

Fordham  
Law School  

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New York, New York

GRADUATE  
PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
PROGRAM

GPDP MINI-GUIDE:  
COVER LETTERS AND OTHER  
PROFESSIONAL CORRESPONDENCE  
FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL AND NON-J.D. PROGRAMS

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## I. INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL CORRESPONDENCE

Professional correspondence is any correspondence that you send to a professional acquaintance or other contact. This could include cover letters for a job application, emails with a networking contact, or even emails with your professors, law school administrators, and other students. Potential employers or networking contacts will view this correspondence as an indication of your writing skills and professionalism—a sample of how you would perform on the job in your interactions with clients and colleagues. Thus, it is imperative that you compose all your professional correspondence—even short email messages—with great care.

This Mini-Guide will address various types of correspondence and will give you general tips that will help you to always project a professional image in your correspondence.

## II. COVER LETTERS

Your cover letter is the introduction to your resume, and it is also the first sample of your writing that a potential employer will see. Therefore, it must be well-written and should tie together the employer's needs with your skills and experience. A strong cover letter exhibits self-confidence, enthusiasm, and knowledge of the employer's business or practice and the position sought. It also shows the employer what it can expect from you in terms of work product—*e.g.*, what a letter to a client might look like coming from you.

These letters should be brief and to the point. Three paragraphs is typical, and cover letters should generally not exceed  $\frac{3}{4}$  page total (including the heading, addresses, etc.). Try to make your cover letter as concise as possible, and eliminate extraneous information. A potential employer is very unlikely to read a lengthy cover letter. In addition, individual paragraphs should be concise; a reader is unlikely to read a paragraph that is longer than six or seven lines.

Although there are many ways to write a cover letter, [Annex A](#) of this Mini-Guide provides a sample cover letter so that you may see a general format that works well. Letters should be formatted in a clean, professional looking business format.

### A. The Heading and Salutation

For the header, consider using the same heading that you use for your resume. By doing this, you are creating your own personalized letterhead, and demonstrating a uniformity in your documents that looks very appealing and professional. Cover letters should be addressed to the individual responsible for hiring at the employer you are contacting. If there is nobody who is in charge of hiring (*e.g.*, small law firms, which generally do not have recruiting staff), the best strategy is to seek out someone in the firm with whom you have a connection (*e.g.*, an attorney who is an alumnus of Fordham) and submit the resume to that person.

In the salutation (*e.g.*, “Dear Mr. Smith”), do not use first names, only a prefix and a last name. The prefix will be “Mr.” for a man or “Ms.” for a woman (never “Miss” or “Mrs.”). Do your best to find a person to whom you can address the letter, but if you cannot find anyone, you may use the salutation “Dear Sir or Madam” (which is generally preferable to “To Whom it May Concern”). Always use a colon after the salutation, never a comma.

## **B. The Introductory Paragraph**

The first paragraph of your cover letter is your opportunity to introduce yourself to a potential employer. This paragraph should generally not exceed two or three brief sentences. Your goal is to establish who you are and why you are writing. Think carefully about how you want to “brand” yourself and the kind of position that you are seeking. Are you seeking temporary or permanent employment? Are you responding to a job posting?

This is also where you should identify any personal or professional ties that you may have to the organization (*e.g.*, you are writing to them on the recommendation of a mutual contact or you have served as co-counsel with the firm in your previous practice). However, be sure not to overstate any connection. Only state what is true and can be verified. If you mention a mutual contact by name, they are likely to reach out to that person to get more information about you. If the person feels that you misrepresented your relationship or, worse, does not know who you are, that will reflect poorly on you. The best practice would be to reach out to the person in advance and ask for permission to mention his/her name in your cover letter.

## **C. The Body Paragraph**

In the body of your letter, you should include one paragraph that conveys to the reader why your skills and experience are a good fit for the employer's needs. Your letter should focus on one or two elements of your experience or skills that best illustrate to the employer why you are the right person for that particular position. The goal is to synthesize the experiences on your resume to reflect the needs of the position and show that you are a good fit. You should not simply reiterate information found on your resume.

The tone of your cover letter is important. Avoid sounding passive or arrogant. Use natural, conversational (but not colloquial) language. Try to convey genuine interest and enthusiasm regarding the position and the employer. When describing your strengths, avoid inflated or self-congratulatory adjectives. Stick with the facts and use *specific examples* of work achievements to support your claims of certain skills. This may include indicating courses related to the employer's particular practice areas in which you received good grades, experience that is directly relevant to the position, or industry or sector knowledge and/or experience that may be helpful for a particular employer (*e.g.*, experience in the airline industry may be useful for law firms that have a practice in aircraft financing or aviation litigation).

While your body paragraph(s) should highlight a couple of relevant skills or qualities that you possess, do not simply state the qualities. Rather, you should demonstrate the qualities by giving specific examples. To give a non-law related example, rather than saying “I have very strong customer service skills,” you should say something like “I have more than fifteen years’ customer service experience, including experience in both large and small retail clothing stores. In particular, my experience as a personal shopper at Nordstrom required a keen ability to communicate effectively and anticipate the needs of a highly discriminating clientele.”

The body paragraph may also demonstrate your knowledge of an employer’s practice or about the position itself. Indicate what you know to be special about the organization and why you want to work there. If you are responding to a job posting, highlight your qualifications that

speak directly to the skills emphasized in the posting. To continue the example from the previous paragraph, this applicant might say, “I am particularly interested in working as a manager in the Handbags Department of Bergdorf Goodman because of the company’s rich history, outstanding reputation, and commitment to its customers. Because I share this strong commitment to customer service, I believe that I would make a very positive addition to the Bergdorf Goodman team.”

It is important to avoid statements about how the position will benefit you. Do not say, for example, “I am very interested in this position because it presents a wonderful opportunity for me to learn and grow as an international lawyer.” The focus of the cover letter should be what you can do for the employer, not what the employer can do for you.

#### **D. Closing**

The closing paragraph of your letter should do three things:

- draw the reader's attention to an enclosed resume;
- let the employer know how to reach you; and
- thank the reader for his/her time/attention/consideration.

If you are sending resumes to employers that are outside the New York area, you should state when you plan to be in the area. This will make the employer more comfortable about reaching out to you for an interview.

Finally, your letter should end with an appropriate closing. The most formal closing that is frequently used in professional correspondence is “Very truly yours.” You may also choose a less formal (but still professional) closing such as “Sincerely yours,” “Best regards,” or “Kind regards.” You should indicate “enclosure” or “attachment” at the bottom of your cover letter.

#### **E. Additional Tips**

Some additional tips for drafting your cover letter include the following:

- Use simple, clear language.
- Be concise.
- Use the contact information section of your resume (*i.e.*, with the same header at the top of the page) to include in your cover letter as a kind of personal letterhead.
- Use business letter format (see [Annex A](#) for an example of a cover letter written in an acceptable business format).
- Use the same font for both your cover letter and your resume.
- Make sure your cover letter is well structured. Ask yourself how the sentences in each paragraph relate to each other and ensure that the ideas are logically organized.
- Vary sentence structure. Avoid too many sentences beginning with "I."

- Make sure each sentence has a purpose. If you cannot identify the purpose of a particular sentence, you might consider omitting the sentence and restructuring your letter.
- Sign your letters by hand (unless your cover letter is written in the body of an email. Never sign by typing your name in scripted/cursive font. If your cover letter is attached to an email, print the letter and sign it by hand, then scan it back into your computer with the signature.
- If sending a printed cover letter, use the same color and type of paper for your cover letter as for your resume and send all materials in a matching business-size envelope.
- **Proofread. Then proofread again. Then have a friend proofread. Then have your cover letter reviewed by the GPDP.** There should be absolutely no errors of any kind.

## F. GPDP Cover Letter Critique

Students are encouraged to take advantage of the cover letter critique services offered by the GPDP. In order to provide the most effective service for all of our students, we request that, prior to submitting a cover letter for review, you do the following:

- Carefully review this Mini-Guide, including the sample cover letter in Annex A, and make sure your cover letter follows the guidelines set forth herein.
- Spell check your document.
- Carefully proofread your document twice.

You can submit your cover letter for review by emailing it to [gdpd@fordham.edu](mailto:gdpd@fordham.edu) with a description of the position to which you are applying. Please note that GPDP staff are not in the office every day and therefore require ample time to review cover letters and any professional correspondence, so please plan your submissions accordingly. Also note that if we receive your cover letter for review and it appears that you have not followed these steps, we will return the document to you for further revision before it is reviewed.

## G. Submitting Cover Letters with Resumes to Employers

### 1. Email Versus Regular Mail

Unless a company or firm specifically requests submissions to be sent via regular mail, email is acceptable for all submissions. If a company specifically requests a cover letter to be included in your application, you should scan the cover letter and attach it as a .pdf file with your resume. Your email body might then say something like this:

*Dear Ms. Jones:*

*Attached please find my cover letter and resume in response to the posting in the Fordham Law Job Bank for an Associate Attorney position. Please feel free to contact me if I can provide you with any further information or materials. I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Best regards,*

*Samantha Fox*

If the company does not request a formal cover letter, you can either copy and paste your cover letter into the body of the email and simply attach your resume, or you can do as indicated above. Note that if you copy and paste your letter into the body of the email, you can abandon the business letter format that you would use for a printed letter and simply use a traditional email format.

See Part III below regarding email correspondence.

## **2. Cover Letter Follow-up**

Once you have submitted your cover letter and resume, it is important to follow up. This is an often overlooked aspect of employer outreach. Approximately 7-10 business days after sending your letter, you may email the employer to inquire about the status of your application if you have not received a response. Try to keep your email message brief while providing sufficient and error-free information. Use the opportunity to reiterate your enthusiasm for the position.

Keep a record of your contact with employers, including the nature of their replies, your follow-up, and the results. Your search may continue for some time and this record will be an invaluable tool. It can be helpful to create an Excel spreadsheet to keep the information about your job search organized.

### **III. EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE**

Most correspondence is conducted via email. Many of these emails are composed quickly, with little thought to tone, structure, or even spelling and grammar. While it may be commonplace to adopt a very informal tone in a personal email, it is important that you maintain a more formal tone with all professional contacts. This includes prospective employers and networking contacts, as well as professors, law school administrators, and even other students. It is important to remember that others will make judgments about your intellect, professionalism, maturity, and English-language abilities based on your email correspondence. A negative impression, once established, is very difficult to overcome.

Here are a few tips that will help you avoid common email mistakes:

- *If you are addressing the recipient as Mr. or Ms., check the gender to be sure you are using the correct prefix.* It is not very difficult to find out a person's gender by doing a quick Google search. For example, most native English speakers would know that Toni Jaeger-Fine is a woman, but many foreigners do not. Thus, she frequently receives emails from strangers addressed "Dear Mr. Jaeger-Fine." These senders could easily discover that Assistant Dean Jaeger-Fine is a woman with a quick Google search. If I type "*is Toni a male or female name*" into Google, the first hit, a Wikipedia entry, says "Toni is a given name. In English it is often female, the male version being Tony." If you want to be even more certain, you can do a Google image search for Toni Jaeger-Fine. In this case, thirteen images come up with photos of Assistant Dean Jaeger-Fine, at which point it should be quite obvious that "Ms." is the correct form of address.

- *Check the spelling of the recipient's name.* This is a careless mistake that we see far too often.
- *Use complete sentences, capitalized correctly.* Do not type using all lowercase letters. Do not type using all uppercase letters. Do not type one long run-on sentence and expect your reader to infer the appropriate punctuation. The proliferation of smartphones and texting, in particular, have contributed to a culture of laziness in this respect. If you have a smartphone in hand and cannot write an email in the manner described above, wait to send the email until you can get to a real computer.
- *Do not use shorthand or abbreviations.* Abbreviations and shorthand are simply unacceptable in the professional world. "You" should never be shorted to "u" and "want to" should never be shorted to "wana." Even contractions (*e.g.*, can't, wouldn't, didn't, etc.) should not be used in written communications.
- *Keep your emails concise.* Just like with cover letters, email correspondence should be short and on point. Avoid lengthy, rambling sentences or you risk that the recipient will not take the time to read your email.
- *Proofread your email before you send it.* The number of times that you proofread a message depends on the level of importance of the email and the recipient, but you should always proofread at least once.
- *Do not omit greetings and closings.* Open your email with "Dear XXX," and close it with an appropriate closing, such as "Best regards," or "Kind regards," followed by your name.
- *Check your recipient(s).* Before you hit "Send," look at your recipient list to make sure the correct address(es) are in the address line. Also, check to make sure you did not hit "Reply All" by accident.
- *Check all attachments before you send.* Try to upload the files before you compose your email in order to avoid the embarrassment of having to send a follow up email with the documents to be attached. Also, double check to make sure you attached the correct document.
- *Check your email "signature."* It should be professional and should contain your contact information. It should never include graphics, slogans, etc.
- *Be careful not to hit "Send" until your email is complete.* Inserting the email address after your email is fully composed and ready to be sent can help you avoid errors caused by jumpy fingers.

#### IV. WHEN TO USE THE PHONE

Telephone correspondence is becoming less and less common as email has become ubiquitous in the workplace. However, the telephone can be an effective way of communicating when used appropriately. The telephone can be a good way to follow up with recruiting

professionals at law firms or with networking contacts with whom you have a strong relationship. Keep in mind that unsolicited calls to busy attorneys will be viewed as intrusive. If you are considering an unsolicited call, be cautioned that the strategy carries a lot of risk.

If you do call someone, begin by asking them if now is a good time for them to speak or if they prefer to set up another time to talk. Do not assume that they have time to speak with you at that moment. At the end of the call, be sure to thank the person for his or her time.

#### **V. GPDP REVIEW OF OTHER CORRESPONDENCE**

In addition to the cover letter review mentioned in Part II of this Mini-Guide, we are always happy to review any other professional correspondence you are drafting and offer feedback. This can include formal letters as well as short emails. We can even discuss phone calls you are preparing to make to help you plan what to say. For advice on any kind of professional correspondence, please email the GPDP at [gdpd@fordham.edu](mailto:gdpd@fordham.edu).

**APPENDIX A:  
SAMPLE COVER LETTER**

September 1, 2017

Ms. Jane Jetson  
Director of Legal Personnel  
Mork & Mindy LLP  
10 First Street  
New York, NY 10213

Re: Foreign Associate Position

Dear Ms. Jetson:

I am a Martian attorney currently pursuing an LL.M. degree in Outer Space Law at Fordham Law School with an expected graduation date of May 2018. I am seeking a temporary position as a Foreign Associate in your New York office.

My interest in Mork & Mindy LLP is based on your firm's outstanding cross-galaxy project finance practice. As an Associate Attorney in the Martian office of Baker & McKenzie, I worked on a wide variety of high profile project financing transactions, including the Martian-Jupiter High Speed Railway and the Kryptonite Mine Project. I believe that my knowledge of Martian law, business and culture, as well as my experience working with clients from various planets across the galaxy, will be of great value to the firm's outer space clients and business interests.

Enclosed is a copy of my resume for your review. Please feel free to contact me if you require any additional materials. Thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,

[SIGNATURE GOES HERE]

Marvin M. Johnson

Enclosure