

20 Covering letters

A CV needs a covering letter. Email can change the formatting, so it is often better to use Word and send your letter as an attachment. Your covering letter should show your enthusiasm for the role, tell employers why their job interests you and what you can offer. You can also raise issues such as the need for adjustments if you have a disability. A compelling and well-written cover letter can make you stand out from other applicants so it is worth making the effort to get it right.

Format

If possible, write to a named person. If you don't have a name, try to find one by phoning the firm and make sure you get the details (name, title and job title) right. Include 3-4 reasonably short paragraphs on a single A4 sheet. Use standard business layout with your address top right and the name and address of the recipient at the left margin below. The date goes below that. Insert the job reference number (if any) after 'Dear xxx' and before the main text.

Style

Write in plain English and short sentences, using lively language and active verbs. A thesaurus can help with new ways to express similar ideas. Try to avoid stereotyped phrases and over-generalisations. Don't be one of the thousands of students who say they want "to work in an international firm with opportunities to travel overseas."

Main sections/paragraphs

Introduction - Tell them about yourself and your reason for writing – whether it's a speculative approach or response to an advertised vacancy. If it is an advertised post, give the job title and say where you saw it.

Why them – why do you really want to work for this firm or Chambers?

Recruiters welcome applicants who show real knowledge of and interest in their business. Briefly indicate how you've researched the firm or Chambers eg through the PCC or personal contacts, at law fairs or from the legal press. Show them what interests you. This might be specific aspects of the traineeship or pupillage, the opportunity to apply the areas of law that interest you most, work that they have done for particular clients, the firm's culture or expansion into new areas of work.

Why you - what can you offer? Highlight relevant work experience, course modules, projects, grades etc. Refer to your CV but don't just repeat points; expand on them by making a match between your specific skills and the job requirements. Aim to show that you are focused but flexible.

Specific issues - If you haven't already discussed them with the recruiter you might create a short section to address issues such as gaps in CV or lower exam grades which don't reflect your ability. You could also highlight particular strengths you have gained through coping with a disability or learning difficulty, or address any possible concerns the employer might have. Be positive, but don't let these issues dominate the whole letter.

Close - Avoid standard phrases such as 'I look forward to hearing from you', instead say that you will phone to follow up a speculative application – and do so within two weeks. You could also include practical details, eg availability for interview or for work experience. Finally, close the letter with 'Yours sincerely' if it has been addressed to a named individual.

This letter is targeted at a high street firm and highlights experience and evidence of local commitment that is likely to be of specific interest.

29 Uxbridge Road
Hayes
Middlesex UB4 7YZ

Ms Nisha Patel
Senior Partner
XYZ Law
High Street
Harrow HA1 7BB

Say where you saw the job – firms like to know which advertising is successful. Establish your ‘unique selling points’ in the first paragraph to encourage the recruiter to read on.

20 March 2012

Dear Ms Patel

I am writing in response to your advertisement for a trainee solicitor which was notified to the Placement and Careers Centre at Brunel University. I am a final year LLB student, have achieved an upper second to date and have 12 months' law placement experience in local firms as well as an LPC place for this September. I have provided full information on my qualifications and experience in the attached CV.

I have undertaken a 12 month placement at Brunel, developing my client, case management and negotiation skills to a point where I have been given responsibility for handling cases with minimum supervision and have won significant claims. I believe that my other work experience is also relevant. I have successfully run a small video business requiring entrepreneurial skills similar to those that have made your firm so successful and I worked part-time for a year rising to supervisor in a financial call centre. The latter built my general commercial awareness, team work and time management skills as well as developing in-depth knowledge of mortgage and loan procedures.

I am attracted to XYZ Law because I have had the chance to meet two associate solicitors at Middlesex Law Society events and was impressed by what I learned from them about the rapid growth of the firm and its personal injury practice as well as its approach to ensuring client satisfaction. I feel a strong affinity to the local area where I grew up and would be very keen to contribute to the further development of the client base.

I am available for interview at any time over the next few months except for the final examination period of 8-11 May and hope to have the opportunity to provide further information in support of my application.

Yours sincerely

Jasbir Singh

Finish with a confident (but not arrogant) statement that suggests that the firm would benefit from interviewing you. If applying speculatively, you could indicate your intention to follow up the letter or email with a phone call to check for possible vacancies.

Have one paragraph that tells them why they should be interested in you (but avoid simply repeating what's on your CV) and a further paragraph with convincing reasons for your interest in the firm. Ideally this will show personal knowledge.

54 Northumberland Avenue
Wembley
Middlesex HA7 0PD

Mr Stuart Randall
Recruitment Manager
XYZ LLP
1 Moorgate
London EC1 2RB

10 November 2011

The first paragraph highlights good grades and relevant work experience both of which will interest the firm.

The student stresses the commercial nature of his experience and level of responsibility.

Dear Mr Randall

Please find attached my application for the summer 2012 vacation scheme advertised on the Brunel Placement and Careers Centre website. You will see that I am a penultimate year student at Brunel, have achieved a high 2.1 equivalent so far and am currently undertaking a sandwich placement with the Treasury Solicitor's Department (TSOL) which is due to finish in June 2012.

At TSOL, I am assisting with the full range of work of the commercial team; this includes multi-million pound cases, intellectual property and comparatively minor contractual disputes. My role involves attending client conferences with Counsel, note taking at court hearings and meetings, reviewing evidence and drafting correspondence and I have received encouraging feedback on both my commercial and client-facing skills. I have also taken advantage of the BLD Legal Launch Pad Scheme to explore different areas of work in City firms through talks, visits and case studies as well as learning about business and the challenges of recession in a very practical way through working in a family property business. In addition, I have gained relevant skills through organising and marketing events for the student Baseball Society and fundraising for a local charity.

I am particularly attracted to XYZ after speaking to trainees at last week's law careers fair. I understand that the firm's size enables staff to undertake challenging work for high profile clients while building close relationships with and offering a breadth of services to smaller businesses. I also note its excellent reputation in dispute resolution and commercial property, areas which interest me greatly and for which I feel I shall be well prepared by my work experience. One of the trainees also spoke very enthusiastically about his seat in tax, an area which I have enjoyed studying and wish to experience in a firm.

I would welcome the opportunity to provide more information at interview and TSOL will allow me appropriate time off.

Yours sincerely

Ashley Williams

It is important to show that you have done thorough research, are really interested in the work of the firm and can offer relevant skills and interests.