

## **Top 5 Legal Cover Letter Mistakes**

*By Karen Anderson*

As a seasoned legal recruitment professional, I have reviewed thousands of legal resumes and legal cover letters. They have ranged from law students looking to land their first summer internship, to chief legal officers transitioning to new industries or companies. Over the years I have seen my fair share of the good, the bad, and the ugly. Most importantly, I have been in the unique position of receiving feedback from employers as to what works and doesn't when it comes to legal cover letters.

Here are the top 5 legal cover mistakes most mentioned by employers:

### **1. Not Identifying the Position You Are Applying For.**

Companies and law firms generally receive so many applications that each legal resume or legal cover letter might only be afforded a moment's attention on an initial screening. It is therefore very important that your legal cover letter be well organized, easy to read, describe what you've done in a meaningful way, and be free of errors.

At minimum, you need to let a potential employer know what position you are applying for. This needs to be identified immediately by someone glancing at your legal cover letter. Therefore, you should use the first line of your cover letter to identify the position you are applying for. Or use a "Re:" line to spell out the position you are submitting your application for. This will help make sure your application gets filed correctly and not by a staff member who may not take the time to read the entire cover letter.

### **2. Using Generic Cover Letters.**

Employers can generally tell when they are receiving a generic legal cover letter, rather than a tailored legal cover letter. Most employers want legal cover letters to show that you have done some research about the company, the position, and that there is something specific about the opportunity that makes it right for you. In other words, they want to see that you've done your homework and put some effort into the legal cover letter to make it specific to them.

If you are applying to a law firm position, make sure that the area of practice you've identified in your legal cover letter is one that the law firm actually has. If the law firm does engage in the practice area you are mentioning, make sure it is at least a significant or growing part of the firm's practice. If you are applying to an in-house position, make sure you are referring to the employer's industry correctly and know what they do as a business. In other words, know your audience, and tailor your legal cover letter accordingly. For more information about cover letter tailoring, take a look at the following article, "Tailoring Your Legal Cover Letter."

### **3. Using Clichés To Describe Your Skills and Experience.**

Your legal cover letter should be used to highlight key elements of your background and the attributes, skills, and accomplishments that you have attained from your work history. What legal employers are looking for are specific and objective examples of your skills and experience and how they are relevant to the position you are applying for.

For example, writing on your legal cover letter, “I am a bright, and hardworking attorney with excellent interpersonal skills,” will not only come across as generic, but as a cliché which you should avoid at all costs. You need to provide concrete examples that will support such a statement. For instance, you could have written, “During the course of my practice at Acme Company, I handled over ten acquisitions independently ranging from \$20M to \$75M, which required me to work with a variety of managers and executives on both sides of the transaction to close these deals successfully. This experience allowed me to learn how to handle a heavy workload, while working cooperatively with a number of different individuals.”

### **4. Not Explaining Obvious Gaps Or Negatives.**

Your legal cover letter should not only be used to detail positives about your application, but it should also be used to explain obvious gaps or negatives with respect to your application that have not otherwise been addressed. For instance, if you have long gaps in your employment history, if you are currently unemployed, or if you have been fired, these things should be explained in your legal cover letter.

While you should not use the cover letter to solely focus on an explanation of your negatives, if the negative is obvious and requires an explanation (i.e. you are getting back into the workforce after an illness or an injury, or you are currently unemployed because of an economic lay off), these things should be included in your legal cover letter.

If you need to provide an explanation or comment on some negative aspect of your background, do so briefly and only after discussing the positives about that aspect of your background. For instance, if you are coming back to the workforce after a long hiatus, you can say, “While I was away from the traditional workforce, I used some of my free time to volunteer my legal tax services to a local women’s shelter.” You need to focus on positive experiences or skills that you developed that enabled you to overcome any negative you have to address. For more information about filling in the gaps, take a look at the following article, “Filling The Gaps On Your Legal Resume.”

### **5. Using Legal Jargon, Acronyms, or Ostentatious Language.**

Your legal cover letter should be clearly written, using simple words that effectively relay what you are trying to say. Using legal jargon or acronyms on your legal cover letter is not a good idea. If a layperson wouldn’t understand the terms you are using, do not use them. You want your cover letter to be easily accessible to anyone reading it, and you should not assume that the person will be familiar with legal jargon like *res ipsa lequitor*, or acronyms like LEGAT.

While your legal cover letter should allow you to show off your writing skills, this is not the time to use “big words” just to demonstrate that you know how to use them. You can use some sophistication in terms of word choice and brag a little, as long as it is done in good taste and conservatively. Remember that anything in moderation is always best.

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