

Introduction to Public Interest Cover Letters

The goal of a cover letter is to highlight your credentials and provide a narrative as to why you are a great fit for the job. Public interest, human rights, and government employers often rely more on cover letters than resumes to assess candidates – so your cover letters have to be good! Additionally, although your experience may not seem like a perfect fit, the cover letter can make connections between your experiences and the job for which you are applying.

In this section, we provide several different cover letters. Be sure to read them all, even the ones that are not at your experience level (like those of upper-class students or graduates). Pay special attention to the tips included in the footnotes. At the end of this section, we also provide several resume and cover letter “pairings” – so you can see how a good cover letter can be crafted from a specific resume. Read these carefully.

Remember, if you are applying to an international employer, or for international jobs, please refer to our **International Public Interest Job Search Toolkit** as well.

Public Interest Cover Letter Checklist

The Goal of the Cover Letter

Your cover letter is a persuasive “brief” to an employer, to state why you want a particular job, and why you are the best candidate. Convince the employer that you are passionate about and committed to their issue area and that you are the best/most qualified person for the job, due to experience, skills and knowledge. Focus on how you can help the employer and its clients, not on how the job will help you.

Cover Letter Do’s and Don’ts

DO revamp each cover letter for each job you are applying to (although letters for jobs in the same sector may be similar). Public interest letters are different than private sector or clerkship letters.

DON’T assume the employer has read your resume. Some read the cover letter first.

DO use topic sentences.

DON’T just list credentials – carefully craft an explanation of your merits.

DO carefully read the job announcement (if one exists) and be responsive to it.

Remember!

If your interest in a job or issue stems from personal involvement (e.g., you want to work at the DA’s sex crimes unit because you are a rape survivor or go into foster care advocacy because you were a foster child), consult with an adviser before including this information. Some employers may view this as an asset; others may question your objectivity and view your application with caution.

GRAD TIP:

Your cover letter may be significantly longer than a law student’s letter, although it should follow the content guide. Clearly state how your personal mission and the mission of the organization align. Don’t be afraid to go onto a second page or use a slightly smaller font.

Cover Letter Content Guide

Student Name
 Street Address, #1a
 New York, NY 10027
 email
 Date

Emp Loyer, Managing Attorney
 The Public Interest Organization
 100 Attorney Street
 New York, NY 10027

Dear Ms. Loyer,

First paragraph: This states who you are (e.g. "I am a second-year student at Columbia Law School."); and what you are looking for (a summer internship/position/fellowship); and your funding status (e.g. "As a recipient of Guaranteed Summer Funding at Columbia, I am able to accept an unpaid position"). If you have any connection to the organization (e.g. if you heard someone speak on a panel, or if you have spoken to their former intern) mention it here.

Second paragraph: Highlight your past experience, commitment and passion. **THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE LETTER, SO MAKE IT GOOD!** Be sure to include any connections or linkages to your past work and the job for which you are applying.

Third paragraph: Explain any relevant skills you have (a 1L may have less to put here than an upper year student or graduate). If there is a job announcement, make sure to specifically address as many of the desired skills and qualifications as possible.

Fourth paragraph: Reiterate your interest. Tell them what materials you have enclosed. Sound appreciative and eager. If you will be in their location, offer to come in and meet with them.

Sincerely,

Student Name