CRAFTING COVER LETTERS
Career Skills Handout Series

CAREER DEVELOPMENT OFFICE [CDO] ASSISTANCE

Be sure to have your cover letters reviewed by a career advisor. We recommend that for an initial review you meet in person with an advisor. If you prefer, you may drop your cover letter off in hard-copy, fax it to (916) 739-7260, or email it to lawcareers@pacific.edu. Of the latter three options, we prefer email and that you send letters to us as Word documents—that allows advisors who would like to electronically edit your letters to do so with the Track Changes tool. We make every effort to return documents within forty-eight hours. When emailing cover letters and resumes to employers, convert them to PDF documents, so they will not get garbled in transmission.

OVERVIEW

A resume and cover letter are often the first opportunity you have to impress a prospective employer. Send a cover letter with every resume you provide, unless a job announcement specifies that you should not.

Your cover letter is vitally important. A good cover letter will demonstrate your interest in the practice area and in the particular employer to whom you are applying. It is also a mini writing sample. The most effective cover letters are clear, brief, precise, and written in business-letter style. Cover letters should not be formulaic. Instead, write in an engaging, conversational style.

Don't try to write a cover letter at the last minute! A good letter is difficult to write and will take time and effort to prepare. Employers tell us that they do pay attention to cover letters. A well-written one can give you the edge you need to secure an interview in today’s competitive market, while a poorly written letter will likely disqualify you.

When drafting a cover letter, always keep your audience in mind. Your letter should answer these two simple questions:

- Why are you interested in this employer?
- Why should this employer be interested in you?

So, how do you create a cover letter that will stand out and will make an employer want to interview you?
I. Research: The Key to a Great Cover Letter

Why? In researching and learning more about the firm, you will be better able to explain why you are interested in working there. Your letter will be more persuasive to the employer if you can point to specifics, about the firm and its practice, that attract you to it.

In addition, learning more about the employer's needs will help you to select for emphasis your most relevant skills, which will help you to demonstrate more persuasively why the employer should want to hire you.

How? Employers impute to applicants constructive knowledge of everything on their websites. Plan to spend time perusing the websites of each employer to which you are sending a cover letter. And there are other important means of researching employers:

- Talk to people who have worked for the firm.
- Read newspaper articles: use WESTLAW's “All News” database, WestlawNext’s “News” database, or LEXIS's “News & Business” database.
- Research employer databases: Martindale-Hubbell (www.martindale.com); NALP Directory (www.nalpdirectory.com), LEXIS, and WESTLAW.
- Speak to CDO staff, classmates, alumni, and others who may be familiar with the employer.

II. Cover Letters Must be Targeted: Tailor Them to Carefully Chosen Potential Employers

“Targeted mailers” can be effective. “Mass mailers”—generic letters (often prepared with a mail merge program) sent to hundreds of employers—are not effective, for several reasons:

- Employers are attuned to the fact that applicants who send mass mailings demonstrate no particular interest in the employers. Employers will not show more interest in applicants than the applicants show in the employers.
- Conducting a mass mailing misleads applicants into feeling as though they have done something meaningful to find a job.
- Receiving scores of rejection letters, or simply getting no response at all, can demoralize even the most secure law students.

1 "Firm" is used generically to refer to any employer, including employers in government and non-profit sectors.
III. Content: Deciding What Goes into the Letters You Send

*The Three- or Four-Paragraph Cover Letter*

The following basic, three- or four-paragraph format provides a solid framework for a strong cover letter. You *must* customize the content.

**1. The first paragraph: Why are you interested in this employer?**

Use a hook to catch the employer’s attention and to establish why the employer should read the rest of your letter.

Here is a checklist of items to be addressed in your first paragraph:

- **The catalyst of your letter** (e.g. the recommendation of a person influential with the employer or a job announcement). If you are sending a “cold letter,” specify the type of position you are seeking (e.g. externship for credit, work-study, volunteer, paid).
- **Who you are** (e.g., class year, school, and other defining information).
- **Your interest in the employer**: that is, your intellectual, academic, or practice area interest in this organization and the work they do, *not* your interest in building your resume, gaining experience or exposure, or using the employer as a stepping-stone.

Again, the crux of your first paragraph is why you are interested in the particular employer. Here are some tips for tailoring your first paragraphs to particular employers.

First, contemplate the criteria you used to identify the targeted employer. Think about such factors as practice area, geographic location, type of setting (e.g., public, private), type of clients (e.g., individuals, businesses), firm size, and reputation. Explain that the employer’s opportunity meets (exceeds?) your criteria.

Second, review the employer’s website for how the firm describes itself. What does the firm say are its philosophy and hallmarks? Express that your interests and disposition are aligned with the firm’s philosophy, goals, and culture. When writing to government and public interest agencies, carefully attend to the employer’s mission. Government and public interest organizations are mission driven and hire from the ranks of applicants they believe share a passion for that mission. Explain that your interests are aligned with the agency’s mission. While on an employer’s website, look at the employer’s press releases. What is the firm bragging about? Explain your interest in what the firm has been doing.

Third, when an influential person recommends you to a particular employer, you need to capitalize on that recommendation. Kimm Walton, the author of *Guerrilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams*, says the most powerful letter you can send to any prospective legal employer starts with these seven words: “[Mutual Acquaintance] recommended that I
contact you . . . ” Explain (1) why the influential person recommended you contact the employer and (2) why the firm is a great match for you. For example, you might open your cover letter with this sentence:

[Influential person], knowing of my longstanding interest in prisoners’ rights work, suggested that my knowledge and skills would be a great match for your firm.

2. The second paragraph: Why should this employer be interested in you?

In this paragraph, you should discuss specific things about yourself and your background that will make the employer think, “I would really like to meet this person.” Review your background and choose the two or three things about you that will be most important to the employer. You might ask, “How will I know what the employer needs in an employee?” Your research should be directed at answering this question.

In explaining why the employer should be interested in you, address three elements: your academic background, practical experience, and personal qualities. You can split this discussion into as many as three paragraphs. The best cover letters interlace the discussion of personal qualities into the other one or two paragraphs.

**Academic Background.**

Academic background is not simply one’s class standing. It involves a panoply of curricular and extracurricular activities. Have you taken courses relevant to the employer you’re applying to? If you are pursuing (or earned) a relevant certificate or concentration, mention that. Your undergraduate background may be relevant, as, for example, when one has a degree in criminology and is applying for deputy public defender or deputy district attorney positions. If you are in the bottom half of your class, because your class standing will not be on your resume, it can be particularly useful to mention in your cover letter any high grades or academic recognition you have received. If you are comfortably out of danger of being on academic probation, include a description of your academic performance that makes clear you are a solid performer with a strong foundation in the law. Almost all applicants can draft an honest cover letter that states some positive thing about their academic performance.

Be strategic about including your extracurricular activities. Let’s say, for example, you are active in the Health Law Society and are applying to a health law firm. You can enhance your credibility as being sincerely interested in the firm by mentioning your involvement in the Society. On the other hand, if you describe your role as program chair for the criminal law group, you may detract from your credibility as an applicant for a health law firm.

**Practical Experience.**

In explaining why an employer should be interested in you, the second element to discuss is your practical experience. First figure out what kind of knowledge and skills the employer is
looking for. If you have experience working in any area of law, you can emphasize strengths such as your legal analytical, research, oral advocacy, client management, and writing skills. If your experience is strictly nonlegal, you can emphasize the relevant (or “transferable”) skills you’ve learned in the workplace. For example, if you were a restaurant server before law school, you could note that you learned the importance of being on time, reliable, diligent, and able to get along with coworkers and customers. The point is to look for the common denominators between your experience and what the employer needs, and to focus on those common denominators.

Your practical experience may be broader than simply your work experience. Practical skills training can be a substitute for work experience. Particularly when you do not have relevant legal work experience, you need to frame extracurricular activities, such as moot court and mock trial competitions, law review and other journals, client counseling, negotiation, and mediation training in terms of practical experience that is relevant to the employer.

**Personal Qualities.**

Do you pride yourself in your work ethic, sense of responsibility, or ability to multitask? You may want to mention in your cover letter some qualities you think distinguish you. In job announcements, sometimes employers allude to the qualities they think are key to successfully performing the job for which they are hiring. When an employer says it is looking for an energetic new team member to join its employment litigation team, you would be well served by noting examples of your energy and team spiritedness.

Don’t conclusorily claim good qualities. Be sure to include “proof.” For example, instead of simply stating that you are a self-starter and a quick study, you might try the following: “Working for Corporation X required that I be a self-starter and a quick study. Only one week after being hired, my supervisor was transferred to another office, and I successfully managed and operated the sales department from that day forward, increasing our sales by 20 percent in just two years.”

Whether discussing your academic accomplishments, practical skills, or personal qualities, it can be effective to cite others’ assessment of you: “My research and writing professor described my appellate brief as memorable, creative, and compelling,” or “After my oral argument, my moot court coach described me as prepared, tenacious, and persuasive.”

You don’t want your resume and cover letter to be redundant—that is, you want no superfluous repetition. But not all repetition is superfluous. Having listed your academic honors on your resume, you need not avoid all references to them in your cover letter. When you have honors, employment, or other experiences that can drive home the point that you would be an exceptional candidate for the position you’re applying for, make that point in your cover letter.

When writing your second paragraph, keep these points in mind:

- Pick one or two items to explore more deeply than you did in your resume.
- Prove to the employer—by way of examples—that you possess the skills,
experience, and qualities they are looking for in an employee. Lawyers want evidence!
• Make sure that your letter demonstrates that you’ve researched the employer.

3. The third paragraph: What do you want to happen next? And “Thank you!”

The complexity of your third paragraph depends on whether you are responding to a job announcement or contacting an employer cold. If you are responding to a job announcement, you simply need to request an interview, list your enclosures, and thank the employer for considering you.

When sending cold letters—if you haven’t already specified in the first paragraph what you’re looking for—make that clear in your third paragraph. Specify whether you are looking to get academic credit, to get a work-study position, to volunteer, or to get paid. If you are thinking “any of the above,” make it clear you are flexible. Also specify at least roughly how much time per week you have available (e.g. quarter-, half-, three-quarters-, or full-time).

List any documents you are enclosing with your letter, such as a resume, transcript, reference list, or writing sample. Include the latter three only if the employer requested them. If the employer is out of the area, you can broadly refer to your availability to interview. But don’t get bogged down in specifics—for example, by specifying your class schedule.

The third paragraph is your opportunity to thank the employer and close your letter.

Examples (use your own words to convey these ideas):

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview with Howe and Grover. I will be available over winter break, when I will be in Los Angeles from December 19 through January 7, or at any other time that is convenient for you.

I have enclosed my resume. It would be my pleasure to discuss my qualifications with you in person. Thank you for considering me.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my application with you and look forward to hearing from you. [Don’t say, “I look forward to hearing from you soon.”—too pushy.]

IV. Style and Tone

Make your tone alive and enthusiastic. If you discuss what interests you and what you’ve enjoyed in your academic and work experiences, you will create a positive tone that will
shine through in your letters.

Make sure that you have your recipients' information correct, including their names, addresses, and genders. Proofread your letters for typographic as well as grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. Employers treat cover letters as exemplars of your best writing.
The 15 Biggest Cover Letter Mistakes

1. Lying, exaggerating, and overstating accomplishments.

2. Drafting generic transmittal letters that could be sent to most any employer.

3. Making typos and other careless errors.

4. Failing to address letters to a person by name. If a job announcement does not list a person to whom you can address your letter, call the firm and ask. When there is absolutely no means by which to find the name of a person to put in your salutation, before resorting to the anachronistic and formulaic, “To Whom it May Concern,” or worse yet, “Dear Sir/Madam,” consider using the name of the institution: “Dear [organization name]”; or a supposed job title of the recipient, “Dear Hiring Administrator.”

5. Appearing clueless about what the employer does, such as indicating interest in an area of law the firm does not practice.

6. Focusing strictly on why you are interested in the employer.

7. Focusing strictly on why the employer should be interested in you.

8. Focusing strictly on why you want the job and how the experience will benefit you. (E.g., “Working for your organization would be the perfect place to start my career.”)

9. Being conclusory. When you say, “I am a hard worker” or “I am an excellent writer” offer evidence to prove it.

10. Being so modest that you leave out your distinctions and accomplishments.

11. Letting pride or self-consciousness get in the way of telling the reader about an influential person who recommends you. A hiring decision will still be made on the merits, even if an influential person paves your way.

12. Reiterating the basic facts of your resume.

13. Being too clever or unconventional.

14. Using inflated, overblown rhetoric. (E.g., “Yours is the perfect job for me,” “I am exactly the candidate you have been looking for.”) Think humble yet confident.

15. Being defensive. (E.g., “I know you get hundreds of letters from top-notch applicants, but . . .”)

The Mechanics of the Two Principal Forms of Business Letters: Block and Semi-Block Formats

Cover letter in block style:

Use the header on your resume as “letterhead.”

Date

Addressee’s name
Title
Organization
Address
City/State/Zip

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

In block style, all entries below the letterhead are left justified. Use a serif font, twelve-point is ideal, but you can go as small as 10.5-point to stay on one page. Single space or double space text depending on the length of the letter. Use only one space after periods. The formal style of a block letter should be used for most cover letters. It conveys a completely businesslike manner. Don’t justify the right margin of your letter; it destroys the integrity of the spaces between words.

Include three single-spaced lines between the date and the addressee. Expand this space as necessary to center the letter on the page. There should be one single-spaced line between the address and the salutation, and one single-spaced line between the salutation and the body of the letter. There should be one single-spaced line between the body of the letter and the complimentary close, and three single-spaced lines between the complimentary close and your name. Insert one single-spaced line between your name and the enclosures note, and one single-spaced line between the enclosures note and any “cc:” entry.

Closing remarks should express clearly what you want—for example, an interview concerning a specific opportunity. Express your appreciation for the attention given to your letter.

Sincerely yours,

Your name

Enclosures

cc: [“Courtesy copy.” Use when needed—for example, when you are copying an influential person you cite in the letter as referring you to the employer.]
Cover letter in semi-block style:

Use the header on your resume as “letterhead.”

Date

Addressee’s name
Title
Organization
Address
City/State/Zip

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

When using a semi-block format, put the date starting at a point set at the center of the page (note this is *not* to say you “center” the date). Also start the complimentary close and your name at a point set at the center of the page. Indent paragraphs. Use a serif font, 12-point is ideal, but you can go as small as 10.5-point to stay on one page. Use a single space or double space text depending on the length of the letter. Use only one space after periods.

Semi-block style is considered a less formal letter style than full-block; use semi-block style when writing to addressees you know. The less formal style sets a warm, friendly tone and is easy to read. Don’t justify the right margin of your letter; it destroys the integrity of the spaces between words.

There should be three, single-spaced lines between the date and the addressee. Expand this space as necessary to center the letter under the letterhead. Include one single-spaced line between the address and the salutation, and one single-spaced line between the salutation and the body of the letter. There should be one single-spaced line between the body of the letter and the complimentary close, and three single-spaced lines between the complimentary close and your name. Insert one single-spaced line between your name and the enclosures note, and one single-spaced line between the enclosures note and any “cc:” entry.

Closing remarks should express clearly what you want—for example, an interview concerning a specific opportunity. Express your appreciation for the attention given to your letter.

Sincerely yours,

Your name

Enclosures
Two-Page Letters

After rigorously editing your cover letter, if you need more than one page to cover all your objectives, your letter can go over onto about a third of the second page. When going to a second page, don’t put a page number on the first page. And you don’t need to flag that you are going onto a second page. Because there is no closing line or signature at the bottom of the first page, it is obvious that there is another page. Print the second page with no letterhead. At the top of the second page, insert a header containing the name of the addressee, page 2, and the date. See the examples below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mr. Mario Adams</th>
<th>Page 2</th>
<th>October 27, 2011</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Mr. Mario Adams</td>
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<td>Mr. Mario Adams</td>
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<td>Mr. Mario Adams</td>
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SAMPLE COVER LETTERS

WARNING:

DO NOT COPY THESE LETTERS.

IN THE PAST, WHEN STUDENTS COPIED OUR SAMPLE COVER LETTERS, EMPLOYERS NOTICED. IT WAS EMBARRASSING FOR THE STUDENTS WHO DID THE COPYING AND EMBARRASSING FOR PACIFIC McGEORGE.
March 3, 2011

Ms. Joan Harris  
Attorney at Law  
Director of Legal Services  
Battered Women's Voices  
9988 Sanford Street  
Berkeley, CA 94331

Dear Ms. Harris:

Paula West, your fellow McGeorge Alumni Association board member, recommended that I contact you regarding a summer law clerk position with Battered Women's Voices. Paula is my mentor and knows I have a longstanding commitment to helping battered women and children. When I told Paula I am looking forward to working with this population in a legal setting, she suggested that my passion and skills would be a great match for your organization. I am a first-year student at the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law. I have attached my resume for your consideration.

While volunteering with Helping Hand, I learned to communicate in a way that empowers clients and allows them to make their own decisions. For example, I counseled women about their options within the legal system, about individual psychotherapy, and about safety plans. I successfully assisted five women in their struggles to secure restraining orders against their abusers and advised many others. I received the 2010 Volunteer-of-the-Year award for my services, along with numerous thank-you letters from the women I served.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss my interest in joining BWV and look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

(Your signature here) If you are emailing your letter, you can paste in your scanned signature or use a script font such as Freestyle Script to simulate your signature.

Sarah Howe

Enclosures
September 23, 2011

Mr. Stephen Sisneros
Attorney at Law
Howard & Ralston LLP
3355 Embarcadero Center
San Francisco, CA 94444

Dear Mr. Sisneros:

I was pleased to see your Daily Recorder article on the history of municipal bond litigation. I plan to specialize in bond work and municipal finance, and therefore seek a law clerk position with your firm for next summer, following my second year at the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law. I have a background in finance and accounting and am currently taking Land Finance and Administrative Law. I have enclosed my resume for your review.

Several of my employers have noted my ability to work independently with very little guidance. My most recent supervisor, Hank Thomas, described me as one of the hardest workers he had ever seen. While working for Mr. Thomas, I managed three major accounts and met my deadlines, even when handling additional accounts for a co-worker who was unexpectedly out of the office. I look forward to bringing this work ethic to my future career in the field of bonds and municipal finance and would especially enjoy using my skills in a small firm such as Howard & Ralston.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss my interest in a law clerk position with your firm. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Very truly yours,

Robert P. Belton

Robert P. Belton
January 28, 2011

Ms. Allison Yang
Attorney at Law
Browne, Pelletier, Stabile & Nash LLP
7890 Rainy Lane
Seattle, WA 98776

Dear Ms. Yang:

Professor Paul Nelson, knowing of my longstanding interest in health law, suggested that my knowledge, experience, and skills are a great match for your firm. Professor Nelson is my health law professor at University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law. He recently spoke to me about your health care department as well as your firm’s recent success in the Kaiser-Blue Cross dispute. I am attracted to health care litigation because of its dynamic nature; I find learning about the ever-changing regulations in health care law particularly exciting. I am graduating from law school in May and taking the July 2011 Washington State bar examination. I am interested in a post-bar clerkship with your firm beginning in August, or an associate position beginning in December when I am sworn in to the bar, or both. I have enclosed a copy of my resume.

Working as an office manager and receptionist for a pediatric practice, I learned the importance of meticulous recordkeeping. This skill, along with my familiarity with medical records, should prove particularly useful when reviewing health care litigation documents. In addition, after two years of managing the demands of five busy pediatricians, young patients, and their worried parents, I have learned the art of multi-tasking, a skill that would undoubtedly be tested in a busy law firm such as Browne, Pelletier.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview with Browne, Pelletier when I am in Seattle for my semester break, from March 21 to March 26, or at any other time that is convenient for you. Thank you for considering me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Judy M. Parker

Enclosure
September 14, 2011

Mr. Daniel Friar  
Hiring Partner  
Anwar & Arrue  
9876 Sandpipe Avenue  
San Diego, CA 98775  

Dear Mr. Friar:

Your job announcement on McGeorge Careers Online prompted me to learn more about your firm. Anwar & Arrue’s recent involvement in private placements in public equity and your diverse roster of corporate clients make the prospect of an associate position with your firm particularly attractive to me. I have found corporate transactional work to be very exciting both in academic and law firm settings and would relish the opportunity to practice with your well-regarded corporate department. As a native of San Diego, I look forward to practicing law in the San Diego area upon graduation and seek a full-time position to begin after I take the July 2012 bar examination. My resume is enclosed for your review.

At Salt & Stein, I drafted numerous contracts and substantially assisted in a successful merger. Based on his positive impression of my work, my supervising attorney invited me to participate in a strategy session with one of the firm’s clients. Later, my supervisor told me that I was the first summer clerk he had ever included in a client meeting. This semester I will be working for the California Department of Corporations, where I look forward to refining my knowledge of the laws that govern California businesses.

I will be in San Diego from December 26 through January 7 and would welcome the opportunity to speak to you in person about a post-bar clerkship, or an associate position, or both. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

– your signature –

Michael K. Martin

Enc.
January 14, 2011

Mr. George T. Moreno  
Attorney at Law  
Hayton & Lee  
3535 Hanson Street  
Los Angeles, CA 91403

Dear Mr. Moreno:

Your recent article in the *California Journal* discussing the constitutional and policy issues involved with campaign finance in California was intriguing to me. As a first-year student at the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law, pursuing a Juris Doctor degree with a Government Affairs certificate, I am interested in learning more about election and political law. I would appreciate the opportunity to hear your views about how I might best prepare for a career in this area.

Would you be available for a brief meeting to tell me about your background and how you got started in election and political law? I would be grateful for your suggestions about what summer work and elective courses I should pursue during the next two years of law school. I would also be interested to know what publications you read to stay current with campaign, election, and political issues.

I am attaching my resume to give you a sense of my background and would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you.

Sincerely,

– your signature –

Josefina M. Martinez

Enc.