

The Importance of the Cover Letter

The cover letter is your first – and possibly, only – opportunity to engage a prospective employer. It is a key marketing tool to convince the employer to take the time to look at your resume. Think of it as “bait” that you are using to “hook” the reader. Attorneys or law firm recruiting coordinators are searching for a reason to dismiss your application. Don’t give it to them by writing a cover letter that is rambling and poorly written, or that contains typos or grammatical errors.

The primary purpose of your cover letter, when combined with your resume, is to get an interview. The second purpose is to communicate “the intangibles” not readily apparent from the factual content of your resume. It should be written in a tone that is direct, unassuming, and conveys enthusiasm.

Five Rules to Keep in Mind:

1. Put Yourself in the Employer’s Shoes

Never forget who your audience is and why you are writing this letter: it should be employer-focused. In your first paragraph, you need to quickly and clearly answer the employer’s unspoken questions:

“Who are you?”

“Why have you contacted me?”

“Why should I be interested in meeting you?”

To answer the last question, you need to do some research on the firm. An effective cover letter will:

- (a) highlight skills and abilities of most interest to the specific employer reading your letter based on your knowledge of their needs; and
- (b) demonstrate that you are familiar with their particular organization.

The most effective job search mailings target individuals you’ve met or who have been referred to you through your networking efforts. Be prepared with additional questions for this new contact based on your knowledge of their background and employers you’ve researched. If you leave the meeting with one or two more names of people to contact, you’ve accomplished one of your goals.

2. Don’t Re-State Your Resume

Your cover letter should **not** re-hash your resume. The cover letter is an opportunity to make explicit how the skills you developed previously will be beneficial to this particular employer. The second paragraph of your letter should articulate specifically where your characteristics and experiences meet their needs. Your introductory sentence or two can assert accomplishments, e.g., “I have developed strong writing skills” or “solid analytical abilities,” but you must have examples that support your claims or conclusions (awards, commendations by employer, professor). If you cannot think of any experience or award that demonstrates this quality or attribute to support your proposition, don’t make the claim. It cannot just be your opinion (or that of your mother!).

3. Style

A successful cover letter is concise, quickly absorbed, sounds genuine and rings sincere. Don’t write complex, convoluted sentences, or use obscure words in an effort to sound sophisticated and highly educated. Instead, you will come across as pompous and insincere, and your letter will be discarded before the reader gets to the signature line.

Confidence and competence will be best conveyed through simple, straightforward language. Don't use outrageous superlatives. Remember that you are a law student building your legal career on a solid academic and practical foundation. Avoid phrases such as *"I'm the perfect candidate for this position because..."* or *"I am confident I will exceed your expectations in every way."* Statements like these ring hollow. Make plausible claims and be sure to support them with credible accounts from your experiences.

Use active voice. Passive voice is often plodding and drags your presentation down. Active voice conveys a much stronger, more positive impression (i.e. "I initiated the project" rather than "the project was initiated by me"). Active voice also demonstrates you are the "excellent writer" you claim to be.

A well-written, professional cover letter will stand on its own merits. Don't resort to gimmicks such as disguising your resume as a subpoena or printing your cover letter in colors other than the standard beige, gray or white paper. It should match the bond paper used for your resume and letter-size envelope. It will work against you if you deviate significantly from the traditionally conservative legal style.

4. Lying – DON'T!

Don't manufacture a story, or embellish an experience or credential to impress a prospective employer. One lie begets another and, typically, you get caught somewhere along the way and the results will be devastating. Integrity is critical in this profession. You want to begin developing a reputation for being trustworthy and honest *now*.

5. Avoid Typos and Grammatical Errors

Proofread your work, and then have a friend do it again! Your sentence structure, punctuation and spelling should be flawless. Don't give the employer a reason to toss your application in the "reject" pile.

- Does the inside address match the salutation? Always address your letter to the person responsible for legal hiring, not simply "Hiring Partner." Confirm the spelling of the recipient's name and his/her gender and title by calling the office receptionist, by checking Martindale-Hubbell at www.martindale.com, the firm's website or the Colorado Legal Directory, which can be found in the Career Development Center.
- Make sure the right letter goes into the right envelope.

These things may seem intuitive, but many qualified candidates are immediately rejected for seemingly "minor" errors. Attorneys will cut you no slack for a simple typo or, even worse, letters that are sloppy, reflect poor editing or proofing. Nor should they! If you can't produce a final product that is flawless about yourself, why would an attorney trust you to competently handle client matters? Don't rush to get them out, or prepare the letters when you are too tired to catch mistakes. Take the extra time to do the job well and you will receive a better response to your letters.

Recommended Cover Letter Outline

Note: Use proper business letter format and make sure your address, phone number and e-mail appear at the top of the page. Use good quality bond paper.

1. Introductory Paragraph

Remember that this paragraph answers the questions:

- “Who are you?”
- “Why have you contacted me?”
- “Why should I be interested in meeting you?”

In other words, this paragraph immediately establishes your employment interest *and* generates interest in you.

If you have a mutual acquaintance, or someone referred you to the individual you are writing, use that in your opening line:

[Name of referring party] recommended that I contact you.

Follow this with an explanation of what you are seeking, for example:

As a first year law student at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law with a strong interest in natural resources law, I am very interested in pursuing a law clerk position with your firm.

Or, something along these lines:

[Referring party] has described your practice in the area of intellectual property as “cutting edge.” As a first year law student at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law with a technical background and keen interest in patent law, I am very interested in clerking for your firm.

If you don’t have a mutual acquaintance or referral, try to draw on something you learned from your research to explain why you are writing to this particular firm.

2. The Body of the Letter – Paragraph Two

In the words of Kimm Walton, author of *Guerrilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams*, this section of the letter is where you “wheel in your big guns.” Describe specific training, achievements or experiences that highlight your strengths and abilities and demonstrate the value you can bring to this particular employer. Remember: don’t simply repeat the information in your resume. Highlight items of particular relevance to this employer in this paragraph. Keep in mind you are answering the employer’s unspoken question: *Why should I meet you?*

3. The Final Paragraph – Paragraph Three

State your action plan! This is where you tell the employer what *you* will do in terms of follow up. Tell her you will follow up within 10 days to see if an interview or meeting can be arranged. Thank the addressee for her time and consideration. Here are a few examples:

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the possibility of summer employment with your firm. I will be in Kansas City during my holiday break, December 15-31. If I haven't heard from you before that time, I will call you to schedule an appointment. Thank you for your consideration.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss how my background may fit your needs. I will contact you within the next two weeks to see if we might arrange a meeting. Thank you for your consideration.

If for some reason you are unable to follow up (generally **not** recommended), close by saying:

If my experience and background meet your requirements for a new associate, please contact me at the address or telephone number listed above. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your consideration.

Sample cover letters are included in this chapter. If you are writing cover letters for judicial clerkships, there are sample cover letters geared specifically for clerkship applications in the chapter on Judicial Clerkships.

Cover Letter Building Workshop

As part of your cover letter preparation, the Career Development Center encourages you to either attend in person, or view the **streaming video** of a previous presentation of the Workshop on “Cover Letter Building Workshop.” This workshop is offered once each semester but if you cannot attend, watch the streaming video available on the Career Services Calendar of Events – <http://www.law.du.edu/career/calendar/index.html>.

SAMPLE COVER LETTERS

Jeremy White

3000 W. 187th Place, Westminster, CO ▪ (720) 222-2222 ▪ jwhite09@law.du.edu

May 24, 2007

Corinne Finley, Recruiting Coordinator
Isaacson Rosenbaum P.C.
633 17th Street, Suite 2200
Denver, CO 80202

Re: My Fervent Interest in Serving as a Law Clerk for your Firm

Dear Ms. Finley:

While serving as a United States Army Ranger and Officer in Charge for the Air Force, my best qualities came to the forefront: self-initiative, dedication, and leadership. Now, as I pursue a legal career, I wish to bring those same qualities to my work – first, as a law clerk, then, as a lawyer. I believe that Isaacson Rosenbaum will be pleased with the motivation and hard work I will bring to the law clerk position.

Upon separation from the Air Force in June 2005, my rank was Technical Sergeant (E-6) and I had completed more than ten years of service. As Assistant Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge, my responsibilities included managing a twelve-person communications shop and its equipment valued at over two million dollars. I was responsible for the personal and professional development of the team, as well as the maintenance, operation, and mobility of essential communications equipment.

I was very proud to be hand-selected by the command team in Korea to oversee the unit's mobility school, where I trained incoming unit members in the necessary skill-sets for operating in hostile environments. The school was ultimately responsible for training over 300 Air Force personnel, including many commissioned officers and senior non-commissioned officers. I was also selected for promotion to Technical Sergeant in my first year of eligibility.

While serving in the military, I completed my B.S. in Social Sciences and M.S. in International Relations. In addition, my tours of duty included two overseas assignments over the course of two years. While in Korea and Italy, I spent much of my free time learning the languages and the cultures. In fact, in Korea, I was honored to volunteer for a local "adopt-an-orphan" program providing mentorship and basic needs to the children living at the orphanage.

I hope my dedication to public service and motivation to work for your office will distinguish me among the other qualified applicants. Thank you for your consideration of my qualifications, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jeremy White

Enclosure

Jason J. Intern

3333 S. Lamont St. Denver, CO 80239

(970) 555-5555 (cell)

jjintern10@law.du.edu

April 3, 2007

Ken Hanson, Esq.
The Hanson Law Firm
13441 Downing Street
Denver, Colorado 80203

Re: Natural Resources and Environmental Law Internship Program

Dear Mr. Hanson:

Professor Rock Pring recommended that I contact you regarding my interest in securing an internship with your firm through the University of Denver's Natural Resource and Environmental Law Internship Program. I am aware that Professor Pring usually assigns students to internships, but because I strongly prefer The Hanson Law Firm to any other potential employers, he suggested that I contact you directly.

My interest in your firm began in 2004 when I worked for Environment Colorado. At the time, I worked on a surface owner's bill of rights, a law that would require mineral rights owners in Colorado to negotiate with surface rights owners before extracting anything from the land. It was during that time that I first learned about the *Escamilla* case and the field of toxic torts.

Toxic torts law interests me because I believe it to be a sensible approach to many environmental problems. I understand that environmental laws are seldom enforced, and even when they are, penalties are minor. I like the idea of toxic torts both for its role as a deterrent to polluters and as an avenue of justice for injured parties. As a public speaker and a former advocate, I believe I am well suited for litigation-based practice. As an environmentalist and geology major, I feel that I have the technical understanding to be successful in the field of toxic torts.

At the same time, as a first year law student, I like the fact that your firm focuses on a wide variety of legal issues. I believe that my research and writing skills, combined with my ambition and enthusiasm for your particular practice area, would make me an excellent summer intern. I would like the opportunity to meet with you so that I can learn more about your firm, and so that we can discuss my credentials for the position. If I do not hear from you by April 20, 2007, I will certainly call to follow up.

Thank you very much for your time consideration of my qualifications.

Sincerely,

Jason J. Intern

Enclosure

Lauren H. Taylor

5 Memory Lane
Denver, CO 80555
303-123-4567
ltaylor@law.edu

January 21, 2007

John Smith
Clerkship Program
Native American Rights Fund
1506 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80302

Re: Fall 2006 Internship Position

Dear Mr. Smith:

Jerilyn DeCoteau highly recommended that I contact you regarding my substantial interest in Indian Law. My experiences and observations of the systematic injustices suffered by Native Americans have fueled my desire to work for an organization which shares and embodies my commitment. My goal is to advocate zealously on behalf of those who lack a voice in our legal system. These circumstances are the reason I attended law school, and they underscore my interest in ultimately becoming a lawyer in your organization.

My research of the Native American Rights Fund revealed your mission and values to mirror my aims in law and life. I feel that my strong research and writing skills will be an asset to your practice. The laudable progress and precedence that your organization has made, and continues to make, on behalf of your Native American clients is preeminent in the law. I would be honored to serve your mission in any capacity. Throughout my life, I have been commended for my strong work ethic, insightfulness and dedication. My leadership in our local Native American Law Students Association has contributed to the production of novel panels and events aimed at educating the public about Indian rights, laws and issues.

I would welcome the opportunity to prove my demonstrated and sincere commitment to contributing to and enhancing the important work performed by the Native American Rights Fund. I will contact you next week to discuss the status of my application.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lauren H. Taylor

Enclosure

Mindy Walker

1773 Pearl St. #503

Denver, CO 80203

October 1, 2006

Ms. Nardos Lemma
Center for Constitutional Rights
Assistant to the Legal Director
666 Broadway, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10012

RE: Ella Baker Internship Application

Dear Ms. Lemma:

I have worked with U.S. permanent residents from Iran who are detained because they are from Iran and with day laborers who work and are not paid because their employers can get away with it. I have also worked with women who have been raped and beaten, yet when the police show up, the woman is arrested. These experiences are the reasons I went to law school and they are the reasons I want to work for social change at the Center for Constitutional Rights.

My first semester of law school, I wrote a paper on the revival of the Alien Tort Claims Act. This paper was my introduction to the CCR. I was captivated by the work CCR has done in the past and equally so with the checks CCR provides on the government and multi national corporations today.

Since August I have been working with a group of law students to bring accountability to employers who exploit day laborers. The problem is huge. Employers, from small cleaning companies to large construction firms building expensive lofts, hire undocumented workers and take advantage of their vulnerable status by not paying them. We found a criminal statute in Colorado that spells out that these actions are criminal. However, the statute has never been enforced. At this time, we have formed a community coalition, and are working toward the enforcement of this statute.

Last summer I created a pro bono immigration project at a domestic violence shelter. I recruited over twenty-five immigration lawyers to donate a case to the shelter, and law students work to put the cases together. With this project, a population that likely would not otherwise have legal representation now does.

My interest is focused on the ability to positively effect social change through litigation, whether it is corporate accountability, international human rights or social and economic justice. CCR would allow me to use my skills and experiences to make contributions in these areas. I look forward to having an opportunity to discuss my interest in CCR and the internship in an interview. I will contact you in a week to follow up on the status of my application.

Sincerely,

Mindy Walker

Enclosures

[Use the same header as your resume]

15 August 2005

[Employer name and address]

Re: Second-Year Summer Associate Position for 2006

Dear Mr. Clark:

My extensive background in securities and corporate governance, combined with my proven ability to perform at the highest levels, will allow me to make a significant contribution as a summer associate in your firm next summer.

On September 3, 2003, the New York Attorney General filed a complaint alleging four prominent mutual fund companies allowed market timing of mutual fund shares. As a Senior Compliance Analyst at one of those companies, the ensuing case served as a catalyst for my decision to pursue a career in law. Needless to say, the scandal that ensued had significant regulatory implications for the entire industry. On a personal level, that fateful day in September changed the direction of my professional life. Previously, my career was aimed largely at mitigating any financial implications occurring as a result of compliance violations. After the complaint was filed, my focus shifted to the legal and ethical ramifications of my business decisions.

This new perspective, combined with my new role in the organization, challenged my abilities as a critical thinker. I was selected by top executives to draft and implement more effective policies and procedures designed to prevent market timing from occurring in the future. I was also given the responsibility of coordinating the dissemination of documents to various administrative agencies, including the SEC and the New York Attorney General. These experiences sharpened by analytical skills and trained me to examine issues beyond the surface level to that which is sometimes painstakingly obscure.

I performed well in these new roles, as I had in previous tasks, because of my dedication and ability to perform. While at the company, I was consistently recognized as a top performer in my group and received several promotions demonstrating my strong work ethic and desire to succeed.

My past experience should prove valuable to the XYZ law firm, given the firm's prominence in securities and corporate governance practice in the Denver legal market. I look forward to meeting with you regarding a position as a summer associate next year.

Best Regards,

Kristen Sandoval

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