

The University of Akron School of Law

Career Planning & Placement Office

DRAFTING A PERSUASSIVE COVER LETTER

A cover letter is nothing but a persuasive argument for why an employer should select you for an interview. The #1 comment that employers make in this market is that applicants must give an employer a reason to hire them and not the next person. Moreover, your cover letter (and resume) is the **first and possibly only writing sample** that the legal employer will read. It should read like a cross between a professional letter and a legal brief/motion. Accordingly, accuracy, content, style, and skill must be demonstrated. If you do not believe that an employer will throw away your resume or not grant you an interview because you have a typo in your materials, then you are badly mistaken. These are lawyers. They write for a living. Writing is a lawyer's craft and that is something job applicants must understand. Further, the letter should present logical arguments and the evidence supporting those arguments. Most cover letters are unorganized, unpersuasive, and either a form/template that says nothing or a "me" letter which focuses on all of the great things the employer or job will do for the applicant.

By drafting a persuasive "brief" type letter, that eloquently and logically argues your position, and that focuses on the needs of the employer, you will: (1) demonstrate, from the outset, your ability to draft a persuasive document; (2) sell yourself; (3) and distinguish yourself from your peers, all at the same time.

How is that done? First, it requires **thinking, planning, and editing**. Most applicants do not bother with these steps; they simply crank out and transmit an unpolished, unprofessional and unhelpful first draft. However, one draft will normally not suffice. It takes **WORK**. That is what will hopefully distinguish you. Second, below is a simple format that can be followed to provide an outline to the writer of a persuasive cover letter. However, it is imperative that the writer understand that the most important part of the letter – the substantive content – is solely up to the writer to craft. This outline is intended only to provide the writer with a framework and points on which to think and focus. It is a tool to help the writer draft a persuasive cover letter. It is not a template and should not be treated as such.

With that in mind, the outline contains 3 major sections: the Claims Paragraph, the Proof Paragraphs, and the Closing Paragraph.

"Claims" Paragraph (Para. 1)

Use the first paragraph to introduce yourself, but most importantly, make your claims. Just like in a brief where you will state your causes of action, you want to, right up front, make your arguments for why the employer should hire you. These are your "claims". Your claims must be in the first paragraph – this is simply good writing (and parallels good public speaking). The point of the claims paragraph is to provide all of your "bullets" in case the reader does not read past the first paragraph. So, when drafting:

1. Write to the reader – a legal employer who is likely an attorney.
2. Avoid "dear" – it is a term of endearment and not appropriate in a professional letter. Instead, simply state "Mr. Smith:"
3. Introductory statement. Be professional. Something like: "Please consider the enclosed resume for a position with XYZ firm."
4. Tell the employer why you will be an asset to them: "I believe that I am an excellent candidate for this position because...."
5. Make your claims. Identify and list the 3-4 things that you think you will bring to the firm. That is, the top 3-4 reasons why the employer should hire **you** and not the next person. Make your claims in order of importance or relevance. "..... I am an outstanding legal researcher and writer, I have significant litigation experience ..."
6. Sell yourself. We are lawyers. Words matter. Word choice is a crucial skill and will demonstrate your ability to write persuasively. Remember, you are advocating for yourself. If you cannot advocate for yourself, how can you convince an employer that you will advocate for their clients?

7. Be humble, but quietly confident in your value and the skills you bring to the table. Use words like “I believe, I am confident” etc. to soften statements like “I am a great candidate....” which may come across as arrogant without some qualifying language.
8. Do not tell the employer about all the benefits you think you will receive from working there. They don’t care about your career aspirations or mentoring you. Law practice is a business – you are a commodity that will make them money. That is what you need to demonstrate.
9. The best way to come up with your claims is to sit down and brainstorm, for each of your prior experiences (work, volunteer, whatever), the knowledge, skills, and abilities you have or gained from those experiences. This is an important step because these experiences will serve as the “evidence” to prove your claims. *See below.*

“Proof” Paragraphs (Paras. 2-4)

1. Keep all of the above in mind.
2. Take each one of your claims and independently and specifically prove them in a separate paragraph. Accordingly, 3-4 claims = 3-4 proof paragraphs.
3. Use your prior experience, law school experience, etc. to prove your claims. See #9 above.
4. Write like a lawyer. Make sound arguments. Prove everything you say. Be specific and concise.
5. Bring it all back to the fact that the claim / skill you just proved will provide a benefit to the employer.

Closing Paragraph (Para. 5-6)

1. Succinctly reiterate your claims. This tracks with good writing and public speaking where the main points are hit at the beginning, middle, and end.
2. Ask for the job – it is perfectly acceptable to express interest or excitement for the job. Another comment from employers is that they want applicants to show genuine interest in **THE** job, not **A** job. It is the writer’s duty to convey this interest to the reader. If the employer has a specific practice area, or there is something about the employer the applicant truly likes or is interested in, now is the time to express it (i.e., location, practice areas, commitment to the community, etc.).
3. Close strong. You just spent five paragraphs boldly stating why you should get the job/interview – don’t back down now. Sadly, many applicants just cannot bring themselves to close strong. Instead, the last impression an employer has is something like “I really hope that maybe you will call me.” Or, the equally weak and redundant “if you have any questions or need more information, please feel free to contact me.” The employer does not need your permission to contact you. If they want to, they will. Or, the unprofessional “please contact me for references.” Again, if they want references, they will ask for them.

Instead, close strong. Leave them with an impression that you are confident but not arrogant. Leave them with little doubt that you expect an interview. Perhaps something like: “I look forward to discussing my qualifications with you.” Or, if that seems too presumptuous: “I look forward to the opportunity to speak with you concerning my qualifications.” Or, if the job is a posted job: “I look forward to discussing this opportunity with you.” Never demand or presume an interview. Certainly **never** tell them that you will have a meeting. Just leave them with the impression that **YOU** believe that **THEY** will naturally want to speak with you given the argument you just made.

4. Always say “thank you.”
5. I avoid “sincerely” and other such terms of endearment. Instead, I suggest “Regards, Best Regards, Respectfully ...”