

End Note

I have these three folders containing letters from law firms responding to my applications for summer clerkships after my first year of law school. I sent them to everyone in New York City, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Boston who said they would consider hiring first-years and whose salaries made it worthwhile to give up my last "free" summer before I hit the express lane of the rat race. That summer has come and gone, but those letters! Those letters will always be with me, till the day I throw them out. They went something like this.

Folder #1 is called "Rejections." It's full of very civil replies from polite firms who want to keep their options open because of my "outstanding record of achievement and promise for a successful career at the bar" (a composite phrase), but, of course, there are only a few spots in our program but, oh yes, we'll keep you on file ready for that massive unforeseen opening just around the corner.

Now, I can spot rejection letters—we called them "hose letters" in college—instantly, using the tools I developed scanning my eight law school rejections. The best trick is looking for the capital U in "Unfortunately"; after that search for "however" and "regret." Keep looking—they're in there.

Folder #1 is no picnic, but Folder #2 is something completely different. These guys not only didn't want me, they didn't care if I quit law school and became an international terrorist and playboy. Folder #2 is called "Outright Rejections," and if they helped me build my character any more, I'd have to stop buying suits off the rack.

Most of the letters in "Outright Rejections" differed only slightly from "Rejections," but differ they did. One trait was brevity so great it suggests that the firms hoped to save a whole computer ribbon by keeping each of the 700 identical hose letters down to three sentences.

Contributing editor Ron Coleman, a second-year student at Northwestern University's law school, can forgive but he won't forget.

*The letters
of the law:
Saying "no"
is never easy—
and judging from
some rejection notes,
it's also never simple*

BY RON COLEMAN

I got one from a Philadelphia firm that first struck me with its stationery. These guys give good letterhead; between a third and a half of the page is filled with tiny print with what must have been the names not only of each partner but associates and on down to the night typing pool as well. Then again, how much room did they need for this?

Dear Mr. Coleman:

Thank you very much for your letter regarding the possibility of employment with our firm.

Unfortunately, we will be unable to interview you for a possible position with our firm.

Sincerely,

Gee, does that mean "no"? I learn from this that if you're going to write a two-sentence hose letter there's no sense in sweating over artfulness.

One New York firm managed to turn three sentences into three paragraphs:

Thank you for your letter dated November 25.

I regret that we will not have a position available for you.

We appreciate your interest in our firm and wish you success in your studies and career.

Well, that's a sentiment I'll treasure for life. These people should have learned from neighbors of theirs, who skillfully compressed their two sentences into one paragraph:

We have received your letter with the enclosed resume. [I checked the envelope; no, they didn't sent it back to me.] We regret to inform you that we cannot offer you a position with us for next summer, but thank you for your interest in the firm.

At least these people did express some gratitude. In fact, some in this folder did verily gush with emotion:

I wish to acknowledge receipt of your recent letter concerning association with this firm. [Maybe I should write them back and explain—I just wanted a job.] While I appreciate your interest, I must advise you that we are not in a position to consider your application at this time. I wish you every success in your legal career.

Very truly yours,

"Not in a position"? Hell, then write me back after you change positions. I can wait, and you'll bill it to someone else either way.

Similar obfuscation came to me from northern New Jersey. The firm in question had written a spirited letter to our placement office indicating a rabid desire for first-year applicants from my school. I figured, Great, they want people from here, plus I went to a fancy college in the state and spent most of my life there too. I felt really good about this one, naif that I was:

Our Associates and Clerks Committee [ooh, a whole *committee* even!] has reviewed your resume and, while it is impressive, our needs are such that we will not be in a position to act affirmatively on it at this time.

You know, faced with that, excessive brevity begins to look good. That phraseology—"reviewed our needs"—sounds like Phil Donahue. If you don't *need* summer clerks, why'd you write to my law school? Or is it that you don't *need* clerks with "impressive resumes"? Then our old friend from the Kama Sutra, "not in a position," reappears, followed by the kind of legalese I thought we were supposed to avoid: "to act affirmatively on it at this time."

Look, you can soften the blow to us sensitive guys in English too. Even if you think I can't read the date on the top, you can still get the chronology across with the word "now." I thought "at this time" went out with the Watergate hearings, anyway.

Another good example of creative phrasemanship is a Boston firm's explanation that, since they have no room for first-years: "We are unable to offer you encouragement... at this writing." Aw, come on guys—just a little encouragement? Compliment me on my resume typeface or something. Darn.

The New York office of a national mammoth firm was enigmatic: "While your resume is impressive, I am afraid that we do not have a position for a person of your background and experience." You can read that a lot of ways—my "background"? I solemnly swear, I am not now nor have I ever been...

One letter gave me new insight into the world of law. From the Garden State:

Your record of accomplishment makes it very difficult to advise you that we will be unable to offer employment to you with our firm for next summer.

That's funny—I never heard a lawyer say it was "difficult to advise" anyone on anything. Oh, you mean for *free*.

Similarly, a big New York firm told me they had "reluctantly concluded that [they] will be unable to accommodate" first-years. I could feel the ooze of reluctance all over the envelope.

Here euphemism is honed to a fine art. The whole "not in a position at this time" deal—it's so helpful. It's as if, Well, if that \$430 loan from my brother-in-law comes through, maybe we can work something out, or, Heck, I *want* to hire you but the little lady, she just insists on a new toaster! Now if it were up to me!

Finally, a big New York mergers-and-acquisitions shop keyed in on my undergraduate economics background and appealed to my love of transactional efficiency:



[W]e feel that it would be unproductive to arrange for you to interview with us at this time.

These guys are telling me, look Ron, we could do it. We *want* to do it. But it's just—it's just not productive! What do you want us to do, some kind of sub-optimal, unproductive, socialistic transaction? (Maybe they were also worried about my "background.") I might have bought this if this same firm didn't disregard its own rationalist logic in the next sentence:

We hope that our inability to meet with you will not be interpreted as a lack of interest on our part.

Actually I'd interpreted it as a lack of interest on *someone's* part. Now I have to figure out whose—who told them about my sex life, anyway?

None of these letters from last year prepared me for one I got this fall, though:

Despite the excellent qualifications on your resume, I do not think there

is a realistic chance that we have an opening for you in our summer program, and so it would not be fair to ask you to come in for an interview.

Realism, fairness—what else is the law about? The lesson seems to be that people paid hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, supposedly in large part for their excellent communications skills, are frequently as inept, or in the last case as incapable, of disguising their contempt as anyone.

By the way, the third folder—that's "Acceptances." There was only one during first year. Of course, any guy with my steely eye contact and a vise-like handshake only needs one interview to get the job. As for that last rejection I quoted—"realistic chance"—that didn't really fit into any of the other three files. That one went right into what we call the rotary file, it was so awful. Compared to letting the caprices of the recruiting process get you down, it's the only way to file. ■