Common Cover Letter Errors

Students always make the same common errors in writing a cover letter. In evaluating your own letter after the first draft, put yourself in the shoes of the judge or attorney to whom you are applying. Would your letter impress you? Have you used your resume to the best possible advantage? In short, would your letter convince you to hire you? If it might, it is probably because your letter convinces the attorney or judge that your unique blend of skills will make the employer’s job (or the judge’s job) easier because you are coming on board. That’s really the key here – successful job and externship applicants convince the employer in a cover letter that an interview is warranted because the attitudes and skills demonstrated by the applicant will make life easier in the workplace.

Here are some common mistakes and how to deal with them:

1. **Grammar errors**: Proofread for grammatical errors! Why would a judge hire you to write legal memoranda if you can’t write a grammatically correct application letter? Your letter is the first impression a judge or lawyer has of your writing ability and attention to detail.

2. **Spelling errors**: There is no excuse for spelling errors and no excuse for relying on a spell check function exclusively. One student spelled Loyola as “Loyla” on his resume and sent it with his cover letter! Another student wrote that he/she wanted to learn how to draft a “compotent” motion. Pretty much tells you all you need to know, doesn’t it? Into the circular file….

3. **Effusive complimentary language**: Lots of students think effusive compliments impress the judge. Students will say “I have a deep respect for the judicial system, and for your chambers; I know this will be an opportunity for me to work with the finest.” Judges know that most students don’t have the slightest idea who they are as individuals, and have probably never been in judicial chambers before, so this is non-helpful language – just empty filler in place of solid qualifications.

4. **Too much emphasis on undergraduate education and activities**: The judge is not really that interested in what you did as an undergraduate, unless those activities demonstrate attention to detail, strong work ethic, organizational ability or time management skills. Most judges or employers, if they are interested at the outset, will pick up those undergraduate activities from the resume. This is not to say those activities are not useful in the cover letter. They are, if they can be linked to the skills necessary in the workplace. Select them carefully.

5. **Ineffective use of the resume**: Very often 1L students say “But I don’t have any legal experience. What do I put in paragraph 2 (the paragraph where you sell yourself)?” Most judges know that 1L students probably won’t have much
actual legal experience unless they were employed as paralegals or legal support staff before law school. So what is there in your background? Did you take a year of accounting? Did you work as an office manager prior to coming to law school, or organize a child care center or work long hours in a battered women’s center? Here’s how you might utilize such experience in a cover letter:

“As you will note from my resume, although I do not have legal experience prior to law school, I do have a broad range of accounting and organizational skills. My accounting career impressed upon me the critical importance of attention to detail and thoroughness in every task – a skill that has translated well into the skills necessary for success in law school. Additionally, as I experience the rigors of law school, my strong work ethic and skills of time management are invaluable. I am confident I will be an asset in your chambers.”

Or, “As you will note from my resume, although I do not have legal experience prior to law school, I did work as a general office manager for a General Electric subsidiary. I developed strong time management and organizational skills, as well as good “people” skills. I was considered not only a good team player myself, but one able to motivate others to join the team. I am confident that my demonstrated work ethic, my organizational skills and my willingness to work as a team player will make me an asset in your chambers.”

Or even: “As you will note from my resume, I do not have legal experience prior to law school. However, as you will further note, I worked in a broad range of offices and companies throughout my undergraduate years, including many hours counseling battered women. Working while in school requires excellent time management skills that have served me well so far in law school. I am also adaptable, have good communication skills and a solid work ethic.”

It is genuinely pointless for a letter to gush on about what a tremendous opportunity it will be to work in chambers, and how ready you are to observe the inner workings of the legal world. Of course it will be a good experience for you; but it is your job to convince the judge or supervising attorney it will be a good experience for him or her to hire you!

Your cover letter is a business document. Be sure and sign your letter in ink!