

Blog Post by Susan Gainen of Pass the Baton – 8/8/2012

<http://www.passthebaton.biz/search/label/business%20letter%20format>

[Cover Letter Tips: ignore the format at your peril](#)

GTW

Going to Work

A first-class cover letter requires laser-like focus on how an applicant's skills might mesh with the needs of a prospective employer. It is the first writing sample and the first chance to create a bad impression.

Sadly, career services and recruitment professionals note that a significant number of students do not know what a business letter should look like, thus providing them with an instant "clueless loser" aura which can be tough to shed. Select from one of the two formats at the bottom of this post, and you will be correct.

NOTES ON EMAIL APPLICATIONS

When applying by email, make sure that the subject line identifies you (Jane Smith's Application for Summer Fellowship), and that your message has a useful signature block (name, phone, law school if you are a student). In the email body, thank the person for considering your application, and list the attachments.

"Why am I writing a cover letter when I'm sending a resume by email?" Unless an employer overtly refuses to accept cover letters, you are foolish to miss this opportunity to make a series of connections that may make the difference between being on the interview list or in the reject pile. Are you from the employer's city? What do you know about the employer and how did you learn it? (If you have gleaned everything from the website, leave this one alone.) Why are you interested in a specific practice area? (Don't fudge this. If you know nothing about securities litigation, waxing eloquent about it will come back to bite you.)

Send every document as a pdf.

FORMATTING RULES

Business letter formatting rules are like ancient secret signs that mark a person as knowledgeable, sophisticated and (one hopes), trustworthy. Not knowing or deliberately ignoring the rules allows a prospective employer to question your knowledge and your judgment. Learn the rules or ignore them at your peril.

SALUTATION

With relatively new professionals being reluctant to use the standard "Dear Mr. Smith" salutation, the substitute "Mr. Smith:" is growing increasingly common. Always use a colon (:) after "Smith." When you go to work, follow your employer's standard.

You may know the full name of the person to whom you are writing (John Smith, Esq.), but -- and this is one of the secret rules of letter formatting that shows what you know or what you don't know -- your salutation is **NEVER**:

Dear Mr. John Smith:

Dear Mr. John Smith, Esq.:

Dear Mr. Smith, Esq.:

but **ALWAYS**

Dear Mr. Smith:

PARAGRAPHS

You will need at least three paragraphs. (1) Introduce yourself and ask for what you want (a job, an interview, a meeting); (2) Show how your knowledge and experience is relevant and useful to the work that the employer does; (3) Promise to follow up and provide your phone number and email address. Be certain that your voicemail is professional and your email address is not the one that was hilariously funny in high school.

SPACES AND LINES

Use a single space between lines in each paragraph. If your word processing program is set to space-a-half, go into preferences and fix it. Skip one line between each paragraph.

SPELLING: NAMES, TITLES, ORGANIZATIONS

Spelling the recruiting professionals' and employers' names correctly should go without saying, but misspellings happen too frequently to ignore. When writing to law firms, pay attention to the commas (or lack thereof) between names, and double-check that you are using the firm's correct name. Know that prosecutors may be "State's Attorneys," "County Attorneys," or "District Attorneys." Get it right.

FONTS

There is much lively discussion about lawyers and their fonts, led by [Matthew Butterick](#), author of [Typography For Lawyers](#), an excellent book which is available for [Kindle](#), too. Should your practice be focused on submitting Supreme Court briefs, you will grow to love Century Schoolbook. In an [Above the Law](#) post, Jay Shepard deftly trashes Times New Roman and recommends Adobe Garamond. (Personal note: I once typeset ALL of Roget's Thesaurus in Times New Roman, thus making it one of my least favorite fonts.)

TWO FORMAT CHOICES

It is so easy to get this right.

WHAT SHOULD A COVER LETTER LOOK LIKE?
TWO CHOICES: BUSINESS LETTER: Format Choice and Business Letter

SIMULATED LETTERHEAD

<p style="text-align: center;">Your Name Your Street Address Your City, ST ZIP Your Phone / Your email</p> <p>To day's date</p> <p>Paula Smith, Recruiting Director Employer Name Employer Address City ST ZIP</p> <p>Dear Ms. Smith:</p>

STANDARD BUSINESS LETTER

<p>To day's date</p> <p>Your Name Your Street Address City ST ZIP</p> <p>John Smith, Esq. Employer Name Employer Address City ST ZIP</p> <p>Dear Mr. Smith:</p>
