

BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW  
OFFICE OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC SERVICE

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COVER LETTER HANDBOOK  
2016 - 2017

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A cover letter is an opportunity to share your unique credentials and strong writing skills with an employer. A cover letter alone probably will not get you an interview, but its strength can certainly get your resume read. Therefore, it is worth dedicating time and effort to writing an outstanding cover letter specific to each position you seek. Writing a cover letter can often be a source of frustration and anxiety for job seekers in that they are remarkably simple in their formula but maddeningly difficult in their execution. This Guide will help get you started.

### **The Basics**

A cover letter should be no longer than one page (there are limited exceptions to this; for example, if you are applying for a public interest position and have extensive experience in the field). Like all legal writing, a cover letter should be well-written (i.e., simply, concisely, and in the active voice) and error-free. Although you may develop a “master” cover letter to use as a starting point, each letter should be tailored to the specific employer to whom you are writing and should convey the relevant skills and experience you would bring to that employer. Keep in mind that the theme of your cover letter should be what you can do for the employer, not what the employer can do for you.

### **Getting Started**

When sitting down to create a cover letter, start by NOT writing anything. Before you write, you need to spend time developing your message. You should think hard about your skills, abilities, and interests and how they might complement a prospective employer’s needs. This requires you to know as much as possible about the employer before you begin writing the letter. Following the three simple steps outlined below can help you to craft your message.

#### **Step 1- Make a list of what you have to offer.**

Come up with several reasons why an employer should want to hire you. The reasons can include: (1) *valuable skills and experience*, e.g., you are a native speaker of Spanish, you have become familiar with the rules and regulations of lending through a prior job, and your research and writing skills have earned you a position on law review, (2) *relevant interests*, e.g., you are interested in intellectual property, land use or structured finance and these interests dovetail with the employer’s practice, or your life experience as a member of the Native American community gives you the cultural sensitivity necessary to pursue a fellowship in the same community, and (3) *positive personal qualities*, e.g., you are hardworking, capable of balancing many tasks, and have excellent communication skills.

#### **Step 2- Review the job description and consider what the employer is looking for.**

In addition to thinking about your qualifications, it is also important to understand the employer’s potential needs and expectations. If you are responding to a job posting, make sure to review it closely, paying particular attention to the required qualifications. If you are applying for an unposted position, be sure to look at the employer’s “hiring criteria” (if available) and ask yourself the following questions: 1) on which practice areas does this employer focus; 2) what is the employer’s client or service base; and 3) if you were this particular employer, what would you look for in an employee? At a minimum, an internet search about the employer and a thorough review of its website is critical to this inquiry. The Office of Career Development and Public Service has many other useful resources about potential employers. You may also want to reach out to former BU Law students who worked for that employer or other personal contacts who may be able to provide relevant information.

### **Step 3- Match your background and qualifications to the employer’s needs and sell yourself using concrete examples.**

Once you have completed the first two steps, pair your skills, experience and interests to the needs of the employer. If at first you do not seem to have any relevant experience, don’t give up. Instead, think creatively about how your past experience might have prepared you for the position for which you are applying. For each of the selling points you have chosen about yourself, think of some concrete examples to demonstrate the point. Too often cover letters just list qualities like: “I am hard working and detail-oriented” or “I have had significant exposure to international business.” These conclusory statements are not enough. You want to show through examples, not just tell (see below).

#### **The Structure**

In general, your cover letter should be organized as follows:

- Introductory paragraph – Talk about who you are and why you are writing. You may also discuss geographic ties and any professional connections you have to the reader. Include a “teaser” about your strengths as a candidate to keep the reader interested.
- Middle paragraph(s) – Argue your case. Using strong topic sentences and good examples, convey your relevant skills and experience.
- Closing paragraph – Reiterate your interest, offer to send additional materials, and close by thanking the reader for his/her time and consideration.

#### **The Introductory Paragraph - Who You Are**

Your primary objective is to make a good first impression so that the person reviewing the letter will read on. Try to capture who you are in a phrase or two that will enable the reader to readily remember you. For a second-year law student the first sentence might be, “I am a second-year law student at Boston University School of Law School and am writing to apply for a summer associate position at your firm.” You should also mention any contact or networking connection that you may have with the reader. For example, you may include in your letter something like, “Micah Smith suggested I contact you.” Further, you may want to address any geographical questions, such as why you want to be in California when your résumé only shows experience in the Boston area. Perhaps you could say, “I am a native of Los Angeles and am committed to practicing law in Southern California upon graduation.”

You may also include a sentence explaining why you are interested in this particular employer (as opposed to others) or a “teaser” about why you are such a great candidate to keep the employer reading. For example, “After working as an entrepreneur before law school, I would be well-suited to work with Cooley’s start-up client base” or “Because I have five years of experience working with the Latino immigrant population, I would be able to make an immediate impact at your organization.”

Applicants are often tempted to explain difficult issues or quirky aspects of their résumé in the first paragraph. Generally, you should resist the temptation. Also, avoid talking about potentially controversial issues that raise more questions. For example, don’t say “After six years raising a family...” or “Having recovered from a medical condition that...” or even “After completing my doctorate in an unrelated discipline...” You may have an obvious issue on your résumé that

needs explaining but leave that for later in the cover letter, after you have had a chance to interest the employer in you as a candidate.

### **The Middle Paragraph(s) - Your Pitch**

The middle section of your letter can be one paragraph or it can be three, depending on how you organize the material and how much you have to say. As noted above, in general, as with your resume, it is best to keep a cover letter to one page. As you are writing, think about the basic tenets of legal writing; you should write succinctly and in an active voice and back up all assertions.

This is where all the initial work you did becomes helpful. Make clear what you can offer and why the employer should consider you. This can include information about the firm and its practice areas and why you would be a good fit. A common cover letter mistake is to simply reiterate the content of your résumé. If you do this, you lose a prime opportunity to market yourself because employers will review your résumé and learn nothing new from your cover letter. When you refer to items covered by your résumé, it should be to emphasize items that are not obvious or to add relevant information that will make the résumé items more meaningful. For example:

Instead of: “I went on a six month exchange to Italy to improve my Italian.”

Write: “During an exchange program to Italy, I participated in an internship where all business was conducted in Italian and which required me to negotiate with Italian service providers. Given this experience and my continued study of the language, I am confident enough in my spoken Italian to conduct the firm’s business in Italian.”

Instead of: “I worked at General Mills first as a management trainee, then as an Assistant Brand manager, and finally as a Brand Manager where I had significant responsibility.”

Write: “During my time at General Mills, I received two major promotions in three years, making me the only member of my entering group of management trainees to rise to Brand Manager. As a Brand Manager, I developed strong relationships within the distributor network enabling me to exceed my targets. I am confident I will be able to effectively communicate with your corporate clients as a result of the client service skills I learned at General Mills.”

Another common mistake in this section of the cover letter is that candidates are reluctant to sell themselves. You are a lawyer – argue your case! It may be insecurity or uncertainty about what the employer seeks, but the result is the same - a few bland words that could be applied to any candidate and do nothing to describe what is unique and exciting about you. If you fear this applies to you, the following suggestions may help:

- First, go back to your list about what you have to offer (see Step 1 above) and pick at least three or four things that correspond with the employer’s needs. The items in this list will form the basis of the middle section of your letter.
- Don’t just stick in stronger adjectives to strengthen the letter. Choose adjectives that properly reflect what you are trying to communicate or avoid them altogether.

- Use examples. Too often candidates simply make broad assertions that can easily be dismissed as puffery such as: “I am fascinated by this practice.” or “I am very committed to this practice area.” Again, don’t just tell them, show them. If you are talking about how much you enjoy real estate practice, talk about the course you took on the topic, your involvement in the bar section in that practice area, or your participation in a deal that was very challenging or satisfying.
- The classic rule is not to reiterate what is on your résumé, and this is true but . . . while you do not want to repeat what they can read elsewhere, your cover letter is where you can bring your résumé to life and put your accomplishments in context. For example, your résumé may show that you worked at a new non-profit that you helped to establish, but it may not show that you worked with a variety of community groups and that the impact of the effort resulted in a 25% decrease in the cases filed in that housing court district.
- When you are done with a draft, put it down for a bit. Then, come back to the letter and ask yourself if you would hire this person. Better yet, ask a friend who is not afraid to be honest if they would hire this person. If the answer is “no” you need to try again.

### **The Closing Paragraph - Taking Care of Business**

This is generally the easiest paragraph to write. At its simplest, it can contain a brief reiteration of your interest, an offer to send additional materials (you do not need to say that your resume or other materials are attached), and a thank you for the employer’s time and consideration. You also may want to mention plans to visit the area where the employer is located and when you will be contacting the employer in the future.

Finally, close on an upbeat note. Be positive and don’t be afraid to express your interest and enthusiasm. For example, you may end your letter as follows: “I am eager for the opportunity to make a contribution to Firm X’s intellectual property practice and would appreciate the opportunity to interview with you while I am in Southern California.”

### **Last, But Not Least – Edit and Proofread!**

Your cover letter is a sample of your work product. It showcases your ability to communicate clearly, concisely, and effectively. If your cover letter is poorly organized, contains grammatical errors, or inaccurate information about the employer, the employer may question your qualifications. Take the time to make the substance and appearance of your cover letter proof of your unique qualifications (and enthusiasm) for the opportunity you seek.

**\*\*\*On the following pages you will find sample cover letter formats and sample letters (and accompanying job descriptions) for a variety of different opportunities. Although these letters are a good starting point, you should strive to make your individual cover letters distinctive and specific to each position. Many of the employers to whom you will apply will also be receiving applications from other BU Law students. Therefore it is particularly important to tailor your cover letters to each specific employer, highlighting your own personal experiences, skills, and writing style, and avoid duplicating those submitted by your classmates.**

## Sample Formats

(use the same letterhead as your resume)

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### **Block Format (everything left justified)**

Date

Name (judges: The Honorable First Last; all other attorneys: First Last, Esq.)

Title

Name of Law Firm, Organization or Agency, Court

Address

Address

Dear Mr. [Ms. or Justice or Judge] Last Name: *(always use a colon and never include first name here)*

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 3

Very truly yours, OR Sincerely,

*4 lines for signature if snail mailed (2 if pdf)*

Your typed name

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### **Semi-Block Format (paragraphs indented, date and closing start from 4 inch tab)**

Date

Name (judges: The Honorable First Last; all other attorneys: First Last, Esq.)

Title

Name of Law Firm, Organization or Agency, Court

Address

Address

Dear Mr. [Ms. or Justice or Judge] Last Name: *(always use a colon and never include first name here)*

Paragraph 1 (first line indented 5 spaces)

Paragraph 2 (first line indented 5 spaces)

Paragraph 3 (first line indented 5 spaces)

Very truly yours, OR Sincerely,

*4 lines for signature if snail mailed (2 if pdf)*

Your typed name

## Sample Judicial Internship Cover Letter

**Position:**  
1L Judicial Internship

**Employer Type:**  
Judge

**Job Description and  
required Qualifications:**

Interns will analyze motions, write memoranda, draft opinions, brief staff on substantive and procedural issues, and assist the Judge with trial preparations. Interns may also observe courtroom proceedings. Applicants should have excellent academic credentials, strong legal research skills, and the ability to write clearly and concisely.

**Lorelai Gilmore**

lgilmore@bu.edu • (222) 345-6789

*School Address:* 5 Commonwealth Avenue, Apt. B • Brighton, MA 02135

*Home Address:* 7 Meadow Road • Stars Hollow, CT 06794

December 1, 2015

The Honorable James T. Kelly  
U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut  
Abraham Ribicoff Federal Building  
United States Courthouse  
450 Main Street - Room 228  
Hartford, CT 06103

Dear Judge Kelly:

I am a first-year student at Boston University School of Law, and am writing to apply for an internship in your chambers for summer 2016. As a Stars Hollow, CT native and graduate of Yale University, I am excited about the opportunity to return home for the summer.

Through my academic and journalistic pursuits, I gained the skills necessary to make a valuable contribution to your chambers. I developed my research and writing skills as an English major and reporter for the Features section of the *Yale Daily News*. I wrote two articles per week and won an award from the Columbia Scholastic Press Association for my article on the Life and Death Brigade. I became Editor in Chief in my junior year, which allowed me to edit student articles and develop a keen attention to detail. Outside Yale, I interned at the *Stamford Eagle Gazette*. I conducted background research on economic and policy issues, and became adept at clearly explaining complex issues while presenting my findings to reporters. I am now developing my legal research and writing skills in BU Law's First-Year Writing Program.

I am excited about the prospect of putting my research, writing, and communication skills to use in your chambers this summer. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview with you. I will be home in Connecticut from December 22 to January 3, but am available at your convenience. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lorelai Gilmore

**Remember, this is just a sample. Your individual cover letters should be distinctive and specific to each position.**



**Sample Public Interest Organization Cover Letter**

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**Position:**  
1L Internship

**Employer Type:**  
Non-Profit Legal Services  
Provider

**Required Qualifications:**  
Interest in working in a non-profit, legal service setting; Interest in working with people in crisis, specifically domestic violence victims; Strong verbal and written communication skills and the ability to deal with the public in a professional manner in both person and on the telephone; Ability to pay close attention to details; and Experience in a multicultural environment.

Ellen Jameson  
1295 Commonwealth Ave., Apt. 3, Boston MA 02134  
617-332-5186 · Jameson@bu.edu

January 19, 2016

Pat Kiernan  
Executive Director  
Massachusetts Legal Services  
195 Boylston St.  
Boston, MA 02155

Dear Ms. Kiernan:

I am a first-year law student at Boston University School of Law and write to apply for a summer internship with Massachusetts Legal Services. I have experience working with low-income communities in crisis, including victims of domestic violence, as well as strong verbal and written communication skills. I am eager to bring my background and legal skills to an internship at your organization.

Prior to law school I gained experience working with communities in crisis as an AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps) volunteer. As an Assistant Team Leader, I managed a team of volunteers in service projects that included providing assistance to individuals recovering from natural disasters in Texas as well as providing meals to low-income communities in Louisiana. In each of these roles, I interacted with diverse individuals experiencing serious crises, either as a result of their homes being destroyed by events such as tornados or because of pervasive poverty. This position also required me to use my communication and interpersonal skills to effectively manage volunteers.

While in law school, I have had the opportunity to conduct client intakes for supervising attorneys at an area women's shelter where many of the clients are experiencing domestic violence. Here I have utilized my legal knowledge to help women in crisis obtain shelter and other supports. In addition, as a law student I have developed the research and writing skills I gained as an undergraduate political science major through my first year law school research and writing program.

I am very interested in a summer internship position with your organization and am confident that the combination of my background and experience will make me an effective addition to your team. Please let me know if I can provide you with any additional information.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ellen Jameson

**Remember, this is just a sample. Your individual cover letters should be distinctive and specific to each position.**

JENNIFER JONES

1 Beacon Street, Apt. 1, Boston, MA 02215 · 617-555-5555 · jjones@bu.edu

**Position:**

2L Law Clerk

**Employer Type:**

Government Agency

**Required Qualifications:**

Applicants should possess excellent research and writing skills, a solid academic record, the maturity to work with a team, strong work ethic, sense of initiative, and commitment to environmental causes.

December 1, 2015

Susan Shinkman  
Director  
Office of Water Enforcement  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.  
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Ms. Shinkman:

I am a second-year student at Boston University School of Law and am interested in a law clerk position with the Office of Water Enforcement this summer. I have strong academic credentials and research and writing skills and a demonstrated commitment to the area of environmental protection. I would like to dedicate my legal career to preserving the integrity of watersheds and safe drinking water and am very excited about the possibility of working for your office.

My research and writing skills coupled with my passion for environmental protection would make me an effective law clerk in your office. My legal research for Professor Taylor focusing on the Pennsylvania fracking case has reinforced for me the urgent need for regulation and policy change to prevent devastation to our municipal wells. While conducting research for Professor Taylor's book "Water Amid the Fracking," I became familiar with many of the federal laws relevant to the Office of Water Enforcement's Work including the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Clean Water Act. I have also been exposed to broader climate issues through my volunteer work at the Massachusetts Water Coalition where I demonstrated initiative in creating an online portal for the public to access state and federal regulations regarding the local water supply.

In addition to these skills, I also have outside professional experience from my work as an analyst with National Bank. This position required the ability to work in a fast-paced, competitive environment while reaching collaborative goals as a member of the public accounting team. I look forward to bringing these well-honed professional skills to the Office of Water Enforcement this summer.

I am work-study eligible and have also applied for independent funding. I look forward to discussing the position in person. Thank you in advance for your consideration of my candidacy.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Jones

**Remember, this is just a sample. Your individual cover letters should be distinctive and specific to each position.**

**Position:**  
2L Summer Associate

**Employer Type:**  
Large Law Firm

**Hiring Criteria:**  
Strong academic record;  
law review/journal  
membership preferred;  
intelligent, enthusiastic,  
confident, and results-  
oriented team players with  
demonstrated  
interpersonal and  
communication skills.

**Aaron Paik**  
600 Commonwealth Avenue  
Boston, MA 02215  
(617) 555-1212 • apaik@bu.edu

July 10, 2016

Ms. Jennifer Stewart  
Director of Legal Recruitment  
Jones, Smith & Taylor  
200 Washington Street  
Boston, MA 02210

Dear Ms. Stewart:

I am a second-year law student at Boston University School of Law, and I am writing to apply for a summer associate position with Jones, Smith & Taylor. As a Boston native with an interest in transactional law, I am particularly interested in the corporate practice of your firm's Boston office. My academic achievements, strong interpersonal and communication skills, and collaborative nature make me an ideal candidate for this position.

During my first year at BU Law, I developed a solid academic foundation that will serve me well as a summer associate. I particularly enjoyed and excelled in contracts, property and legal research and writing. I also learned valuable client counseling and negotiation skills in BU Law's one-week intensive lawyering lab. This summer, I was able to draw upon my academic experience and further develop my legal research and writing skills as a judicial intern for the Massachusetts Superior Court. I plan to continue to strengthen these skills and my core legal knowledge through my second year coursework, including corporations, tax and contract drafting, as well as my work on the *Boston University Law Review* and as a Writing Fellow in the BU Law First Year Legal Research and Writing Program.

In addition to a solid academic base, I have strong interpersonal and communication skills and enjoy working collaboratively with others in a stimulating environment. Prior to law school, I worked as a project coordinator for a Boston-based marketing firm. In this role, I worked closely with a team of professionals to develop individualized marketing and communications plans for a variety of corporate clients. I developed many skills, including the ability to communicate clearly and effectively in a business setting, and experienced first-hand the satisfaction that comes from working diligently with your colleagues toward a common goal. This was particularly evident when we successfully developed and pitched an extensive marketing campaign for a new client on an accelerated schedule.

I would be pleased to have the opportunity to discuss my background and skills with you in further detail. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Aaron Paik

**Remember, this is just a sample. Your individual cover letters should be distinctive and specific to each position.**

**Amy Chen**

(617) 555-7891 • mchen@bu.edu

Local Address: 17 Hillview Road, Apt 8, Watertown, MA 12345

Permanent Address: 38 Main Street, Madison, WI 54627

**Position:**

1L Summer Associate

**Employer Type:**

Small-Midsize Law Firm

**Required Qualifications:**

The ideal candidate should have strong geographic ties, be self-motivated, with strong writing and communication skills and great attention to detail.

April 7, 2016

Robert Smith, Esq.  
Smith, Bradley & Carter  
Three Center Plaza, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Chicago, IL 12345

Dear Mr. Smith:

I am a first-year student at Boston University School of Law, and I am writing to express my interest in a summer associate position with Smith, Bradley & Carter. I am originally from Wisconsin with an undergraduate degree from a Minnesota college. I am particularly interested in your firm because of its ideal Midwest location, sophisticated work and client-centered focus.

My law school training thus far has prepared me well to be a summer associate. In particular, I have developed strong legal research and writing abilities and sharp analytical skills as a student in BU Law's rigorous legal research and writing program. I also learned valuable negotiation and client counseling skills through my work in the first-year lawyering lab and as a student volunteer with the Volunteer Lawyer's Project Attorney-For-The-Day Program in Suffolk County Housing Court.

In addition to my academic work, I developed valuable skills and experience in the positions I held prior to law school. As a Corporate Finance Analyst at Bankgroup, I learned the importance of paying close attention to detail while analyzing financial plans, forecasts and results and maintaining an extensive database of information. These skills were also essential to my work as a marketing researcher at Adams, West and Reed LLP, where I developed and helped implement a new marketing strategy for the firm. Through this work and my prior employment experiences at financial institutions, I learned how to work both independently and as part of a team while gaining a deeper understanding of my employers' business and legal needs. I am excited to put this knowledge and my other skills to use as a summer associate at your firm.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss further the possibility of a summer associate position at your firm. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Amy Chen

**Remember, this is just a sample. Your individual cover letters should be distinctive and specific to each position.**

**Position:**  
In-House Counsel

**Employer Type:**  
Corporation

**Required Qualifications:**  
Must be admitted to practice in MA after sitting for the July 2016 bar. Financial services experience preferred. Strong writing, contract negotiation and organizational skills required. Should have good interpersonal skills and ability to interact with members of senior management as well as adaptability and willingness to take on a wide variety of new tasks. Position will be based in Boston, MA.

**CORBIN D. BERNSEN**

1172 Commonwealth Ave #1 • Allston, MA 02134  
617.555.4440 • cbernsen@bu.edu

September 30, 2015

Douglas Friselle, Esq.  
Deputy General Counsel  
Hyatt Corporation  
One Lincoln Street  
Boston, MA 02111

Dear Mr. Friselle:

I am a third-year student at Boston University School of Law, and I am applying for the legal counsel position in Hyatt's Boston office. My experience working on transactional matters and strong academic performance make me an excellent fit for this position.

This summer I gained experience in a transactional legal practice as a summer associate at McKenzie Brackman LLP. In that role, I drafted financing documents, conducted due diligence for an acquisition by a Fortune 100 company, and developed internal training materials on open-source licensing. I also drafted legal memoranda on issues including the potential conflict of interest in a corporate counsel's simultaneous representation of a parent and subsidiary, and the duties of a Board of Directors in a change of control context. In law school, I pursued my interest in transactional law by taking courses such as Contract Drafting, Secured Transactions, and Corporate Finance. I received Dean's Awards for attaining the highest grade of any student in Financial Reporting for Lawyers and Mergers and Acquisitions.

In addition to the skills I developed at McKenzie Brackman and BU Law, I have valuable experience working with startups and operating my own computer programming business prior to and during law school. Building web applications for small business owners and entrepreneurs has exposed me to a range of business issues, helped me hone a keen attention to detail, and taught me how to work under tight time and budget constraints to meet the needs of my clients.

I value building relationships and watching businesses grow, and am excited about the prospect of joining Hyatt Corporation. My experiences would make me a valuable member of your legal team, and I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my candidacy with you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Corbin Bernsen

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