

# How Attorneys and Law Students Can Craft the Perfect Cover Letter

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Many young job-seekers make the mistake of saying a lot about themselves in cover letters, resumes, and interviews.

A cover letter serves an entirely different purpose than bragging and talking about yourself.

What a cover letter needs to do is make a connection with your audience and show you are interested in them.

Your ability to make this connection and the strength of this connection will determine how well you do.

When I was a first-year law student, I [approached legal cover letters the way many law students do](#): I made it all about me. My message was so self-centered, so egotistical, so off-putting, and such a complete disaster that other kids in my law school class started circulating and making fun of it. I am 100% confident every employer that reviewed it was equally amused because the letter said so much about why I was 100% unqualified to work in any law firm.

When I was about eighteen years old, I decided I'd had enough of my circumstances. I was going to a private school, and my best friend had a BMW convertible and lived on a five-acre spread in a nice neighborhood in a posh suburb of Detroit that was on valuable land. (That land has since become an office park for a major corporation.) Other kids in my school were living equally well--coddled with luxury vacations, cars, and other sorts of things I did not have. I lived with my father in a tired apartment complex built in the 1950s and named after the mall it sat next to. For transportation, I drove a Yugo--probably the worst car ever made--that my mother bought for me because the payment was only \$100/month.

I certainly do not feel sorry for myself: Growing up around wealthy kids when I was not, created a desire to become wealthy. I thought the lack of parental wealth explained my adolescent angst. I felt like I did not belong among wealthy kids, and my parents were not good enough.

## See Also:

[Attorney Resume Secrets Revealed](#)

[Law Firm Diversity: How Race, Gender, Age, Social and Economic Divisions Impact the Hiring, Retention and Advancement of Law Firm Attorneys](#)

[Chapter 7: Beginning Your Legal Career](#)

[The People You Work and Associate with Can Either Make or Break You](#)

Because of my situation, I decided I needed to make a lot of money. I started going to the drug store and buying all sorts of income opportunity magazines and reading these. An income opportunity magazine contained all kinds of long-form advertisements describing how you could make a ton of money if you bought an educational program. The advertiser would take a picture of themselves standing in front of a huge house or expensive car and state that if you sent them \$29.95, they would send you a report about how they made all of this money using a unique system. These long ads built up excitement and made the reader feel that if they just ordered your system and implemented it, their life would change.

The ads were all about the writer: How much money they made, the obstacles they overcame, how people said they never would be successful, how they never realized (until discovering a "system") how easy it was to make money, all the perks being wealthy gave them, etc. I bought one of these systems, which told me the way to make a lot of money was to sell a get rich scheme like the author was doing! I sat down and wrote a 120-page book about how to start a business that sells information, and sold that for a while with very little success. When I became convinced the system did not work--since it did not work for me--I became convinced I did not want bad karma surrounding me and refunded the few poor souls like myself who had purchased the "system" without them even asking.

The initial cover letters I sent to law firms were my first foray into selling myself. I based them on my experience in the "income opportunity" business just five or so years earlier. I figured the best way to sell myself would be to tell people how great I was: My scholastic honors, the asphalt business I started in high school (after my get rich quick schemes did not work), the book I wrote about school busing in Detroit, and more. I believed I needed to get it all down and explain everything I had done. Words like "determined" and "aggressive" were undoubtedly part of my vocabulary at the time. I was announcing to employers that I had arrived and was ready to do whatever it took to succeed.

None of this, of course, was what the employers were seeking. I know that now. [However, many young job-seekers make the mistake of saying a lot about themselves in cover letters, resumes, and interviews in an attempt to get hired.](#) My cover letters showed my immaturity and unreadiness to practice law. A cover letter is not about you - it is about what you can do for others and the potential you show. A cover letter serves an entirely different purpose than bragging and talking about yourself. What a cover letter needs to do is make a connection with your audience and show you are interested in them. Your ability to make this connection and the strength of this connection will determine how well you do.

### See Also:

[What Law Firms Want to See in Your Cover Letter](#)  
[The Do's and Don'ts of Attorney Cover Letter Writing](#)  
[Attorney Resume and Cover Letter Advice](#)

My cover letters were the same whether I was sending them to law firms in New York City or Chicago. They were the same whether I was sending them to tax law firms or intellectual property boutiques. If someone were to read this cover letter, they would have absolutely no reason to bring me in. If I were to read a cover letter like this these days, I would think "what an interesting person," but there is no way in hell I am bringing that person in my organization. [No one wants to hire someone who thinks so highly of themselves that they need to write two pages about how important they think they are.](#)

Months ago, I listed my home for sale. After six months of no activity, I decided not to sell the house after my listing with the real estate agent expired. Within days of the listing expiring, I suddenly received at least fifty letters from real estate agents in and around Malibu, where I live. Malibu is a very competitive real estate market. There are more real estate agents in the city than there are properties leased or sold each year. Therefore, people fight hard for each listing and do their absolute best to get them.

Almost all the letters I received were bland. They typically had a picture of the real estate agent and urged me to call if I was interested in their services. Frequently they bragged about all the sales they had made in Los Angeles (okay), sometimes in Malibu (better), and other times even on my street (best). However, none of the letters I received were memorable--except one.

One letter I received was from a well-known real estate agent in Malibu. He talked about knowing a past owner of the house, spending a lot of time at home socializing with him and his family, and how he loved the

house. The letter caught my attention, and I remembered it. This letter was seeking to make a personal connection with me. I saved the letter. Later, as I re-read the letter a few times, I realized it most likely was a "form letter"--and quite a dishonest one at that--but it so well done that it appeared to be genuine. It got my attention. He made a personal connection and did so in a way that seemed legitimate and piqued my curiosity.

### See Also:

[How "Consistency" and "Relationship Building" Will Aid You in Your Job Search](#)  
[The Need to Feel Loved, Your Life and Career](#)

I receive countless solicitations in the mail each week. I receive letters from accountants, financial advisors, and all sorts of people; however, almost none of these people ever try to make a personal connection with me and find a shared interest. None of these letters make any sort of personal connection. Sometimes I receive letters in the mail from vendors that appear to be handwritten; however, I can always tell a machine has written them. Wherever I turn, most people do not make this personal connection. Without a personal connection, I do not want to do business with these people because it makes me feel like I'm just a commodity.

The only job of your cover letter is to make a personal connection--the more personal the connection you make with the recipient, the better. People want a personal connection because it makes them more comfortable. Wherever possible, organizations look for a positive personal connection with the people they interview and hire.

There are several ways to make personal connections. Making a personal connection is generally going to require understanding something about the work people are doing in the firm.

If you are applying to a firm, and have worked with their attorneys in the past, you should note this in your cover letter. If you admire someone in the firm because of the work they have done, you should note this connection.

You need to do what you can to connect with a law firm and form a personal connection. You need to understand what type of people are in the firm and, if possible, use that information to create a personal connection with the firm or the people there.

You can also create a personal connection geographically. If you grew up in the area where you are applying, you should always note this in your cover letter. If your significant other lives or grew up in the area where you are applying, you should note this. You should do whatever you can to highlight a connection to the region where you are applying. People who have a link to a particular area are more likely to get positions.

### See Also:

[Relationships, Commodities, and Making Connections](#)  
[You Need Connections to Make the Most of Your Career](#)

If you know someone in the firm, you should try to use that personal connection in the cover letter, if appropriate. For example, I know of one girl who went to school and was friends with the daughter of a partner of a large law firm in Los Angeles. She called the partner and spoke with him about the firm in an "informational interview," and after doing this, she mentioned him in a cover letter to the firm that she spoke with him. She got the job.

Everyone is seeking a personal connection. We want others to like us and think highly of us. Most of us go

through life without as much connection as we desire. Lawyers, especially, often feel a lack of connection. This connection is vital to our health and happiness. We want to be around people who like us and are like us.

There are all sorts of people you can connect with inside of law firms. You can call the law firm, speak with the recruiting person for some time, and build rapport with them. Later on, you can mention in the cover letter to the firm how helpful they were, and that person will advocate for you. You need this connection, and the more connections you can highlight in your cover letter, the better off you will be.

Most hires are between people who have some sort of connection. You need to try and make this connection in your cover letters, if at all possible. The stronger the bond you make, the better.

### See Also:

[Why Attorneys Who Do Not Make the Attorneys Who Give Them Work Feel Important Can Destroy Their Legal Careers](#)  
[You Need to Be in Favor with the Right People](#)

You can connect with the firm's people, or you can connect with the type of work the firm is doing. Whatever connection you identify, it needs to be as strong as possible and believable. When the best candidates show up, the law firm thinks they fit like a glove. You want to strive for this level of connection.

Law firms and most legal employers hire a particular type of person. They hire people who are like them and have similar interests and backgrounds. The better you [understand who you are writing to](#), the more of a connection you will make.

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Most employers do not spend a lot of time reading cover letters, and many do not read them at all. However, a cover letter is an excellent opportunity to hurt yourself and a unique opportunity to help yourself.

### A. Your Cover Letter Should Always Show You Can Do the Job and Are Qualified for the Job

Showing you can do the job simply means you have the background and experience for the position. It also means you are likely to work hard and the employer can rely on you.

At BCG Attorney Search, I spend a lot of time with the legal placement professionals ("LPPs") in our company each week [reviewing resumes of candidates](#) and identifying what they do individually. Because our LPPs want to find as many positions as possible for their candidates, they tend to try and make their candidates look like they have experience in more than one practice area, which is not always a good idea. They think that if a commercial litigator has handled an employment case in the past, they might be able to be submitted to employment positions. They may also hope that because a litigator is interested in corporate law, perhaps they can be placed in a corporate job.

As a general rule, if you want to work in a large law firm, your background needs to be very specialized. You need to have experience doing something specific and in one practice area. [If you are writing a cover letter to a large law firm, the last thing you should be doing is talking about how you do a bunch of different things.](#) Your cover letter needs to focus on what the law firm does and your experience in this area. Nothing more. If you think your additional experience is relevant, you are wrong. Highlighting other experience shows a lack of focus, which will serve to disqualify you.

### See Also:

[How to Prepare Outstanding Cover Letters](#)

## 21 Reasons You Will Never Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Now (or Ever Again)

It is tempting for most legal placement professionals to try and classify the attorneys we are working with as doing multiple things because they are trying to help them.

They may want to say an insurance defense attorney does that and commercial litigation. While this could be true, a law firm with an insurance defense opening is only going to want an insurance defense attorney for that position.

A law firm with an opening for a capital markets attorney is only seeking someone who does capital markets. For that position, they are not interested in the experience an attorney has doing mergers and acquisitions. A law firm seeking a patent attorney with a biotech background will not be interested in an attorney with an electrical engineering background who has done some work in biotechnology.

Large law firms seek specialists. Most medium-sized law firms do too. When you apply to law firms seeking specialists, you need to make sure you lead with the fact that you are a specialist in something, because this is what the employer is seeking. They want someone committed to doing one thing. The law firm couldn't care less about what you are interested in doing, or what else you can do. They want a specialist because that is what their clients need and how the law firm justifies its high billing rates.

If I were to see a plastic surgeon and get my nose fixed after an auto accident, I want someone who specialized in fixing noses. The more I read about her fixing noses and how specialized she is, the better. If the plastic surgeon talked about how she was experienced as an infectious disease specialist and spent a lot of time doing this, I would run for the hills. I would want to hire someone who had experience doing one thing, and one thing only, who I was confident could fix my nose. I would think the person was "unqualified" to work on my nose if better, more specialized alternatives were available.

If you are applying to law firms that have specialists, or have a job opening for a specialist, how your experience aligns with this is all you need to emphasize. There is nothing more you should talk about in your cover letter. The law firm is going to hire a specialist, so your cover letter and resume need to lead with your specialist experience. It does not matter what sort of work you want to do; the law firm needs a specific type of person and is going to hire that sort of person. They couldn't care less about what you want.

### See Also:

[How Law Firms Can Hire the Best Attorney: A Guide to Hiring Stars](#)

[The Top Three Qualities Warren Buffett Looks for When Hiring Attorneys, Managers, and Others-and Why This Is All You Need to Know to Hire, Get Hired, and Be a Great Employee](#)

A good cover letter to a large law firm might talk about how you have experience doing specialized work but would like to work for larger clients (like the firm has) or work on even more specialized manners. The law firm wants to hire the right person for the job.

While large law firm wants specialists, smaller ones may not. Larger law firms charge higher rates because they have people that can be more efficient and effective with their time. Law firms in smaller markets, and many smaller law firms, cannot be so discriminating with their client base and will often be willing to do all sorts of work. It is common for corporate attorneys in smaller markets to do a variety of work (mergers, finance, general corporate work, securities, and so forth) while attorneys in larger markets specialize.

You need to adjust your cover letter to the employer and audience.

It is standard for employers in large markets, or large employers, to want very specialized attorneys. It is standard for employers in smaller markets, or smaller law firms, to want generalists. You should look at the background of the law firm you are applying to and structure your cover letter accordingly.



My initial cover letter showed I was utterly unable to do the job for countless law firms. For example, there was nothing in my background that indicated an interest in patent law. Patent attorneys have science and engineering backgrounds. I had no such interest and nothing my history to show any sort of interest in this. Your cover letter needs to prove you are reasonably qualified for the position you are applying to. If you are applying to places for which you are not fit, you cannot do the job.

### See Also:

[Top 6 Things Attorneys and Law Students Need to Remove from Their Resumes ASAP If They Want to Get Jobs with the Most Prestigious Law Firms](#)

[What is the Best Way to Get My Attorney Resume and Cover Letter Noticed by Law Firms?](#)

If you are a litigator interested in being an environmental attorney, that is not enough to get you a position as an environmental attorney. An employer with an environmental position is not going to hire you if you have nothing in your background that indicates you can do this or have a substantial interest in this. They will hire someone who is already doing this sort of work.

There is typically a job description listed on an employer's website or a job board. Job descriptions describe what the job is, and the sort of background the job requires. If you do not have that background, you should not be applying for the job. You can apply to the firm generally, but should not apply to jobs you are not qualified for.

A well-written cover letter will discuss your suitability for a given position.

If a law firm is seeking someone with 5+ years of experience doing aircraft finance, your cover letter will discuss the fact that you have this experience.

If a law firm is seeking an attorney with 2+ years of litigation experience who has taken depositions, your cover letter will discuss this.

Your cover letter needs to show that you can do whatever the job is. You need to read the job description and personalize your cover letter based on this. If you are smart, you will learn a little more about what the employer does and personalize your cover letter even further to indicate you have specific experience representing the types of clients or doing the particular types of work the employer does.

### **B. Your Cover Letter Also Needs to Show You Can Be Managed.**

One of the biggest mistakes that attorneys and others make with their cover letters is showing that they cannot be managed. No employer who knows what they are doing is going to hire an attorney who cannot be controlled.

Attorneys who cannot be managed will usually do what I did in my cover letter: Make it about themselves, their achievements, and their individualism more than they make it about others. They show certain things are essential to them that will not matter to employers.

Regardless of whether someone is a partner, an associate, or a summer associate, at a law firm, they need to be managed. I work with partners on an ongoing basis who make millions of dollars a year, and even they are managed. Your cover letter needs to focus on the employer and what you can do for them, not what you want.

For example, it is common for attorneys to write about pro bono and other sorts of things that they may have done at their current firm in their cover letter. While this may be impressive to the attorney writing about this, an employer will be most interested in what you can do for them, not others. You need to show every

employer the value that you will bring to them. If you write about pro bono work, you show the law firm you may be more interested in things that do not make the firm money.

### See Also:

[The Five Things Employers Really Want to Know during a Law Firm Interview](#)

Some cover letters discuss things like how the attorney is looking for a reduced-hour position. While there is nothing wrong with wanting this, most employers are not going to hire people who place limits right out of the gate on what they will do for the law firm and its clients.

Other cover letters discuss problems with a past employer; this also shows that the candidate is unable to be managed.

You need to understand your audience. Your audience is a business that relies on people primarily sitting behind desks billing lots of hours and doing so without questioning the absurdity of spending years staring at a computer screen inside of an office 10+ hours per day for decades on end. The more you put in your cover letter that indicates this is not something you aspire to or are interested in, the less likely a law firm is to hire you.

Many attorneys will even write about their outside interests in their cover letters. I saw one attorney apply to Pacific Northwest law firms by telling law firms in his cover letters how he loved hiking and camping and yearned to live in an area where he had this sort of opportunity. This shows someone who might have management issues.

Attorneys who work inside of law firms need to be soldiers to the mission of the law firm. This means they need to subjugate how important they want to feel about themselves to the needs of the law firm. They need to be perceived as people who will work hard and commit to the mission of the law firm: to make money.

All employers struggle with the difficulty of managing people. They hire people who are more interested in things other than the work they do all the time. Your cover letter needs to talk with pride about what you have done in the past and how seriously you take it. Showing you are someone who can be managed and will commit to the legal employer's mission is crucial if you are going to get a position.

## C. Your Cover Letter Need to Show You Can Write Well and Directly

Many cover letters show that the person writing is not a skilled writer. Your punctuation, formatting, and grammar need to be perfect. Presumably, the level of care you put into representing yourself will carry over to how you represent clients. Lawyers are paid to pay attention to small details and write well. You need to make sure your cover letter is proofed and well-written.

### See Also:

[How to Choose a Legal Writing Sample When Applying for a Legal Job](#)

[12 Frequently Asked Questions About Legal Writing Samples](#)

If you cannot write well, it will harm you in the long run. [You need to be able to write well and write convincingly.](#) Your ability to argue why you are suitable for a particular employer is always going to help you.

## D. Your Cover Letter Needs to Give the Impression You Will Work for the Employer Long Term

Employers want to hire people that will stick around, try hard, and work for the employer as long as the employer wants them. You need to show you commit to your practice area, a commitment to the geographic

area, and a commitment to the specific law firm you are applying to.

This may seem hard to believe, but if you are an attorney at a major law firm with excellent qualifications, it's easier for you to get a position with another large law firm than with a smaller law firm--unless you have excellent reasons for applying.

When you apply to work for law firms, they are always trying to figure out whether you will stick around if they hire you.

The problem with highly-qualified attorneys from major law firms applying to smaller, less prestigious law firms is that law firms always believe the person will leave. They think they will go somewhere with better work, a higher salary, and more prestige as soon as they have the opportunity. This often happens with attorneys who have excellent qualifications and are hired by less-prestigious firms. They almost always use the less-prestigious law firm as a springboard to go to more prestigious law firms later on.

Every year, some great students come out of Columbia, New York University, Harvard, and other top law schools who do not get hired at large law firms and, instead, end up in smaller law firms due to their grades, interviewing skills, etc. Because their peers went to larger law firms, these students almost always feel like they need to prove something and will usually end up trying to get a position with a large law firm later on.

There are a ton of partners in large law firms who lose their jobs due to sexual issues, substance abuse issues, and other problems. These partners will almost always be able to get a job, but while they are radioactive, the only people who hire them are smaller law firms. These attorneys almost always leave when they get back on their feet.

### See Also:

[Do Small Firms Like Attorneys That Start Out at Big Law Firms?](#)

[25 Reasons Why Boutique Firms Are the Best Choice for Many Attorneys and Can Be Much Safer Than Larger Law Firms](#)

Whenever an attorney's salary is less than they believe they are worth (even if this is the prevailing rate at their firm), or they are at a less prestigious law firm than they think they can get into, they are likely to leave. A law firm that knows what they are doing should not hire them because they are likely to leave if given the opportunity.

Attorneys from markets like New York City, where they are doing very sophisticated work, often have a difficult time understanding why their applications to law firms in places like Fresno do not get any attention. The reason is simple: the law firms know they will leave. Unless you have some sort of connection to an area that is not a prestigious place to live, law firms in that area are unlikely to have an interest in hiring you.

When I was finishing a federal clerkship, I sent some letters to law firms in Fresno by mistake--Fresno is a hot agricultural town close to Death Valley and about three hours from Los Angeles. It is not for the faint of heart. One of these law firms called me and was very direct: They asked if I was applying to other markets, and I told them I was applying in Los Angeles. They told me that if I came to work there, I would probably leave in short order. They were right--I would not have been able to deal with living in Fresno.

Employers want to hire people they believe will stick around. This is why it is so crucial that your cover letter emphasizes why you are seeking to work in the firm you are applying to. You need a connection to the market. You need a connection to the practice area. You need a connection to the people there, if possible. Moreover, you need to justify why you are applying to the sort of firm you are applying to.



You need to explain why the employer you are submitting to is the sort of place that represents the culmination of all you have done, why this firm is a place you can see yourself remaining for the rest of your career.

If you are applying to larger law firms than you are used to working at, it is essential to stress that you want more important work. Emphasizing that you want the opportunity to service larger clients will help. It also helps to explain that you want more challenge.

If you are applying to smaller firms, you may want to stress that you want the opportunity to bring in smaller clients, a more intimate or cordial environment, and so forth. You need to make employers believe you are likely to settle down at the next employer you go to. If a cover letter does not make this connection, then it is going to hurt you.

One of the best ways to make this connection is to talk about what the employer does and why this interests you. You can talk about the firm's reputation in a given practice area and your enthusiasm for this.

### See Also:

[The Only Thing That Matters Is Commitment](#)

[The Benefits to Living and Working in a Smaller Market](#)

## E. Checklist for Legal Cover Letters and Sample Cover Letter

A cover letter is personal to the individual writing it; however, in general, every cover letter should do the following.

### The First Paragraph Needs to Explain Why You Are Applying to the Legal Employer

The cover letter needs to tell the person who you are and mention the position you are seeking or would be interested in doing. If you are applying to an open job, you should say this:

*Dear Ms. Jones,*

*My name is Harrison Barnes. I am a third-year antitrust associate with [law firm name]. I am applying for your position for an antitrust associate based in your Washington, DC office.*

### The Next Paragraph Needs to Explain Your Interest in a Particular Employer.

The cover letter should mention that you are familiar with the employer and know something about the employer. The more, the better.

*I am familiar with [firm name's] antitrust practice and its national reputation and several of the cases you have handled recently. My interest in antitrust initially came about when I heard a lecture in law school by one of your partners, Jim Hennigan, who spoke at an event at the DC Bar when I was in my third year of law school.*

### You Also Need to Show a Commitment to the Practice Area You Are Applying to Work in the Second or Third Paragraph.

*I have worked on several significant antitrust matters over the past four years since graduating from law school and been the highest billing attorney in my department. I have also published several articles on antitrust law on our firm's website and in client newsletters.*

### The Second, Third, or Fourth Paragraph Needs to Show You and the Employer are Likely to Be Compatible.

*Although I am currently working in New York, I grew up in Washington, DC, and my family all still reside there. I also know several attorneys in your firm and believe I would fit in well with the culture and people of your firm.*

### The Final Paragraph of the Cover Letter Needs to Tell People How to Get in Touch With You.

*I can be reached at 555-354-2345 or [email@email.com](mailto:email@email.com).*

*Sincerely,*

*Harrison Barnes*

Your cover letter is an opportunity to be persuasive and demonstrate your writing ability. Write direct sentences and be as straightforward as possible. There is nothing you need to say that should go longer than one page. There is not more than this you need to say.

### **Conclusion**

Cover letters should not be complicated. They should be as focused as possible on an employer and give employers reasons to be interested in you and think you will be a good fit for the position.

When you finish a cover letter, put yourself in the shoes of an employer, and ask yourself the three questions they will be asking: (1) can this person do the job? (2) can this person be managed, and (3) is this person likely to do the job long term?