

## Career Aid

### Cover Letter Handout

#### The Purpose of a Cover Letter

*"The entire focus of every letter you write to any prospective employer is this: what's in it for them? What can you bring to the table for them? Why should they want to meet you? That's the only thing that matters."* Guerrilla Tactics for Getting The Legal Job of Your Dreams, Kimm Alayne Walton, p. 172 (emphasis in the original).

#### How to Prepare Your Cover Letter

##### A. Know Your Audience

You absolutely, positively must make some effort to know something about the people or organizations that you are contacting. Make every effort to find a mutual acquaintance. If you have trouble coming up with someone on your own, contact Career Services or search for an alum of GSU or your undergraduate school. Find someone who can say "send your resume to Suzy Q and tell them that I sent you."

Also, try to find some piece of hard information about that employer. All you need is one tidbit or news item that's unique to that organization or person to demonstrate that you've done your homework and that you have a sincere interest in that particular employer.

In addition, see if you can use your network to find inside (positive) information that the organization is proud of, and would consider a "best kept secret." For example, if you know that the employer dearly prizes its collegial, team-oriented environment, mention that you know about this trait and value it yourself.

##### B. Keep Your Audience Reading

The opening sentence - certainly the opening paragraph - must convince the reader that there is some reason to keep on reading. Your reader needs to know right away "why should I finish this letter?"

###### 1. Mutual Acquaintances are Your Ideal Bet

Some attorneys report that the primary thing - sometimes the only thing -- that they look for in a cover letter is whether they know the author, or whether the author was referred by someone that the attorney knows. If one of your contacts says "tell them I sent you," then tell them who sent you!! It may be the best way to "hook" your reader.

In addition, you may also seek advice from your mutual acquaintance on who to specifically direct your resume towards, i.e., he or she may have an inside scoop on who is likely to respond most favorably and/or advocate most effectively about your application.

###### 2. Targeted Mailings can be Effective - Generic "Mass Mailings" Usually Aren't

If you can't locate referrals or mutual acquaintances for all of your targeted organizations, then use a fact or other "hook" that shows you've really noticed that employer.

Notice that we do not advise generic "mass mailings." Career experts agree that "mass mailings" sent indiscriminately to huge numbers of employers without any specific plan or forethought are not effective. Why? No employer wants to feel like just another name on a mail-merge. Also, mass mailings give you a false sense of security that you've taken concrete steps with your job search - when really, your chances of success are much better if you use other methods. For example, experts agree that most people are better off with fewer really **targeted** letters instead of hundreds of generic, untargeted ones. Finally, the more generic letters you send, the more generic rejections you may receive - and that may damage your outlook, which needs to be positive and optimistic to stay in the game.

##### C. Answer this Question: "Why Should the Reader Meet You?"

Talk about specific qualities about yourself that will make your audience think, "I really should give this person a shot." Don't simply regurgitate the facts that are stated in your resume. Rather, draw out the inferences or the conclusions that you believe your resume facts actually support or prove. Demonstrate how your experiences have made you a better, more qualified candidate for employment. Here are some tips:

Support statements about yourself with proof. Ask yourself "I'm a good writer because...." or "I'm good at juggling many deadlines because..." or "I'm a self-starter because....." and back up your contentions.

Demonstrate and prove your commitment to the geographic location you've targeted. Particularly if you're targeting an area

where you didn't attend school or grow up, you must provide a reason why you're interested in that locale. Such reasons could include: close friends, family, growth potential, recent "good press," reputation in a particular practice area or segment of the economy, history, or cultural background.

Show that you've researched your potential employer. Communicate something that you've learned about that specific organization or one of its attorneys.

In general your cover letter is a marketing piece, not a "mea culpa." Acknowledge your perceived weakness and turn your disappointment into a positive experience that the employer will find compelling. For example, describe the concerted efforts you took to dissect your "hook" in Civ Pro, the diligence with which you worked to improve your performance, and how that has made you a better law student overall. Or, talk about how you've compensated by getting great practical experience or leadership opportunities in extracurriculars.

#### **D. Tell the Reader What You Want to Happen Next**

This is where you explicitly advise what you plan to do next, and what you'd like the reader to do. For example:

*Out of town interview* - Tell the reader when you'll be in town and that you'd appreciate the opportunity to meet and discuss the possibility of a position (summer or otherwise). Give several weeks lead time. Or, tell the reader that you'd be available to travel to the area during specified times or at their convenience.

*Meeting or call to discuss possible opportunities* - For example, "I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss how my background may fit your needs." Or, "I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at your convenience, either at your office or before the workday."

*Consider stating that you'll contact the reader to follow up* - but then make sure to FOLLOW UP! Saying you'll follow up puts the ball in your court. On the other hand, it shows that you take initiative to follow through (that is, if you follow through in fact). All experts agree: only say you're going to follow up if you actually intend to, and are able to, follow up with the reader

#### **Before you write:**

- Give careful attention to your cover letter.
- Spend more than an hour crafting a good general letter.
- Customize your letter for yourself and for each employer.
- Research each potential employer.
- Be professional.
- Avoid risky strategies.
- Remember, your audience is a conservative profession.
- Remember, busy hiring personnel get 10 to 20 letters per day.

#### **When you write:**

- Keep your cover letter to one page.
- Be positive, clear, concise, flawless, and inoffensive.
- Answer any obvious questions raised by your application (e.g., geographic connection).
- Give several weeks notice of your visit to out-of-town employers.
- Tailor your letter to any ad you are answering.
- Send all required information with your letter (e.g., resume, transcript, references, writing sample).
- State if you are applying in confidence (e.g., you are clerking elsewhere so phone calls should be directed to your home phone).
- If you write to an attorney in an organization that has a recruiter, cc (copy) the recruiter.

#### **After you write:**

- Check the name, spelling, and title of the addressee (e.g., is the recruiter an attorney?).
- Verify all current contact and address information about the organization.
- Proofread, proofread, and proofread again.
- Have a trusted friend proofread each letter.
- If you use a mail merge, triple check for glitches (e.g., check that the inside address and body of the letter match).
- Call and follow up if you have not received any response after about 2 weeks or so.

#### **For second or third-year students who have clerked with firm the prior summer:**

- If the answer is "yes," indicate whether you have an offer (for summer or full time) from your prior employer.
- If you don't have an offer, include the name of person in the firm who has agreed to act as a reference.
- Identify specific practice areas in which you have experience or training.

