

# Young Lawyers

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## EMPLOYERS CAN (AND DO) JUDGE AN APPLICATION BY ITS COVER LETTER: MAKE YOURS WORK FOR YOU

If there is one part of the job search people tend to dread the most, it is the drafting of cover letters. Nevertheless, from the employer's perspective, the cover letter can be the most important part of the application. The best letters are thoughtful, complete, error-free, and clearly explain why the candidate is the best person for the position. Below are some tips for drafting a successful cover letter, along with some common issues and errors to avoid.

Cover letters should be addressed to a person. Because the contact person's name can usually be easily discovered through limited research, there is very rarely an occasion to address a letter "Dear Hiring Partner." If the job posting or website does not specify to whom cover letters should be addressed, you can call the law firm and ask the receptionist. If the posting is on the Boyd School of Law website or another law school's website, you can call the school's career services office and ask. Only if you have exhausted all avenues for figuring out how to address the letter should you write something general like "To Whom it May Concern."

Cover letters serve as your first writing sample, so poor drafting or errors in the letter may mean the rest of your

application is never even read. The most common (and easily avoidable) error occurs when applicants applying for multiple jobs include another law firm's name somewhere in the body of the letter. Also, be sure to triple-check your letter for spelling errors, including making sure that the firm's name is spelled correctly. Use a typical business format for the letter, including your contact information and the addressee's mailing address, even if you are applying to the position online. Keep your letter to one page.

The best cover letters are tailored to the job description. Standard-form cover letters (or mass-mailed letters) are not as effective as cover letters specific to the employer and the position. If you are applying in response to a job posting, you should specifically explain how your characteristics and skills are those sought by the employer in the posting. This is particularly true when you are applying for a position outside of your current field or practice area. For positions that are not specifically legal, you will need to connect the dots for the employer and explain how your law degree and experience will be beneficial. Do not wait until the interview to make these points because you may not get to the interview stage unless you've already made a clear and compelling case demonstrating that you are a strong candidate.

Cover letters also provide you with a valuable opportunity to give context to your resume and address any potential questions. For example, if all of your education and work

experience are in Las Vegas and you are applying to a firm in Denver, you should use the cover letter to explain your connections to Denver and/or why you have an interest in that location. If there is a gap in employment history (other than the common gap between law school and bar passage), you should consider addressing this in the cover letter in one or two sentences. If you are attempting to make a lateral move after only six to nine months at your current firm, consider addressing this in a positive way, without disparaging your current employer. Something along the lines of, "While I am not actively seeking to leave my current position, I could not pass up the opportunity to apply for this position, because my long-term career goal is to work in the Attorney General's office."

Finally, just because an employee application process is online does not mean that the employer's review process is similarly automated. In many organizations, including UNLV, online applications are read by a committee that often includes people who are very high up in the organization. From the employer's perspective, when reviewing applications submitted online, it is very clear which applications were submitted without the same planning or care as would have been put into a more formal, mailed application. **NL**

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