



Writing Cover Letters for Government

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Unlike clerkship and law firm applications, applications to government positions often specifically require a cover letter or personal statement. A cover letter is the hiring committee's first look at your qualifications – but it is also an introduction to your personality, your interests, and your skills as a writer.

Because government hiring is relatively holistic, cover letters are usually given significant consideration. In other contexts, such as clerkship applications and applications to law firms, cover letters serve as a very brief introduction to your qualifications and interests. In the government context, cover letters are typically longer, more substantive, and play a larger role in hiring decisions.

Some applications limit the length, topic, or format of the cover letter – agencies occasionally provide a prompt, specify a page or word count, or give detailed formatting instructions. Because of this – and because no two applicants are identical – there is no formula or template for the perfect cover letter.

While a successful letter can take many forms, excellent letters will demonstrate that the applicant has a strong understanding of the position, a clear interest in the agency's mission, and a commitment to public service – all while being concise, polished, and engaging.

Step 1: Research

Because your cover letter should reflect a clear understanding of the position and the organization, your first step is to thoroughly research the agency, the office, and the job itself. Familiarize yourself with the agency's stated mission and with what aspects of the work and culture are emphasized in recruitment material. This information can often be found on the agency's website.² Find out what type of work is actually done by

¹ Prepared by Sabrina McCubbin, Spring 2018.

² E.g. DEP'T OF HOMELAND SEC., *Mission*, <https://www.dhs.gov/mission>; DEP'T OF TRANSP., *About Us*, <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/about-us>.

lawyers in the position. In the case of honors programs, take note of how the agency structures rotations through different components.³

If you can, talk to people who work at that agency (and preferably in the position you are applying to). Don't ask how to get hired – ask them instead about what skills they think are most valuable, what type of assignments they have, and what they enjoy most about their job.

The goal of your research is not to fill your cover letter with facts about the agency, but to help you pick the most relevant experiences to focus on, and to weave your understanding of the position into your letter. Doing this not only tells reader that you have a genuine interest in the job, but also demonstrates that you are thoughtful and detail-oriented.

Step 2: Develop a Narrative

Before you get started with writing, reflect on why you want this job, and what you think makes you a strong candidate. In an interview, you will probably be asked some version of “why do you want to work here?” and “why should we hire you?” Think about the stories that you would tell about yourself to answer these questions, and how you can weave these stories together to build a cohesive narrative.

First, what makes you want to work in this area of the law? If you had substantial experience in the area prior to law school, you might want to focus on why you chose to make the move to law. If you are new the field, you might want to discuss an internship that made you think that this was the right path for you, or a course that sparked your interest. If you are interested in government broadly, think about what draws you to public service, and what aspects of government work or culture appeal to you.

Consider how your experiences, during or before law school, prepare you for the position. You might have already gained experience at the agency or done similar work elsewhere. You may have excelled in relevant classes, or have taken on leadership responsibilities in relevant student organizations. You may have focused on building concrete skills, like oral advocacy, research, or legal writing. These are all experiences to draw from while discussing your motivations and qualifications.

³ Most federal government attorney honors programs are designed to rotate new attorneys through different offices to expose them to different types of legal work.

Finally, think about what you hope to accomplish in the position. If you are applying to an internship or externship, you might be seeking a certain type of practical experience, or exposure to a new area of law. If you are applying to a permanent position or honors program, you might be looking for a particular culture, mission, or environment in which to start your career.

Step 3: Build a Structure

As with any piece of writing, it helps to start with a rough outline. Because the reader is evaluating your writing, large scale organization is very important. Most cover letters begin with a brief introduction, and end with a short paragraph expressing particular interest in the agency and the job, and thanking the reader for their consideration.⁴ The substance of your letter is what you write between those paragraphs.

You should organize this section of your letter to highlight your strengths in a way that is coherent and easy to read. You should aim for two to four body paragraphs addressing your interests, skills, and goals. Because the reader will also have your resume, you should not aim to provide a laundry list of relevant experiences. Instead, select examples that best highlight your strengths and most closely relate to the position.

The structure you choose depends on your narrative. If you have many experiences to draw from, you may want to structure your cover letter around how these experiences have prepared you; if you have fewer relevant experiences, but have developed a number of pertinent skills (e.g. leadership, research, writing, oral advocacy, trial skills) you may want to structure your letter around how you gained each skill, and how those skills make you a strong candidate.

Below are some possibilities:

Example 1: Experienced Candidate

¶ 1: Introduction

¶ 2: Describe a relevant pre-law school job, explain motivations for going to law school.

⁴ Note that some agencies request a personal statement in lieu of a cover letter. A personal statement is not typically bookended by the introduction and 'thank you' paragraphs, and may be more flexible in structure, but, absent a more specific prompt, it should still cover the same general substance discussed in this handout.

¶ 3: Discuss experience at a legal internship, describe the ways that the responsibilities relate to what your role would be.

¶ 4: Describe an internship at a closely related agency, focusing on public service and your enthusiasm for the mission of the agency.

¶ 5: Conclusion

Example 2: Skills Focused

¶ 1: Introduction

¶ 2: Describe a relevant skill that you gained before law school in a job or college extracurricular, connecting that to an interest in law school or the practice area.

¶ 3: Describe a relevant skill gained during law school, with a focus on why it motivated you to pursue a career in this field.

¶ 4: Describe a skill you gained in a relevant internship, connecting that experience to an interest in the agency's mission and public service.

¶ 5: Conclusion

Example 3: Extracurricular Focused

¶ 1: Introduction

¶ 2: Describe involvement in student organization, focus on how your participation piqued your interest in the area.

¶ 3: Describe a leadership position in a relevant extracurricular, focus on how the skills gained in that position make you a strong candidate.

¶ 4: Describe an internship or other work experience with a focus on demonstrating your commitment to the agency's mission and public service.

¶ 5: Conclusion.

Example 4: Combination

¶ 1: Introduction

¶ 2: Describe your interest in the area of the law and commitment to public service.

¶ 3: Describe a relevant experience, such as a job or internship, explaining how it cemented your interest.

¶ 4: Describe a skill you gained in a relevant extracurricular or internship, connecting that experience to the responsibilities of the position.

¶ 5: Conclusion

These are just a few examples – there is plenty of room for flexibility. The only real requirement is that you are highlighting your best qualities and demonstrating your commitment to the agency and to a career in public service.

Step 4: Write a Draft

Once you've figured out what main points you will make in your letter, get something down on paper! As with any writing assignment, your first draft won't be perfect, but focus on sticking to your structure, keeping it concise, and communicating your enthusiasm for the position.

Step 4: Editing

Because your cover letter is one of the only pieces of your writing hiring committees will see, you should edit it carefully. Your letter should flow nicely, convey information concisely, and demonstrate your ability to communicate effectively.

Transitions: Transitioning from paragraph to paragraph in a cover letter can be challenging. Remember that you are telling a story, and think about how the subject of one paragraph relates to the next. One way to make this easier is to order paragraphs chronologically. Another is to link the concepts in each paragraph. For example, you could end your first paragraph by concluding that an internship experience motivated you to pursue related extracurricular activities, then transition into a paragraph about the skills you gained through moot court or journal.

Brevity: Short, direct sentences tend to be easier to read. When editing, cut out unnecessary examples, avoid using the passive voice, and choose your words to convey ideas more efficiently.

For example, instead of saying:

In law school, I have deliberately made choices that have allowed me to become an engaged, contributing member of the antitrust community.

Keep it brief:

I have endeavored to become an engaged, contributing member of the antitrust community.

Another example:

In addition to developing a deeper appreciation for the importance of financial services regulation, this position gave me the opportunity to build strong teamwork and writing skills.

In this example, shifting away from the passive voice improves clarity:

In this position, I gained a deep appreciation for financial services regulation while developing strong teamwork and writing skills.

This writing center handout may be helpful while editing for brevity: [Concise is Nice! An Aid for Writing Concisely](#).

Phrasing Choices: Demonstrating an understanding of the role and a passion for the agency’s mission can make an application stand out. A subtle way to do this is to use key words from the job description and agency mission statement in your cover letter.

For example, the DHS honors program job description notes that they are seeking candidates with “*excellent research, writing, and analytical skills.*”⁵ You could work this into your letter:

At Arnold and Porter, I helped to draft a brief for a pro-bono asylum case. This assignment gave me the opportunity to hone my research, writing, and analytical skills, and introduced me to the field of immigration law.

Another example – the FTC’s mission statement reads:

Working to protect consumers by preventing anticompetitive, deceptive, and unfair business practices, enhancing informed consumer choice and public understanding of the competitive process, and accomplishing this without unduly burdening legitimate business activity.⁶

In a cover letter for the FTC’s honors program, you could describe a past role in which you “worked to protect consumers,” or “worked to prevent unfair business practices.”

⁵ DEP’T OF HOMELAND SEC., *Legal – Secretary’s Honors Program Attorneys*, www.dhs.gov/homeland-security-careers/honors-attorneys (emphasis added).

⁶ FED. TRADE COMM’N, *About the FTC*, <https://www.ftc.gov/about-ftc>.

Step 5: Refine and Polish

Your cover letter should be completely free of typos, grammatical mistakes, and ambiguous statements. Proofread it *thoroughly*. Make sure the date, names, and addresses are all correct. Even small mistakes can be detrimental to your credibility. Read it out loud and read each sentence in reverse order. Ask a couple of your friends to read it, or make an appointment at the writing center.

Examples

Below, you will find some annotated examples of government cover letters. These are real letters⁷ from students who successfully obtained federal government employment in an honors program or a summer government internship:

⁷ Some details have been removed for anonymity.

Honors Attorney Program Manager
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Office of the General Counsel

Dear Program Manager,

I am a third-year student at Georgetown University Law Center. Please accept this letter and supporting materials as my application to the Honors Attorney Program at the Department of Homeland Security. I believe deeply in the importance of the DHS mission, and I have centered my legal education around gaining the substantive experience to work effectively in the Department's many practice areas.

I have a strong desire to serve my country, and am particularly drawn to the field of national security law because it is constantly evolving—responding to changing threats, new technologies, and shifting norms. Rotating through DHS components as an Honors Attorney would allow me to work at the intersection of privacy, technology, criminal, international, and constitutional law, all with the goal of safeguarding the people of the United States.

As a legal intern with [government agency], I was able to work on issues including intelligence policy, FOIA review, computer crime and national security law. The experience cemented my desire to work in a mission-driven organization focused on national security, and informed my academic and extracurricular pursuits at Georgetown. I am now the Chief Research Assistant for [employer] and the Editor-in-Chief of [secondary journal], and I have structured my coursework to build a strong foundation in a range of relevant practice areas.

I am also confident that because of my legal writing and litigation experience, I am prepared to work effectively within any of the DHS components. At [law firm], as a summer associate focused on litigation, I conducted research for a range of matters, and I assisted with the drafting of motions and briefs. As a Law Fellow last year, I worked closely with a group of first year students, providing regular feedback on their research and persuasive writing. Both of these experiences have strengthened my abilities considerably, and I will continue to build on these skills in my third year as a Senior Writing Fellow.

I believe that because of my interest in national security law, my writing skills, and my commitment to public service, I would be able to make a meaningful contribution as an Honors Attorney. Attached are my resume, unofficial transcript, and a letter of recommendation from [Professor]. I can be reached at [phone number] or [email]. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Student

Writing Center

This indicates familiarity with the program, which involves four rotations over two years.

Writing Center

Indicating a desire to work in public service is helpful.

Writing Center

This section demonstrates a knowledge of the agency's work, but it would be more effective if it tied these interests back to the applicant's personal experience or interest

Writing Center

The DHS mission is "With honor and integrity, we will safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values."

Writing Center

These are all experiences that will be useful as an honors attorney in this particular program.

Writing Center

Legal writing is an essential skill in any attorney's job, and demonstrating strong credentials in this area can tell the reader that the applicant will be able to adapt to different practice areas.

Writing Center

This section would have been more effective if the applicant explicitly tied legal writing skills to the role in the concluding sentence.

Writing Center

Briefly summarizing the main points in the conclusion helps the reader to remember the gist of the letter.

Honors Attorney Program Manager
Office of the Comptroller of the Currency
Law Department

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a third-year student and Public Interest Law Scholar at Georgetown University Law Center. Please accept this letter and enclosed materials as my application for an Entry Level Attorney position at the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency. I came to law school because I believe passionately in economic justice, and I have built my career around gaining the substantive experience necessary to contribute to your mission of ensuring economic stability, fair access to financial services, and fair treatment of consumers.

My enthusiasm for working at the OCC stems from seeing how financial services laws affected Americans' economic opportunities in the wake of the financial crisis. As a paralegal with [public interest organization], I saw how the law determined whether we could prevent mortgage foreclosures, lend public funds to struggling families, and develop disaster recovery programs after Hurricane Sandy. I have since brought my passion for economic regulation to the government, investigating deceptive and unfair practices as an [fellow] and as an Honors Clerk at [related agency]. In these positions, I worked on litigation and investigations in the areas of payment systems, student debt, car lending, privacy, and financial marketing.

I have also sought every opportunity to develop both the practical legal skills and the substantive knowledge of the law that will allow me to thrive from my first day working at the OCC. The responsibilities of this position closely parallel my previous experience investigating abusive and deceptive practices in student lending and servicing, drafting motions to shut down a foreclosure rescue scam company, and organizing, with minimal supervision, a massive review of thousands of documents produced by auto lenders. I also have significant clinical litigation experience: I successfully represented a [clinic client], submitting a thirty-page brief and arguing in a three-hour hearing before a federal judge. This year, I will continue to hone my oral advocacy and legal writing skills through moot court, as a law journal editor, and litigating civil rights cases with [clinic].

I believe that my litigation experience, writing skills, and dedication to your mission will enable me to make a positive contribution to your office, and I hope to have the opportunity to discuss my background and skills with you in greater detail at the Georgetown Government Interview Program. I can also be reached at [phone number] or [email].

Sincerely,

Student

Writing Center

Distinguishing yourself as a leader or specialized student in the first sentence can be an effective way to make your application stand out. Only include this information if it is relevant to the particular application.

Writing Center

Here, the applicant expresses a strong interest in the organizations core values.

Writing Center

The applicant also explicitly uses the language from the agency's mission to demonstrate that they understand the work.

Writing Center

The applicant has some experience in the field, and is connecting that experience directly to the work he or she would do as an honors attorney.

Writing Center

This section would be more effective if it took a step beyond describing the experiences, and explained how these experiences will translate into being a strong honors attorney.

Writing Center

The applicant focused this section around useful skills.

Writing Center

Again, this section would be more persuasive if the applicant tied these skills directly to the type of tasks that he or she will likely have as an honors attorney.

Dear Summer Intern Coordinators,

My name is [name] and I am a second-year student at Georgetown University Law Center. I write to express my interest in joining the Eastern District of Virginia U.S. Attorney's Office as a summer intern in the Criminal Division. I am deeply committed to the work done by criminal prosecutors and would be honored to further develop this commitment at your office.

Writing Center
The applicant clearly indicates commitment to the mission of the organization.

My motivation to apply for this position is rooted in my deep commitment to public service and informed by my experience as an intern in the [relevant DOJ component]. Before attending law school, I spent five years [military experience] where, during a stressful combat deployment, I was directly involved with [military experience]. After transitioning from the military, I continued to serve as a teacher with Teach for America and enhanced my ability to plan strategically and work under tight deadlines with competing demands. While teaching, I also developed my research and writing skills by completing a thesis in support of my [master's degree]. During my 1L summer and 2L fall, I worked for [relevant DOJ component]. As an intern in a litigating section, I was able to spend a significant amount of my time drafting motions and assisting attorneys with important pre-trial preparation.

Writing Center
The applicant is indicating an understanding of the fast-paced nature of the EDVA's USAO by writing about the ability to handle stress.

Writing Center
The applicant expressly ties the skills gained as a teacher to the USAO role, while simultaneously indicating a commitment to public service.

Writing Center
This demonstrates an understanding of the USAO role.

My experiences both inside and outside the classroom have given me the skills needed to effectively contribute to the important work done at the EDVA USAO. My experiences as an intern, a research assistant, and a staff editor on [secondary journal] have afforded me opportunities to develop as an efficient legal researcher and effective writer. As a former teacher and intelligence officer, I have developed the ability to communicate complex concepts in both written and oral formats and adapt quickly to new situations.

Writing Center
This demonstrates that the applicant has relevant skills and is interested in developing those skills further.

Writing Center
These examples also demonstrate a strong understanding of the skills necessary to succeed in a USAO position.

During my six-months as an intern in the [relevant DOJ component], I became familiar with the work done by the EDVA Criminal Division. Many of the attorneys with whom I worked closely served in or worked with this office at various points in their careers. By speaking with attorneys, including Matthew Blue and Alex Bogle, I have become aware of the high standards and professionalism of the Alexandria office. I would be honored to learn from the members of this team.

Writing Center
The applicant communicated directly with attorneys in this office, and indicated this in the letter. Only do this with the permission of the individuals.

I will be in the Alexandria area from [dates] and will be available for an interview during that time. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Student