

## COVER LETTERS

### *What is a cover letter?*

A cover letter is a formal letter that accompanies and introduces your resume to a potential employer. It is essential when applying for jobs, internships, grants or fellowships with private firms, government agencies, judges, and other organizations.

### *What is the purpose of a cover letter?*

The purpose of a cover letter is to get an employer to take action on your resume, preferably by inviting you to an interview. Cover letters and resumes don't get you a job; rather, they are marketing tools to persuade the employer that you will meet their needs.

### *A strong cover letter successfully accomplishes the following in one page:*

- **Tells the employer who you are and what you are seeking**

Mention that you are a current law student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law and name the particular job or type of experience you are seeking (e.g. law clerk, associate position, summer externship, volunteer clerkship, work-study position).

- **Focuses on the needs of the employer.**

The fact that you need a job to pay your school loans or that you want legal experience is of little or no importance to the employer, so don't mention this in your letter. Your focus should be on how you can give value by contributing to accomplishing the employer's goals.

- **Persuades the employer that you have the skills and accomplishments that will meet the employer's needs and will "fit" well in the organization.**

The more you know about the employer and the job/position you are applying for, the better you will be able to emphasize the pieces of your background that match their needs. Research the employer and the job description before you prepare your cover letter and before you decide whether or not to "customize" your current resume.

In the cover letter, highlight the major reasons why you meet the employer's requirements as well as your other skills and accomplishments that will benefit the employer. You may emphasize certain things that are on your resume, and/or go more deeply into specific areas that are not highlighted in your resume.

- **Persuades the employer that you have the skills and accomplishments that will meet the employer's needs and will "fit" well in the organization.** (*Continued*)

Point out similar things you have done, transferable skills from other experiences, research or writing in the same areas of interest, or similar legal issues dealt with in other contexts. Discuss accomplishments and quantify or qualify them, if possible, with numbers or percentages or awards of excellence given.

If the job is for an associate or other post-graduation position in a different geographic location, stress ties you have to that location that indicate you are making a commitment to stay in that location.

Don't use presumptuous adjectives to describe yourself. (e.g. "I have *incredible/outstanding* research skills.") On the other side, don't point out what you don't have to offer. (e.g. "Although I am *only a first year* student and *don't have any legal experience . . .*")

- **Shows that you are enthusiastic about working for that particular employer.**

Express genuine enthusiasm for that specific employer and articulate reasons for your interest other than broad general thoughts such as: "You have a good reputation." or "I could get great experience here". Research is needed first to do this well.

Researching the employer, beyond looking at the organization's web site, is important because it helps you identify the points to emphasize about how your skills meet the employer's needs and also to ask intelligent questions in an interview.

To show your interest in a cover letter, you need to be able to talk about something specific that draws you to the employer that you learned in your research, such as a particular practice area or client segment, recent publications or major cases of the firm, an innovative approach or new client-base being developed in a firm, or a personal connection you have with someone in the firm that yielded unique information.

- **Demonstrates excellent writing skills.**

A cover letter is one example of your persuasive writing skills. Letters that are poorly organized, contain incorrect information (e.g. addressed to the wrong person with the wrong title), misspellings or grammatical errors, or are printed on poor quality paper may be eliminated almost immediately by the hiring attorney or recruiting coordinator.

- **Provides opportunity to follow-up in appropriate ways.**

Indicate your willingness to be contacted should the employer need additional information.

### ***Proper Letter Format***

The sample cover letter format included in this packet demonstrate one example of a proper letter format.

It is important to address the letter to a specific person. Check the web site, job posting, the Career & Professional Development Office or other source (including calling the employer) for that information. If you cannot find a contact name, use “Dear Hiring Partner:” (law firms only), “Dear Hiring Manager:” or “Dear Hiring Committee:” (do not address it “To whom it may concern”).

### ***Four Key Points in the Body of the Letter***

Your letter should communicate these four things:

- What you are seeking (first paragraph)
- Why you want to work for that specific employer (second paragraph)
- What skills/background/traits you have to offer that fits the employer’s needs (third paragraph)
- Closing (fourth paragraph)

Below are some samples of how to communicate the four key points in your letter. Use these only as a general guide. ***NOTE: Do not use the exact wording from the sample paragraphs or letters in any of your own letters! If many students do this, then all Mitchell Hamline student letters will sound the same, and this will NOT impress any employer, but will be viewed as plagiarism.***

Sometimes you will only have three paragraphs in your letter and may combine the content of the first two paragraphs into one paragraph. If you have a lot to say in the third paragraph regarding your skills, you may want to combine paragraphs one and two and use two paragraphs to talk about your skills and accomplishments.

### ***First Paragraph – What you are Seeking/Drawing Connections to Referral Contacts***

**SAMPLE:** As a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, I am very interested in helping to improve the lives of persons affected by mental illness. Although I am not aware of any current job openings with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill-MN, I would consider it a privilege to work for you as a law clerk or researcher this summer, either through utilizing federal work-study dollars or by volunteering.

*(No known openings – looking to work, volunteer or use work-study monies)*

**SAMPLE:** I am a second-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law and am interested in being considered for the law clerk position posted by your firm in Mitchell Hamline’s Symplicity database. *(Applying for a position posted in Symplicity)*

**SAMPLE:** I am a third-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law with an undergraduate degree in accounting. My taxation professor and acquaintance of yours, Denise Roy, suggested

that I contact you about the possibility of working for your firm in the near future. (*Referral contact & common background with firm's practice area*)

***Second Paragraph – Why do you specifically want to work for them?***

**SAMPLE:** Your organization is particularly appealing to me because of its commitment to investigation and advocacy in the field of civil liberties. I am especially intrigued by your work in prisoners' issues, including police misconduct, prisoners' rights and death penalty defense. (*Non-profit legal organization – issues of interest*)

**SAMPLE:** I am interested in exploring employment opportunities with Smith & Jones, P.A. after graduation. I spoke with one of your attorneys, Benjamin Harrison, at a recent Minnesota State Bar Association meeting, and he described some of the substantive work your firm has done in assisting large healthcare industry clients with compliance issues. Because I spent twelve years with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services developing federal laws and regulations for the healthcare industry, I bring a strong knowledge base and understanding to this area. (*Previous related career & personal contact*)

***Third Paragraph – Why should they hire you?***

**SAMPLE:** I have strong writing, research and analytical skills, as shown by my accomplishments in law school. I am in the top 18% of my class, finished second with my teammate in the Rosalie E. Wahl Moot Court competition, and am currently participating in a Minnesota Court of Appeals Externship with Judge Miriam Walker. In addition, I have two years research experience as a law clerk with Smith & Jones, P.A. and have been described by those who know me well as hardworking, thorough, and a team player. (*Judicial Clerkship application – 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> year*)

**SAMPLE:** As indicated by my resume, my commitment to the community and to low income populations is a driving force in my life. Service through such organizations as Habitat for Humanity, Big Brother/Big Sister programs, the YWCA and Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services has given me experience in client intake, interviewing and counseling, providing advice and referrals, and researching. I am enthusiastic about the possibility of working with you! (*MJF Clerkship application – 1<sup>st</sup> year*)

**SAMPLE:** I believe my skills would serve your firm's family law clients well and also allow me to help build your client base. My greatest strengths are in the areas of mediation, advocacy, and marketing. In law school, I took all available alternative dispute resolution classes, am certified as a Qualified Family Neutral, and was awarded first place in the regional Negotiation Competition. As the Marketing/Sales Director of XYZ Company, I increased sales by 38% within one year of being hired, bringing in several new clients and an additional \$2 million in profits. (*Applying for a small family law firm Associate position/Prior career*)

***Fourth/Final Paragraph***

I look forward to discussing this opportunity with you further. Please feel free to reach out if you need additional information or would like to schedule an interview. Thank you for your consideration. (*Traditional job posting or Job posting says, "No calls please!"*)

I will be in Milwaukee from August 14-20 and would welcome the opportunity to speak with you about the position. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you.  
(*Out-of-state position*)

### ***Printing & Mailing Considerations***

Your resume, cover letter, and reference list should be printed on matching paper with matching envelopes, if possible. This only holds true if you are mailing your materials. Long writing samples do not need to follow this rule. If you are mailing a thick packet of materials, you would not use “matching” envelopes, but probably a 9 x 12 size envelope.

Purchase quality linen paper (usually 20-50 lb. weight) in a neutral color (ivory or white). Be certain to print your resume and cover letters directly from a high quality laser printer or have any duplicated copies made from a professional printing/copy center.

### ***TIPS:***

- Each cover letter should be tailored to the specific employer/specific position.
- Address your letter to a specific person whenever possible.
- Do not reiterate large portions of your resume.

**COVER LETTER  
ACCOMPANYING A RESUME OR APPLICATION**

Your Name  
Your Street Address  
Your City, State and Zip Code  
(or use header from resume)

Current Date

Name of Person  
Person's Title or Position (if known)  
Name of Company  
Street Address  
City, State and Zip Code

Dear [name of employer contact]:

**FIRST PARAGRAPH:** State why you are writing, name the position for which you are applying, and tell how you heard of the opening. You may also refer to another person's name. (If someone your reader knows suggested the position to you, mention his/her name, but first get permission to do so.)

**SECOND PARAGRAPH:** Explain your interest in working for this particular employer, including your interests in this specialty area and/or geographic location. (Do your research on the employer so that your reason for interest in them is specific and not general information.)

**THIRD PARAGRAPH:** Stress why this employer should hire you. Elaborate on your accomplishments and skills and how they relate to this type of work or to the current opening.

**FOURTH PARAGRAPH:** Having created a desire in the reader to know more about you, close the letter by expressing your interest in discussing the opportunity further and thanking the employer for their time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Your Signature*

Your Name