A cover letter is the first impression an employer gets of your writing skills, so make a great first impression!

**Persuade the Reader:** Your cover letter’s goal is to persuade the employer that you have the skills to do the job. Understand what the job entails – that’s the research part (a lawyerly skill), and focus on the needs of the employer. Specifically, ask yourself what knowledge, skills, traits and passions will make a candidate successful in this particular job? Then write a letter using your advocacy skills that shows how you can meet those needs.

**Resume vs. Cover Letter:** Many students fear their cover letter is just a repeat of what is in their resume. Think of the resume as the statement of facts in a memo -- it tells the story of what you know and have done. The body of the cover letter is like the legal analysis argument where you use the most important, relevant facts to demonstrate your analysis is sound.

**Do’s & Don’ts:** Don’t exaggerate – do write about the highest level of responsibility you have been given. Don’t use hyperbole – do give specific facts to show, rather than tell, the value of what you have done. Don’t focus on your needs -- do focus on the employer’s needs. Don’t use generic statements of opinion or feeling – do cite specific work product or favorable outcomes and do give details that show what you did that can transfer over to the job you seek.

**Revise, Edit & Proofread:** Write a draft, revise it a few times, tighten it up, edit out repetitive or duplicative words or phrases, and proofread it, again and again. Ask someone else to proofread it and answer whether it leads them to the conclusion that you have transferable skills that will make you good at this job.

**The Structure of the Cover Letter:** Introductory Paragraph: State why you are writing (2-3 sentences). The Body: Explain why your transferable skills are what is needed to do the work (1 to 3 paragraphs and no more). Conclusion Paragraph: Show how you will follow up (1-2 sentences).

**Specific Tips for Each Part of a Cover Letter:**

**Greeting:** Dear Mr./Ms. Smith: Don’t use first names unless you know the person well; don’t use first and last names in the greeting line; do use Mr. or Ms. and the last name.

**Introduction:** Succinctly state why you are writing (to apply for a posted position; to apply for a summer associate position; to apply for an externship, etc.). Don’t restate your name – it’s on your letter and resume. If you have a personal contact that referred you or suggested you write, include that in this paragraph, usually in the first sentence. The last sentence should answer the question: why is this candidate interested in our workplace in particular? If you can write a truthful, modest, sincere, attention grabber sentence, do. If not, a simple truthful and direct sentence works. Don’t list platitudes about the greatness of the employer. Don’t cite soft
attributes, such as training or pro bono commitment; cite to practice areas, clients, attorneys in the office, news of cases or deals, etc.

**The body of the letter:** Here is where you persuade the lawyer that you are best able to do the job. Re-stating the facts the lawyer has read, or will read, in your resume, is not effective. Applying those facts to the specific components of the job is persuasive. That is what lawyers do. Remember IRAC? Use it here. Lawyerly writing shows, more than it tells.

Be sure to vary your sentence structure. Letters with many sentences starting with “I” and a verb are dry and focused on the writer, not the reader. Print out your letter, circle the sentences starting with “I” (including sentences like “Moreover, I wrote two opinions as a Ninth Circuit extern”), and then go back and see how you can change at least half the circled sentences to keep the action and content, but add variety and interest. Also delete unnecessary introductions like “moreover” “additionally” “furthermore” as the best legal writing avoids them.

**The conclusion** is straightforward and states what you’ll do next. Will you “look forward to hearing” from the employer? Will you “follow up within the week with a telephone call to confirm” the employer received your letter? State what you will do and then do it!

“Sincerely” is a fine closing, or find a closing phrase that seems to fit you and use it. Read the letters you have received from employers, including rejection letters, and see what closings strike you as the most professional, yet friendly.

The Career Office counselors are here to help – we can review your draft and suggest how to make it more effective.
SAMPLE ALUMNI PROSPECTING LETTER

Anna N. Smith
Smith & Jones
1111 Jones Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

August 25, 2011

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am a recent graduate of University of California, Hastings College of the Law, seeking a position as an Associate or Contract Attorney with Smith & Jones. As the daughter of Japanese and Israeli classical musicians, I was raised in Europe with many multinational influences. In law school, I discovered my aptitude for immigration law. The combination of working closely with clients, observing the direct impact of international factual situations on legal issues, and using written and oral advocacy to help clients achieve tangible solutions to their immigration needs, has been both challenging and rewarding.

I learned from the biographies on your website that the attorneys at Smith & Jones are not only highly skilled and renowned for their professional expertise, but truly believe in the work that they do. My goal is to bring the same combination of professional excellence and passion to the practice of law.

As a law clerk at Diamond & Associates, I helped clients around the globe, many in the high technology sector, apply for L-1B visas and responded to Requests for Evidence for H-1B applications. The pace of employment-based immigration practice is a good fit for me. I particularly strive to develop individualized legal strategies to optimize the outcome for each client. As a legal intern for the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, I handled affirmative political asylum cases from start to finish. While representing asylum seekers at affirmative asylum interviews before USCIS agents, I honed my oral advocacy skills. I also developed strong interview skills, which allow me to put clients at ease when sharing their personal and often traumatic life stories. I take great satisfaction in fully informing clients of their options and guiding them through the often daunting immigration process with dignity.

I would appreciate a chance to talk with you about the possibility of working for Smith & Jones. I will contact you within the next two weeks to inquire about the possibility of an in-person meeting. In the mean time, please contact me if you have any further questions. I am attaching my résumé for your review.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Cara Williams

Note the attention-grabbing opening paragraph that segues into an explanation of her commitment to this firm’s practice area, the detailing of her relevant experience in the thirds paragraph and the straight-forward explanation of her next steps in the closing paragraph.