THE COVER LETTER

What is the purpose of a cover letter?
Your cover letter serves to:
- display your writing ability and attention to detail - it’s a writing sample!
- highlight significant achievements
- encourage the reader to look at particular information on your résumé
- answer questions the reader may have based on a quick review of your résumé
- interest the reader in talking with you to learn more

When should I use a cover letter and what should it contain?
You should always include a cover letter when applying for a position or responding to an advertisement, even when it is not expressly requested. The cover letter should be a concise, well-written business letter that introduces you and requests an interview. Three or four paragraphs are usually sufficient to state your purpose for writing and to create a favorable impression. Show genuine enthusiasm for the job and "market" yourself. Make your letter sound unique to that employer. Avoid clichés. The more your letter looks as if it could have been addressed to just anyone, the less effective it will be.

When applying to different types of employers, develop several cover letters that are tailored to the various types of organizations; do not write one cover letter to be used for every employer -- it will signal that you have not done your homework about a particular position/employer. At the very least, you should tailor your cover letters to the type of practice or employer; i.e., litigation or government, demonstrating that you are particularly interested in and qualified to work for a certain kind of employer. You should highlight those skills and experiences most relevant to the position sought. For example, if applying to a boutique litigation firm, you will want to highlight oral advocacy skills and client contact; if applying to government regulatory agency, these same skills are not as relevant and should not be given as much emphasis.

Typographical and/or grammatical errors are usually deadly; run spell-check, but do not rely on it solely as it will not detect all errors; proofread carefully and have someone else proof your letter as a back-up precaution. Career advisors in OCPD are happy to review cover letters; they should be dropped off at the reception desk, room 163 or emailed to jobs@law.edu.

What format should I use?
Use standard business format in all correspondence with employers. That means indented paragraphs with address, date, and closing on the right half of the paper. Do not use the flush-left business format. If you send your cover letter via email, send it as a .pdf attachment to maintain control over format and in order to provide a signature on the letter.
Address Block and Salutation

When addressing any business correspondence, be sure the employer’s name is correct. When writing to a law firm, this includes appropriate placement of commas and whether the title includes an ampersand (&) or an “and” before the final name. Your letters should be addressed to a specific person. If you cannot find a name of a recruiter or hiring partner, call the general number to the organization’s switchboard to find out the name (and correct spelling) of the person responsible for hiring.

Use of “Esquire”: When including “Esquire” or the abbreviated “Esq.” after an individual’s name in the address block, never use Ms. or Mr. as a prefix. Esquire is used alone at the end of a person’s name to indicate that he or she is an attorney.

Use of colon: Because this is a business and not personal letter, always use a colon in the salutation and never a comma. For example:

John P. Smith, Esq.
Smith, Smith and Jones
100 Surrey Road
Arlington, VA 20001

Dear Mr. Smith:

Samples

For an unknown person: If you do not have a contact name, address your cover letter to the hiring attorney, recruitment administrator or intern coordinator. Locate the name if at all possible.

Dear Sir or Madam:

For U.S. Representatives or Congressman/woman:

The Honorable Michael C. Korson
U.S. House of Representatives
104 Dirksen House Office Building
Washington, DC 20000

Dear Mr. Korson:
OR Dear Representative Korson:

For U.S. Senators:

The Honorable Ruth O. Steinmetz
U.S. Senate
204 Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20000

Dear Senator Steinmetz:

Who is an appropriate person to contact within an organization? You should always direct your cover letter to a specific person. Deciding whom to write will take some research on your part. The most common choices are an employer’s recruiting coordinator, a firm’s hiring partner, the head of a practice group in which you are interested, someone you know who
works for the employer or a CUA alumnus. If the firm has a Recruiting Coordinator/Recruiting Manager, you should send your materials to that individual. All large law firms and government organizations should have such an administrative person to handle applicants. Smaller firms will not typically have a recruitment person and you will contact a lawyer who is the designated recruitment contact within the firm. It is always a good idea to find an attorney within the firm to contact in addition to a recruitment contact, such as:

1. **Alumni** from the Columbus School of Law or your undergraduate institution (Martindale search can easily identify such individuals)

2. Within a law firm, the **Partner who is the head of the practice group** in which you are interested (search the law firm’s website).

3. Within a law firm, the **hiring partner** (see NALP Directory of Legal Employers, available at www.nalpdirectory.com); for some of the smaller and medium sized firms, you will probably have to call the firm to find out who is in charge of law student and attorney hiring.

Any of these individuals may take an interest in your candidacy and be of assistance to you. Check on employers’ websites to see if they have a preferred procedure for employment applications. You should follow that procedure, but you may also want to send your résumé to someone who will take a personal interest in it. If you decide to send your résumé to two people at the same employer - for example, the recruiting coordinator and a CUA alumnus - indicate in your cover letter that you are also submitting your résumé to the other person.

**What should I include in my letter?**

**First Paragraph: Your Introduction**

The opening should be up to three sentences. Begin confidently and state: 1) Who you are (a first, second or third-year law student and the name of the school, not Hello my name is...) 2) Why you are writing, and 3) Where you heard of the opening. Try to be original, but not flip. **You want to grab the reader's attention.** If someone referred you to the addressee, mention that person’s name in the first line of the first paragraph; a referral or contact’s name can set your application apart from others.

Examples:

I am a third-year law student at The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law and am writing to express my interest in the Associate position advertised on your firm’s website.

Professor James Smith, a former partner with your firm, suggested I contact you with regard to a possible internship. I am currently a second-year law student at The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law and am very interested in your firm as it is on the cutting edge of litigating new and innovative intellectual property claims.
Second to Third Paragraphs: Your Sell

You may split this part of the letter into two paragraphs if (and only if) your relevant background is fairly extensive. Employers prefer short cover letters demonstrating that you can make your point clearly and concisely, much like a legal memorandum. Focus on why the reader should talk with you. Expound on what you have to offer and why you want to offer it to this particular employer. Remember that the employer already knows that you need experience or the job; indicate why you are interested in the organization, expressing genuine enthusiasm in working for the organization. Also, explain why you are a unique candidate and would be a valuable addition. Employers like to hear what they can gain by hiring you. Show how your education, experience, interests, etc., match the employer's needs. Highlight significant, relevant portions of your résumé, but do not repeat the content of your résumé. If you are responding to an advertisement, summarize how you meet the qualifications stated in the ad.

Examples:

As you can see from the attached résumé, I have achieved significant academic and practical exposure to labor law issues while attending law school. Through my internships with the United Mine Workers of America and the Office of the Solicitor at the U.S. Department of Labor, I developed a deep appreciation for this area of work. I researched and analyzed many labor-related matters for staff attorneys and wrote lengthy memoranda and opinions detailing my findings. I was also able to explore the application of the ERISA statute to the workplace through my summer clerkship with the Pension and Welfare Benefits Administration. In addition to my hands-on work experience with the labor law field, I have also excelled in my labor law coursework while in law school earning an A+ in Labor and Employment Law as well as Practice and Procedure before the NLRB. I feel that the Federal Labor Relations Authority is an ideal place for me to establish my labor law career and am confident that my qualifications will enable me to be an immediate asset to your organization.

Last Paragraph: The Closing

This paragraph should be up to four sentences. State that you want to interview/meet to discuss the position. State how the employer can contact you and provide your contact information. Finally, be sure to thank prospective employers for their consideration and/or assistance.

Examples:

Enclosed please find my résumé and transcript as requested in the job posting. I would welcome the opportunity to further discuss my qualifications with you. I can be reached at (202) 319-5132. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.
Are there any special tactics regarding out-of-town job searches?

When applying to out-of-town employers, note in your letter that you plan to be in town “later this month,” “the week of October 17,” etc. Most employers will be more likely to interview you if you indicate that you will be traveling to their area. Also, note why you are interested in that geographic region (e.g., you are a native, went to college in the area, have family/friends there); employers want to see a demonstrated commitment to their geographic area. If you are considering a long-distance job search, you should make an appointment with an OCPD Career Advisor to further discuss job search resources.
COVER LETTER OUTLINE

The following outline of possible topics is designed to help you brainstorm before putting pen to paper. They are ideas for inclusion – **do not use them or the sample letters verbatim or your letter will end up looking exactly like those of all of your peers.**

1. **Attention: Why are you contacting this organization or person, and why are you interested in this employer in particular?**

   - You are applying for [POSITION TITLE]
   - The employer focuses on [PRACTICE AREA]/[TYPE OF PRACTICE]
   - A personal contact referred you to the employer; i.e., “Catholic University Law Professor James Smith suggested that I contact you about the possibility of employment with [ORGANIZATION].”
   - You are interested in the breadth of the employer’s practice and potential ability to observe different areas (larger law firms or organizations containing numerous practice groups)
   - The opportunity to serve the public appeals to you (for government, judiciary or public interest positions); you are deeply committed to [PUBLIC CAUSE]
   - You read in [PUBLICATION] (newspaper, book, legal periodical) about the employer/practice area/other item of interest to the employer
   - If you are applying to employers out of this geographic area, state your connection to the geographic region

2. **Fit: Why are you the right person for the job; Why should the employer hire you?**

   - Your legal work experience, both in specific substantive and procedural areas and more generally in the hurly burly of the practice (summer jobs, clinics, internships, school year jobs, etc.), which developed your **job/legal** skills (the skills are the important part – don’t forget to mention them!)
   - Your coursework at law school; mention specific courses related to a particular practice area, including substantive/doctrine courses, clinical, internships, and simulation courses which show that you realize a legal education is more than just classroom work
   - Your nonlegal work experience that is related to a specific practice area or the legal field in general, i.e., a former securities broker wants to be a securities lawyer; an IT
consultant worked one-on-one with clients, made presentations and developed communications skills that are also essential to attorneys.

- Qualities that set you apart from other candidates. Any educational, work, or extracurricular experience that is somewhat unique to the typical law student

- Avoid stating a “laundry list” of your academic or work experiences; i.e., “I did _____ my first year; I worked at _____ my second year; etc.” Instead, state the connection between the experience and the position for which you are applying, or why the experience was important; i.e., “My experience last summer at _____ was particularly useful because it provided behind the scenes exposure to the entire litigation process” (applying for position in litigation practice). **Organize your thoughts by legal skill rather than by chronology.**

3. Conclusion

- Be sure to include all materials asked for by the employer, i.e. résumé, transcript, references, etc.

- Include your phone number and email address where the employer can contact you for an interview.

- Thank them for their time and consideration in reviewing your credentials

*An Additional Recommendation: Recordkeeping: Be sure to construct a simple chart for yourself with four columns: name of employer; date of initial contact letter; deadline for follow-up contact (no more than 2-3 weeks from date of letter); and remarks: what did they say when you called, i.e., we’re not hiring, call back in 2 weeks, let’s meet, etc; be sure to put in your impressions, too: tone of voice, etc. **Don’t miss the follow-up deadline!**
ACTION VERBS FOR RÉSUMÉS AND COVER LETTERS

accelerated  
accomplished  
accrued  
achieved  
acquired  
adapted  
addressed  
administered  
advised  
allocated  
analyzed  
answered  
appear  
applied  
appointed  
appraised  
approved  
arbitrated  
arranged  
assessed  
assisted  
assumed  
assured  
attended  
audited  
awarded  
bought  
briefed  
budgeted  
calculated  
cataloged  
chaired  
changed  
classified  
closed  
coached  
collected  
combined  
commented  
communicated  
compared  
compiled  
completed  
composed  
computed  
conceived  
concluded  
conducted  
conceptualized  
considered  
constructed  
consulted  
continued  
contracted  
controlled  
converted  
convinced  
coordinated  
corrected  
counseled  
counted  
created  
credited  
critiqued  
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dealt  
decided  
defined  
deprecated  
delivered  
demonstrated  
described  
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maintained  
managed  
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organized  
oversaw  
participated  
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performed  
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programmed  
prohibited  
projected  
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promoted  
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spearheaded  
specific  
spoke  
started  
streamlined  
strengthened  
studied  
submitted  
substituted  
suggested  
summarized  
supervised  
surveyed  
tackled
November 12, 2013

Sam Seaborne, Esq.
Executive Director
Environment R Us
10 M Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 90210

Dear Mr. Seaborne:

As a first-year law student at Catholic University’s Columbus School of Law, I am interested in employment opportunities with your office this summer. I heard you speak at last month’s Public Interest Panel presentation and was impressed by your organization’s work in the area of environmental conservation.

My volunteer activities as an undergraduate, coupled with my work experience with Trees International, have provided me with a strong background in environmental issues ranging from biodiversity to pollution control. At Trees International, I led the campaign to raise school children's awareness of biodiversity issues in the Amazon. In addition, I researched and evaluated legislative initiatives aimed at preserving diversity among species; thus, I am quite adept at swiftly gathering comprehensive information through legislative research. My volunteer work with the H2O Group further augmented my desire to work in the conservation field. This background in environmental issues, as well as the research and writing skills gained in law school, have provided me with a solid foundation that would allow me to make a valuable contribution to your organization.

Enclosed is my résumé for your review. The opportunity to meet with you to discuss summer employment would be greatly appreciated. I can be reached at (202) 555-1234. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Josiah Bartlett

Enclosure
Mr. Charles Young  
Recruiting Coordinator  
Sampson & Lamp  
1236 Pearson Lane, Suite 210  
Richmond, VA 20000  

Dear Mr. Young:  

As a native of Richmond, I plan to return to the area to practice securities law after graduation in 2014 from Catholic University’s Columbus School of Law. I would like to work as a summer associate for Sampson & Lamp this summer following the completion of my second-year of law school, as it is my understanding that Sampson & Lamp’s Securities Group is one of the most reputable in Richmond. My interest in securities and financial institutions practice stems from my involvement as an active attendee at lectures and events sponsored by the Corporation, Finance and Securities Law Section of the District of Columbia Bar Association, of which I am a student member, and my work experience in the banking industry. 

I feel confident that my academic background and work experiences will allow me to make a positive contribution to your Securities Group. As a summer associate with two years of experience in American Security Bank’s management training program, I am able to bring to the firm an insider’s knowledge of a traditional lending institution. On the academic side, a rigorous, full year legal research and writing course and an undergraduate degree in English from the University of Richmond have sharpened my research and communication skills. In March, I will strengthen my advocacy skills by participating in the securities law moot court competition. I am looking forward to the challenge of applying my skills, interest and knowledge as a contributing member of a practical legal environment this summer and am confident in my ability to succeed at Sampson & Lamp. 

Please find enclosed a copy of my transcript and a résumé for your review. The opportunity to meet with you to discuss your summer associate program would be welcomed. I can be reached at (202) 555-1234. I will be in the Richmond area the week of November 28th should you like to meet. Thank you for your time and consideration. 

Sincerely, 

Madeline Hampton  

Enclosures
C. J. Gregg, Esq.
Sheppard & Manning
4322 K Street, Suite 200
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Ms. Gregg:

Professor John Smith suggested that I contact you regarding the opening for a summer associate in your expanding litigation department. I understand that Sheppard & Manning’s litigation department is divided into three practice groups, and that summer associates rotate through each group over the course of a summer. My hope is to gain as much exposure to varying kinds of litigation as possible this summer; thus, your program is particularly appealing to me.

My developing interest in litigation is demonstrated by my work and academic experiences. As an intern with the Alexandria Commonwealth Attorney’s Office, I assisted prosecutors by interviewing witnesses and prosecuting criminal and traffic cases in General District and Circuit Court. In addition to the moot court competitions highlighted in my enclosed résumé, I recently received the Best Oralist award for the Dean’s Cup Competition at Catholic University’s Columbus School of Law. I am eager to build on these experiences and contribute the skills and knowledge that I have acquired as I begin my career as a litigator. Sheppard & Manning’s reputation for quickly integrating new attorneys into the litigation team makes your firm especially attractive to me. I am eager to gain courtroom experience and know that your firm would provide that exposure.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person to discuss the possibility of employment. I can be reached at (202) 555-1212 or TZiegler@gmail.com. I thank you for your consideration and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Tobias Ziegler

Enclosure
Leo McGarry, Esq.
General Counsel
Child and Family Services
Callahan Foundation
1236 Pearson Lane, Suite 210
Washington, D.C. 20000

Dear Mr. McGarry:

Cynthia Miller suggested that I contact you. Over the past semester, Cynthia and I have spoken extensively about her experiences as an intern with Child and Family Services. Because I hold a deep interest in the strengthening of American families, I would like to work for the Callahan Foundation this summer as a part-time law clerk.

It is my understanding that your organization seeks a sharp, diligent and compassionate law clerk with excellent research and writing skills who is able to successfully prioritize and complete a variety of tasks under demanding conditions. I am confident that I meet the above criteria. My past work experiences have helped me to develop the skills necessary to perform well in an organization such as yours. For example, my work as an Account Representative at Leo Burnett strengthened my work ethic of persistence and attention to detail. It also taught me how to handle multiple tasks, to work well as a team player, and how to produce a quality product under intensely demanding time constraints. This year, in my lawyering skills class, I became very efficient at researching and writing on a wide variety of issues and was awarded “Best Brief” for my submission in the St. Ives Moot Court Competition. Further, my volunteer hours with the House of Ruth have helped shape my fervent desire to be an active participant in the movement to preserve American families. I have no doubt that I will be able to utilize these skills at the Callahan Foundation and make a valuable contribution to your staff.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss your summer law clerk program. I can be reached during the day at (202) 555-5555. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Josh Lyman

Enclosures
May 1, 2013

Nicole Rose
Hiring Coordinator
Human Resources Division
Federal Labor Relations Authority
607 14th Street, NW, Suite 430
Washington, DC 20005

Re: Position Announcement No. FLRA-01-22

Dear Ms. Rose:

I write to apply for the position of General Attorney, or Law Clerk Trainee until passing the Virginia bar examination. I will receive my Juris Doctor degree from Catholic University’s law school at the end of this month and plan to sit for the bar exam in July. My ultimate career goal is to serve the public through federal government service, and I hope to accomplish this by helping your office promote fair labor practices in our country.

As you can see from the attached résumé, I have achieved significant academic and practical exposure to labor law issues while attending law school. Through my internships with the United Mine Workers of America and the Office of the Solicitor at the U.S. Department of Labor, I developed a deep appreciation for this area of work. I researched and analyzed many labor-related matters for staff attorneys and wrote lengthy memoranda and opinions detailing my findings. I was also able to explore the application of the ERISA statute to the workplace through my summer clerkship with the Pension and Welfare Benefits Administration. I feel that the Federal Labor Relations Authority is an ideal place for me to establish my labor law career and am confident that my qualifications will enable me to be an immediate asset to your organization.

I have enclosed my résumé and a list of references for your review and would be happy to provide a writing sample and transcript at your request. I would welcome the opportunity to further discuss my qualifications for the position. I can be reached at (202) 555-5511. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to speaking to you in the near future.

Very truly yours,

Joseph A. Fox

Enclosure
August 20, 2013

The Honorable Colleen Kollar-Kotelly
U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia
333 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Judge Kollar-Kotelly:

I write to apply for a judicial clerkship in your chambers beginning in September 2013. I am a third-year student at The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law and have served as a judicial intern to The Honorable Catherine Blake, judge in the Arlington County Circuit Court. I have thoroughly enjoyed my legal education thus far, and hope to deepen my understanding of the intricacies of the law through a federal clerkship.

My internship with Judge Blake and my opportunities to use my legal writing skills as a member of the Journal of Contemporary Health Law and Policy have been exceptionally rewarding experiences. Each has provided me a unique opportunity to examine various aspects of the law, sharpen my analytical skills, and gain exposure to and familiarity with a wide array of legal issues and practices germane to the federal judiciary. I have benefited immeasurably from the strong emphasis that Judge Blake places on thorough and efficient legal research and the clear and concise writing of legal opinions and memoranda. My legal writing has been enhanced over the past year as I have drafted a note suitable for publication related to the District of Columbia’s Patient’s Bill of Rights. My internship and journal experiences have instilled within me a passion for the law and a healthy respect for its pervasive influence on the people it governs.

I am confident that my strong work ethic and commitment to gaining hands-on experience under your tutelage would benefit your chambers. My academic and work experience has taught me the importance of meeting deadlines, working independently, and maintaining a positive attitude and a professional demeanor. I sincerely believe that my skills and experience have prepared me to serve you, and I am ready and eager to commit myself to that task.

Please find attached a résumé, two letters of recommendation, two unedited writing samples, and an official academic transcript. Should you require any additional information, I am available at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Lauren Smith
Dear Sir or Madam:

I am a first-year law student at The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law and am writing to apply for the 2013 Public Rights Division Summer Honors Program. As I intend to begin my legal career in the Bay Area after graduation, my top placement preference is the San Francisco office followed by the Oakland office.

My academic, personal and professional experience has solidified my commitment to public service and, in particular, to the vital mission of the Public Rights Division. I would appreciate the opportunity to contribute to that mission, while learning from the experienced government attorneys within the section. While an undergraduate at Boston University, I had the opportunity to serve as an intern at Greater Boston Legal Services. This experience exposed me to a diverse set of legal issues ranging from employment discrimination to fair housing legislation and provided me with the opportunity to witness the critical role that attorneys play in ensuring justice for all parties in need of representation. Through participating in client intake and supporting the attorneys at administrative hearings, I was able to develop basic fact-finding and investigation skills. Most importantly, this internship furthered my desire to dedicate my legal career to addressing the systematic barriers preventing millions of Americans from accessing legal protections and remedies. Since arriving at the Columbus School of Law, I have continued to develop my research and writing skills through my participation in the Journal of Law, Philosophy and Culture and during the standard course of legal writing, which required the drafting of two legal memoranda.

My résumé and writing sample are enclosed as separate attachments. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you further my qualifications for summer employment and can be reached at (703) 555-1525 or RJacobs@gmail.com. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Very truly yours,

Ronald D. Jacobs

Enclosure
COMMON COVER LETTER MISTAKES

1. MISSPELLING A FIRM’S NAME - Check the job listing, NALP Directory or organization’s web site for correct placement of commas, etc.

2. SENDING LETTERS TO AN OLD HIRING CONTACT - Check the NALP Directory or the organization’s web site for up-to-date information.

3. MENTIONING PRACTICE AREAS NOT PRACTICED BY THE ORGANIZATION - Shows you did not do your research.

4. COURIER FONT - CG Times New Roman is the appropriate font for a standard business letter.

5. USING “MR./MS.” AND “ESQ.” SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE ADDRESS BLOCK - If you use “Esquire” after the name of the hiring attorney, it is incorrect to use “Mr./Ms.” before the person’s name.

6. ARROGANT LANGUAGE - By using concrete examples and/or anecdotes to support your assertions about your skills, you create an aura of objectivity.

7. SENDING COVER LETTERS WITH TYPOS, MISSPELLED WORDS OR GRAMMATICAL ERRORS – Don’t forget - this is a writing sample!

8. FORGETTING TO SIGN YOUR LETTERS – Don’t.

9. SUBSTITUTING “Resume” FOR “Résumé.”