

Selling Yourself In a Cover Letter

By Vanessa Vidal

In the rush to secure a position, many attorney job seekers unwittingly toss together ineffective attorney cover letters, hoping to beat out other eager applicants. When applying for a legal position, you need to craft your attorney cover letter carefully and deliberately. Taking the time to properly craft one good attorney cover letter will be a better use of your time than sending the same poorly drafted cover letter to a hundred employers. When employers estimate that nearly 80% of all cover letters are ineffectively drafted, it is clear that most job applicants are not correctly drafting, organizing, or proofreading their cover letters.

Properly Formatting the Cover Letter.

The first impression you make with your attorney cover letter may be the most important. Therefore, you should pay special attention to the formatting of your attorney cover letter. If your attorney cover letter is improperly formatted, a potential employer could look no further than the first sentence, and essentially render your cover letter pointless.

A standard attorney cover letter should include a date in the top left-hand corner. Abbreviations should never be used, either in the date, body, or conclusion of your attorney cover letter. In fact, as a rule of thumb you should never use abbreviations in any of your application materials, including your resume.

Follow the date with two spaces, and then list the hiring contact's full name and title. The next line should include the full legal name of the company you are applying to. Be sure to check the company's website to see how the name of the company is spelled. Next, enter the company's full mailing address. Do not forget to double-check all spelling and punctuation when proofreading the employer's name and contact information.

After the address, leave two more spaces, and provide a "Re:" line that contains the name of the job, and job number, if applicable. This will allow your attorney cover letter reader to immediately identify which position you are applying to. Then, begin your cover letter with "Dear," and insert the employer's name. It is standard to address the employer as "Mr." or "Ms.," but it is acceptable to use recipients' full names if you are connected with them or know them in some way.

Opening Paragraph of the Cover Letter.

The opening paragraph of your attorney cover letter should start by specifying the reason why you are writing to the employer. It should state what position you are applying for, the job reference information if any, and the location of the position.

For instance: "I am writing to apply to your Senior Attorney position (Job Number: 00107) located in Wayne, NJ."

Next, you need to describe how you fit the position. Provide a brief description of your experience as it relates to the position. For instance, if you are applying to a legal position with a pharmaceutical company, your introduction could state the following: "As my attached resume indicates, I possess over twenty years of professional legal experience, the last ten of which I have spent working as a Senior Counsel with Merck & Co."

This paragraph is also where you should include any references to connections you may have with the organization. If you have a relationship with someone who works with or knows the employer, mention it here in the cover letter.

Middle Paragraph of the Cover Letter.

The substance of the attorney cover letter, or the middle paragraphs, should focus on your experience and background and how they relate to the position you are applying to. You need to correlate how your skills and experience directly meet with the requirements of the position, and the organization's overall culture. In order to do this effectively, you will need to conduct good old-fashioned research on the company.

You also need to think about the content of your legal cover letter the way a prospective employer will. Assuming an employer receives hundred of resumes and cover letters for a position, what do you think he or she will be looking for when making a selection? It's not only about meeting the minimum requirements listed on the job description. It's about the depth and quality of your experiences and skills and how they relate to those requirements that will make a difference.

Closing Paragraph of the Cover Letter.

The closing paragraph of your attorney cover letter should conclude everything you have already said. You should reiterate your interest, and restate why you are an ideal candidate for the position. You need to inquire about the next step, and ask to set up an appointment to further discuss your interest and qualifications. Be sure to appropriately thank the reader, and end the cover letter with a formulation such as "Sincerely" or "Regards." Make sure to print your name, and if you are mailing a paper copy of your attorney cover letter, sign it using blue ink.

Finally, make sure that your attorney cover letter does not extend beyond one page. A cover letter must boil down the essentials in a tightly written format as not to bore or overwhelm the reader. The key to an effective attorney cover letter is to keep the reader engaged, to have him or her refer back to the resume, and ultimately invite you for an interview.