

Career Services

UALR William H. Bowen School of Law

The Cover Letter

A cover letter must accompany each resume you send to potential employers. It is often the first contact you have with them. This letter introduces you, expands on important points in your resume or parts of your background not mentioned in your resume, and requests an interview. It should be no more than one page (3-4 paragraphs).

Research the firm before you write the cover letter. This will enable you to relate your background more directly to the employer's needs and specific law practice. Martindale-Hubbell and other research databases will provide you with information on the educational background of the attorneys to determine if anyone is a UALR graduate, graduated from your undergraduate or graduate institution, or has any connection to Arkansas, for non-Arkansas searches.

1. Identifying the Hiring Partner/Administrator

- In small firms generally, call the firm and ask for the name of the person responsible for hiring law clerks. If in doubt, ask that person's title. Direct your letter to that person, using the correct title. For example:

Thomas A. Paine, Hiring Partner
Wallace, Jones & Faison Law Firm
202 West Capitol Avenue
Little Rock, AR 72201-3699

Dear Mr. Paine:

This information may change from year to year for most firms, so it is best not to rely on printed manuals, lists, or previous letters. If you know someone in the firm, it is appropriate to direct the letter to that person, asking him or her to forward it to the appropriate person for hiring consideration, or better yet, ask that person for the name of the individual to whom your credentials should be sent and for permission to use the person's name as a "connector" in your cover letter.

- Search the firm's web site, or use the Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory or the NALP National Directory of Legal Employers for current information on firms. While few Arkansas firms are listed in the national directories, these avenues might save you the cost of a long-distance call. If the firm is not listed either place, call the firm for the correct information.

- In only the most unusual circumstance should you use words such as “Dear Hiring Partner” or “To Whom It May Concern.” Generally speaking, if you can’t find out the name of the hiring partner, the firm will not consider you the kind of hustling new attorney or law clerk for whom they are looking.

Follow the three-paragraph rule: Zap them with the opening, state the essentials, and close with an ending which will make the reader want to talk further with you. Keep the cover letter brief – it should never exceed one page.

- The goal of the first paragraph is to get the reader’s attention. There are several different ways to do this. If you were referred by someone who is well known to the organization, mention his or her name first. “Mr. John Smith suggested that I write to you about an associate position.” Sometimes the best opening statement mentions your strongest qualification or the one most related to the prospective employer. “My extensive academic training in labor law and strong interest in that area may be an asset to your firm.”

The second and third sentences of this opening paragraph should introduce you as a law student and indicate the type of position for which you are applying.

- The second paragraph (and third, if necessary) reveals information about yourself and how it relates to the needs of the firm. Your research of the organization comes into play here in permitting you to link your background with the law practice. You can highlight and expand on things mentioned in your resume or discuss things that may have been left off the resume, such as high grades in particular courses. Remember, it is the quality of your background that will be important to the potential employer, not necessarily the quantity.
- The last paragraph is a direct request for a personal interview. (e.g. “I would be pleased to discuss further details of my legal background in a personal interview.”) Make it easy for the employer to schedule a meeting. Specify times that are convenient for you. Provide telephone numbers or an e-mail address where you can be reached.

2. How to end your letter

- Use a closing such as “Sincerely” or “Yours truly.”
- Three to four lines beneath this closing, type your full name. Sign either your full name or your nickname in black ink.
- Double-space, and flush against the left margin, type “Enclosure.” This reminds you to enclose your resume with the cover letter. It also reminds the reader to look for the enclosure.

3. Stationery

- Use white, eggshell, or light gray.
- Match the stationery to the paper used for your resume.
- Be sure to use matching envelopes.
- It's best if you use the same printing/copying process for a uniform look.
- Sign the letter in black ink.

4. Follow-up

If you have not heard from the employer after waiting two weeks for a response, write again and repeat your interest, asking if you can provide additional information. Better yet, call the person to whom you wrote and ask him or her if you can come in. If you are asked for a writing sample, offer to drop it off so that you have an opportunity to meet the prospective employer in person. Don't wait for the firm to come to you: BE AGGRESSIVE!

5. Additional Correspondence

You may send other letters as a matter of courtesy and professionalism. Thank employers for considering your resume, even after rejection. Send confirmation letters if an interview is set up for the distant future. The most important letter to send is a thank you letter after an interview. This letter also gives you an opportunity to reiterate your interest in the firm.

The content of these letters can be very short, but should follow a business format similar to the cover letter.

EXAMPLE

Dear :

This is to confirm my interview with you on Monday, November , 200_, at 9:00 a.m. I look forward to meeting with you to discuss my association with your firm.

Sincerely,

Dear :

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me yesterday. I enjoyed talking with you and your associates.

I am enthusiastic about your firm and look forward to our future contact.

Sincerely,