



WRITING A JUDICIAL CLERKSHIP COVER LETTER*¹

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Clerkship applications are a challenging process to navigate, but one thing you are to certain to need are clear, concise, and error-free cover letters for your application packets.

Unlike applying for other types of legal jobs where a more tailored cover letter is often preferred, judicial clerkship cover letters are about making a strong introduction without excessive detail.

The paragraph break down below is a **suggested** format. It notes where you should include the few specific, relevant details a judge is likely interested in hearing about you **IF** applicable to you and your application.

Paragraph 1: The What/The Who

- This is where you lay out all the important introductory information:
 - Your name, where you go to school, what year you are, and the clerkship term for which you are applying.
 - Be sure to note if the judge is hiring for a two-year clerkship instead of a one-year clerkship. Expressing interest in the 2018-2019 term when the judge has specifically requested applications for a 2018-2020 position is a careless error that can get you quickly discarded from the pile. If you have more flexibility about when you are able to clerk for a judge you can express general interest in the “next available clerkship position,” rather than a specific term.
 - Note any geographic tie to the judge’s state/jurisdiction (e.g. you are from there, have a significant other who is from there), and/or a specific interest in/plans to practice in that area long-term.

* By Lauren Kelleher.

¹ For other helpful resources check out what judges had to say about hiring law clerks including pitfalls to avoid in cover letter writing see: *The Law Clerk Hiring Process – An Interview with Judge Thomas Ambro*, CONCURRING OPINIONS (Mar. 31, 2014), <http://concurringopinions.com/archives/2014/03/the-law-clerk-hiring-process-an-interview-with-federal-judge-thomas-ambro.html>; Darhiana Mateo Tellez, *Clerkship Confidential: Judges Reveal What it Takes to Get Inside Their Courtroom*, ABA STUDENT LAWYER (Mar. 2015), http://www.americanbar.org/publications/student_lawyer/2014-15/march/clerkship_confidential_judges_reveal_what_it_takes_get_inside_their_courtroom.html; See also, Zoe Tillman, *Federal Appeals Judges Open up About Clerk-Hiring Preferences*, THE NAT’L LAW J. (Nov. 16, 2015), <http://www.nationallawjournal.com/id=1202742506773/Federal-Appeals-Judges-Open-Up-About-ClerkHiring-Preferences?slreturn=20160320180753>; David Stras, Diane S. Sykes, & James A. Wynn Jr., *Panel Discussion: Judge’s Perspectives on Law Clerk Hiring, Utilization, and Influence*, 98 MARQ. L. REV. 441 (2014).

- Finally, note if this is your first choice job and/or if you have a **genuine**, particular interest in clerking for this judge. Be brief and specific about what that reason is.
 - Possible examples of these types of genuine, particular interest include if a particular professor the judge knows recommended you apply to her, you know one of the judge's current or former clerks, or you and the judge have shared career interests (e.g. "I would welcome the opportunity to learn from your experience not only as a judge, but also as a former public defender, a career I plan to pursue.")

Paragraph 2: The Why (optional)*

- If you choose to include this paragraph, this is where you want to highlight why your prior experience has prepared you well for clerking, taking particular care to note:
 - Research and writing experience.
 - Were you a Law Fellow? Did you frequently research legislative history, or draft memos, or court documents for a professor as an RA? What kind of writing experience did you get as an intern, extern, judicial intern, summer associate, or other summer law clerk position? Naming the type of writing is helpful too (i.e. memo, brief, complaint, motion) as is showing breadth and diversity in writing experience.
 - Prior litigation experience:
 - This has some overlap with research and writing experience, but it is helpful to signal to the judge if you have experience working on the type of litigation she handles in her court. For example, if you are applying to an appellate court noting significant brief writing, or other appellate advocacy experience would be appropriate. Whereas if you are applying for a trial level judge noting motions practice experience would likely be helpful.

Paragraph 3: The Closing

- This is where you list the other materials included in your application packet as well as the names of your recommenders. Some of the examples below include the names *and* contact information of the students' recommenders.

As you decide whether to include a "why" paragraph, consider that there are competing schools of thought as to whether you should include a "why" paragraph highlighting your prior experience. Moreover, if you do include such a paragraph, how much to say is debatable. One school of thought counsels against writing such a paragraph because writing an effective "why" paragraph that does not sound overstated or "braggy" is challenging. A poorly crafted "why" paragraph can hurt an applicant. At the same time, the other school of thought advises that the "why" paragraph is an opportunity for the applicant to explain why she would be a good fit for this clerkship. A compromise position may be to write a shorter "why" paragraph or include more biographical information in the opening paragraph. By doing so, you may be able to convey why you are a good fit for this clerkship in a brief biographical summary. Instead of saying, "My experience as senior articles editor on X journal helped hone my ability to edit complex legal documents," an applicant could simply state the facts: "I am senior articles editor on X journal."

The key thing to remember is that cover letters mostly function as a transmittal document that provides brief biographical summaries, states any geographic connection, and explains the components of the application packet.

IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE, Do these three things! These may seem obvious but they protect against the types of errors that get your application quickly discarded from the pile.

- 1. Check to make sure you included the correct judge's name in the address line! It's easy to mess up if you are sending a lot of packets.**
- 2. Did you proofread for spelling errors? Consider quickly reading through the letter out loud, as this can make it easier to catch mistakes.**
- 3. Have you correctly noted which terms you are applying for? Have you included all the attachments the judge requested (e.g. did the judge ask for two writing samples instead of one), and have you correctly listed those in the final paragraph?**

Now for some examples! Please note the examples below are *representative* of different types of cover letters from students with a range of career plans, post-graduate plans, and degrees of ties to where they were applying. All of the students from whom these samples were collected successfully obtained clerkships.

[NAME]
[ADDRESS]
[DATE]

The Honorable Jane Doe
Richard H. Poff Federal Building
210 Franklin Road, S.W.
Roanoke, VA 24011

Dear Judge Doe:

I am writing to apply for a 2017-2018 clerkship with your chambers. I am currently a 3L at the Georgetown University Law Center and plan to complete a one-year litigation fellowship in the D.C. area following graduation.

As an aspiring civil rights attorney with extensive federal litigation experience both prior to and during law school, I believe I would make a strong addition to your chambers. The breadth of my work experience reflects a commitment to tackling systemic social justice issues through impact litigation as well as honing the skills that will make me an effective advocate and judicial clerk. In addition to my work experience, I have developed a professionalized approach to writing — beginning with my reporting work as a journalism undergraduate — that places significant emphasis on clarity, conciseness, and accuracy. At Georgetown I was selected to serve as a Legal Research & Writing Fellow my 2L year and as a Senior Writing Fellow my 3L year. Both positions involve working with other law students on their legal writing while taking advanced legal research and composition seminars. This year I am also a member of Georgetown's Appellate Litigation Clinic where I am continuing to hone my research and writing skills briefing and arguing cases before the Fourth Circuit and local state courts of appeal.

My resume, unofficial transcript, and writing sample are submitted with this application. Georgetown will submit my recommendations from Professors XXXX and YYYY under separate cover. I would welcome the opportunity to interview with you, and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully,

[SIGNATURE]

Commented [LK1]: If you are applying for clerkships further out from graduation it also makes sense to let the judge know what you plan to do (or are applying to do post-grad. Judges are increasingly prioritizing hiring graduates with one, two, or more years of post-law school experience, so it is definitely something to highlight.

Commented [LK2]: It's important to tie your prior experience into skills that will make you a valuable judicial clerk.

Commented [LK3]: The second half of this paragraph highlights the applicant's full range of research, writing, and litigation experience.

Commented [LK4]: The conclusion should list what else is enclosed (if paper) or submitted (if through OSCAR or other electronic means) with your application. Refer to your recommenders by name even if their letters are not submitted under separate cover.

Commented [LK5]: You can create a JPG of your scanned signature to use here.

[NAME]
[ADDRESS]
[DATE]

The Honorable Jane Doe
Edward T. Gignoux Federal Courthouse
156 Federal Street, 2nd Floor
Portland, ME 04101-4152

Dear Judge Doe:

I am a third-year law student at Georgetown University Law Center. I write to apply for a clerkship in your chambers starting in the fall of 2017, after I have completed my clerkship with Justice John Doe on [COURT].

Commented [LK6]: Important to note post-graduation experience and where this clerkship would fall in your career planning.

Enclosed please find my resume, a writing sample, my transcript, and letters of recommendation from the following people:

X
Address
Phone

X
Address
Phone

X
Address
Phone

Commented [LK7]: This applicant has included the contact information for references in her cover letter, which can make it easier for judges to find rather than having to refer to the recommendation letters themselves for it.

I have also attached a list of references to this letter.

Commented [LK8]: Some judges also want a separate list of references. Make sure you double-check each judge's requested enclosures before sending your application!

Please let me know if I can provide any additional information. I can be reached by phone at [PHONE NUMBER] or by email at [EMAIL ADDRESS]. Thank you very much for considering my application.

Respectfully,

[SIGNATURE]
Candidate for Juris Doctor 2016

[NAME]
[ADDRESS]

[DATE]

The Honorable Jane Doe
The New Jersey Supreme Court
Suite 1101, North Tower
158 Headquarters Plaza
Morristown, NJ 07960

Dear Justice Doe:

I am a second-year law student at Georgetown University Law Center. I write to apply for a clerkship in your chambers at the [COURT] starting in August 2016. I spoke with [your former clerk] about clerkship opportunities in [STATE]; he expressed enthusiasm and admiration for the intellectual rigor with which you approach your work. Clerking in your chambers at the [COURT] would be my first choice for a job after I graduate.

Commented [LK9]: Noting you have spoken with a former clerk up front shows you have a clear idea of why you would want to work for that specific judge.

I understand that you will begin to consider applications on June 15. I am reaching out now to express my interest in, and preference for, clerking at the [COURT].

Commented [LK10]: A strong statement like this can quickly set you apart from applicants who send more generic cover letters. It is not appropriate to include this in all of your cover letters.

I am confident that I could contribute meaningfully to the XXX Court's work in [STATE]. As an intern for Judge John Doe in U.S. District Court for the District of Vermont, I wrote thorough and precise bench memoranda. As a member of the Appellate Litigation Clinic, I will brief and argue cases in federal courts of appeals. These experiences will have trained me to think and write clearly about nuanced legal questions.

Commented [LK11]: If you have specific information about the chambers' hiring schedule from a current or former clerk, professor, or other personal connection its appropriate to note that in your letter as well.

Enclosed please find my resume, a writing sample, and my transcript. Letters of recommendation from the following people will arrive separately:

X
Address
Phone

X
Address
Phone

X
Address
Phone

Commented [LK12]: Showing a strong tie between prior work experience and the type of tasks this applicant would be called upon to complete as a clerk.

Please let me know if I can provide any additional information. I can be reached by phone at [PHONE NUMBER], or by email at [EMAIL]. Thank you very much for considering my application.

Respectfully,

[SIGNATURE]
Candidate for Juris Doctor 2016

NAME
[Street, City, State Zip]
[Email] ❖ [Phone]

[DATE]

[JUDGE]
[COURT]
[COURTHOUSE]
[ADDRESS 1]
[ADDRESS 2]

Dear [JUDGE/ CHIEF JUDGE] [LAST-NAME],

Please consider my application for a clerkship in your chambers for the 2017-2018 or 2018-2019 term. I am currently a student at Georgetown University Law Center and will graduate in 2016. For the 2016-2017 term, I will be clerking on the District Court for Judge [NAME] on the District Court for the District of [STATE]. I am planning to move to [STATE] after clerking so I am particularly interested in clerking for you because it would allow me to establish roots there.

This spring, I took a course through the Supreme Court Institute on the mechanics of being an appellate clerk. For that course, I wrote a bench memo and held a case conference with a professor in preparation for a moot. Additionally, I interned for Judge NAME on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the REGION. Next year, I will be participating in the Appellate Litigation Clinic.

Included are my resume, writing sample, and transcripts. My letters of recommendation will be sent separately. My recommenders are:

| | | |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| NAME <i>POSITION</i> | EMAIL | PHONE |
| NAME <i>POSITION</i> | EMAIL | PHONE |
| NAME <i>POSITION</i> | EMAIL | PHONE |

I hope to have the opportunity to interview with you.

Respectfully,
[SIGNATURE]

Commented [LK13]: An example of succinctly explaining your geographic tie to the judge's region.

Other possibilities include: I am particularly interested in clerking for you because... it would allow me to return home to North Carolina; ...I plan to practice in California after I graduate."

Commented [LK14]: This applicant described this paragraph as a "short story about yourself that makes you appealing."

[NAME]
[ADDRESS]
[DATE]

The Honorable John Doe
District of Columbia Court of Appeals
430 E Street Northwest
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Judge Coyote:

I am a third-year student at Georgetown University Law Center where I am the [EDITOR] of [JOURNAL]. I am writing to apply for a 2017-2018 term clerkship in your chambers. I have greatly enjoyed living in Washington, DC these past three years and would welcome the opportunity to serve it as a judicial clerk.

Enclosed please find my resume, law school transcript, and writing sample. The writing sample is a memorandum I wrote while interning at [JOB]. It addresses the viability of a consumer protection claims under New York and California law and whether federal law preempts the plaintiff's claims. Arriving separately are three letters of recommendation from the following people:

[NAME]
[ORGANIZATION]
[PHONE NUMBER]

[NAME]
[ORGANIZATION]
[PHONE NUMBER]

[NAME]
[ORGANIZATION]
[PHONE NUMBER]

Please let me know if I can provide any additional information. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

[SIGNATURE]

Commented [LK15]: This student was on the executive board of his journal, which bears mentioning in a cover letter.

Commented [LK16]: Noting an intent/interest to remain in D.C. if you are applying for judges here — particularly if you are from somewhere else — can send an important signal to the judge about your genuine interest in the position.

Commented [LK17]: This applicant has opted to describe his writing sample in his cover letter. Another option is including a short cover page with that sample stating this same information.