

# How to Write a Cover Letter

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# COVER LETTERS

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a cover letter is to set forth your reasons for sending a resume to a particular employer. For example: "I am writing in response to your job notice with the Office of Career Resources at Loyola University Chicago School of Law" or "I am writing because I am interested in environmental law, and your firm is at the forefront in the field." In addition, it is your opportunity to expand on the *general* information in your resume, to make it *specific* to the particular position for which you are applying.

A good cover letter:

- describes all of the positive things you bring to a particular job;
- shows your interest in, or ties to, a particular position or geographic area;
- permits the employer to view you as a well-rounded person with good organizational and writing skills;
- is the first writing sample that a potential employer sees.

A good cover letter does the following:

- uses standard business letter format (see attached examples);
- addresses a person rather than a function, with the correct spelling of the person's name;
- identifies the desired position or type of position specifically and, if applicable, explains the circumstances that lead you to apply;
- focuses upon the writer's relevant skills, training, or experience, either by highlighting the resume or adding information;
- refers briefly to the resume or any other enclosures;
- requests an interview;
- thanks the employer;
- does not exceed one page, with approximately three fairly brief paragraphs;
- uses the correct firm name and contact name (be aware of this when sending letters to multiple employers);
- is always accompanied by your resume whether you mail it in response to a job notice, or as part of a targeted job search mailing that you initiate;
- is printed on the same paper stock as your resume (and should have matching envelopes, which you can usually purchase with resume paper);
- uses the same heading as on your resume, like a letterhead.

**The key to writing a good cover letter is to make it as *personal* as possible**, e.g. the letter must be addressed to a particular person. Address the letter to the Hiring Manager, Hiring Chair, Recruiting Coordinator, Loyola alumni or person you know by name. If you do not know the name of the proper contact person, call the employer and ask the receptionist for the name of the person in charge of hiring. Consider addressing your letter to someone who works in your area of interest, or a Loyola alumnus - in other words, someone likely to take an interested look at your resume.

### LETTER-WRITING STYLE

Be persuasive and creative with your cover letters. Try to put yourself in the employer's position: s/he has already reviewed fifty letters and resumes in the previous hour. Some review over 1,000 per week. Make your letter interesting and keep in mind the qualities the employer seeks. How would you respond to the following letter?

*Dear Ms. Smith:*

*I am a second year student at Loyola University Chicago School of Law and am interested in a summer clerkship with your firm. I have enclosed a resume for your review and consideration.*

*I would welcome the chance to meet with you in the near future to discuss employment opportunities. I am available at most any time and may be reached at 555-5555.*

*Sincerely,  
John Doe*

The letter is bland, fails to tell Ms. Smith why the writer wants to work at her firm, and does not highlight any of the writer's skills which could be important to the firm. It is too passive, and fails to generate any interest in the reader to devour the "enclosed resume."

Be careful to avoid overly flowery or pompous language, legalese and other jargon, and overly intellectual phraseology. Employers have been known to pass around examples of this kind of overwrought writing for office entertainment. A clear, friendly, straightforward approach works best.

### **Try to keep your letter to three paragraphs.**

**The first paragraph** should grab the reader's attention by explaining why you are writing him or her. An employer wants to know why you have written *his/her* company/firm/organization and how you can contribute. Learn as much as you can about the employer before writing the letter. The information will enable you to demonstrate that the decision to write that specific employer was an informed one, not just because their name appeared on an employer list. If the employer is in another geographic location, mention your connection to that location. For example, you may be applying for positions in your hometown or that of your spouse. Also mention your plans to take the bar examination in that state.

**The second paragraph** should convince the employer that they should meet and hire you. Present your experience and skills and discuss how your experiences translate into skills that will be useful to the employer. If there is a job description, pay attention to it and carefully echo the language from the job description in your letter. Always keep in mind that they want your skills to match the job they are seeking to fill.

**The third paragraph** should thank the employer for his/her time and consideration and express your availability for an interview. Include your telephone number and email address so they can easily reach you. If you plan to travel to the area to which you are applying, mention this in the third paragraph. Employers often will take your request for an interview much more seriously if you tell them in your cover letter that you plan to be in their city on a particular day.

A cover letter should contain the following:

- A statement of who you are and what you want, at a minimum. For example: **"I am a second-year student at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and I would like to be considered for a summer position at [name of firm/organization]."**
- A reminder that a resume is enclosed for review. For example: "Enclosed is my resume," or "As my resume reflects."
- A statement of your skills and accomplishments. Make sure to be creative and specific about your skills and accomplishments by giving examples. This paragraph is essential to sparking interest in the prospective employer, so make it work for you. For example:

**"As you will see from my resume, I have done extensive research in the areas of juvenile rights and child custody while in law school. That work led to a publication in *The Family Law Reporter*. I enjoyed the challenge of developing the project, and welcome the opportunity to bring the same energy and enthusiasm to projects with your law firm."**

**"As a small firm specializing in complex business litigation and white collar criminal defense, your firm is perfectly suited to my individual strengths and skills. During my time at Loyola I have focused on business and criminal law, achieving academic honors in four of the last five semesters."**

**"As my resume reflects, I have developed the research, writing and analytic skills that will benefit your firm. For over a year I have been working as a law clerk for a personal injury firm, completing legal research and drafting documents such as legal memoranda, motions to dismiss and motions for summary judgment. Prior to law school, I worked as a paralegal in the real estate, commercial law and estate planning department of a large law firm where I . . . ."**

- A conclusion, in which you tell the reader what you would like him or her to do next. For example: "I would welcome an opportunity to meet with you personally at your convenience."

If you plan to email your resume and cover letter to an employer, make sure to attach your resume and cover letter as PDFs. This way they will receive a signed version of your cover letter. In the body of the email address the recipient as "Dear Mr./Ms," and their last name and briefly state that you have attached a cover letter and resume for their review.

**SAMPLE COVER LETTER FORMAT**

Following is the suggested format for a cover letter. Other sample cover letters appear later in Part II.

Heading as on your resume  
including name, address, telephone, & e-mail

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

First paragraph—tell why you are writing, name the position for which you apply (i.e., *I am applying to be a law clerk*, associate, staff attorney, summer clerk, intern, etc.), and if applicable, tell how you heard of the opening. You can mention a name if someone told you of the opening, suggested you apply, or spoke well of the employer.

Second paragraph—state why you are interested in working for this employer and what you have to offer in the way of special interests, training and/or experience which would be appropriate to the practice or business involved. Also, state facts you have learned about the employer (through your research) which make the employer unique or highly desirable. If you have ever lived in the city or area under consideration, or have visited there frequently enough to know it well, be sure to mention this. Be as specific and factual as possible. Talk about yourself in terms of the *employer's* needs, not your needs.

Third paragraph—refer to the enclosed resume summarizing your qualifications. You may also summarize or highlight of any other material you may be including (writing sample, transcript, reference list) or an elaboration of your previous or present employment to illustrate your training, interests and experience. Pave the way for an interview by stating when you expect to be in the city or area, or offering to make yourself available at the employer's convenience. Give any alternate telephone or contact information not in your heading.

Sincerely,

[YOUR ORIGINAL HANDWRITTEN SIGNATURE – NOT PHOTOCOPIED!]

Your name (typewritten)

Enclosure(s)

### TARGETED MAILINGS

Many law students and graduates send out resumes in mass quantities to contact a large number of employers. A *mass* mailing should be considered a last resort. Generally, you can expect about a 2-3% favorable response rate from a mass mailing. This translates into 2-3 interviews per 100 letters. If this rate of return sounds dismal, remember that you are sending out unsolicited resumes; that is, there may or may not be an available position with the employer. One thing is for sure—if you don't send out any letters, you won't get any interviews. You might, however, contact certain firms by telephone to investigate job opportunities before writing.

Avoid the use of “mass mailing” services that charge a fee. The better approach is a *targeted* mailing, in which your resume may not have been solicited but, through research and networking, you have identified employers most compatible with your goals and qualifications

As stressed earlier, the best cover letter will be highly personalized and that principle remains important in a targeted mailing. A "personalized mailing" may sound like a contradiction in terms, but mailings can be personalized much more than is commonly thought or done, even if you start with fairly standard language as a model. For example, a mailing can be personalized by writing different letters for different types of employers. You could tailor one letter for a small, general practice law firm, one for civil litigation firms, one for government agencies, etc. Drafting several different model letters for different types of employers allows you to make specific statements of your reasons for working at each one.

You can also draft letters for different geographic regions. For example, if you are originally from the West Coast and wish to return there to practice law, you might say something like:

*As a native Californian, I attended college at U.C.L.A and have always intended to return to Los Angeles after the experience of attending law school in another part of the country. Loyola's excellence in litigation training drew me to the Midwest...*

Or if you are originally from the Northeast, but have decided to stay in the Midwest, you might say:

*Having lived and worked in Chicago for the past three years, I have decided to make Chicago my permanent home. I will be taking the Illinois bar exam in July...*

## Examples of cover letters:

### Letter in response to job listing

**NAME**  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing in response to the job listing posted with Loyola University Chicago School of Law. I am strongly interested in the advertised position and enclose my resume.

[Paragraph 2 should review your qualifications and illustrate how your skills mesh with the firm's needs.]

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future and hope to discuss the possibility of my employment with your firm/organization. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

*[Written Signature]*

Your Name Typed

Enclosure(s)

## Letter to "Resume Direct" firm

**NAME**  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing in response to your request that Loyola University Chicago School of Law students with an interest in your firm write directly to you. I enclose my resume for your consideration.

[Paragraph 2 should review your qualifications, illustrate how your skills mesh with the firm's practice areas, needs, culture and discuss your tie(s) and/or desire for that geographic location.]

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future and hope to discuss the possibility of my employment with your firm this summer. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[Written Signature]

Your Name Typed

Enclosure(s)

### Letter seeking on-campus interview when you don't get an interview through the lottery

#### NAME

Address

City, State ZIP

Telephone

Email address

Date

Name of contact person

Title of contact person

Name of firm/organization

Street address

City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a second year student at Loyola University Chicago School of Law and I write to request an interview with your firm on the scheduled on-campus interview date of \_\_\_\_\_.

I *do meet* the interview criteria set by your firm [if applicable]. Unfortunately, Loyola's interview lottery system excluded me from your on-campus schedule. Loyola's interview selection process involves a computerized lottery based on students' preferences that results in some students not being able to interview with a particular firm due to interview schedule limitations. This is extremely disappointing to me because I am very interested in your firm.

I enclose a resume for your review. If possible, could we set a time to meet at your convenience during the interview day or at some other time at your office in the near future? I would be most grateful for the opportunity to meet with a member of your firm and believe I am the type of candidate that you desire to hire at [Name of Firm].

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[Written Signature]

Your Name Typed

Enclosure

## Letter seeking on-campus interview when you do not qualify (“waive the criteria”)

**NAME**  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a second-year student at Loyola University Chicago School of Law and I write to request an interview with your firm/organization on the scheduled on-campus interview date of \_\_\_\_\_.

I was unable to secure an interview slot with your firm/organization because I did not meet your stated hiring criteria of \_\_\_\_\_. However, as illustrated in my enclosed resume and transcript, I am in the top twenty percent of my class and recently became a member of the Loyola Law Journal. In addition, . . . .

I would be most grateful for the opportunity to meet with a member of your firm/organization. If this is possible, our Office of Career Services asks that you contact them at (312)-915-7160 in order to waive your hiring criteria in my case. Please contact the office no later than August 7, 2007.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[Written Signature]

Your Name Typed

Enclosure

## Letter where you have a contact or lead

**NAME**  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing at the suggestion of \_\_\_\_\_. As \_\_\_\_\_ informed you, I am currently seeking a position as [a law clerk/an associate/a staff attorney/a summer associate] as I complete my \_\_\_\_\_ year of law school at Loyola University Chicago School of Law. I have enclosed a resume for your review.

[Paragraph 2 should review your qualifications, illustrate how your skills mesh with the firm's needs and discuss your tie(s) and/or desire for that geographic location.]

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future and hope to discuss the possibility of my employment with your firm/organization this summer. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[Written Signature]

Your Name Typed

Enclosure

## Letter for targeted mailing

**NAME**  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing to inquire about a position with your firm/organization as [a law clerk/an associate/a summer associate/a staff attorney]. I am a \_\_\_\_ year student at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

[Paragraph 2 should highlight your accomplishments and be tied to the type of firm or organization to which you are writing and to the type of work they will want you to do. As a new graduate you will most likely be asked to do a lot of research and writing so focus on those skills. Indicate your desirability as a candidate should the firm be considering hiring someone. Again, sell yourself! Match your skills with your experience.]

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future and to our discussing the possibility of my employment with your firm/organization. I enclose my resume for your review and appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

[Written Signature]

Your Name Typed

## Thank You Letter after interview

NAME  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I very much appreciated the opportunity to interview with you on [date]. The information you shared with me about [law firm or organization name] was extremely useful and I am excited about the possibility of applying my education and experience to the position we discussed.

If I can provide you with any additional information, please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

[Written Signature]

Your name typed

**NOTE: This letter should be sent after visiting an employer's office. It is NOT necessary to send thank you letters after OCI interviews on campus. After callback interviews, you may send one letter to the person who invited you to the callback interview, the recruitment coordinator, or whichever interviewer seems most appropriate and ask that person to thank all your interviewers. You may send a thank you letter or card to each person who interviewed you, but this is not expected. If you do send multiple letters or cards, however, they must be different from one another.**

## Letter of Acceptance

**NAME**  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

I am very pleased to accept your offer [state offer] as outlined in your letter of [date]. [Include all details of offer—location, starting salary, starting date.] Please let me know if there is further information or documentation that you require prior to my starting date.

I look forward to working at [name of employer].

Sincerely,

[Written signature]

Your name typed

## Letter of Rejection

**NAME**  
Address  
City, State ZIP  
Telephone  
Email address

Date

Name of contact person  
Title of contact person  
Name of firm/organization  
Street address  
City, state, zip

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:

After considerable thought, I have decided not to accept your offer of employment as outlined in your letter of [date].

Thank you for your time, effort and consideration.

Sincerely,

(Written signature)

Your name typed

*OR:*

Dear \_\_\_\_:

I am very pleased that you have offered me a position. I have, however, accepted another offer.  
[Or, However, I am unable to accept your offer at this time.]

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

### THANK YOU LETTERS

- Always TYPE! Every letter must be originally printed and signed—no forms. A handwritten thank you letter might be considered in *very rare* situations if you are already well-acquainted with the interviewer, have excellent penmanship, and are *very* sure of your audience.
- Use business letter format.
- No spelling, punctuation, or formatting errors! No corrections if you are handwriting.
- Be *careful* and *neat*!
- Use 8½ x 11 inch paper, preferably a 20% - 25% rag bond that matches your resume.

### THANK YOU NOTES

- Handwrite your thank you notes – they are considered more personal.
- If the employer is in a hurry to make a decision, feel free to email them your thank you.