

Office for Career Development  
St. Thomas University School of Law  
16401 N.W. 37<sup>th</sup> Ave., Miami Gardens, FL 33054  
(305) 623-2351

# ST. THOMAS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW



## COVER LETTER GUIDE

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## Introduction

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A cover letter offers you an opportunity to make a positive first impression. This is why it is so important to create a personal, well-crafted cover letter to accompany each resume sent out to a potential employer.

A cover letter has two objectives: 1) it is a marketing tool, which allows you to highlight your skills; and 2) it is a writing sample, which allows you to demonstrate your writing and editing skills.

A cover letter should explain your interest in an employer and relate your specific qualifications and experience to the employer's type of work and hiring needs. A cover letter also serves as an introduction to your resume, enabling you to elaborate on your most relevant skills and explain your interest in the open position. Just like your resume, your cover letter should be clear and concise.

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## Basic Cover Letter Guidelines

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There is no single way to set up a cover letter. However, there are some general rules you should keep in mind:

- Recognize that your cover letter is the first, and possibly only, writing sample an employer will read.
- Be prepared to carefully draft, edit, and revise each paragraph.
- Create an individualized cover letter for each employer.
- Research the employer before writing. Show that you have researched your potential employer by communicating facts you have learned about the employer.
- Employers want to know how you can help them. Tell the employer why you will be an asset.
- Indicate your specific interest in the particular position or organization.
- Refer to the documents included with the cover letter and only include the documents or information requested by the employer.
- Sell yourself. Words matter. Word choice is a crucial skill and will showcase your ability to write persuasively.
- Be specific and concise.
- Check your cover letter over and over again for typos, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Leave the employer with an impression that you expect to speak with them, and remember to always say thank you.

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## The Format

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The **first** step in composing your cover letter is to read over your resume and identify which of your experiences are most relevant to the position for which you are applying. Consider the personal strengths required by those experiences, the type of training they gave you, and the skills you acquired. **Second**, use the information you gathered from your research. Identify the needs of the organization given its size, location, legal practice area and other characteristics. The more you know about the prospective employer, the more effectively you can describe your value to the organization. **Third**, express how you plan to use the skills and training you acquired from previous experiences to contribute to the employer.

Note: Vary your sentence structure to keep the employer interested. In other words, do not begin every sentence with “I (verb)”. A letter that is more readable will make a better impression.

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## Writing the Cover Letter

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### Before You Write

Think about the skills, abilities, background, and experience that make you a good candidate for an employer, perhaps even make a list, and then communicate those things in an engaging manner. Focus on two or three selling points you want to convey to the potential employer, and give concrete examples. Explain what you have to offer the employer, instead of what the job will do for you. Research each potential employer and think about the professional qualities employers look for and what they will find valuable.

### When You Write

Keep the cover letter to one page. Write in a business letter format; the date, address block, salutation, paragraphs, and closing should be aligned left. The paragraphs should be justified. Write a personalized letter. Proofread your letter and thoroughly check for accuracy in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Be clear, concise, and positive. Answer any obvious questions raised by your application (such as geographic location). Tailor your cover letter to the specific posting and employer. Send and reference all requested information with your cover letter (resume, transcript, references, writing sample). Make sure you have used the same font, heading and margins as your resume.

### After You Write

Once you have sent your cover letter to an employer, you may not get an immediate response. You may have to contact the employer again. If this is the case, wait about two weeks before following up with an email or telephone call to inquire if the employer received your application. Persistence in follow-up is considered a positive quality, however it should be moderated. If you receive a negative (we do not have any openings) response, then remove that employer from your list. Contact a Career Development Counselor if you have any questions or concerns about how and when to follow up with an employer.

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## **The Outline**

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Though the contents will vary depending on the job search, a standard three to four paragraph format for cover letters is well-recognized in the professional legal community and extremely effective.

### **Heading**

The heading of your cover letter contains your contact information, and must include your name, address, telephone number, and email address. Your email address should not have a hyperlink (i.e. underlined). Your heading should be the same format as your resume to give your application a consistent presentation style.

### **Salutation**

When sending out a cover letter, address a specific person. Use the complete and correct name, title, organization, and address. If no contact person is listed in the job posting, address the letter to the senior partner or director of the organization.

### **Opening Paragraph**

The first paragraph of your cover letter should state four items: (1) why you are writing, (2) the position for which you are applying, (3) why you are interested in working for the particular employer, and (4) which documents you have included for review. Specify your interest in the type of work the firm does and what is appealing to you about the employer. Where possible, mention who referred you to the job or how you learned about the organization and the specific job opening, whether it was from a friend, a previous intern, an article, or a job posting. Remember, the opening paragraph should be short and to the point.

### **Body Paragraph**

The body paragraph should establish a logical link between you and the employer by focusing on your skills that are valuable to the employer. You should stress those experiences which are most relevant to the position, without merely repeating the descriptions in your resume. Use the body of the cover letter to highlight and supplement items on your resume. Be sure to point out achievements in the employer's field or type of work. Indicate why you are qualified for the position. Focusing on how your skills will fulfill the employer's needs shows you recognize your own capabilities and that you have done your research.

### **Concluding Paragraph**

The last paragraph should be concise, thanking the employer for their time and consideration. Remind the reader of your interest in, and availability for, an interview. If it is an out-of-town interview, indicate your willingness to interview personally by stating when you will be in the area or by offering to make yourself available at the employer's convenience. Provide the reader with a telephone number and email address so that they may contact you to request additional information or set up an interview.

**APPENDIX A**  
**SAMPLE COVER LETTERS**

**Sample Cover Letter: General**

**Scout Finch**

123 NW Thomas Ave., Miami Gardens, FL 33055  
305-625-6000 · sfinch@stu.edu

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DATE

CONTACT NAME

CONTACT TITLE

ORGANIZATION NAME

STREET ADDRESS

CITY, STATE ZIP

SALUTATION: Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name:

OPENING PARAGRAPH: Identify yourself, why you are writing, the position for which you are applying, your interest in the position, how you learned about the opening, your connection if any, and list documents that are enclosed/attached.

BODY PARAGRAPH: State your qualifications and why you are interested in this employer. Use your resume entries as starting points and amplify these items in your cover letter. This is your sales pitch. It should tell a brief story that explains your background, and ends with why you are seeking work with this particular employer. Clearly state why the organization should hire you. Tell the employer about your experience, how you will meet the employer's needs, and why you are the best candidate for the particular job. Use meaningful specifics based on your research about the employer. This is an opportunity to highlight the skills, interests, and experiences on your resume, without restating that information verbatim.

ADDITIONAL BODY PARAGRAPH: An additional body paragraph might be needed depending on your experience, education, or other qualifications. Under no circumstances should your cover letter include more than four paragraphs. Remember that cover letters are typically skimmed; thus, they need to concisely deliver the relevant information.

CLOSING PARAGRAPH: Indicate your desire for an interview. Request for action or promise to follow-up. And remember to thank the employer for their time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Your Name in Italics*

YOUR FIRST AND LAST NAME

Enclosures/Attachments

**Sample Cover Letter: Firm**

**SEAN R. SMITH**

1122 Southwest 36th Avenue • Miami, Florida 33112 • (305) 888-9999 • s.smith@gmail.com

December 1, 2015

Felix Martinez, Esq.  
Partner and Recruiting Attorney  
Martinez & Martinez, P.A.  
1395 Brickell Avenue  
Miami, FL 33131

Dear Mr. Martinez:

I am a second-year student at St. Thomas University School of Law, and I am responding to your firm's posting for a 2016 Summer Associate Program with Martinez & Martinez, P.A. I am particularly interested in securing a position in the summer associate program because I hope to become a corporate attorney and working in your office would be an invaluable opportunity.

My strong analytical, research and writing skills would make me a valuable addition to your summer class. Last summer, I worked as a legal intern assigned to the Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization at the Pax Romana, United Nations. In that role, I drafted official memoranda and correspondence for Ambassador Bhagwat-Singh. I am also a research assistant for Professor Lauren Gilbert and I am an active learning instructor for Dean John Hernandez. As a research assistant, I conduct legal research relating to immigration issues and assist with editing Professor Gilbert's pending law review articles. I am confident that my background and experience will enable me to make a positive contribution to your clients.

As requested, attached please find a current resume, writing sample, and transcript for your review. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you. Should you wish to schedule an interview or require additional information, please contact me at (305) 888-9999 or s.smith@gmail.com. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

*Sean Smith*

Sean Smith

Attachments

**Sample Cover Letter: Judicial Clerkship**

**Sam S. Rodriguez**

ssrodriguez@stu.edu

(212) 111-2222

**Local Address:**

3654 South 200 Avenue  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33332

**Permanent Address:**

166 East State Drive  
Richmond, VA 11223

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December 1, 2015

The Honorable Felix Howe  
United States District Court  
for the Southern District of Florida  
299 East Broward Boulevard, #108  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301

Dear Judge Howe:

Please accept this as my application for a clerkship position beginning in Fall 2016. I am a third-year law student, in the top 5% of my class, at St. Thomas University School of Law, and I am expecting my degree in May 2016. I am particularly interested in securing a clerkship position because it will give me valuable insight into the legal decision-making process while allowing me the opportunity to further hone my research and writing skills. I have attached my resume for your review.

Currently, I am the managing editor of the *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review*, and the president of the Moot Court Board. As the attached resume indicates, I have committed myself to serving my community. As a Florida Bar Foundation Public Service Fellow at the Department of Children and Families, I researched current legal issues and analyzed new cases for legal sufficiency to proceed to trial. I also wrote motions to terminate parental rights, motions to compel a party to submit to a mental examination, motions to adjudicate a child dependent, memoranda of law and judicial review draft orders. In addition, I have served as a legal intern with the Immigration Clinic at St. Thomas Law. Both positions have helped improve my legal writing and research skills, my ability to analyze and interpret the law, and my interpersonal and communication skills. These experiences can be well-utilized in the public interest context and I am eager to gain exposure in a courtroom setting. I look forward to applying my research and writing skills to work for you.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss a possible clerkship with your Honor. If offered this opportunity, I could make a substantial contribution to your chambers. You can reach me at any time at the cell number or email address listed above. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Sam S. Rodriguez*

Sam S. Rodriguez

Attachments

**Sample Cover Letter: Public Interest**

**MICHAEL E. ROE**

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1234 College Ave. • Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314 • (954) 444-2963 • michael.e.roe@gmail.com

December 1, 2015

Felix Howe, Esq.  
Office of the Public Defender  
Broward County Courthouse  
201 SE 6th Street  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33302

Dear Mr. Howe:

I am writing to express my interest in an Assistant Public Defender position with the Broward County Public Defender's Office. I was admitted to the Florida Bar in October of 2015 after graduating *cum laude* from St. Thomas University School of Law in May 2015. I am committed to the practice of criminal defense for the indigent. In particular, Broward County is especially appealing to me because I have family ties to Fort Lauderdale and I look forward to beginning my career in the area.

You will find that my background and practical work experience will allow me to make an immediate contribution to the office. During the summer of 2014 I completed a criminal practice clinic with the Miami-Dade Public Defender's Office. This position required me to communicate effectively with clients, work under deadline pressure, and prioritize multiple responsibilities. Additionally, I have continued to develop my research and writing skills through my *pro bono* project with the Broward County Bar Association. These experiences have contributed to my desire to pursue a career as a trial attorney, in part because I witnessed the crucial role that attorneys play in ensuring justice for those most in need of representation. Due to my strong desire to pursue criminal defense work, I am confident that I would make a positive addition to your staff.

As requested, my resume, law school transcript, writing sample, and references are attached. I would appreciate an opportunity to interview with your office and discuss my qualifications and interest. I can be reached at any time at the phone number or email address listed above. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

*Michael E. Roe*

Michael E. Roe

Attachments

**Sample Cover Letter: Non-traditional (In-House Counsel)**

**Scout Finch**

123 NW Thomas Ave.  
Miami Gardens, FL 33055  
305-625-6000  
sfinch@stu.edu

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December 1, 2015

Felix Howe, General Counsel  
Widget Corporation  
950 W. Cypress Creek Road  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33309

Dear Mr. Howe:

I am a second-year law student at St. Thomas University School of Law and I am interested in an internship opportunity with the General Counsel's Office of the Widget Corporation. My background in both business and law will enable me to make an immediate contribution to your office.

Prior to attending law school, I was a regional sales manager for Factory, Inc. In this role, I oversaw several employees and handled all aspects of distribution for five stores. I was promoted to this position after starting as a retail sales associate. I found these business experiences to be invaluable both in terms of exposing me to a corporate setting and allowing me to develop strong interpersonal and communication skills. My interest in the legal aspects of business has continued to grow as I learn the core subjects in law school and understand how law affects corporations.

I would very much welcome the opportunity for an interview to discuss how I can best put my knowledge and skills to work for you. Attached per your request is my resume and writing sample. If you have any questions or if I can provide any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at the phone number or email address listed above. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Scout Finch*

Scout Finch

Attachments

**Sample Cover Letter: Request for Informational Interview**

**Scout Finch**

123 NW Thomas Avenue  
Miami Gardens, FL 33055  
(305) 625-6000  
sfinch@stu.edu

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December 1, 2015

Felix Howe, Esq.  
Managing Partner  
Howe & Smith, P.A.  
6789 Gallows Road  
Tampa, FL 34567

Dear Mr. Howe:

Samantha Jones of Wilson & Associates suggested that I contact you. I am very interested in labor and employment law and, if you have time, she thought you would be the ideal person to provide me with advice about labor practice in your region. Additionally, any counsel you might have on how to focus my time in law school to best prepare for a career in labor and employment law would be appreciated.

I will graduate from St. Thomas University School of Law this May and take the Florida Bar in July. I will be visiting Tampa from March 3-8 and would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you while I am in town. I know you have a busy schedule and will be flexible to your schedule to come in early or late in the workday. If a visit is not convenient, perhaps we can schedule a time to speak on the phone. Starting a career in today's market presents both challenges and opportunities and I am sure I would benefit from your advice.

I look forward to hearing from you. I can be reached via email at sfinch@stu.edu or on my cell phone at (305) 625-6000.

Sincerely,

*Scout Finch*

Scout Finch

***Sample Email: Request for Informational Interview***

Dear Mr. Howe:

I am a first-year student at St. Thomas University School of Law, and I am interested in learning more about labor and employment law. While conducting research, I came across your name and news articles about your distinguished career.

I would appreciate the opportunity to talk with you and obtain first-hand information about labor and employment law practice. Additionally, I can be reached at (305) 555-1234 or Mjones@stu.edu, and can arrange an appointment at a time most convenient for you. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Mary Jones