

How To Write an Effective Lawyer Cover Letter

By Leslie White

A lawyer cover letter should accompany each resume you send to an employer. Is it necessary? Absolutely. Many job seekers are skipping this important step in the process, not realizing the full importance of the lawyer cover letter. A cover letter not only introduces you to a potential employer, but it allows you to provide explanations and discuss important points or parts of your background that are either not mentioned in your resume, or that cannot be adequately covered in a resume.

A lawyer cover letter should always be professional, enthusiastic, sincere, and on point; in other words, it should be specifically tailored to the particular employer to whom it is addressed. The lawyer cover letter should follow the same formatting style as the resume. For example, if you used 10-point Arial fonts and 2-inch margins on your resume, your lawyer cover letter should include the same font, margins, and header as your resume. A lawyer cover letter should be no longer than one page, and include at least three paragraphs. Each paragraph should serve a distinct purpose, and provide information related to the position.

Here is the basic format for writing an effective lawyer cover letter:

Paragraph 1

The purpose of the first paragraph is to introduce yourself and refer to the position you are applying to. Tell them who you are, why you are writing the letter, and give them a reason to continue reading the rest of your cover letter. The first sentence of your first paragraph should read something like this: "I am Class of 1990 litigator applying to the Trial Attorney position with the U.S. Department of Justice." In this first paragraph, you should also refer to your practice area, and why you are a good fit for the position. Also, if the position requires a relocation on your part, be sure to mention any geographic ties that you may have to the region in which the employer is located.

To grab the reader's attention and entice them to keep reading your lawyer cover letter, you should include a statement that sets you apart, such as a personal connection or specific interest in the position or organization. One example could be: "Professor John A. Smith recommended that I contact you because of your expertise in immigration law." If you do not have a personal contact or recommendation within the firm or organization, try something like this: "I was fascinated to read your article in the August issue of *The National Law Journal*" or "My extensive experience in tort litigation and strong interest in that area may be an asset to your firm." Whatever you choose to include, make sure that it is something that you learned in your research about the particular employer or position that sets you apart from other applicants.

Paragraph 2

The purpose of the second paragraph is to elaborate on your background, experience, and skills and relate how they fit with the position and needs of the employer's organization. It is not enough for a potential employer to review your resume and determine whether those skills are a match, it is up to you to make those connections. You should use any element of your background, such as your job experience, skills, and training to demonstrate how these are relevant and transferable to the position. One mistake that is often made in the course of this exercise is for job seekers to repeat what is already on their resume. While elements of your resume are important to stress, you should make an effort to go beyond the resume, and provide a fresh perspective on what you have to offer.

Another important purpose of the lawyer cover letter is to be able to discuss relevant aspects of your candidacy that are not appropriate or practical to include in the resume. For instance, if you are no longer working with your last employer, this is a good place to discuss why. For example, if you were laid off because of economic reasons, it's best to explain this on the cover letter, rather than have the employer assume that something is wrong with you from the resume alone. This is also a good place to explain gaps on your resume, transitions, or any other elements that show that you've not taken a linear route to your legal career. Any perceived or potential negative can be easily dealt with and explained in the cover letter.

The lawyer cover letter can also allow you to discuss positives that are not easily addressed on the resume. For instance, if you earned high grades in a particular course, received professional training in a particular practice area, or published articles in a specific field, this is a good place for you to discuss these accomplishments in details. You can expand on a specific skill or accomplishment as it best relates to the position, and discuss how these achievements enabled you to hone essential skills for the job. Finally, if the position requires relocating, you should take the opportunity to show your interest or ties to city, and convince the employer of your willingness to move.

Paragraph 3

The purpose of the third and final paragraph of your lawyer cover letter is to reiterate your interest in the position, and direct the employer to what you want them to do. Make it easy for the employer to schedule a meeting. If you are going to be travelling to the employer's city, let them know when so they can easily schedule a time to see you. If you are local, specify times that are convenient for you and provide telephone numbers where you can be reached and an email address.

Finally, be sure to include a line of gratitude. For example: "I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the real estate associate position. I will be in Atlanta the week of March 18th, and can be reached on my cell phone at (555) 434-9987. I hope we can arrange a mutually convenient time to meet. Thank you for your consideration."

OR

"I am eager to speak with you and discuss my possible contribution to John, Doe & Associates as I feel my experiences in intellectual property will be an asset to your firm. I will be in touch with you within a week, and if you need to reach me, you can call 555-434-9987, or email me at applicant@email.com. Thank you for your time and consideration.

OR

"I hope to have the opportunity to discuss how my background and experiences may fit your needs for this general counsel position. Thank you for your time and consideration, I look forward to hearing from you soon."

There are a number of ways to close your lawyer cover letter. There is no one correct way. Use whatever configuration you are most comfortable with. That said; if you are going to make an "assertive" closing, such as telling an employer that you will call them in a few weeks or on a specific date, follow through. If you have not heard from the employer after waiting at least two weeks, you can contact them again, unless the employer has specifically asked that you not do so. However, if you've done one follow-up, and you've still not heard anything, stop. Contacting an employer more than once about your candidacy may be detrimental. Remember that employers are busy, probably reviewing hundreds of resumes, and are doing their best to get to everyone. There is a fine line between being eager and assertive, and becoming a nuisance. Use your better judgment, and when in doubt err on the side of caution, and keep the follow-up to a minimum.

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