

The Do's of Legal Cover Letter Writing

By Leslie White

Legal cover letters are necessary to any job search. While many legal professionals think that a solid legal resume alone is enough to do the job, the reality is that it often is not. Why? Because a legal resume is meant to cover certain aspects of your employment and skills, while a legal cover letter is meant to cover others. See “The Purpose of An Attorney Cover Letter” for more on the elements of a legal cover letters.

The first step in writing an effective legal cover letter is to appreciate the potential effect it can have on a potential employer. Remember, this is another tool you have to separate yourself from other applicants. While there is no standard formula to follow in crafting your legal cover letter, there are some things you should be sure to do.

1. Make Your Legal Cover Letter “Reader Friendly.”

One of the most important things to keep in mind when crafting your legal cover letter is your audience. Who will be reading your legal cover letter? What is this person looking for? Your legal cover letter reader is most likely a busy professional, who has the difficult task of going through hundreds of cover letters. This is the person whose attention you will need to capture quickly. What’s the best way to do this? You need to make your cover letter “reader friendly.” In other words, the critical information of your legal cover letter needs to be readily accessible.

Most readers spent an average of 30 seconds per cover letter. A reader skimming your legal cover letter needs to be able to see your biggest selling points very quickly, or they will be missed altogether. A good way to make you legal cover letter “reader friendly” is to use bullets to list your most important selling points. Bullet points can be used to list important matters you have recently worked on, or that reflect your most important skills. For example:

- Significant experience advising and counseling internal business clients with respect to complex commercial and regulatory law issues in the area of pharmaceuticals.
- Proven record of success developing risk mitigation and litigation avoidance strategies, as well as managing products liability cases.
- Considerable exposure to alliances and joint ventures, including those formed with key biotech collaboration partners.

If you are a law student with less experience, you should still use bullet point to highlight your strengths and skills, whether or not they were acquired as part of a

job, a class, or an extracurricular activity. While there is no set-rule with respect to length and content, in general you should aim to limit your legal cover letter to one page, unless there are specific circumstances that warrant a longer cover letter.

2. Use a Confident Tone and Highlight Your Strengths.

Just as the format of your legal cover letter should make your information readily accessible, the tone should also be used to highlight your strengths. A legal cover letter is an opportunity to sell yourself to a potential employer. Your tone should be confident, enthusiastic, and yet modest. In other words, you need to clearly highlight the skills you bring, but focus on those skills have been identified and/or complimented by former employers, colleagues, or peers.

In addition to mentioning your strongest assets, you should also consider discussing obstacles you have overcome. This is particularly effective if you are a junior level attorney or a law student without a lot of practical work experience. For example, you may want to discuss the fact that you supported yourself through school, or that you were the first in your family to go to college. Your legal cover letter is an opportunity to differentiate yourself from other applicants. Look at your background and determine what specific experience or circumstance you've faced that has made you who you are today. Be sure to provide specific examples to back up your claims, and explain how overcoming those obstacles gave you skills you use today to face new challenges.

3. Tailor Your Legal Cover Letter To Each Job You Are Applying To.

Most applicants tend to send the same form cover letter to all the positions they are applying to. Yet, form cover letters are completely ineffective. If you are planning to apply to more than one position, your legal cover letter should be drafted specifically for each position you are applying to. See "Tailoring Your Legal Cover Letter" for information on how to tailor your legal cover letter.

The real value of a legal cover letter comes from its specificity with respect to the position it is targeting. Tailoring your legal cover letter means addressing it specifically to an individual, by name. It means providing specific examples about your work history, legal experience, skills, and accomplishments as it relates to the position's requirements. You should also show that you have done some research on the firm or the company, and demonstrate how your background fits with the organization. A mass-produced cover letter will not impress your audience. Targeting a firm or a company specifically in your legal cover letter adds sincerity to your application, and will demonstrate to the reader your desire to work for that particular employer.

4. Show Interest, But Remember To Be Patient.

The final paragraph of your legal cover letter should reiterate your interest in the position and the organization. It should also be used as an opportunity to follow-up. Unless the position specifically requests no phone calls from applicants, make sure to let a prospective employer know that you plan on following-up with a phone call. You may also want to let an employer know if you plan on being in town if the position is out-of-state. Following-up once is fine, but you don't want to keep contacting a potential employer and become a nuisance. Employers review hundreds of resumes, and generally have other responsibilities that require their time and attention. Remember to be patient and wait for a response. Finally, it is important that you thank the reader for his/her time and consideration.

5. Finally Proofread, Proofread, and Proofread Again.

Nothing can make a worse impression than a legal cover letter with typos, sloppy punctuation, wrong word choices, or grammatical errors. Proofreading your legal cover letter thoroughly is arguably the most important thing you can do when crafting your cover letter. It will not matter that the information contained in the legal cover letter is persuasive, interesting, or impressive if it contains errors. If the reader is distracted by an error, you may lose your opportunity to be seriously considered for the position.

You should not only use a spell checker, but also re-read your legal cover letter several times. You should ask a friend or a relative to look at it as well. Sometimes a fresh pair of eyes can catch something you may have inadvertently missed. By making sure that there are no grammatical errors and typos, the company or the employer will be sure that you took the time of making the simple act of making a letter perfect, and that can make the difference between getting an interview or not.