

# Cover Letters – Best Practice Tips from a Recruiter

## Good Cover Letters

- Summarize who a candidate is, why they are applying, and why an employer should hire them.
- Showcase the strength of a candidate's writing abilities and attention to detail.
- Demonstrate a candidate's knowledge of the employer.
- Build a logical, possibly passionate, case for why the candidate is a strong fit for the employer.

## General Formatting

- Length: Single-spaced, one page, even for second career students; proofread-don't repeat words and phrases.
- Cover letters are meant to introduce a candidate's resume. There should be symmetry between the cover letter and resume including font type and size; use of a header; and contact information.
- Cover letters are formal. Include a: header; date; address block of the recipient; salutation; and closing.
- Cover letters should be drafted using word processing software. Cutting/pasting from drafts made in email, Notepad, or other informal communication software leads to sloppy formatting.
- Always submit PDFs; turn off track changes (solved by submitting a PDF).

## Heading

- Use full legal names; if a nickname is preferred, indicate it in quotes or a parenthetical.
- Write out a full address; certain applicant tracking systems require it. A permanent address can be used to highlight a geographic connection to an area.
- Voicemail and email addresses should be professional. Make sure voicemail inbox isn't full!

## First Paragraph

- The first paragraph should be enough for the reader to know who is applying to what and why.
- State the specific position that the candidate is applying to. Include office(s) of interest.
- Students should include their class level or anticipated graduation date.
- Note why a candidate is interested in the position including a particular practice interest, geographic tie, or prior connection to the employer.

## Middle Paragraphs

- A single middle paragraph may suffice for junior candidates. Experienced candidates may need two.
- The middle paragraph(s) should illustrate the candidate's interest in the position. This can include information specific to the employer, practice area, or nature of the work. It's the "make them feel special" paragraph—make it unique to the employer. Employers can spot generic language a mile away.
- Avoid directly reciting what is listed on the resume. Instead, use the space to elaborate on experiences or traits that tie into the position.
- Second career candidates should focus on their interest in law. To the extent that a first career is mentioned, it should be to highlight transferable skills rather than on industry specific details.
- Even as a 1L, try to at least know if you're interested in transactional or litigation practice.
- A good phrase to use: "I distinguished myself by..."

## Closing Paragraph

- The last paragraph ties the letter together and should be quite short. Thank the reader for their time; express a hope to speak further; don't include contact information at the end of the letter.

## Do Not Include

- Specific references and statements like "References available upon request". This is assumed to be true.
- Headshots, social media addresses, or scannable codes to connect on social media.
- Leave out overused words: "honed" "strengthened" "exposed to" "I had the opportunity to".

# PERSONAL/DIVERSITY STATEMENTS – BEST PRACTICE TIPS FROM A RECRUITER

## General Formatting

- Length: Always follow employer or program directions on length. 500 words is a common cut off.
- Personal Statements are part of a suite of application materials. There should be symmetry between it and other documents including: font type and size; use of a header; and contact information.
- Personal statements should be drafted using word processing software. Cutting/pasting from drafts made in email, Notepad, or other informal communication software leads to sloppy formatting.

## Tone

- Personal statements are meant by their nature to address things beyond purely professional topics. As a result, they can have a less formal tone than cover letters and they can evoke emotion.
- Despite their personal nature, it is still important to maintain proper grammatical construction and to have an orderly flow of thoughts.
- If a candidate has experienced adversity, it is fine to discuss it. However, not all statements need to include adversity or hardship.
- Adversity is not a prerequisite to being diverse. Candidates who have not experienced substantial adversity can assess their positive experiences, support received, unique position, and the value they bring to an organization.

## Drafting Tips

- Speak for yourself, not for an entire group of people. No group is monolithic and those who are reading personal statements want to learn about your particular experiences and values.
- Make the statement about you, not others in your family or circle. It may be necessary to include them for context, but that space should be limited. You should be the main character.
- It is often helpful to begin with an anecdote or background summary. For example:
  - The first time I realized that I was different from most of the kids in my neighborhood was....
  - Growing up as the child of immigrants has meant that I have seen....
  - I did not know how much my mother sacrificed for me until...
- A genuine statement typically requires being vulnerable or addressing tough things. Remember, needing to share some details does not mean that you must share ALL details and emotions:
  - I learned to take care of myself and a household before I was in grade school because my parents suffered from addiction. vs. detailing specific episodes or emotions that may still be hard to discuss.
- Part of a personal statement includes pointing out how your experiences have shaped you.
- If you have a hard time identifying your strengths, ask somebody you trust (a professor is fine!) what they would tell other people about you.

## Remember Your Audience

- Great personal statements tie together the author's past, present, and future. Your goals in law do not have to stem from your past experiences, but you should articulate why you are pursuing law.
- Your past may shape you, but so do your professional aspirations. Your future employer wants to hear about your plans for your career.
- Employers with diversity initiatives appreciate hearing how candidates think they can contribute to their office and field.
- Be specific in what you bring. It is too generic to just say that the industry needs more of a part of a group. Take the extra step of explaining why you are a strong choice.

# RESUMES – BEST PRACTICE TIPS FROM A RECRUITER

## General Formatting

- Length: Legal resumes should be a single page, even for second career students
- Font: Use traditional fonts (Ex. Times New Roman; Arial) and not smaller than 11 pt.
- Margins: Margins should be at least .5”
- Chronology: Use reverse chronology in all sections
- Avoid overuse of embellishments like italics, underlining, and boldface
- No typos! Avoid spelling and grammatical errors. Spell check: “trial” vs. “trail”
- Do not use personal pronouns. Use “Drafted contracts” not “I drafted contracts”

## Heading

- Use full legal names; if a nickname is preferred, indicate it in quotes or a parenthetical
- Use a boldface font slightly larger than the rest of the document
- Write out a full address; certain applicant tracking systems require it. A permanent address can be used to highlight a geographic connection to an area
- Include both a phone number and email address. Voicemail and email addresses should be professional

## Education Section

- Education should be listed first for students
- GPA should be listed if it is 3.0 or higher; include Honors and Activities, in that order
- Do not include: LSAT score, non-leadership titles (ex. “Member”), or classes that are on transcripts

## Experience Section

- Paragraph form should be used for those with considerable experience
- Bullet points are permissible if they are brief, without each being its own paragraph
- Include relevant paid and unpaid professional experiences
- Begin each sentence with an action word that emphasizes transferable skills. Ex. Drafted; Researched; Negotiated; Analyzed; Summarized
- Do not exaggerate; avoid adjectives, adverbs, and self-evaluation
- Do not include “from that I learned” descriptions. That belongs in a cover letter

## Additional Information

- Include accurate descriptions of language skills, volunteer activities, or interests
- Interests should be specific, not general. The point is to provide a conversation starter
- Everything included should be something that you should be able to speak about deeply

## Know Your Audience

- The audience for legal resumes is a busy attorney or recruiter. Resume should be easy to read
- Avoid multiple text boxes; balance black and white space. Cluttered resumes don’t get read
- Be sensitive to the type of employer who is reading the application; highlight experience accordingly
- Attorneys value effective communication and writing skills. Resumes are an indication of those skills
- A resume is part of a suite of documents. Consistency in format, font, and headers between those documents shows attention to detail and is noticed by both recruiters and attorneys

## Do Not Include

- “References available upon request”. This is assumed to be true
- Professional Summaries or Job Objectives
- Pre-college education, work, or volunteer activities with a few exceptions