

Cover Letters:

7 Steps to Creating a Great True First Impression

by Joel A. Holt

Job candidates long to make a great first impression when they interview. All across the world, applicants shine shoes, buy new suits, meet with career coaches, and practice in the mirror to accomplish this one venerable and paramount objective. In a changing economy, the pressure to make a great first impression has only grown. However, applicants must understand that the interview does not create the first impression. Instead, a legal employer's first impression is formed by the application materials and specifically, the true first impression often comes from an applicant's cover letter.

Yet, applicants are all too often content to fire off uninspired and vague cover letters. Whether this is from ignorance or apathy may never be known and undoubtedly varies from case to case. However, because most law students and law graduates apply to legal employers, they must keep in mind a few overarching points.

First, legal employers are typically lawyers. Second, legal employers want applicants to provide reasons to hire them over another candidate. Third, legal employers want applicants to prove the claims they make. Finally, the lawyers to whom applicants are applying write for a living and, for the most part, critically judge others' writing. These factors create a perfect storm to either foster or sabotage success.

Applicants must address these factors in a manner meaningful to legal employers. Because most legal employers are lawyers, they are trained to

think and talk a certain way, and to expect things like accuracy, logic, and persuasion. All lawyers — whether litigators or dealmakers — advocate for their clients and expect no less from an applicant. If an applicant cannot advocate for himself or herself, how can a legal employer possibly expect the applicant will advocate for clients? Thus, it makes sense that an applicant's cover letter must advocate on the applicant's behalf.

Yet, many cover letters are uninformative and uninspired, simply regurgitating the résumé in sentence format. Many cover letters discuss what the applicant will gain, but fail to mention any benefit to the employer. Many cover letters present poor writing while lauding the applicant's writing skills. Many cover letters are disorganized, rambling messes that neither provide the employer with reasons to hire the applicant nor provide evidence of the attributes the applicant claims to have. When first impressions count so much, this cannot be.

This article proposes that a cover letter can, and should, be much more. A cover letter should present a persuasive argument for why an employer should select the applicant for an interview. Because many cover letters fail in this capacity, this article offers seven simple steps for creating a cover letter that eloquently and logically advocates for the applicant while focusing on the needs of the employer. By doing so, applicants: (1) demonstrate their ability to draft a persuasive document; (2) advocate on their behalf and demon-

strate the ability to advocate for others; and (3) distinguish themselves from competitors.

Here are the 7 steps to share with applicants.

STEP 1

Recognize that your cover letter is the first and possibly only writing sample that the legal employer will read. Therefore, it should read like a professional letter *and* a legal brief. Accuracy, content, style, skill, and professionalism must be demonstrated. A legal employer will throw a résumé away if there is an error in the document. These are lawyers. They write for a living. Writing is a lawyer's craft, and all lawyers, at least in spirit, are very serious about writing. The job search process is filled with uncertainty, subjectivity, and uncontrollable elements. Do not sabotage your success because of something that is entirely within your control.

STEP 2

Be prepared to think, plan, edit, and most of all, work. Revise each paragraph multiple times. Continually ask if there is a better, clearer, more concise way to express your point. Purchase a thesaurus, a dictionary, and a modern usage dictionary. Use them. This dedication to your craft will undoubtedly shine through your work product.

STEP 3

Brainstorm the "claims." That is, verbalize the best reasons why an employer should hire you and not someone else. Identify four grounds to support the argument that you are an outstanding candidate. "Framing your argument" is a technique often used in brief writing, yet many applicants do not take the time to conceptualize and frame the argument they will make in their cover letter. Instead, they rattle off facts and claims with no particular order or flow. This leads to disorganized and unpersuasive writing. Also, be sure to orga-

nize your claims in order of importance or relevance. Order of importance is often overlooked but demonstrates an organized mind and a grasp of relevance.

STEP 4

Importantly, come up with evidence supporting your claims garnered from your prior work history, education, and other relevant experience. Be specific.

STEP 5

Utilize your first paragraph as your "claims" paragraph. As in a legal brief, present your best arguments at the outset. That way, if the reader does not read past the first paragraph, you have "shot all your bullets." When drafting, remember the following:

Always write to the reader and customize the letter.

Craft a professional introductory statement. Avoid repeating information that should be clear from your letterhead and résumé. Also, resist the urge to tell the employer about the benefits you will receive from working there. Employers are more concerned with what you will do for them. Tell the employer why you will be an asset. Realize you are a commodity and demonstrate an understanding of the business of law practice.

Sell yourself. Words matter. Word choice is a crucial lawyerly skill and will showcase your ability to write persuasively. If you cannot advocate for yourself, how can you convince an employer that you will advocate for their clients?

Be humble but quietly confident in writing about your value and the skills you bring to the table. Use words like "I believe" and "I am confident" to soften definitive statements like "I am a great candidate" or "I am the best choice." Most legal employers want to hire bright, enthusiastic, and confi-

dent people. There is nothing wrong with saying you meet those criteria as long as you do not cross the line into arrogance.

STEP 6

Independently and sequentially, draft one “proof” paragraph for each claim. The proof will consist of employment, education, and other relevant experience. Always write like a lawyer. Make sound arguments. Avoid generalizations and prove everything claimed. Be specific and concise. Always bring your arguments back to the principle that the claim you just proved will benefit the employer.

STEP 7

Draft a “closing” paragraph including the less germane information routinely featured in the first paragraph, such as name dropping and personal information about yourself, your reasons for applying, and your desire for the job. This information should not be eliminated from cover letters. It is *advisable*, for example, to express genuine interest or excitement about the specific job, not just *a* job. The employer wants to know that you have done your homework, and that their organization offers something that you think is impressive.

Know when to quit. This demonstrates to the employer your competence as a thinker and writer.

When you decide to close, be sure to close strong. Leave the employer with an impression that you expect to speak with them — i.e., “I look forward to the opportunity to speak with you concerning my qualifications.” Never demand or presume an interview. I once read a particularly aggressive cover letter that said: “I will contact you early next week to schedule an interview.” This is definitely inappropriate. Simply impress on employers that you believe they will naturally want to speak with you given the evidence presented. And remember, always say “thank you.”

Clearly, in this market, applicants need to take every opportunity to plead their case to employers. A cover letter is the truly first means with which an applicant can create a good first impression. Therefore, applicants, especially law students, would be well served to stop treating cover letters as irritating formalities, and start treating them as what they are — persuasive writing samples that are being evaluated by legal employers and have the potential to generate buzz about an applicant’s abilities and value to a legal employer.

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