



From Perfunctory to Powerful: The Art of the Cover Letter

Ari Blicker

Director, Student & Associate Programs

Aird & Berlis LLP

Very often, cover letters:

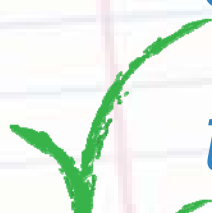
 *look “computer-generated”*

 *undersell the applicant's accomplishments*

This seminar is intended:



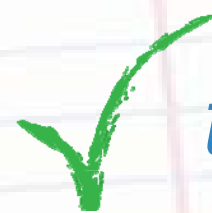
*to be interactive
(your feedback and questions
are encouraged)*



to elevate the level of discourse



*to help you tell your story in a
credible way*



to combat cover letter fatigue



This seminar is NOT:



*a lecture on the
importance of
proofreading*





Allways chek for
speling erors

We will:



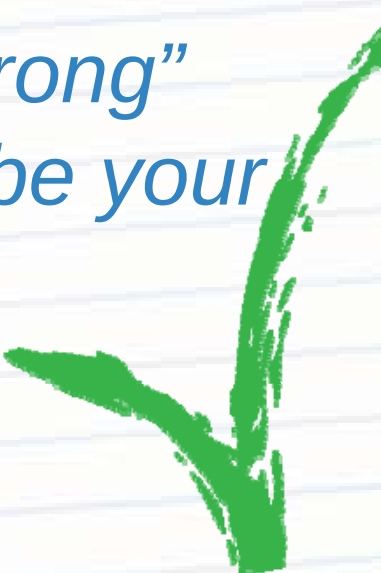
discuss the usual framework for a cover letter



discuss tips for transforming a cover letter from underwhelming form letter to compelling personal narrative



work through examples of the “wrong” way and the “right” way to describe your skills and experiences

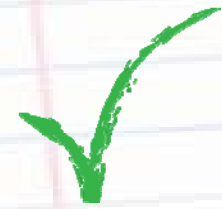


Before you

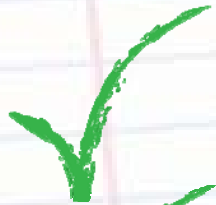


Reflect on who you are.

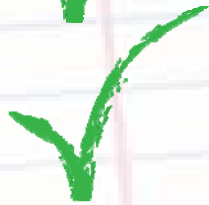




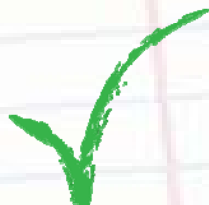
Consider adjectives that others would use to describe you, professionally and personally.



Reflect on what is different about you.



Recall highlights, successes, challenges and failures from past experiences (both professional and personal).



The more reflective you are, the more effective your letter will be.

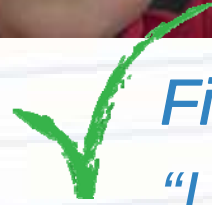
Structure





Structure

First Paragraph



First sentence

“I am a second year law student at [insert name academic institution] and I am writing to apply for a summer position at [insert name of organization].”



Second sentence

your initial interests, and reasons for your interest in the firm:

“At this stage, I am gravitating towards a career in litigation. Competitive advocacy has been the high point of my time in law school.”



Structure

Second Paragraph



*highlights from work experience
(often in reverse chronological
order but can be in chronological
order if it helps the narrative)*



Structure

*Third
Paragraph*



*highlights of law school
involvement and/or volunteer
experience*



Structure



a few key qualities (should tie in with preceding paragraphs):

Concluding Sentence

"I believe that I possess the grit, client focus and intellectual curiosity to be a successful student at your firm. I hope to meet with you for an interview."

DEVELOPMENT

A close-up photograph of several sharpened pencils (green, brown, blue, and red) resting on an open dictionary. The dictionary page shows the word 'DEVELOPMENT' and its definition: '1 put each of two things into a new state; stop or change from one place to another; noun [from inter + develop]'.

It tells a story.

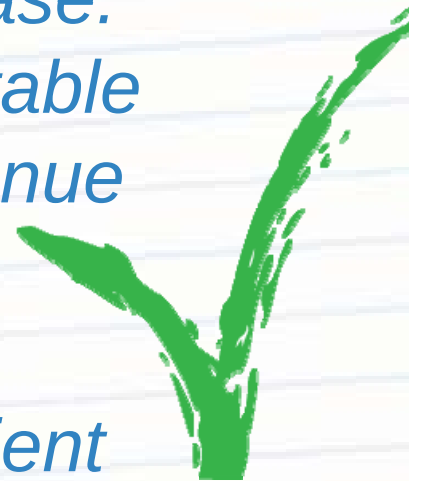
My unique skill set, entrepreneurial spirit, tireless work ethic and fanatical attention to detail will make me a valuable asset to your team.



A close-up photograph of several sharpened pencils in various colors (green, brown, purple, red) resting on an open dictionary. The dictionary pages show words like 'DEVELOPMENT' and 'interchange'.

It tells a story.

When I was an undergraduate, I founded an online business selling sports memorabilia. I built the business “from scratch,” designing the company’s website, creating marketing collateral, and establishing a client database. The business has been consistently profitable since its inception, and last year had revenue of \$70,000. In five years of running the business, I have come to appreciate the importance of building and maintaining client relationships.





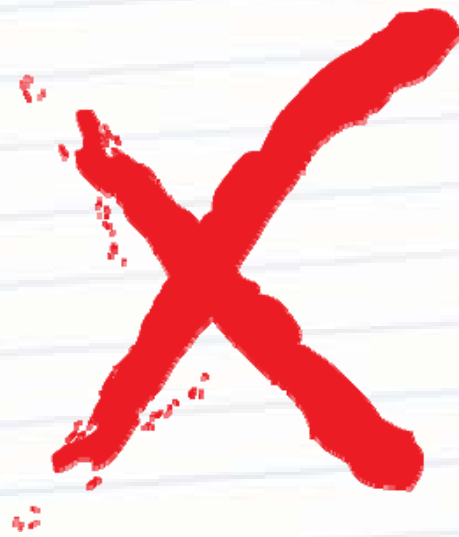


Every “claim” should have a “proof.” Provide examples of highlights in your educational, work or volunteer experience.

Show

**Don't
Tell**

*While working at TechCo, I developed
superb project management skills.*



Show

Don't Tell

I spent two years at TechCo, a leading provider of database management systems for Fortune 500 companies. One of my personal highlights was leading a team of developers in the creation of the company's new customer relationship management application. Despite a very ambitious delivery date, our team completed the project successfully, and on time.



Keep it simple

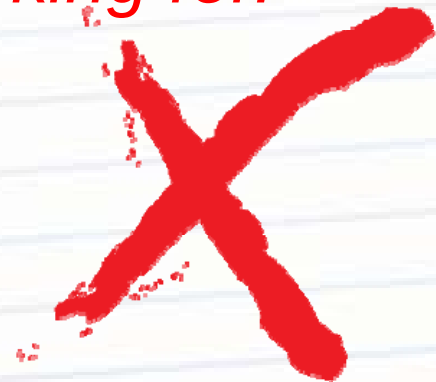
*- one idea per
sentence.*

Short beats long, every time.



Keep it simple.

Reading the descriptions on your website of the projects students are involved in, such as the merger of LeftCo and RightCo, and the opportunity to run client meetings, has made me confident that a summer with your firm will provide me with the range of challenging and substantive experiences I am looking for.



Keep it simple.

A blue pencil is shown drawing a curved line across the top of the page. The pencil is blue with a yellow eraser and a sharp lead tip. The line it is drawing is a smooth, upward-curving arc.

I was particularly impressed with the student testimonials on your website. I am excited at the prospect of hands-on transactional experience and direct client interaction.

A large, hand-drawn green checkmark is located in the bottom right corner of the page. It is drawn with a thick green line, giving it a sketchy, artistic appearance.

*It helps to
have a
“hook”... or
a theme that runs
through your letter.*





*It helps to have a
“hook” ...*

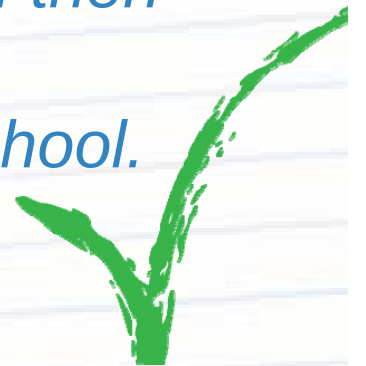
*I take initiative and am a
natural leader.*





It helps to have a “hook” ...

As an undergraduate, I co-founded a charity that assists students with review sessions in exchange for financial contributions. The money raised from these review sessions is donated to education projects in Latin America. Along with two other students, I hired tutors and volunteers, marketed review sessions, and raised over \$10,000 in our first year. The money helped fund the construction of a school in a village in Nicaragua. I then organized and led a volunteer trip there, where I (along with 12 fellow students) helped build the school.





*Active
voice,
not
passive
voice.*



*Active voice, not
passive voice.*

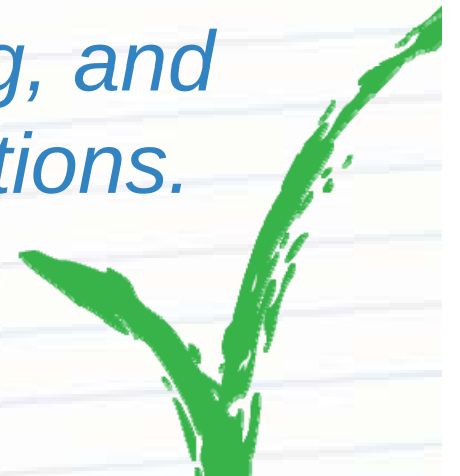
*My experiences working as a counsellor
at the Youth Crisis Hotline taught me
how to remain cool under pressure.*





Active voice, not passive voice.

As a counsellor at the Youth Crisis Hotline, I routinely counselled teenagers who were struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues, and in rare cases, contemplating suicide. I learned the importance of listening, and remaining calm in high-stress situations.





*Be
authentic.
Speak in your own
voice.*



Be authentic.

*I thrive working independently or as
part of a team.*





Be authentic.

Working for a luxury brand meant catering to clients with the highest of standards. In addition, the hotel underwent a major financial restructuring, which added a new layer of complexity.



Be descriptive about your experiences.

*Avoid
mechanical
pairings of job
titles and skills,
the hallmarks of
a form cover
letter.*





Be descriptive.

Through my experiences at Habitat for Humanity, I learned valuable time management and people skills. I am a self-starter and I also work very well in teams. I pride myself on my ability to assimilate information quickly and my attention to detail. I also have excellent research skills and communication skills and am looking forward to the opportunity to apply those skills to your clients' problems.





Be descriptive.

Last summer, I volunteered for Habitat for Humanity. It was an opportunity to leverage my skills in construction and carpentry. For the first part of the summer, I spent two days a week in the office helping with administrative work and three days a week as a team member on various construction sites. By mid-July, I was given responsibility for supervising the construction process at one of the sites. By the end of the summer, I had helped build seven homes, three as construction foreman.





*Don't
make
excuses
for below average
academic
performance.*



Don't make excuses.

*I am disappointed in my
academic performance this year.
I had some personal
circumstances to deal with. I do
not believe my grades this year
are reflection of my
true potential.*





Don't make excuses.

Attached is a letter from the Assistant Dean regarding some circumstances that affected my academic performance this year. A few days prior to the beginning of my first semester of law school, I was in a boating accident and suffered a serious eye injury. I missed the first month of law school. As a consequence, my academic performance fell short of my usual standards. [Note: It should be in a separate document, NOT the cover letter]



Show interest

*in the firm and an
understanding of
its strengths.*

*Don't "recycle"
material from the
firm's website.*





Show interest

Your firm is highly respected in many fields of practice. I am interested in learning about litigation, intellectual property law, wills and estates and entertainment law and would welcome the opportunity to gain exposure in those areas (among others). What is truly enticing about your summer program is the responsibility you entrust to students. As a result the students are able to gain exposure to substantial work. Your firm's extensive "lunch and learn" programs, robust mentoring system, collegial working environment and significant transactions (such as MegaCo's \$2 billion acquisition of HugeCo) are all very intriguing to me.





Show interest

I have a background in corporate finance, and I am interested in your firm because its securities law practice group is widely viewed as one of the best in the country.





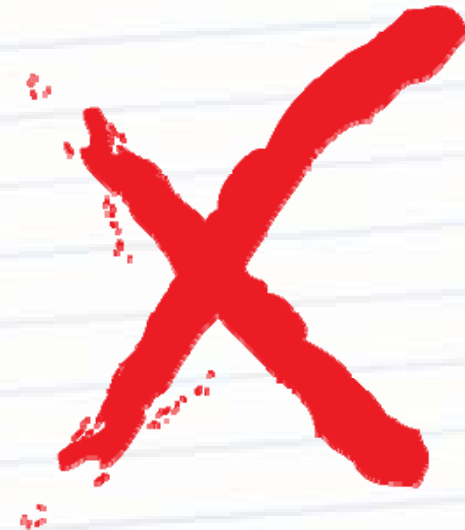
Personalize the letter.

*If you have
met people
from the firm
and have
been
impressed,
say so.*



Personalize the letter.

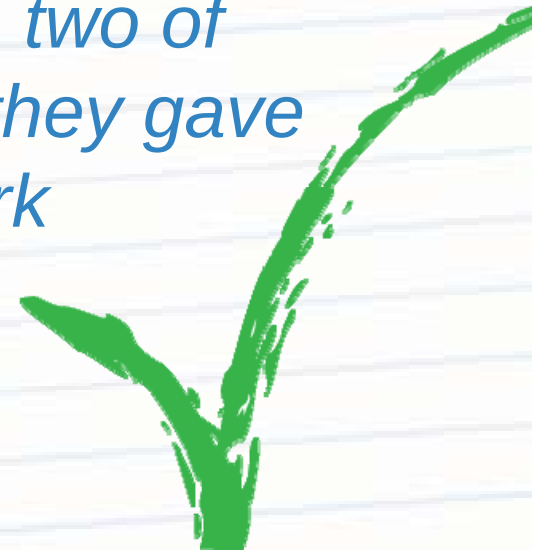
*Joe Partner, head of your
firm's Litigation Department,
is a family friend and he
suggested that I apply.*

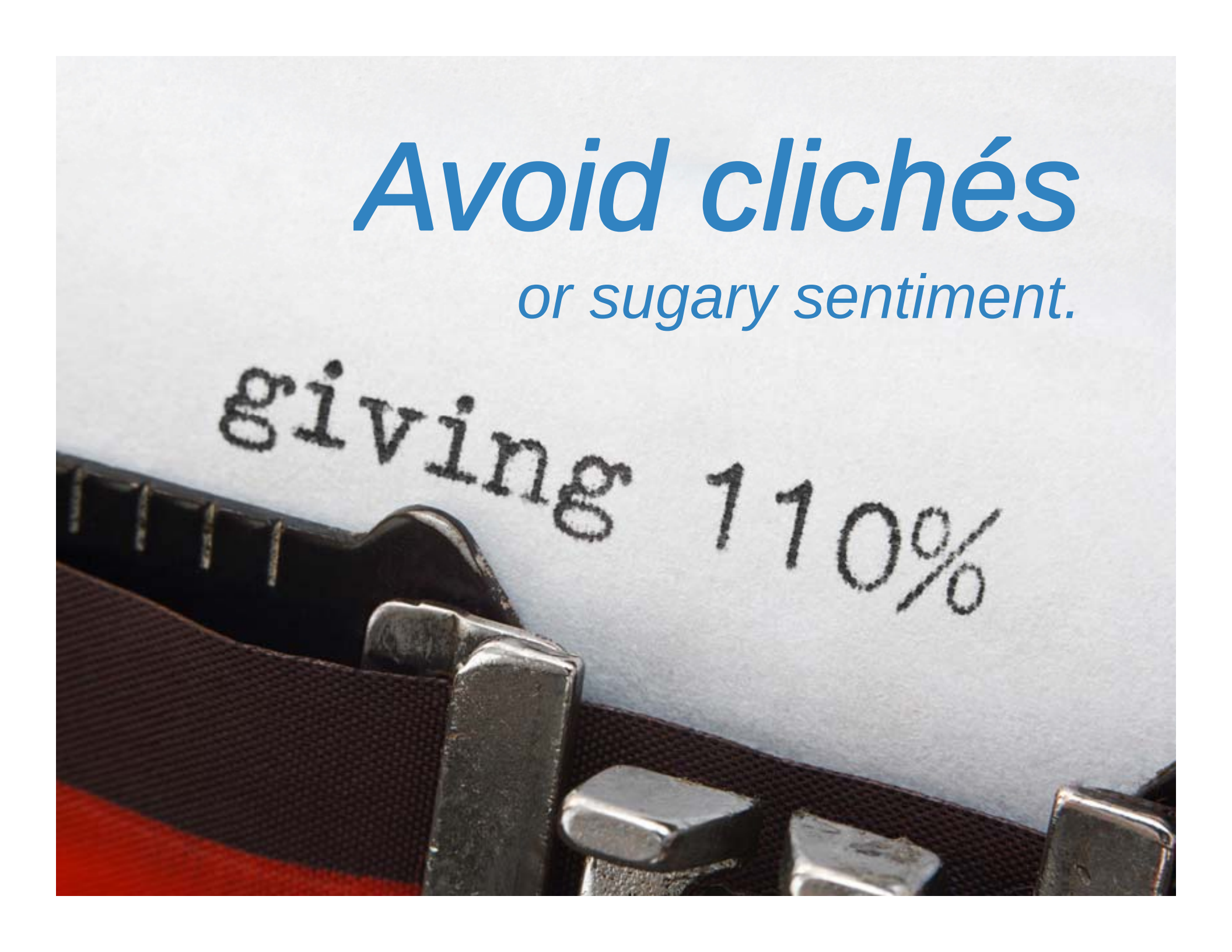




Personalize the letter.

John Doe, one of your summer associates, is a classmate of mine. He spoke at length about your firm's dynamic culture and tight-knit student group. I also spent time at the career fair with Jane Smith and John Jones, two of your firm's litigation associates, and they gave examples of some of the exciting work assignments for students.





Avoid clichés

or sugary sentiment.

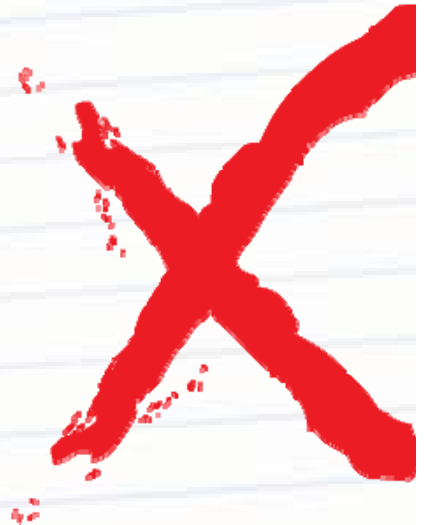
giving 110%



giving 110%

Avoid clichés

I volunteer my time because I believe it is important to give back to the community. Being a Big Brother to a young person has been the most memorable and rewarding experience of my life, and I hope that in some small way I have made a difference in my Little Brother's life.

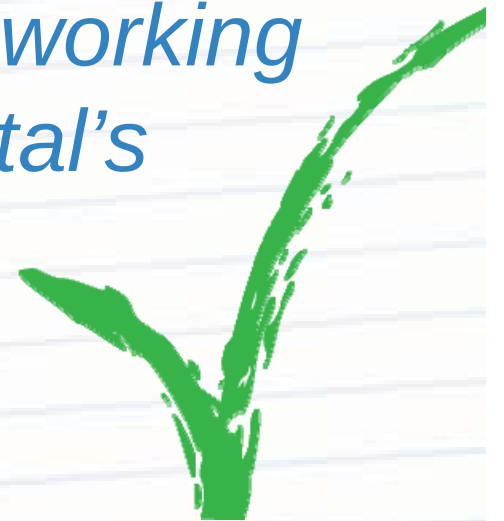


A close-up photograph of a typewriter's carriage and paper. The paper has the words "giving 110%" typed on it. The typewriter is dark-colored, and the paper is white.

giving 110%

Avoid clichés

Away from the workplace and the classroom, volunteerism is a priority for me. For the past three years, I have been spending six hours a week at Local Rehabilitation Hospital working with young patients in the hospital's therapeutic pool.



Questions?





Thank you.

Ari Blicher

*Director, Student &
Associate Programs*

ablicker@airdberlis.com

416.865.4149

AIRD & BERLIS LLP
Barristers and Solicitors

www.airdberlis.com

© 2014 Aird & Berlis LLP. This presentation may be reproduced only in its entirety, without modification, for non-commercial training purposes.