

Center for Co-op & Career Development

GUIDE TO WRITING COVER LETTERS

Writing effective cover letters is a skill that you will need to use throughout your professional life. The two main keys to writing effective cover letters are:

1. Tailoring the cover letter to the employer and the details of the job
2. Proofreading several times to ensure that the cover letter is error-free

Once you have written one great cover letter for a particular type of job and employer, you often can modify it and use it to apply for a number of similar positions with similar employers.

The purpose of this guide is to assist you with formatting and drafting an effective cover letter. We encourage you to also submit your cover letters for review by a co-op advisor in order to maximize your chances of receiving an interview. As noted in the Co-op Rules & Professional Expectations, please only request review of your cover letter to *one advisor at a time*.

The following sections of this guide cover the purpose of a cover letter, formatting guidance, and best practices for drafting effective cover letters. There are also sample cover letters included that you may reference when preparing your own.

Why do employers want cover letters? Don't resumes tell all that employers need to know?

A resume outlines your relevant experience in limited detail. An effective cover letter elaborates on your education and experience to demonstrate you are well-suited for a particular position.

When employers ask for cover letters, they will read it very carefully to assess your level of interest in and knowledge of the position/employer, to evaluate your writing ability and professionalism, and to determine if they should take the time from their busy schedules to interview you. Employers want to see that you are putting yourself in their shoes and that you are putting forth what you can offer, rather than how you would benefit from the position.

FORMATTING YOUR COVER LETTERS

Here are some basics to keep in mind:

- **Length** – Cover letters should be limited to one page.
- **Page Margins** – Aim for one-inch margins but adjust as needed to keep to one page.
- **Spacing** – Single-spaced, with spaces between paragraphs.
- **Font and Font Size** – Match the font and font size to your resume. Use a common business font such as Times New Roman or Arial. The font size should be an 11 or 12.
- **Paper** – (For those rare employers that require hard copies) – Use good quality 8.5” x 11” white or ivory bond paper. Use the same paper for both your resume and cover letter. Use black ink for the print.
- **Signatures** – It is not necessary to sign your cover letter if you are submitting it electronically. Your typed name beneath the closing (e.g., Sincerely), will suffice.
- **Appearance** – Carefully proofread your cover letter several times. Misspellings (especially of names), typos, or grammatical errors can take you out of consideration. Consider asking someone else to proofread it for you. Without another reviewer, you may overlook errors in your cover letter, even after making several revisions.

Page Set-up

- **Heading** – Use the same heading as used in your resume. Remember, your heading should have a physical mailing address. Make sure that your heading is positioned at the same location on the page as your resume (for example, ½ inch from the top).
- **Date** – The date should be placed a few lines below your heading. We recommend placing the date flush with the far left margin. Your closing (e.g. Sincerely or Respectfully) should be lined up with the date.
- **Recipient’s Address** – Preferably, your letter should be addressed to a real person (NOT to a function, e.g., “Hiring Partner”) whose professional title is included. If a name is not included in the posting, research the appropriate recipient. The full physical mailing address of the recipient follows. The recipient’s address is positioned flush with the far left margin, usually one to two lines below the date. Even if you are submitting a letter via email, you should include the employer’s physical mailing address, not the email address.
- **Salutation** – Your salutation is positioned flush with the far left margin, and should begin with the word, “Dear,” followed by the appropriate courtesy or professional title and surname of the recipient. Do **not** include the recipient’s first name only. You will often be addressing cover letters to attorneys, and in that case the salutation should

read: “Dear Attorney Smith.” Always double check to see if the recipient is an attorney. The proper punctuation after the name is a colon or a comma. Typically, law firms, companies and judges prefer the use of a colon. While you should always make every effort to identify the name of the person in charge of hiring, if you are unable to, the salutation “Dear Hiring Committee or Dear Hiring Coordinator” is appropriate. Avoid “To whom it may concern.”

- **Body of Letter** – Your letter should consist of three or four paragraphs, typed single-spaced with a blank line of space between each paragraph. All paragraphs should be flush with the far left margin. Do not indent the first line of the paragraphs.
- **Closing** – There should be one blank line between the last paragraph of the letter and the closing. Your closing may be the words, “Sincerely,” or “Respectfully,” followed by a comma, then two or three blank lines, and lastly, your typed name on the fourth line. Both typed lines of the closing should be positioned at the same left margin as the date of your letter. If you are running out of space, you may reduce the spacing between the closing and your name.

SAMPLE COVER LETTER FORMATS

MARIA SANCHEZ

400 Huntington Ave., Apt. 45 · Boston, MA 02115 · (617) 234-5678 · sanchez.ma@northeastern.edu

January 12, 2017

Mary Nguyen
Director of Recruiting
Davenport, Jay & Taylor, P.C.
8255 Norristown Way, Suite 14
Philadelphia, PA 19115

Dear Attorney Nguyen:

[Body of letter]

[Body of letter]

[Body of letter]

Sincerely,

Maria Sanchez

WRITING EFFECTIVE COVER LETTERS

The First/ Opening Paragraph

The first paragraph of your cover letter serves as a brief introduction (3- 5 sentences). It describes who you are and provides the recipient with clear and concise context about why they are receiving your cover letter. Provide the recipient of your cover letter enough information so that they do not have to guess why you are writing to them, and do not include extraneous detail. Remember to start strong – this is your first impression to a potential employer. Boil down your interests, passions, motivations, or whatever else propels you to this position, into a concise, one sentence, pitch.

Your introduction may include reference to the following points (if relevant) to help distinguish you from other applicants:

- if you have a tie to the geographical area of the employer
- if you were referred by someone who knows the recipient or spoke with a student/ graduate who worked with the employer
- if you can articulate a very specific connection between your area of interest and the employer's work

For public interest employers, make sure you demonstrate that you understand the mission of the employer and role of the attorneys in that organization. Express that you want to do this type of work, using any details from your background and experience to support that.

Here are some sample paragraphs to give you an idea of what constitutes an effective opening paragraph. **Do not copy the language verbatim.** Instead, customize and personalize your cover letters so that your letters reflect your individual voice.

Examples:

- I am a first-year student at Northeastern University School of Law, writing to apply for a summer internship with the Civil Division of the U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) in Boston. As an aspiring litigator with a strong interest in civil law and a commitment to public service, I would be honored to intern with the USAO next summer.
- I am a first-year student at Northeastern University School of Law writing to apply for a summer legal intern position with Joy, Freund, & Spring, LLP. Having worked as a full-time paralegal in a busy immigration law firm for two years, I am confident that I would contribute immediately to your firm. I am especially interested in your employment and labor practice, as many of my prior clients were U.S. businesses hiring international candidates.
- I am a second-year law student at Northeastern University School of Law and I am writing to express my strong interest in a legal internship with the American Civil

Liberties Union's (ACLU) of Maine. I grew up in Maine and plan to practice there after graduation. I spoke recently with John Smith, who shared his experience working with your team of attorneys on a civil rights case involving the harassment of Somalian refugees living in Lewiston. Mr. Smith encouraged me to apply for an internship with the ACLU and I am eager to join your efforts to protect the rights of marginalized communities in Maine.

- I am a second-year student at Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, applying for a Summer Associate position with Fox, Grimes and Banks LLP (FGB). As a native of Pennsylvania, I look forward to returning to my home state after graduation to begin my legal career. Joining the Summer Associate program at FGB is of particular interest to me because of the firm's representation of numerous start-up technology companies in the Philadelphia area and its reputation for valuing innovation and diversity.
- I am writing to apply for a summer legal internship with the Child Care Law Center (CCLC). The CCLC's leadership in legislative and regulatory victories for children's rights, particularly the successful campaign for affordable childcare programs, serves as a national model. My prior work on child custody issues with the Department of Children and Families and XYZ Law Firm will allow me to contribute to CCLC's important work. I am currently a 3L at Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, but as a native Californian, I plan to practice in the Bay Area after graduation.

If you are applying to an employer that is not familiar with NUSL's co-op program, it can be helpful to add a few sentences about the structure of the program and when you are available for an internship. You do not need to include this information for any summer program, as the summer term is typical for all law students. Speak with the co-op office to determine whether this section is necessary for a particular employer.

- As you may know, Northeastern University School of Law (NUSL) has a cooperative education program in which students alternate between academic terms and full-time legal internships throughout their second and third years of law school. Through this program, students complete three full-time legal internships prior to graduation. I am writing to inquire about a full-time internship during NUSL's fall term, from September 3 to November 22.

Note to LLMs:

For LLM students, we recommend indicating in your cover letter that your co-op period will be twelve (12) weeks, since it is different from full-time JD co-ops. You can do this in the first paragraph of your cover letter.

Sample:

I am pursuing my LLM at Northeastern University School of Law and I am writing to apply for a full-time spring internship position with Alvarez, Bronstein, & Clark, LLP. Having practiced law in Canada as a full-time attorney for over five years in a busy immigration law firm, I am confident that I would contribute immediately to your firm. I am especially interested in your employment and labor practice, as many of my prior clients were businesses hiring international candidates. As you may know, Northeastern's spring internship program for LLM students is a twelve-week term, from [date] to [date]. I am excited about the prospect of contributing to your firm during that time.

The Second and/or Third Paragraph

Here is where you advocate for yourself, elaborating on the information you included in the opening paragraph, and presenting your background and professional aspirations. Your letter will be much more effective if the employer clearly understands why you are interested in a particular kind of work and how you can make a strong contribution to their office based on your background and experience. Remember, don't merely repeat line items on your resume. Instead, highlight relevant and specific experiences in more detail and perhaps in a more reflective way. This is also an opportunity to showcase your persuasive writing skills.

For some employers, especially public interest employers or smaller firms with a more specialized focus, injecting passion for the clients, issues, or work is appropriate. You should highlight your commitment to the population served and issues addressed by the organization. This commitment does not have to be tied explicitly to prior work experience, but it certainly can be. Convince the recipient that you care about what they do. Do you have a relevant personal or professional experience? Were your undergraduate studies relevant to their work in any way? Do you have volunteering or other personal experience with the type of work they do? You must at least acknowledge the importance of the work being done by the organization and demonstrate why you believe it is so important.

For Clerkships/Judicial Co-ops, highlight the strength of your legal research and writing. Do not just tell your reader you are good at/have these skills, demonstrate them. Provide examples of large-scale research assignments or research papers you have completed or authored, such as your Legal Research and Writing memos you completed as a 1L, or any academic research you completed prior to law school.

For any type of employer, it is important to show what you can provide as an intern or new lawyer, rather than only what you are hoping to get out of the experience. You should want the employer to understand how your skills and experience relate to their particular needs. If

you are a 1L without much prior work experience, highlight transferrable skills from involvement with student organizations/volunteer work or your Legal Skills in a Social Context project and how that work has prepared you to hit the ground running.

Start your paragraph(s) with a strong topic sentence that contextualizes the experience you will be discussing to the mission/work of the employer and/or the required skills for the position. Follow each topic sentence with examples that support or expound upon what you have stated in your topic sentence. In so doing, your paragraph(s) can avoid merely repeating resume items and help the employer better connect your experiences and demonstrated interests to the job at hand.

Remember, your reader is a busy employer, and they will only be spending a very limited amount of time reading your cover letter. The more clearly and concisely you can state who you are, why you are writing, and how your prior experience and interests make you an excellent candidate for the role, the better.

Examples of good second and third paragraphs:

- Prior to law school, I worked as a non-profit grant writer and successfully obtained several major grants for my employer. Currently, I am enrolled in my law school's full-year legal research and writing program, through which I have authored three legal research memoranda. I enjoy the intellectual and creative process involved in the factual and legal analysis required by writing these memoranda, and I am confident in my ability to work successfully on legal research projects as an intern with your organization.
- During my internship in the Criminal Division at the U.S. Attorney's Office, I strengthened my research and writing skills, analyzed a variety of complex legal issues, and gained valuable insight into federal criminal trial practice. I had the opportunity to assist with a white-collar criminal trial, including witness preparation, drafting motions, and negotiating with opposing counsel. Your firm is of particular interest to me because of its well-known white-collar criminal defense practice.
- As Program Director at Open Doors, I obtained valuable court experience by assisting *pro se* litigants in civil proceedings and assisting victims of domestic violence involved in criminal cases. I had the privilege of learning about the law and court procedures from experienced attorneys. My desire to play an even greater role in seeking solutions to the problems of poverty, discrimination and domestic violence brought me to law school. If hired as an intern at [name], my strong academic skills, relevant experience, and commitment to social justice will enable me to contribute immediately to your important work.
- Your firm is of particular interest to me because of your active litigation practice in personal injury law. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I worked at Ghet & Ghet, a small law firm with a variety of personal injury cases, ranging from lead paint poisoning and automobile crashes to dog bites and accidental death. I was involved in every phase of litigation from preparing complaints, conducting discovery, and assisting the attorneys of the firm at trials and settlement negotiations. I am confident that I will be an asset to your office as a legal intern.

The Closing Paragraph

This very brief paragraph (2-4 sentences) reiterates your interest in the position, requests an opportunity to meet with the employer, and thanks the reader for their consideration. You do not need to include your contact information, as it will be clearly displayed in your header.

Examples:

- I would appreciate the opportunity to further discuss my interest in an internship with [employer name] and your important work advocating for the rights of society's most vulnerable communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.
- I would greatly appreciate an opportunity to meet with you to discuss both your needs and my interest in working at your firm. Thank you for your consideration.

SAMPLE COVER LETTERS

Lisa Franklin

416 Huntington Ave., Boston, MA 02115 | l.franklin@northeastern.edu | 617-373-0000

April 14, 2017

Bill Lee, Esq.
Deputy Director
National Nonprofit Organization
60 Green Street
Boston, MA 02000

Dear Attorney Lee:

I am a first-year student at Northeastern University School of Law (NUSL), writing to apply for a fall internship with the National Nonprofit Organization. I enrolled in law school because I want to represent underserved clients and communities. Given your office's reputation as an outstanding advocate for homeless youth, I would be honored to join your team as an intern this fall.

While attending Boston College, I volunteered at a local YMCA tutoring recent immigrants learning English as a second language. I valued forming connections with my students and understood that in order to be an effective teacher I needed to build trusting relationships. Over time, my students shared with me some of the barriers they faced, which are often unacknowledged by society and render their significant struggles invisible. This experience opened my eyes to socioeconomic inequities across our society and spurred my interest in attending law school. I plan to dedicate my legal education to learning how to become an advocate for change.

Through NUSL's first year required course, Legal Skills in Social Context, I am currently working with a group of law students to provide a statutory analysis of workers' compensation laws, as well as drafting a complaint and legal brief for a potential class action lawsuit on behalf of undocumented immigrants. This experience has sharpened my legal research and writing skills, and provided an outstanding opportunity to advocate for indigent clients during my first year of law school.

I am eager to contribute to the exceptional work of the National Nonprofit Organization and would appreciate the opportunity to further discuss my interest and qualifications. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lisa Franklin

XAVIER WILLIAMS

85 Main St., Apt. 3, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130 · (222) 333-4444 · williams.x@northeastern.edu

January 7, 2017

Christine Gordon
Legal Recruiter
Harter Secrest & Emery, LLP
1600 Bausch & Lomb Place
Rochester, NY, 14604

Dear Ms. Gordon:

I am a second-year student at Northeastern University School of Law, writing to apply for a summer associate position at Harter Secrest and Emery (HSE). Originally from Syracuse, I intend to return to Western New York State after graduation. HSE is of particular interest to me because of its highly regarded financial services practice. Having studied business administration and economics as an undergraduate at Cornell University, I have both academic and practical experience that I am eager to bring to HSE.

Prior to law school, I worked for two years as a sales consultant with John Hancock Financial Services where I advised customers on the financial products and services we offered, including retirement and life insurance plans. In that role, I participated in meetings with senior executives, resolved customer concerns, and became familiar with the applicable state and federal regulations governing our financial products and services. After my first year of law school, I completed an internship with the Massachusetts Securities Division where I supported the Enforcement Section by assisting with the investigation of potential violations of state law. Specifically, I conducted research and drafted memoranda on topics including securities fraud, civil racketeering, and administrative remedies. I am now eager to apply my expanding knowledge of securities law towards advising private sector companies.

I am excited about the possibility of joining HSE for the summer. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Xavier Williams

JOSEPHINE MADRIGAL

222 Main Street, Boston, MA 02222 · (617) 234-5678 · madrigal.j@northeastern.edu

November 1, 2018

April Kiley
Assistant Attorney General
Massachusetts Attorney General's Office
One Ashburton Place
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Attorney Kiley:

I am a second-year law student at Northeastern University School of Law and I am writing to apply for a spring legal internship with the Human Trafficking Unit of the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office. Prior to law school, I worked extensively with victims in crisis and I hope to apply my passion and legal skills to serve the Commonwealth's residents as an intern with the Attorney General's Office.

As a Victim Advocate with the Dover County District Attorney's Office and a Case Manager at two domestic violence shelters, I worked with survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse. I listened to their stories, provided support and connected them with community resources. Through these experiences, I learned that an essential component of healing is for survivors to feel empowered within the legal system.

As a clinical student with Northeastern University School of Law's Domestic Violence Institute (DVI), I had the privilege of representing clients in Abuse Prevention Order proceedings and conducting community outreach and education. I developed strong client relationships and honed my oral advocacy skills preparing for several court hearings. Through this work, I further solidified my commitment to serving survivors of gender-based violence and enacting systemic change in the legal system.

I would appreciate the opportunity to further discuss my interest in an internship with the Human Trafficking Unit and your important work advocating for the rights of society's most vulnerable people. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Josephine Madrigal