Creating the Public Service Cover Letter

A cover letter is your opportunity to communicate confidence in your abilities, and to reiterate your commitment to, and enthusiasm for, public service work. It’s your first, and perhaps only, chance to tell your story and to highlight the skills and experiences that you offer to the prospective employer. Don’t assume the reader will thoroughly study your resume. Tell her/him in the letter the main things you want her/him to learn about you. You should write a letter which addresses the requirements listed by the employer in the posting, showing why you would be an asset to the organization. Letters that merely state your needs and wishes will not evoke an employer’s interest in you. Cover letters are an example of your ability to write well, so use them to showcase your strong writing skills.

I. Addressing Your Cover Letter

Learn the name and title of the person to whom you are writing. It may take research to discover the name of the individual in charge of hiring, but it is well worth the effort, as it will ensure that your letter reaches the appropriate person. You may wish to call the organization to verify that the individual still works there and to confirm accurate spelling. Addressing your letter to a specific individual demonstrates that you are truly interest in the employer. A letter addressed “Dear Sir or Madam” conveys the impression that you are conducting a mass mailing, and are not specifically interested in working for this employer. Remember that mass mailings often result in mass rejections.

TIP: If one of your networking contacts referred you to this employer, mention that person’s name (e.g. Jane Doe from the National Lawyers’ Committee on Civil Rights suggested that I contact you). Make sure to ask the contact if you can use his/her name.

II. Content

The cover letter should generally be one page in length, and should include three sections to demonstrate:

1. Who you are and why you are interested in the position.
The first paragraph will introduce you to the employer (i.e. I am a first-year law student at the University of Michigan Law School). You need to explain why you are writing and a brief word about your interest in the position and organization, perhaps demonstrating your knowledge of the work the employer does. This is also the paragraph where you mention your network contact.
2. What you have to offer the employer, distinguishing yourself from others.
The next paragraph (or two) should be used to elaborate upon your experiences and skills that are most relevant to the employer, which the research that you have conducted about this employer and/or practice area will help you identify. Your skills and experience might include summer internships, activities and courses in law school, or pre-law school jobs. You should describe your skills and experiences in an analytic, rather than a chronological, way. That is, perhaps you talk in one paragraph about your passion for the work using experiences to illustrate, while the second paragraph discusses the technical skills you have to offer, again illustrating with experiences. In sum, your middle section should have two themes: 1) why public service/enthusiasm for the position (e.g. “My professional and academic experiences have fueled my passion for x issue”), and 2) why you have the skills and knowledge required to succeed (e.g. In addition to fostering a passion for x, my experiences have given me the y skills to effectively contribute to z-agency’s work”). Don’t forget to use strong topic sentences so the employer knows what questions you are answering.

\[\text{TIP: Do not simply repeat what is in your resume, but rather draw attention to the information most likely to catch this employer’s attention and demonstrate how your skills and experiences match the job. Use examples to support your assertions. For example, instead of writing “I was a paralegal for 2 years at xyz law firm, then I went to abc non-profit, so I have experience with x cases,” you would write, “Through my work at xyz firm as a paralegal, I gained experience managing discovery for a large tort suit [or anything relevant to the skills required by the job you are seeking]. At abc non-profit, I honed my research and writing skills.”}\]

3. When and how you will follow up.
The last paragraph should state the next course of action you intend to take and when. Inform the employer that you will call to discuss further your qualifications or to arrange an interview, and state a date by which you will follow up; this will force you to do so. Also, you should thank the employer for his or her time and consideration.

\[\text{TIP: If you are applying to employers in another city and intend to be in there for a visit, mention that in the follow up paragraph and that you would enjoy the opportunity to visit the office.}\]

III. Cover Letter Tips

1. The biggest difference between a public interest and private sector cover letter is that the former must convey why you are interested in the mission/the
organization/service to that community and demonstrate that through your experiences.

2. Do not tell them why the job is perfect for you; rather explain what you can contribute and why you are a good fit for the job.

3. Think creatively about the skills you have acquired. For example, as a paralegal in a large firm, you may feel that all you did was create endless document binders. However, you also learned attention to detail and professionalism. Be as specific as possible about the skills you have and how they apply to the job.

4. Use strong topic sentences at the beginning of a paragraph to signal what you are addressing, e.g. “In addition to fostering my passion for housing and community development work, my experiences have given me the legal and policy skills to effectively contribute to the work of HUD.”

5. Avoid the word “unique” and phrases such as “ideally suited,” trying to strike that difficult balance between an unpretentious but confident tone.

6. Use the same paper, heading and type style that you used for your resume.

7. Sign and date your letters.

8. If you use your cell phone as the contact number on your resume, remember to change the voice mail message to a professional one and answer all phone calls from unfamiliar numbers in a professional manner.

Follow-up Phone Call

In calling to follow-up on your application, you should contact the person to whom you sent your resume and cover letter. Introduce yourself – informing the person that you recently sent a resume – and tell the person that you are calling to verify that s/he received your materials, to inquire about the status of your application, and to see if the person has any questions. Employers are encouraged by job seekers who show initiative and persistence. Don’t wait for an employer to call you; you must do the follow-up. Unless the employer specifically states that it does not want any phone calls, you should call the employer about two weeks after sending your resume and cover letter. Students often worry about annoying prospective employers with phone calls, but what students typically consider being a pest usually falls far short. Do not call every day, but unless the employer tells you otherwise, calling every few weeks to check on the status of your application is acceptable.

Other Commonly Requested Documents

You should not include other documents with your initial mailing to the employer unless the job announcement specifically requests them.
A. Transcripts

Grades are often not the primary focus for public service employers. Public service employers often are more interested in the courses you took (especially clinics) rather than the grades you received in them. However, they usually want copies of your transcripts. You can order an official copy through Wolverine Access at http://wolverineaccess.umich.edu. The Office of Career Planning will keep transcripts on file for MLS students.

B. Writing Sample

Public service employers will carefully evaluate your writing sample because they don't have the time or the resources to teach you good legal writing skills. Choose a writing sample based on the quality of the writing, not the subject matter. Be prepared to articulate your legal arguments and analysis in the interview. Make sure the sample contains no grammatical or typographical errors. Many employers will put a page limit on the writing sample but a good rule of thumb is not to send more than 10 pages. You may send an excerpt from a longer legal writing memorandum or a journal note. A sample of your written work from a summer internship may be used if client confidentiality is not compromised.

C. References and Letters of Recommendation

References are individuals who agree to be contacted by prospective employers by mail or phone to discuss your qualifications. Recommenders are those who agree to write a letter of support on your behalf.

How to Select and Use References/Recommenders:
1. Two to four references/recommenders is plenty (unless otherwise specified by the employer).
2. When selecting your references/recommenders, it is not necessary to have the most well-known names. Rather, you should select someone who is available and knows you and your work well. They should be able to comment meaningfully on your work, saying more than “he was an excellent student and had good attendance.”
3. References/recommenders should be law professors or former legal employers, if possible (First year students are not expected to have prior legal employers, so don’t worry about it if you don’t have that at first). Legal practice and clinical professors make particularly good references/recommenders, since they’ve had a chance to get to know you and your abilities well.
4. Do not put your references/recommenders on your resume. Create a list of references using the same heading as your cover letter and resume, complete with the reference/recommender’s name, title, address, phone number, Web site, and how you are connected to the individual.

5. For each reference, ask their permission before giving out their name!

6. Give each reference/recommender a list of the positions you are applying for, an updated resume, an updated transcript, a copy of your cover letter or essays, a list of either courses taken or tasks performed at the job, and for employer references, examples of your performance, such as staying late to meet deadlines, creative solutions reached, etc. You can help them be an advocate for you by reminding them about your experience and skills and how they apply to the job you’re seeking. Especially for recommenders, write the description in such a way that the language can be lifted verbatim (but be sure to write a different such description for each reference, as you don’t want their letters to sound similar).

7. If a letter is required, give your recommender plenty of time (at least a month, if possible) and detailed instructions about who to address the letter to and where to send it, as well as a specific date for it to be sent by. Send your recommender a gentle reminder e-mail two weeks before the letter is due.

8. Letters of recommendation can be placed on file with the Office of Career Planning. There are two forms available on OCP’s Web site: 1) a request that a letter be placed on file, and 2) a request that the letter on file be sent.

9. ALWAYS thank your references and recommenders AND their assistants (when applicable) with an e-mail or hand-written note. Also, keep your recommenders up-to-date your job search, particularly when you have good news! Stay in touch, even after you start the job, to keep your recommender as part of your future network.

More Information/Samples

- For cover letter samples, we’ve compiled some cover letters that were good to start with, but were improved through subsequent drafts. These letters will likely be very helpful to you as you do multiple drafts of your cover letter.
  - Good Letter #1/Better Letter #1
  - Good Letter #2/Better Letter #2
  - Good Letter #3/Better Letter #3

- For more cover letter advice, review Georgetown Law Center’s Guide to Public Sector Legal Job Applications and Harvard Law School’s Cover Letter Advice.

- For additional cover letter samples, see
Michigan Law School’s Sample Resumes, Cover Letters, and Internship Funding Applications
Yale Law School’s Sample Student Cover Letters
Harvard Law School’s Sample Cover Letters
Duke Law School’s Cover Letter Advice and Samples

BOOK REFERENCE: For more on cover letter writing, check out the Harvard Law School’s Public Interest Job Search Guide; and Adams, Cover Letter Almanac. Both are available in the OCP library (210 HH).