

The Art of the Cover Letter

by [Steve Marchese](#) on September 3, 2009

Despite all of the technical changes to the legal job searching process, a well-written cover letter remains an essential component of any job application. Granted, you may be able to submit numerous resumes electronically via websites or e-mail, but if you neglect to include a cover letter, you will miss out on your best chance to make the strongest case for why you are the best fit for the position.

The purpose of a cover letter is to convince someone to talk to you about the position. It will not get you the job, but it will get you through the door.

A solid cover letter starts with carefully evaluating what the potential employer is seeking, what skills and experience you possess, and why you are interested in the position. Here are some questions to consider:

- What are the most persuasive reasons why the employer would want to invite you to an interview?
- Are there aspects of your background that should be emphasized (or de-emphasized)?
- How would this position fit with your overall career goals?
- Are there any special considerations worth mentioning? (e.g., personal connections, location, etc.)

First paragraph

This should be brief—three or four sentences max. It should answer the following: who are you, what are you applying for, and why. If you have a personal connection, consider including it somewhere in the first couple of sentences. (For example, if the reader's close colleague suggested you apply, you may want to mention his or her name.)

Second (or middle) paragraph

This should discuss your background in light of the position's requirements. Here is where you build the case for your candidacy. *Selectively* discuss items on your resume. Highlight relevant experience and transferable skills. Focus on showing by example how you would be a good match, as opposed to telling. Like any good brief, a good cover letter should lead the reader through your case—which is that you should be interviewed.

Third (or final) paragraph

This is where you connect everything in the preceding paragraph (or two, perhaps) to make your pitch why you are the one to interview. It is also where you mention any other relevant details—for example, if you will be in their location and when. Quickly conclude with something

pleasant, but professional—“Please let me know if you need additional information,” “Thanks for your attention,” etc.

Keep it to one page

Finally, a word about length—it is preferable to have a one page cover letter under most circumstances. (This is particularly true for newer lawyers and law students.) Most of the time, the reader has a chance to look over one page and may not see succeeding pages. If you have more experience and/or are looking to make a job sector switch, two pages might be fine. Even in that case, I suggest trying to edit down to the essentials.

Good luck and get drafting!