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MITCHELL | HAMLINE

School *of* Law

## COVER LETTER GUIDE

A cover letter is a formal, persuasive letter that convinces an employer they would benefit from your skills and experiences. It is also an opportunity to create a memorable first impression, while providing the employer with a writing sample showcasing your writing and editing skills.

A good cover letter:

- Tells the employer who you are and what position you are seeking
- Shows what you know about the employer, including their mission, vision, and work
- Demonstrates a commitment to the employer's mission
- Demonstrates good writing skills
- Explains why you are a good "fit" for the employer and position
- Emphasizes skills and experiences that would benefit the employer

Cover letter tips:

- Follow all instructions in the posting and read the full job description
- Tailor the cover letter to the specific job
- Use persuasive writing to draw in the reader and make yourself memorable
- Use a formal tone that conveys professionalism
- Research the employer's mission, practice areas, reputation, and community involvement
- Explain why you are interested in the position and/or employer
- Relate your past experiences and skills to the job description/qualifications
- Focus on your transferrable skills
- Explain how your experiences and skills will benefit the employer
- Back up claims about your skills with examples – "show don't just tell"
- Highlight your accomplishments
- Structure paragraph with topic sentences, supporting details, and concluding/transition sentences
- Use a variety of sentence starters, structure, and length
- Be confident and avoid negative or uncertain phrasing ("I think I would be a good fit" vs. "I would be a good fit")
- Avoid wordy sentences; be clear and to the point
- Avoid abbreviations and contractions
- Proofread, proofread, proofread

Utilize your resources by asking your career advisor to review your cover letter and visit the Career and Professional Development webpage.

## Overall Format

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- Use a standard business letter format
- Including a heading with your name, address, email and phone number (like your resume)
- Include the date
- A cover letter should not exceed one page
- When emailing, send the document as a PDF with a professional name such as:  
Last Name, First Name, \_Cover Letter\_Month\_Year

## Salutation

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- The cover letter should be addressed to a person (or people)
- If you are not sure to whom to address the letter, you can call and ask or address it to the name of the executive director, hiring partner, hiring manager, or selection committee
- For gender inclusivity, you may address the cover letter:  
Dear First Name Last Name
- If you know preferred pronouns from an online search (e.g., firm website or LinkedIn) you may address the cover letter:  
Dear Mr.,Ms., or Mx. Last Name (never Miss or Mrs.)  
Dear Judge Last Name

## Body Paragraphs

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There are four key points that correspond to four paragraphs:

- First paragraph: Who you are and what position you are seeking?
- Second paragraph: Why you want to work for that specific employer?
- Third paragraph: What skills/experiences do you have to offer?
- Fourth paragraph: Conclusion.

## First Paragraph

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- State who you are and the position you are seeking
- Grab the reader's attention or make yourself memorable by including a few personal, relevant facts or experiences
- If you have a connection to the employer (e.g. an alumni connection) state it here
- Questions to consider:
  - Have I done my research by looking at their website and/or social media profiles?
  - Have I consulted with my career counselor to see if they have a connection or can help me make one?
  - Why am I excited to apply to this position or work for this employer?
  - What are some experiences/skills that I want the employer to know right away because they relate well to the position/employer?
- Samples:
  - As a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, I am interested in helping 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.

- I am a first-year law student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law with a passion for serving my community, and I am ready to bring my enthusiasm, positive energy, and strong work-ethic to the Ramsey County Attorney's Office. As an individual who is knowledgeable in vital areas, such as legal research and writing, I would be an excellent fit for the law clerk position.
- As a recent graduate with over twelve years of experience in developing federal laws and regulations for the healthcare industry, I was excited to see an open position for a first-year associate with Smith & Jones, P.A. 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 of my prior career with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, I bring a strong knowledge base and understanding to this area which would make me an excellent candidate for this position.

#### Second Paragraph:

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- Research the employer to identify and emphasize the employer's mission, values, work, and community involvement
- Show you are enthusiastic about working for the employer
- Focus on the needs of the employer and emphasize how you can offer value by contributing the employer's goals
- Emphasize their needs, not yours (e.g., do not talk about gaining experience and what they can do for you).
- Questions to consider:
  - Why do you want to work for that employer?
  - What is the culture of the firm? Why is this appealing to you?
  - What does the job posting/description say that interests you? Why does it interest you?
  - What is their mission, vision, and/or community involvement? How do you relate with this?
  - What skills or experiences do you have that can accomplish the employer's mission or goal?
- Samples:
  - I fully believe in the vision of your organization, and your commitment to advocate for the community by defending civil liberties. I am especially intrigued by your work in prisoners' issues, including police misconduct, prisoners' rights and the death penalty defense, because I also have a passion for protecting others against injustice. This mission is what motivated me to become a student certified attorney for Anoka County Public Defender's Office, where I assisted clients one-on-one in a particular challenging time in their life. Our shared vision, as well as my practical work experiences, will allow me to immediately contribute to your firm in a meaningful capacity.

- I have seen the positive impact that patents prepared and prosecuted by your firm have on society, and I would like to be a part of your organization's mission to produce patents with purpose. My engineering background and years of experience working with patent attorneys will be especially valuable to your firm. I joined Carrier in their legal innovation group as a legal intern and worked on various types of patents related to air conditioning technology, so I understand how patents are valued and treated in the market place.

### Third Paragraph:

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- Highlight reasons why you meet the employer's requirements as well as your other skills and accomplishments that will benefit the employer
- Do not restate or rehash your resume
- Show how your experiences will translate into skills that are useful to the employer
- Do not use presumptuous adjectives to describe yourself (e.g. "I have incredible/outstanding research skills").
- If the job is for a different geographic location, stress ties you have to that location
- Questions to consider:
  - What skills are needed for this position?
  - What skills do you have to meet the employer's needs?
  - What "evidence" do you have that demonstrates those skills?
  - What "evidence" do I have that indicates I will be a good "fit" with the employer and the employees?
  - Am I connecting why these skills and experiences are relevant to the position/employer?
- Samples:
  - My commitment to the community is a driving force in my life. Not only am I passionate about serving the community, but I also have the practical skills required for this law clerk position. Service through such organizations as Habitat for Humanity, Big Brother/Big Sister programs, and Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services has given me experience in client intake, interviewing, research, and drafting. Since your firm emphasizes zealous client representation, I would be able to use these skills to make meaningful connections with your clients, understand your client's needs, and help your clients receive positive outcomes.
  - I believe my skills would positively serve your firm's family law clients and 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. Further, as the Marketing/Sales Director of XYZ Company, I became skilled in business development. Not only did I increase sales by 38% within one year of being hired, but I also brought in several new clients and created an additional \$2 million in profits. These experiences and skills will help me make an immediate, positive impact to your firm.

#### Fourth Paragraph:

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- Thank the employer for their consideration
- Restate the position you are seeking
- Avoid uncertain language (e.g. “I hope to hear from you”) and use positive language (e.g. “I look forward to hearing from you”)
- If the position is outside your current geographic location, state if and when you will be at the employer’s location
- State when you will be following up and by what means (depending on the job description, instructions, and employer)
- Questions to consider:
  - Do I have a conclusion/summary statement?
  - Did I thank the employer?
  - What does the job description say about follow-up?
  - How will I plan to follow-up?
- Samples:
  - I sincerely believe my unique set of skills will allow me to take a substantial and important role as an associate with U.S. Bank. Thank you for considering me, and I look forward to speaking with you about the position.
  - I will be in Milwaukee from March 14-20, 2021 and welcome the opportunity to speak with you about the position. I will give you a call next week to ask about the possibility of meeting during that time. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to speaking with you.

#### Follow-Up

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- Check the job posting as to whether there are any instructions regarding follow-up
- Follow-up with a phone call one or two weeks after you believe the employer received your letter (if no deadline is specified) or after the deadline

#### Printing and Mailing Considerations

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- Your resume, cover letter, and reference list should be printed on matching paper with matching envelopes
- Purchase quality linen paper in a neutral color (ivory or white)
- Print your resume and cover letters directly from a high-quality laser printer or have duplicated copies made from a professional printing/copy center

#### How to Explain Gaps on Your Resume

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- You may want to use your cover letter to provide a more detailed explanation of an employment gap to address any potential concerns
- One-two sentences should be sufficient to explain the gap
- Be honest and keep a positive tone
- You are not required to disclose any information about a protected class status in your cover letter (including but not limited to family responsibility, gender, caregiver status)
- Talk to your counselor if you have concerns or questions about what information to share

- Discuss any meaningful, professionally relevant uses of your time when you were unemployed (e.g. networking, consulting, taking online courses)
- Samples:
  - Although successful in my prior career as an educator, I have realized that the aspects of my work that I find the most rewarding are all in policy-related functions. This is what drove my decision to attend law school, and I am confident my years of experience in education, and my newfound legal knowledge, will allow me to excel in this position.
  - During the last five years, I choose to focus on the needs of my family, but now I am ready and eager to return to my professional career. I had a passion for public service dating back to my volunteer work with Minnesota Justice Foundation while I was attending law school, and I continued to stay active in the community by volunteering and for various charitable organizations. In addition to staying active in the community, I have been consistently attending online CLEs to stay informed on new issues related to public housing and disability law. These skills and experiences will allow me to take an immediate, impactful role as an associate with Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid.
  - In the last couple of years, I served as primary caregiver to my father, who was diagnosed with a terminal illness. During this difficult period, I kept my work skills updated by actively participating in events hosted by the Minnesota Bar Association's employment section, and by attending online courses to keep current on employment law issues. I am eager to return to the workforce, and confident that I would be an asset to your team.

# Your Name

1234 Summit Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55105  
651-227-9171 | @mitchellhamline.edu

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May 18, 2021

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

Dear First Name Last Name:

**FIRST PARAGRAPH:** State who you are, the position you are applying to, and if anyone referred you to the position. Grab the reader's attention or make yourself memorable by adding relevant, personal facts or experiences.

**SECOND PARAGRAPH:** Explain your interest in working for this particular employer, including your interests in this specialty area and/or geographic location. Research the employer's mission, practice areas, reputation, and community involvement, and tailor the cover letter specifically to the employer. Mention specific skills or experiences that would benefit the employer or discuss a shared mission.

**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 the mission of the employer.

**FOURTH PARAGRAPH:** Conclude the cover letter by restating the position you are seeking and thank the employer for their consideration.

Sincerely/Truly/Regards/Best/Respectfully

/s/ *Your Name*

Your Name

Encl. (use only if you are submitting more than just your resume)