

# COVER LETTER WRITING & CAREER PLANNING WORKSHOP

March 2016

Career and Professional Development Office  
Mitchell Hamline School of Law

# Cover Letters

Do not underestimate the power of a good or bad cover letter.

**If good:** Reader goes to resume; impressed with writing; already likes candidate.

**If bad:** Reader puts application in shredder without looking at resume, references, transcript or writing sample.

# Cover Letter Purpose

- Introduce yourself to the employer.
- Provide writing sample and first impression.
- Clearly articulate two points:
  1. Why you want to work for THIS employer.
  2. Why this employer should hire YOU.

# Biggest Pitfalls

- Repeating resume.
- Boiler plate language, not tailored to specific employer.
- Grammatical or typographical errors.
- Too verbose, over-confident or apologetic.
- Not addressed to a person, i.e., To whom it may concern.

369 Bottom Line Way  
Blaine, MN 55448

March 10, 2016

Ann Peterson  
Mitchell Hamline Law Firm  
400 North Financial Plaza  
1032 Oak Street  
Golden Valley, MN 55422

Dear Ms. Peterson:

I am a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, and am writing to apply for the law clerk position with the Mitchell Law Firm.

I am interested in the Mitchell Hamline Law Firm because of its outstanding reputation for serving clients in a wide variety of practice areas. I especially appreciate your emphasis on capable and responsive client service. I share your firm's commitment to the community, which is evident in its unique focus on city and county work and its proven track record in providing pro bono services.

As a server at family-owned restaurants, I gained an understanding of some of the issues faced by your clients who are small business owners. For example, I have ensured compliance with liquor ordinances, and have some exposure to employment issues. Furthermore, my position as a server allowed me to develop skill sets that are critical to work in a busy law firm: patience, time efficiency, and the ability to juggle many different tasks at the same time. In the service industry, moreover, it was essential that I learn to effectively communicate with a wide customer base. This role has provided me the personal skills to effectively serve clients.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "S. Student".

Samuel Student

# Cover Letter Content

## Heading:

Name & address of applicant on top left  
(preferably in same format as resume)

Date of letter in center or left justified

Complete name, title, address of recipient

Salutation: Dear Ms. Peterson:

# Heading Example 1

369 Bottom Line Way  
Blaine, MN 55448

March 10, 2016

Ann Peterson  
Mitchell Hamline Law Firm  
400 North Financial Plaza  
1032 Oak Street  
Golden Valley, MN 55422

Dear Ms. Peterson:

# Heading Example 2

**Samuel Student**

369 Bottom Line Way

Blaine, MN 55448

[samuel.student@mitchellhamline.edu](mailto:samuel.student@mitchellhamline.edu)

(651) 123-4567

March 10, 2016

Ann Peterson

Mitchell Hamline Law Firm

400 North Financial Plaza

1032 Oak Street

Golden Valley, MN 55422

Dear Ms. Peterson:



# Cover Letter Body

## **Paragraph 1 – Introduction:**

Tell the employer who you are and what job you are applying for.

# Paragraph 1 Example

I am a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, and I am writing to apply for the law clerk position with the Mitchell Hamline Law Firm.

# Paragraph 1 Example

I am a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, and I am writing to apply for the law clerk position with the Mitchell Hamline Law Firm. I believe that my four years of experience as a family law paralegal makes me a good fit for this position.

# Paragraph 1 Example

I am a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, and I am writing to apply for the law clerk position with the Mitchell Hamline Law Firm. I recently spoke with Sara Smith, an associate at your firm, and she encouraged me to apply for this position.

# Cover Letter Body Cont'd

## **Paragraph 2 – Why are you interested in THIS particular employer?**

Review its website, research its attorneys, read articles, learn about subjects and cases it is involved in.

Be specific: Refer to its mission, history or reputation, and use its name.

What draws you to this employer? The size of the organization? The location? The substantive work?

Tap into themes that demonstrate why this position and organization are a good fit for you.

# Paragraph 2 Example

I am interested in the Mitchell Hamline Law Firm because of its outstanding reputation for serving clients in a wide variety of practice areas. I especially appreciate your emphasis on capable and responsive client service. I share your firm's commitment to the community, which is evident in its unique focus on city and county work and its proven track record in providing pro bono services.

# Cover Letter Body Cont'd

**Paragraph 3: Why are YOU the best candidate for this position?  
Match the job description.**

Why are you **UNIQUELY** qualified? Language skills?  
Coursework? Volunteer experience? Prior work experience?

Highlight skills in research, writing, analysis, meeting deadlines, multitasking, handling pressure, working collaboratively and independently, etc.

**SHOW, don't tell:** I have great research skills –versus–  
My experience as a research assistant to Professor John Sonsteng supporting the publication of a legal treatise has allowed me to sharpen my writing and analytical skills.

# Student Profile 1

- Came to law school right after undergrad
- Has no legal employment experience
- Has had three restaurant server positions



## **Student 1 Paragraph 3 Example**

As a server at family-owned restaurants, I gained an understanding of some of the issues faced by your clients who are small business owners. For example, I have ensured compliance with liquor ordinances, and have some exposure to employment issues. Furthermore, my position as a server allowed me to develop skill sets that are critical to work in a busy law firm: patience, time efficiency, and the ability to juggle many different tasks at the same time. In the service industry, moreover, it was essential that I learn to effectively communicate with a wide customer base.

# Student Profile 2

- Worked for a year after undergrad as a case clerk at a family law and estate planning firm
- Current volunteering with MJF

## Student 2 Paragraph 3 Example

As a case clerk at Anderson Smith, I prepared trial materials, managed electronic discovery, and have completed many day-to-day clerical tasks in support of three firm partners. I have experience with family law and estate planning issues, and I look forward to learning more about these areas. Additionally, as a volunteer through the Minnesota Justice Foundation, I work with low-income clients and have learned the importance of a law firm's commitment to pro bono projects.

# Student Profile 3

- Worked for five years before law school
- Primarily worked in business management
- Member of the Mitchell Hamline Civil Litigation Society

## **Student 3 Paragraph 3 Example**

My five years of experience as an Operations Manager and Corporate Project Specialist for Best Buy has well-positioned me to represent clients in commercial disputes. I was primarily responsible for redesigning the company's inventory intake and control processes, and therefore am familiar with the negotiation and drafting of commercial sales contracts. In my first-year legal writing course, I had the opportunity to draft sales contract provisions and prepare a contract litigation memorandum. I have learned about litigation procedure and strategy through the Mitchell Hamline Civil Litigation Society, and I look forward to devoting my career to commercial litigation.

# Cover Letter Body Cont'd

## **Paragraph 4 – Conclusion:**

Thank the employer, invite questions, express enthusiasm.

# Concluding paragraph example

Please let me know if you have any questions about my application. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Samuel Student

# Cover Letter: Final notes

- Use the same font as your resume
- Sign the letter if possible
- Convert emailed letters to pdf
- Keep the cover letter to one page only!



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Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "S. Student".

Samuel Student

# An accompanying email

Dear Ms. Peterson:

I am a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, and I am writing to apply for the law clerk position with the Mitchell Hamline Law Firm. Please find my cover letter and resume attached.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Samuel Student

# The Cover Letter

Any questions or final thoughts?

# Career Plan

- It is time to start planning now!
- The plan can change, no magic formula
  - It may initially focus on experience-building
  - But always have an eye out for a long-term opportunity
- Opportunity is out there... if you look for it
- It is a mistake to wait!

# Career Plan

- Planning worksheets
- Consult with Career & Professional Development Office
- It's not about the plan itself, it's about getting the process going early

# Student Profile 1

- Came to law school right after undergrad
- Has no legal employment experience
- Has had three restaurant server positions
- Uncertain of what practice to pursue

# Career Plan

## Student 1 Sample Career Plan:

Long-term goals:

- Discern one or two practice areas of interest
- Add three meaningful experiences by fall
- Develop a strong professional network

# Career Plan

## Student 1 Sample Career Plan:

### Short-term goals:

- Check Symplicity at least weekly for opportunities to build experience
- Volunteer through MJF this semester or summer
- Self-assessment to determine what type of employer or practice setting is right for you
- Register for a summer course in a more specific practice area



# Career Plan

## Student 1 Sample Career Plan:

### Next Steps:

- Update resume and application materials with likely audience in mind
- Research Contacts/Employers
- Attend a CLE, Informational Interview, or other networking event at least monthly

# Student Profile 3

- Worked for five years before law school
- Primarily worked in business management
- Member of the Mitchell Hamline Civil Litigation Society
- Strong interest in a career in Civil Litigation

# Career Plan

## Student 3 Sample Career Plan:

Long-term goals:

- Work at a civil litigation firm in the Twin Cities.
- Secure summer employment (next summer) through fall on-campus interviewing at large law firm
- Write on to a law journal

# Career Plan

## Student 3 Sample Career Plan:

### Short-term goals:

- Develop a strong professional network with strong representation by Twin Cities litigators
- Identify preferred firm size/practice environment
- Update resume and application materials over the summer in preparation for OCI and review with Career Advisor

# Career Plan

## Student 3 Sample Career Plan:

### Next Steps:

- Seek leadership in the Litigation Society
- Volunteer through MJF this semester
- Set up informational interviews with litigation attorneys at least monthly

# What's Coming Up?

- **MJF Clerkship Application** deadline extended for Anishabe Legal Services and White Earth Tribal Court (Postings 9349 & 9350; due 3/25/16)
- **2016 Public Interest Law Fellowship (P.I.L.F.)** (Posting 9341; due 4/1/16)
- **Federal Government Career Panel** (4/8/16, 11:30-12:30, Room 123)
- **HLI Career Panel** (4/12/16, noon-1:00, Room 240)

# Plan Ahead For “Fall”

- **OCI:** Employer Reception 8/3/16; Bidding open 7/11/16 – noon on 8/5/16; Interviews begin 8/16/16
- **Public Interest Fellowships & Federal Government** Applications typically open/start coming due in July (for 2017 positions)
- Register in **OSCAR** any time to view federal clerkships

See the “Plan Ahead for ‘Fall’ Recruiting Season” handout for more details on the above and more!