer in light of what you've already accomplished. If an employer has to read between the lines, or your past experience does not match all of the requirements of the position, you should not waste your time applying for the job.

Rule #2: Tailor To Fit

You need to take the time to customize your legal cover letter to fit the employer's requirements. Legal cover letters are not a "one size fits all" document. Although you can start with a form cover letter, before you start sending your legal cover letter, you need to first review the requirements of the position and make a list of what the employer wants. This list might include specific areas of expertise, years of experience, technical knowledge, transferable skills, and personality traits.

Once you have determined what the position's requirements are, you need to incorporate these items into your legal cover letter. In order to do this correctly, you need to provide concrete examples of the desired skills or qualifications you have that match the employer's list of requirements. This is called "cover letter tailoring" and it should be done to every single legal cover letter you send to a prospective employer.

Rule #3: Actively Sell Yourself

The current job market is tough! Your legal cover letter is an opportunity for you to sell yourself better than the next candidate to get the interview. Remember that the application process is a sales situation. You are the product and you should approach your legal cover letter the same way a sales professional prepares for a sales meeting.

First, find out as much as possible about the employer. The more extensive knowledge of the employer you have the greater your chance of success. Research the company online, drop by before the interview and pick up company brochures and reports, research the type of work involved, and find out about their competitors. Use this information to formulate relevant answers to the common job question: why should we hire you? Make notes of the important details you find, include these in your legal cover letter, describe how your experience and skills make you particularly well-fitted for the organization, and let the employer see that you have done your homework.

Second, you need to present evidence in your legal cover letter that supports your assertion that you are the right candidate for the position. Provide concrete examples that support your skills and qualifications so that the reader can picture you actively involved in a particular activity required for the job. Don't be afraid to list your achievements. Never sell yourself short: be confident in everything that you have achieved. After all, you worked hard to get where you are, right? However, don't just summarize your resume or gush about your achievements, be sure to provide specific details or anecdotes.

Rule #4: Keep it Simple

Keep it short and simple. Rambling on or providing too much information makes you seem unfocused or unconfident. A well-constructed single page composed of 3 to 5 paragraphs is sufficient. In your first paragraph, explain why you are writing to the employer. In the middle paragraph or two, highlight why you are a good candidate for the position, convey a clear story about your career, and detail what you can do to help the company reach its goals. Your closing paragraph should indicate how you will follow up on your submission.

The tone of your legal cover letter should be professional, positive, but not arrogant. One way to judge the tone of your legal cover letter is to read it out loud. It also helps to have someone else read your legal cover letter. Does it flow naturally in a conversational tone? Is it easy to read and understand? Is it confident but unpretentious?

Finally, make sure both your spelling and grammar construction are perfect. Most employers are immediately turned away by spelling and grammatical mistakes. That means proofreading your legal cover letter several times and using a spellchecker. Again, you may want to have someone else read your legal cover letter; sometimes a fresh pair of eyes can catch mistakes you may have missed.

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