



UNIVERSITY OF  
NOTRE DAME

The Law School

# *Cover Letter Guide*

Career Development Office

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## PURPOSE AND FORMAT

A cover letter should accompany your resume whenever you submit it in response to a known job opening or as part of broader-based canvassing. The cover letter is an important supplement to your resume. It should indicate your reasons for applying, the reasons the employer should hire you, some background information about yourself that is unique or of particular interest to the employer, and your availability for interviews. In addition, it should cover any pertinent information not presented in your resume and/or highlight an aspect of your resume to which you wish to draw the reader's attention (e.g., you have strong ties to the employer's geographic area).

The cover letter itself should be no longer than one page and no more than three (3) or four (4) short paragraphs. Use that limited space to make as strong an impact as possible. A cover letter allows for flexibility, tailoring, and amplification which are not always possible in a resume. Personalizing each cover letter and making reference to the employer's work lends credibility to your request for consideration, reflects the time you have spent in learning about the employer, and states how your skills fit with the employer's practice.

A cover letter must be well-written and error-free. It is an example of your writing capabilities and should be succinct and to the point. No letter that contains an error should ever be sent. Pay special attention to grammatical and spelling accuracy. If printing your letter, white resume paper is considered the most professional. A standard business format should be followed which means you need to use a colon to punctuate the salutation. Examples of cover letters are included at the end of this booklet.

Avoid mass-producing your cover letters. Better results are achieved if a specific letter is tailored for each employer in which you are interested. Portions of both the first and second paragraph should change in order to make the letter specific to a particular employer. In the first paragraph, indicate why you are applying and how you learned about the opportunity (e.g., if you were referred to the employer by a contact, note the person who referred you). In the second paragraph, indicate why the employer should hire you and why you are qualified for the job that is available. Elaborate on items in your resume without restating information verbatim. Emphasize coursework or experiences that relate to the position

for which you are applying. Include additional information about yourself that is relevant to the specific employer but not otherwise included in your resume. In some cases, a third paragraph expanding on your interest in the employer and their work may be appropriate. This is particularly true with public interest employers. Following these suggestions strengthens your message and distinguishes your cover letter from the literally hundreds of other cover letters the employer receives. In your final paragraph, restate your interest in the employer and indicate the times when you are available to interview. Be sure to close by thanking the employer for their time and consideration.

If multiple letters are sent using the same form, be certain that all the employers in a mailing practice the same type of law, have approximately the same number of attorneys and practice in the same geographic area. Write your letter to one specific employer and then make any adjustments necessary to make your letter appropriate for all other similarly-situated employers. Remember that mass-produced letters neither impress the employers nor encourage special consideration of your application. Every attempt should be made to make a targeted mailing to a group of homogeneous employers appear as individualized as possible.

Address each cover letter to a specific person, if possible – ideally to the individual who has the power to hire, to your contact, or to a Notre Dame (or college alma mater) graduate. If you are responding to a notice for an advertised opening, write to the person designated. If no person is designated, attempt to find the appropriate contact from outside sources (e.g., the employer’s website, NALP’s Directory of Legal Employers, Google, and Martindale-Hubbell). If you are unable to determine the appropriate contact person from an outside source, call the employer’s office and ask the name of the hiring partner or recruiting coordinator, the spelling of that name (even Smith can be spelled different ways) and ascertain whether the individual is a Mr. or Ms.

## CONTENT

Cover letters should be brief and direct. Avoid flowery language and do not simply restate information contained in your resume unless there is something in your background that would be of particular importance to the employer (e.g., you have lived, worked, or attended college in the employer's city). Your letter should supplement the information provided in your resume and highlight your particular skills and qualifications.

In your letter, state four important things in this order:

- (1) **why you are writing** (e.g., for a summer clerkship or associate position);
- (2) **why you are interested in the employer;**
- (3) **why the employer should hire you;** and
- (4) **when you will be available to interview.**

Give specific reasons why you are interested in this employer. Is it a substantive area of practice, the size of the organization, its location, someone who knows of your interest suggested you contact the employer, a job notice was posted on Symplicity, or some other reason? Your letter should focus on the employer and why that employer should be interested in you. After an employer reads your cover letter, the employer should know why you would add value to their organization and would be worth an investment of time and resources.

In explaining why you are applying to a particular employer, include a reference to the person who recommended approaching the employer, if possible, especially if that person is known to the prospective employer. Such a reference implies that the person believes you have qualities that merit consideration by the employer. If you have met or spoken with someone who works for the employer, include a reference to that conversation when explaining why you are applying. Doing so demonstrates your initiative and provides a distinct reason for your interest in the employer. If you intend to reference a person in your cover letter, you should check with the referenced individual prior to sending the letter.

End your letter by reiterating your interest in the employer and expressing your availability to interview. If the employer is some distance away, inform the employer when you will be in the area.

Give the employer a time frame and state your availability to interview. This can create an incentive for the employer to interview you while you are in town. If after two weeks you have not heard from the employer, you may follow-up by telephone or e-mail to confirm your materials arrived and offer to provide any additional materials that may be needed to help the employer evaluate your credentials.

## **SUMMARY**

In general, a good cover letter

- Tells the employer who you are beyond your resume
- Shows that you know about the particular employer and the type of business they handle
- Demonstrates your writing abilities
- Illustrates your commitment to do a particular employer's work
- Conveys that you have something of value to contribute to the employer
- Tells the employer how to contact you and when you are available to interview

The actual composition of your cover letter depends on the specifics of the particular employer, the position to which you are applying, and your individual background and qualifications. Your cover letter should show that you are an ideal candidate for the position and that you have a genuine interest in working for this employer. Remember that your cover letter is an opportunity to convey that you are a distinct person who carefully chose this employer and that your application deserves a closer look.

Examples of cover letters follow to serve as references. Read all of the examples thoroughly. One sentence in any of the letters may be applicable to you and may help you form your own cover letter. These are examples only. You must carefully and thoughtfully draft your own cover letters to fit the employers to which you are applying and highlight your own unique background and qualifications.

Feel free to contact a CDO counselor at any time for assistance with your cover letters. Because your cover letters must be completely error-free, always have someone proofread them before sending. When submitting your cover letters to employers, always do so in PDF format.

## OUTLINE OF A COVER LETTER

Your Address  
City, State Zip  
Your Phone Number  
Your Email Address

Date

Name of Contact Person  
Title of Contact Person  
Employer Name  
Address  
City, State Zip

Dear Mr. (Ms.) last name of contact person:

**First Paragraph:** Tell why you are writing – name the position for which you are applying. If you have a personal referral or connection, mention it here. Identify your career goals and indicate why you are interested in working for *this* employer. If you have ties to or lived in the area, mention it. Specify your interests in the type of work the employer does. Describe what is particularly appealing to you about the employer.

**Second Paragraph:** Show how your background qualifies you for the position. Point out the experience and coursework you have that relates to the employer's field or type of work. Focus on what skills or experiences you would bring to the employer. Emphasize pertinent items on your resume and supplement with other details. Tie experience to tangible, transferrable skills. Convince the employer that you would be an asset.

**Third Paragraph:** Restate your interest in working for the employer. Have an appropriate closing to pave the way for an interview. Indicate your willingness to interview personally by stating when you will be in the area or by offering to make yourself available at the employer's convenience. Thank the employer for his/her consideration.

Sincerely,

*(leave 4 blank lines for signature)*

Your full typed name

**EXAMPLE OF LETTER FOR  
FIRST-YEAR STUDENT APPLYING FOR A  
SUMMER ASSOCIATE POSITION**

456 Main Street  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
ssmith34@nd.edu  
574-123-4567

December 1, 2016

Ms. Zoe S. Employer  
Baker, Cook & Bottlewasher P.C.  
123 "I" Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60606

Dear Ms. Employer:

I am a first-year student at Notre Dame Law School, and I am interested in a summer associate position with Baker, Cook & Bottlewasher. As an alumna of DePaul, I intend to return to Chicago to practice upon my graduation in May 2019. I am particularly interested in your firm's labor law practice, given my previous experience as a manager at United States Steel.

My background has prepared me to be a successful summer associate at your firm. Every summer throughout college, I worked in the offices of United States Steel and was promoted to a management position before my junior year. This experience allowed me to observe the interplay between management and employees from the corporate viewpoint. At Notre Dame Law School, I have cultivated strong research and writing skills while preparing memoranda, complaints and an appellate brief in the law school's first-year legal writing program. I look forward to applying these skills and experiences as a summer associate at Baker, Cook & Bottlewasher.

I am very interested in serving as a summer associate with Baker, Cook & Bottlewasher and would be pleased to discuss my qualifications in an interview scheduled at your convenience. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sylvia A. Smith



EXAMPLE OF LETTER FOR  
**FIRST-YEAR STUDENT APPLYING FOR A  
JUDICIAL INTERNSHIP**

1234 Eddy Street  
South Bend, IN 12345  
mjones15@nd.edu  
123-456-7890

December 1, 2016

The Honorable John Smith  
U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan  
Theodore Levin U.S. District Courthouse  
231 West Lafayette Blvd.  
Detroit, MI 48226

Dear Judge Smith:

I wish to apply for a judicial internship in your chambers for the summer of 2017. I am a first-year student at Notre Dame Law School and a native of the Detroit area. I am particularly interested in pursuing a career in litigation, and I plan to return to Detroit to practice after my graduation in May 2019. Jim Jones, your former clerk, suggested that I contact you regarding a possible summer internship.

My background has prepared me to contribute meaningfully to your chambers. As an intern for the Washtenaw County Public Defender's Office, I observed courtroom proceedings on a daily basis and prepared clients extensively before they pled their cases. The experience piqued my interest in the inner workings of the judicial system and in a career as a litigator. In addition, I have refined my research and writing skills immensely through my senior thesis coursework at the University of Michigan and through Notre Dame's comprehensive first-year legal research and writing program. I am eager to use these varied experiences to assist your court.

I would be honored to serve as a 2017 summer intern in your chambers and would be pleased to discuss my qualifications in an interview. I will be home in the Detroit area from December 22 through January 12 and can be available at your convenience. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully,

Mary K. Jones

**EXAMPLE OF LETTER FOR  
SECOND-YEAR STUDENT APPLYING FOR A  
SUMMER ASSOCIATE POSITION**

456 Main Street  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
mayajones@nd.edu  
123-456-7890

August 15, 2016

Ms. Erin C. Contact  
Smith & Moore LLP  
1987 Grand Avenue  
Los Angeles, California 90071

Dear Ms. Contact:

A mutual friend, John Thompson, suggested I contact you regarding a summer associate position at Smith & Moore. I am a second-year student at Notre Dame Law School and a lifelong resident of Los Angeles. Your firm is of particular interest to me because of its commercial litigation practice, as I am committed to becoming a litigator.

During law school, I have pursued opportunities to develop practical litigation skills. I am a member of the Moot Court trial team and have taken both Trial Advocacy and Deposition Skills classes. Last summer, I worked for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office where I interviewed witnesses, assisted with depositions, conducted legal research, and drafted briefs. Given my background and experience, I am confident I can make an immediate and substantive contribution to Smith & Moore.

I travel to Los Angeles on a regular basis and would be pleased to schedule an interview at your convenience. Thank you for considering my application. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Maya Z. Jones

**EXAMPLE OF LETTER FOR  
THIRD-YEAR STUDENT APPLYING FOR AN  
ASSOCIATE POSITION**

456 Main Street  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
leighwilson@nd.edu  
574-123-4789

February 19, 2017

Mr. Richard A. Mortar  
Wood, Brick and Mortar  
923 Market Street  
New York, New York 10001

Dear Mr. Mortar:

I am a third-year student at Notre Dame Law School, and I wish to apply for an associate position with Wood, Brick and Mortar. I am committed to building a career in products liability and am drawn to your firm because of its significant practice in that area. I will be relocating to Manhattan upon my graduation, and I am registered to sit for the New York bar exam in July.

Throughout law school, I have pursued opportunities to prepare myself for a career in products liability. Last summer, I worked for a boutique firm in Brooklyn specializing in products liability defense. There, I participated in depositions and conducted extensive research on negligent design and negligent failure to warn. This spring, I am writing my third-year seminar paper on the products liability system and have represented clients through the law school clinic. Through the clinic, I have managed my own caseload, prepared complaints and argued motions. In addition, I have completed coursework in complex civil litigation, torts, medical malpractice and trial advocacy.

I am very interested in an associate position with Wood, Brick and Mortar and would welcome an opportunity to interview with you. I will be in New York over spring break, March 7-14, and can be available to meet then or any other time that may be convenient for you. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Leigh D. Wilson