

Drafting a Legal Cover Letter

Southwestern Law School has served the public since 1911 as a nonprofit, nonsectarian educational institution. Southwestern does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, religion, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, or prior military service in connection with admission to the school or in the administration of any of its educational, employment, financial aid, scholarship, or student activity programs. Nondiscrimination has been the policy of Southwestern since its founding. The law school also requires employers using its Career Services Office and facilities to abide by these standards and to ensure that no such discrimination occurs in hiring, promotion, or compensation for work assignments.

There is an exception to the above non-discrimination policy as to representatives of the U.S. Department of Defense who discriminate on a basis not permitted by Southwestern's non-discrimination policy or AALS bylaws. This exception is currently made in order to avoid the potential loss of funds that could result if participation in Southwestern's OCIP was denied.

While every effort has been made to provide complete, accurate, and current information, this Guide is not intended to be, and is not, a contract of any kind or description. All information set forth herein is subject to change.

Cover Letters

Purpose

A cover letter introduces you to the potential employer, explains that you are seeking a job, demonstrates your qualifications, and serves as a writing sample. A good cover letter also persuades the employer to interview you.

Key Tips

- Make your letter specific to the employer. If it looks like a generic, mass-mailed letter, it is likely to go where your junk mail goes – into the trash!
- Focus on the employer and the employer’s needs, not just a list of your credentials. Do not just provide a laundry list of your qualifications or recite your resume.
- Be direct and to the point. Do not obscure your message by burying it in unnatural, flowery language. Be concise and tell the reader what you want. Your cover letter should **never** be more than one page long.
- Use good quality paper – the same paper used for your resume.

Format

The format of a cover letter is the same as any business or professional letter. It should contain the following elements:

- Letterhead with your name and contact information (matching your resume)
- Date
- The Inside Address (person’s name, title, firm/business/organization and address of the person to whom you are writing)
- Salutation
- Body of the Letter
- Closing and Signature
- Enclosure notation

Letterhead

Your letterhead on a cover letter should match the letterhead on your resume. Include your:

- Name (do not use nicknames; use a larger font size for your name);
- Address;
- Telephone Number (don’t list cell phone numbers unless it is your **ONLY** one; make sure that you have a professional message on your answering system); and
- E-Mail Address (avoid using addresses that are unprofessional or “cutesy”).

Angela R. Bradford

1865 Beautiful Drive; Los Angeles, California 90005
323-786-2387; abradford@mail.com

The Inside Address and Salutation

If the inside address and salutation of your letter are inaccurate, the body of your letter might never be read.

Identify the name and title of the person that should receive your resume. **Spell the name correctly**. Note whether Mr., Ms., Mrs., or another prefix such as “Dr.” is appropriate. If the addressee is an attorney that uses “Esq.” after his or her name, a prefix is not used. On the next line, list the person’s correct job title. On the following lines, list the firm/business/organization name and address.

The salutation should consist of “Dear,” the appropriate prefix, the person’s last name, and a colon. A prefix is always used here and “Esq.” is not. Always use a colon and not a comma after the salutation.

What if you don’t know the appropriate person’s name or title? Look again! Check every nook and cranny for this information. It is appropriate to call the firm or organization and ask to whom you should address the letter.

Rarely, you may need to use a generic title instead (for example, if you are applying to a blind ad and they have only told you a generic title and no phone number or email is available). The following titles are common: Hiring Partner, Recruiting Administrator, Hiring Committee, Human Resources Director, Office Administrator, Hiring Manager. One of these generic titles could stand in for a specific name/title ONLY if absolutely necessary. Choose the title carefully. If you use “Hiring Partner” for a non-profit organization that does not have partners, the organization will not be impressed.

Frederic Ferren, Esq.
Law Offices of Frederic Ferren
9111 Wilshire Blvd.
Beverly Hills, California 90103

Dear Mr. Ferren:

Closing and Signature

Choose a complimentary closing such as “Respectfully yours,” “Very truly yours,” “Sincerely yours,” or “Sincerely.” Leave at least three blank lines before typing your full name. Do not forget to add your actual signature before sending the letter.

Respectfully yours,



Angela R. Bradford

The Body of the Letter

The body of the letter is generally three, possibly four, paragraphs long. Introduce yourself and your interest in the position, explain why you should be hired, and express your desire for an interview.

The Introduction

The first paragraph of your letter introduces you and your basic reason for writing. It is a two to three sentence introduction to the letter that serves as your “hook” and tells the reader why they should continue reading. Explain *who* you are. Are you a law student, a new attorney, an experienced attorney, or someone seeking to enter a new field perhaps? Explain *what* you want by telling the reader what position you are applying for. Lastly, explain (very briefly) *why* you should be hired or *why* you are writing.

To explain why you are writing, you might (1) state something unique about you compared to the other applicants, such as relevant and unique travel experience; (2) refer to a particular skill that the employer needs and you have, such as criminal law experience with a small defense firm; or (3) state your special interest in the employer. A special interest in an employer could include the reason for your interest in the practice area that the employer specializes in or an explanation that you intend to move to the employer’s city. It could include any name-dropping that you have to do. If applicable, briefly explain that so-and-so suggested you write or that you are interested in the position based on so-and-so’s recommendation.

In your effort to “hook” the reader, creativity is good. However, do not confuse creativity with being odd or overly cute. If you appear strange or are trying *too* hard, the letter can be off-putting.

Discussing Your Qualifications

The second paragraph is where you should do your most persuasive work. By now you should know what the employer is looking for either because they said so in an advertisement or because your research told you. Your job in this paragraph is to explain how you have those qualities. You can’t just *tell* them you have them though, why should they believe you? Instead, you must *demonstrate* using supporting evidence. If they want a skilled writer, do not just write, “I am a skilled writer.” Instead, explain your writing experience. For example, “In my last law clerk position, I wrote over 10 legal memoranda and my supervisor incorporated those memoranda into appellate briefs.” If they need a critical thinker, this is the place to mention a key piece of analysis you did at your last job.

If you just provide a laundry list of your skills instead of connecting your experience to what the employer needs, the employer will not continue reading your letter. Instead, the employer can read a recitation of your experience on your resume.

If you are making a career change or the employer has many stated requirements, you may need another paragraph to demonstrate why you should be hired. However, this is the exception and is rarely necessary.

Closing Paragraph

The last paragraph of your cover letter should reaffirm your interest in the position, thank the employer for considering you and request an interview. You may state that you will contact them for an interview or that you look forward to meeting with them. If you state that you will contact them, make sure you follow through. In this final paragraph, you can mention any administrative details necessary. For example, if you are applying out of state and you are planning a trip to the area, mention it here so the employer knows they can interview you then.

Special Considerations

Applying to Judges

If you are applying to a judge, you need to use “Honorable,” “Judge,” and “Justice” correctly. “The Honorable” precedes the judge’s full name in the inside address.

In the salutation, do not use “The Honorable.” Here, you use “Judge” or “Justice” followed by the last name. Whether you use “Judge” or “Justice” depends upon the court. Generally, the title “Judge” applies to those on state trial courts, local courts such as municipal courts, state intermediate appellate courts, federal district courts, and federal appellate courts. However, California appellate courts use “Justice” and not “Judge.” Federal magistrates should be greeted by using “Dear Magistrate Judge.” The title “Justice” applies to those on the U.S. Supreme Court and state supreme courts. Use “Chief Judge” or “Chief Justice” when appropriate.

The Honorable Larry H. Saunders
California Court of Appeals, First Division
123 Court Street, Room 173
Sacramento, California, 96000

Dear Justice Saunders:

Mass Mailings

Generally, you should do an individual cover letter for each position to which you apply. Occasionally, this is impractical and a mass mailing is required. In this circumstance, make sure your cover letter is not so general that it is useless. You might still need three or four different letters. For example, one letter appropriate for large firms, one for small firms, one for criminal defense firms, and one for plaintiffs firms. Proof read your letters to make sure the mail merge functioned properly and that you changed all the necessary parts of the letter. Watch for details such as “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” “Judge,” and areas within the letter that must be changed such as mentions of particular cities you will be visiting.

Checklist

- My letterhead matches my resume
- I used a professional closing
- I noted “enclosure(s)” at the bottom of my letter
- My letter is tailored to the position I am seeking
- The information is accurate; I did not misrepresent anything
- I proofread the letter
- A trusted person (such as a CSO Team member) reviewed and proofread the letter
- I used good quality paper in white or off-white that matches my resume
- I used a laser printer
- I signed my name to the letter
- I prepared a type-written envelope
- I’ve included all of the requested documents along with my cover letter
- I am ready to discuss my cover letter in an interview

Sample Cover Letter: Law student with some legal experience

Angela R. Bradford

1865 Beautiful Drive; Los Angeles, California 90005
323-786-2387; abraford@mail.com

May 1, 2004

Frederic Ferren, Esq.
Law Offices of Frederic Ferren
9111 Wilshire Blvd.
Beverly Hills, California 90103

Dear Mr. Ferren:

I am a second-year student at Southwestern Law School and I am applying for the law clerk position you recently advertised with the law school. Based on my externship with the Workers Compensation Appeals Board, I intend to practice workers compensation defense after graduation.

During my externship, I reviewed workers compensation case files and worked closely with Deputy Commissioner Sherman. I was responsible for researching legal issues and writing memoranda to the Appeals Board. Additionally, I have the required skills to assist with administrative tasks at your firm. Prior to law school, I was an Office Assistant at a title insurance company where I was responsible for scheduling real estate closings, filing documents with the County Clerk, and contacting clients for requested information.

I have enclosed my resume and transcript for your review. I look forward to the opportunity to interview with your firm for the law clerk position. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully yours,

Angela R. Bradford

Enclosures

Sample cover letter: Law Student with no legal experience

Michael J. Chen

4999 Universal Street
University City, CA 90004

323-555-4343
mjchen@mail.com

April 10, 2004

Karen L. Cutler, Esq.
Cutler & Weinberg
1901 Avenue of the Stars
Penthouse Suite
Los Angeles, California 90067

Dear Ms. Cutler:

Professor Avery Christensen suggested that I contact you regarding the possibility of a summer clerkship with your firm. I am presently completing my first year of studies at Southwestern Law School. Professor Christensen is aware of my interest in International Law and advised me of your firm's present dealings with several Japanese computer companies.

My experience with international issues and my legal studies would make me an asset to your firm. At the University of Southern California, I majored in Asian Studies and participated in the Asian Students Association. I have traveled extensively throughout Japan, lived in Tokyo for one year during high school, and I speak Japanese fluently. In my first semester of law school, I received a high grade in my Legal Writing course.

I look forward to applying my skills in a law firm with an international practice. The opportunity to interview with you would be very much appreciated. I will call you within two weeks to inquire regarding an interview time. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to meeting you.

Very truly yours,

Michael J. Chen

Enclosure

Sample cover letter: Law Student applying for position requiring special certification

PETER M. PARNEL

1881 Middle St.
Irvine, California 90015

pparnel@swlaw.edu

(work) 714-188-1000
(home) 714-101-1880

April 10, 2004

Saul Fellow, Esq.
Chadelli, Smithe & Realt
1000 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 300
Los Angeles, California 90005

Dear Mr. Fellow:

I am completing my second year at Southwestern Law School and am very interested in the clerking position that you have listed with Southwestern's Career Services Office. I intend to practice criminal defense following law school, and I am eager to gain additional legal experience.

Having completed a course in Evidence, as well as one-half of my units toward graduation, I am qualified to be certified for court appearances, as you require. Additionally, I have legal writing and research experience applicable to your criminal defense practice. During my externship with the District Attorney's office last semester, I assisted the attorneys in all phases of trial preparation. I currently clerk part-time for a civil litigation firm. Through this clerkship, I have expanded my basic lawyering skills, including research and writing, and drafting complaints, interrogatories and motions. I am eager to apply my legal studies and practical experience to a position with your firm.

The opportunity to interview with you would be very much appreciated. Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,

Peter M. Parnell

Enclosure

Sample Cover Letter - Recent Bar Admittee/In-House Position

Amy S. Pearlstein

555 S. Plymouth Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90005

aspearl@earthlink.net
323-444-5555

November 10, 2003

John P. Jerome, Esq.
Looking Forward Insurance Company
5000 Westwood Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90025

Dear Mr. Jerome:

As a recent admittee to the California bar, I am very interested in your advertisement in the *Daily Journal* for a new attorney to join your in-house legal department. I have several years' experience in the corporate world, in addition to my Juris Doctor degree from Southwestern Law School.

Since August 2002, I have been employed as a law clerk with the insurance defense firm of Mason & Marsh. Under Mr. Mason's direct supervision, I have gained valuable experience in drafting pleadings, discovery motions and interrogatories. Mr. Mason has also given me opportunities for extensive client contact, including attendance at several depositions.

My business experience includes three years as a contracts administrator at Englewood Engineering Company before starting law school. As my enclosed resume indicates, I was promoted to Manager of the Contracts Administration section and held that position during three of my four years in the Evening Program at Southwestern. This experience allowed me to manage and supervise a 25-person department as well as to learn the details of contract negotiations and compliance.

The opportunity to meet with you for an employment interview would be very much appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you and learning more about your in-house position. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Very truly yours,

Amy S. Pearlstein

Enclosure

Sample Cover Letter - SCALE Student Requesting Externship

Belinda Anne Carson

445 Vista Street
Los Angeles, California 90065

bcarson133@hotmail.com
323-500-8780

September 1, 2003

Mr. Warren Finkelstein
Attorney At Law
Barth, Jacobs, Williams & Finkelstein
4200 Sunset Boulevard
Beverly Hills, California 90212

Dear Mr. Finkelstein:

I am completing my final year of the two-year Juris Doctor SCALE program at Southwestern Law School. As part of this program, I am seeking an externship with your firm because I intend to specialize in family law and Barth, Jacobs, Williams & Finkelstein is well respected in Los Angeles as one of the leaders in this area.

SCALE is a fully-accredited program with a conceptual approach to legal education that emphasizes practical training in basic lawyering skills, such as oral and written communication, case planning, interviewing, counseling, and negotiating. The SCALE program is a very demanding and ambitious undertaking, and my success in SCALE reflects my enthusiasm and capacity for the practice of law. The final phase of the SCALE program includes an opportunity to supplement theoretical skills with an eight-week unpaid externship for a minimum of 40 hours per week with a professional host. The host assumes the responsibility of providing the student extern with challenging tasks, practical experience, and constructive criticism of the extern's lawyering skills.

Enclosed is my resume for your review. I would very much appreciate an interview with you for an externship, and I will telephone your office on Friday, September 8, to inquire regarding a convenient time to meet with you. If you wish to contact me earlier, I may be reached at the telephone number or email address listed above. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely yours,

Belinda Ann Carlson

Enclosure

Sample Cover Letter – Moving Outside of Los Angeles Area

Larry S. Stevens

3789 Addy Street
Los Angeles, California 90039
323-665-9293
stevenslarry@mail.com

April 23, 2004

Lucille D. Devero, Esq.
Devero & Associates
788 LaSalle St., 28th Fl.
Indianapolis, Indiana 60012

Dear Ms. Devero:

I will be graduating from Southwestern Law School this May. Following my graduation, I intend to move to Indianapolis in order to be near my immediate family. I am seeking an associate position in a family law practice and am impressed with the reputation of your firm in the Indianapolis area.

During law school I have gained practical experience through moot court, an externship with a California Superior Court judge, and a law clerk position with the Law Offices of Roland Marves, who practices family law exclusively. During my externship with Judge Manoukian, I researched and reviewed several case files including a child custody dispute and a community property issue. My work at the Law Offices of Roland Marves enabled me to polish my writing skills by drafting an appellate brief section on whether a former spouse was entitled to further spousal support. All of these experiences would be useful in a position at your firm.

I am very interested in meeting with you and will be visiting my family in Indianapolis during the week of May 18th. I will call prior to my trip to discuss an interview with your firm. Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,

Larry S. Stevens

Enclosure

Sample Cover Letter – Name-Dropping, Discussing Improved Grades

Lucia Arnez

231 Colorado Blvd.
Pasadena, California 90031

626-258-8799
larnez86@yahoo.com

April 14, 2003

Ms. Julie K. Barnes
Recruiting Coordinator
James, Howard, and West LLP
1400 Main St., 23rd Floor
Los Angeles, California 90071

Dear Ms. Barnes:

I am a second year student at Southwestern Law School interested in the summer law clerk position recently advertised by your firm on symplicity.com. Additionally, Ms. Erma Weber, an acquaintance of Mr. Matthew Williams at your firm, suggested that I contact you regarding the position.

I possess the writing and analytical abilities your firm is seeking. Following my first year of law school, I clerked for Mr. Alan Peterson, a sole practitioner of civil litigation. I drafted complaints, answers, discovery requests, and correspondence in this position. I also assisted his paralegal in creating a new computer filing system for the firm's litigation files. While my grade point average does not place me in the top of my class, my grades have improved during my second year of law school. In fact, I received a CALI award last semester for the highest grade in Evidence.

I have enclosed my resume and transcript for your review. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Very truly yours,

Lucia Arnez

cc: Matthew Williams, Esq.

Enclosures