

From Perfunctory to Powerful: The Art of the Cover Letter





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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





Always chek for
speling erors


We will:



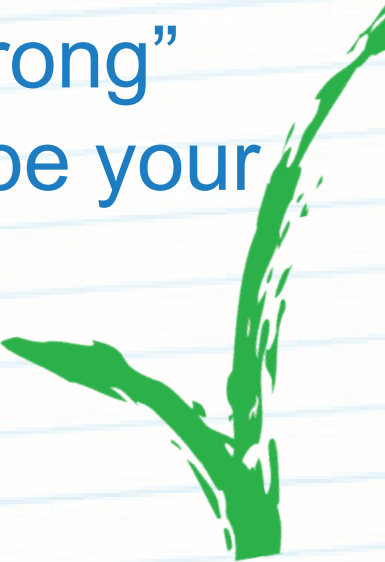
discuss the usual framework for a cover letter



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

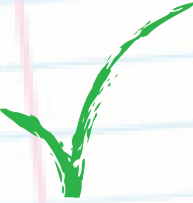


Before you



Reflect on who you are.






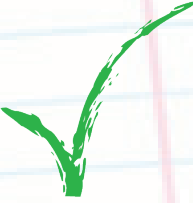
Consider adjectives that others would use to describe you, professionally and personally.



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 sentence

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



First Paragraph



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**

*“As a former varsity
basketball player at McGill, I
am a firm believer in the
importance of teamwork.”*



Structure

Concluding Sentence(s)

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

“On every team that I join, I bring an ‘all-in’ attitude and give my best effort. I believe I can be a contributor to your team. If I join your firm, I will be the loudest person on the bench (metaphorically speaking, of course). I hope to meet with you for an interview.”

A great cover letter is descriptive –

it tells a story.

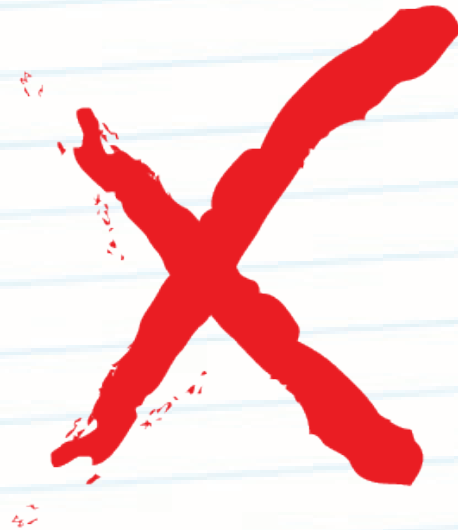
It is a piece of subtle advocacy.





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.





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.





Show

*Don't
Tell*

B

N

Show

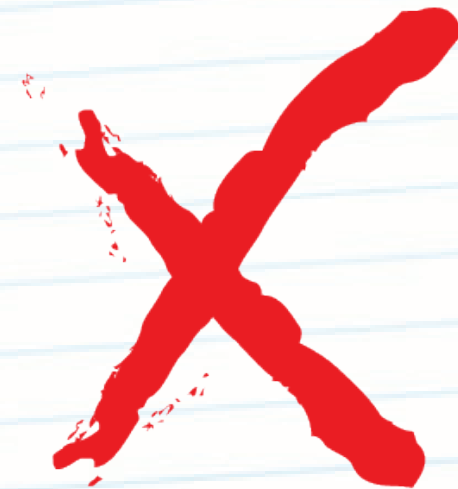
Don't Tell

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.



Peel the onion

A young girl with dark hair, wearing yellow safety goggles and a green shirt, is focused on peeling a red onion. She is holding the onion with both hands, and a small piece of the onion skin is visible. The background is a plain, light color.

When describing your experience, move from the general to the specific. Context is key.



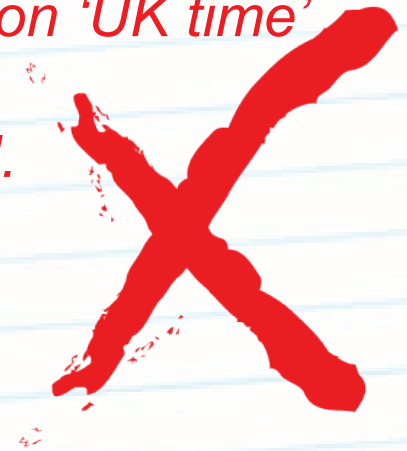
Peel the onion

- *Background on your recent employer (e.g., products/services, stature within the industry/sector)*
- *Background on your role and high level responsibilities (not tasks), and how your role evolved*
- *Some highlights*



Peel the onion

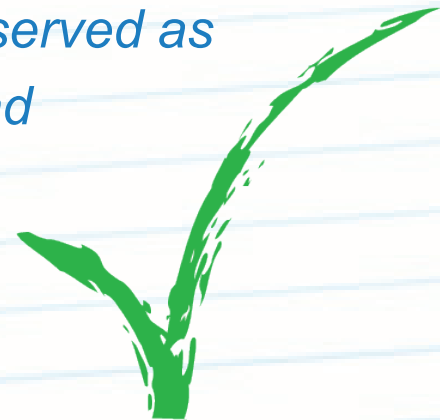
While working as a Research Assistant for Professor [X], I jumped at the opportunity to become a member of the investigative team mandated to report on the State-sponsored Russian doping at the Olympic Games. My keen attention to detail and ability to manage a high volume of work allowed me to excel at being the individual in charge of document review, editing the Report each night, creating graphs, and organizing the thousands of entries of athlete data. We worked on 'UK time' for most of the summer, which meant that I was on-call every day beginning at 2AM.





Peel the onion

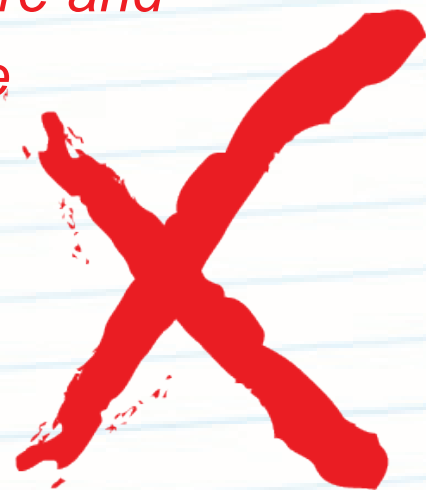
This summer, I was a Research Assistant for Professor [X], a leading expert in international sports law. In the lead-up to the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio, Professor [X] was retained by the World Anti-Doping Agency to investigate and report on allegations of widespread, state-sponsored doping among Russian athletes. I jumped at the opportunity to join his multi-disciplinary investigative team. I was one of only two law students on the team, which also included a former FBI agent, a lawyer from Serbia who served as our Russian translator, and Rich Young (formerly the lead prosecutor on the Lance Armstrong case).





Peel the onion

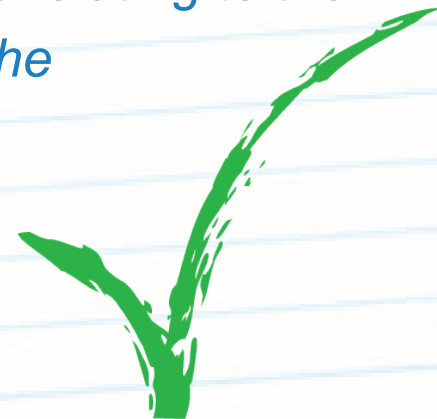
The investigation moved quickly, and our seven-person team did not leave our Montréal 'war room' for 16 hours each day leading up to the International press release in mid-July. The pressure from both the deadline and the meaningfulness of the Report was very heavy, but working with such an experienced and encouraging team allowed me to channel the pressure and produce results. Following the press release, my role transitioned to drafting affidavits, and providing a quick turn-around time for any research requested by our team.





Peel the onion

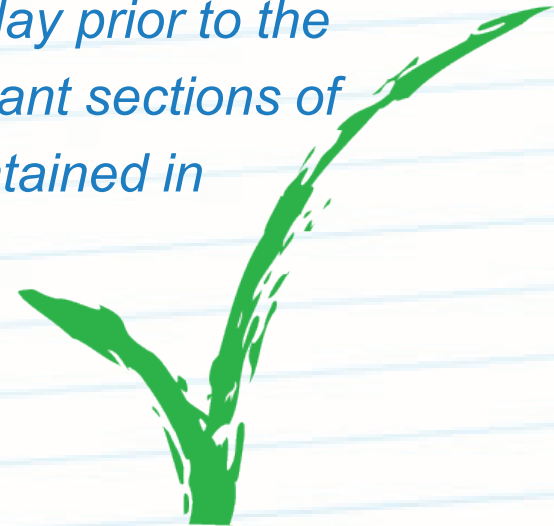
Our team's mandate was to complete its investigative report by mid-July, in time for an international press release and mere weeks before the Opening Ceremonies of Rio. At a high level, our team conducted an extensive forensic examination of a massive cache of decrypted data, much of it obtained from our key 'whistleblower' (the former head of the Moscow Laboratory) and a few confidential witnesses. As a member of that team, I sifted through thousands of communications relating to the testing of athletes, including communications between the testing facility and Russia's Ministry of Sport.





Peel the onion

We worked on 'UK time' for most of the summer, which meant that I was on-call every day beginning at 2 a.m. A week prior to the deadline for the completion of the report, I travelled to Montréal with Professor [X] and the rest of our team for a final 'push.' We set up our 'war room' in a downtown law firm and worked very intense 16-hour days until we completed the report, only one day prior to the international press release. I drafted several important sections of the report, and all graphical illustrations of data contained in the report are my handiwork.



Keep it simple

**one idea per
sentence.**

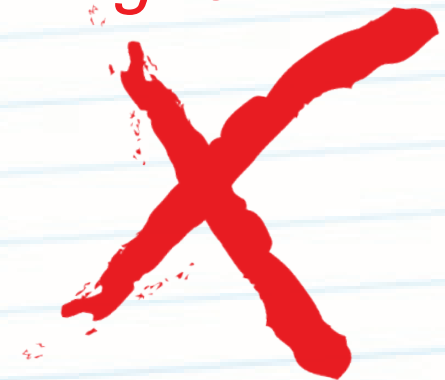
Short sentences are powerful.



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 in the top right corner, pointing downwards and to the left. It has just finished drawing a thick, curved blue line that starts from the right edge and curves towards the left, ending under the first line of the main text.

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 green plant sprout is located in the bottom right corner. It consists of a short, thick stem that branches into two thinner stems, one pointing upwards and the other pointing to the right. The background of the entire slide is a light blue and white striped pattern, resembling lined paper.

**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.



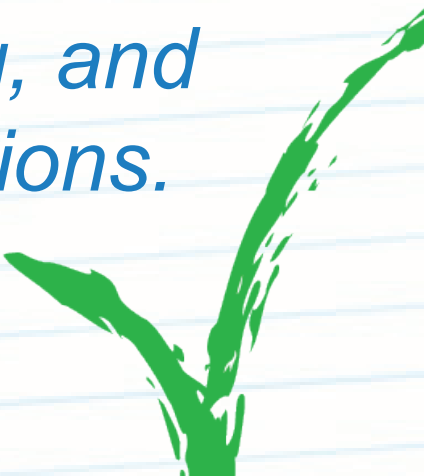
My experiences working as a counsellor at the Youth Crisis Hotline taught me how to remain cool under pressure.



A young girl with long, vibrant pink hair is singing enthusiastically into a silver microphone. She has her eyes closed and a joyful expression, with her mouth wide open. She is wearing a black t-shirt with some colorful graphics. Her right arm is raised, showing a tattoo on her forearm. The background is plain white.

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.

A decorative green brushstroke graphic that starts from the bottom right corner and curves upwards and to the left, resembling a stylized plant or leaf.

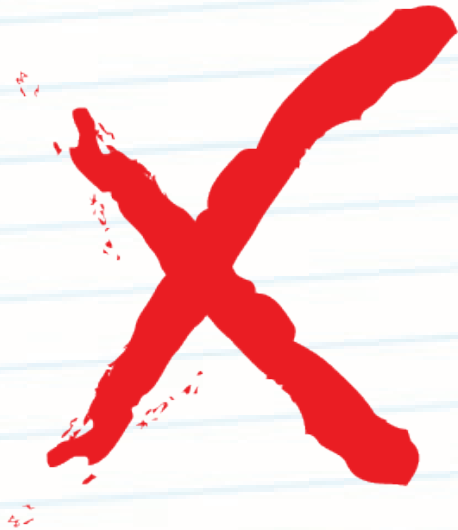


**Be
authentic.**
Speak in your own
voice.



Be authentic.

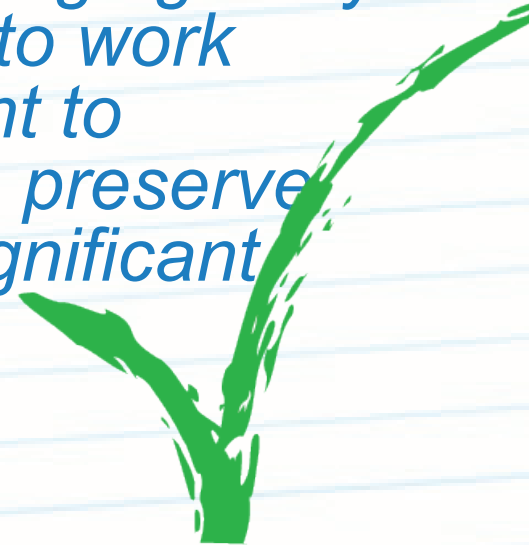
I thrive working independently or as part of a team.





Be authentic.

Prior to law school, I worked at a boutique crisis management firm in Toronto. I worked closely with the founder of the firm on a range of client matters. The firm's clients are public figures (politicians, athletes, entertainers) and major corporations. When a potentially damaging story about a client surfaced, my role was to work directly with the founder and our client to contain the potential fall-out and help preserve our client's public image, all under significant time pressure and media scrutiny.

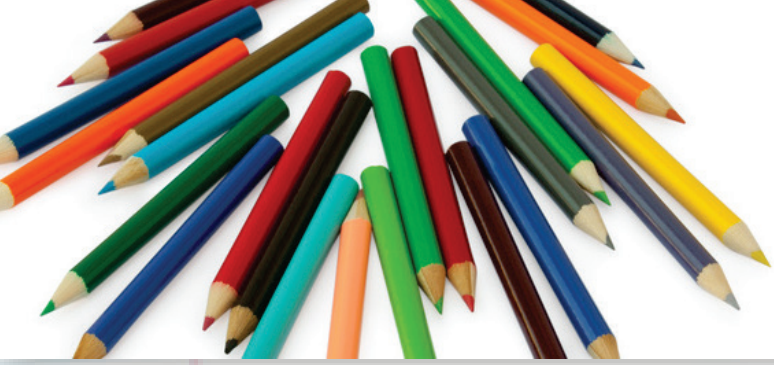


Be descriptive

about your experiences.

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





Be descriptive.

As a summer law student and research assistant, I navigated legal databases, interpreted jurisprudence and synthesized bodies of law. I have exhibited proficient legal research and writing skills as well. Having contributed to dozens of files at my school's legal clinic, I am prepared to manage conflicting priorities and time-sensitive assignments.





Be descriptive.

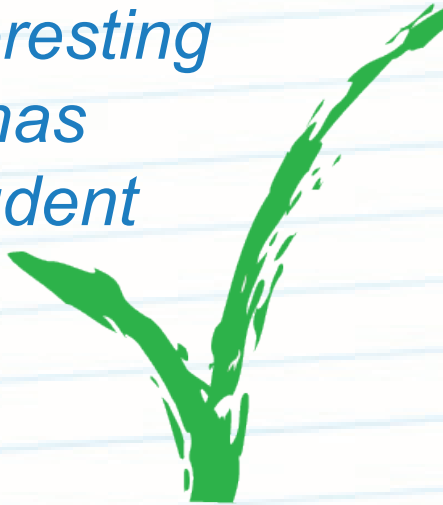
This summer, I worked on a full-time basis for a community legal clinic, supporting clients who could not afford a lawyer. I had carriage of several active files, including landlord and tenant and social benefits matters. I worked directly with clients on a regular basis. Some of my best learning came from my experiences in the field, representing clients at tribunals. I really enjoyed being “on my feet.”





Be descriptive.

In addition to my full-time work at the clinic this summer, I worked on a part-time basis for Professor [X], analyzing and synthesizing judicial review cases where presiding judges were alleged to have demonstrated race-based bias against the accused. I am co-authoring a paper on this topic with Professor [X]. In addition to being interesting from an academic perspective, this issue has additional resonance for me as a black student who aspires to be an officer of the court.





**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]





**Don't gloss over your
accomplishments.**

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.

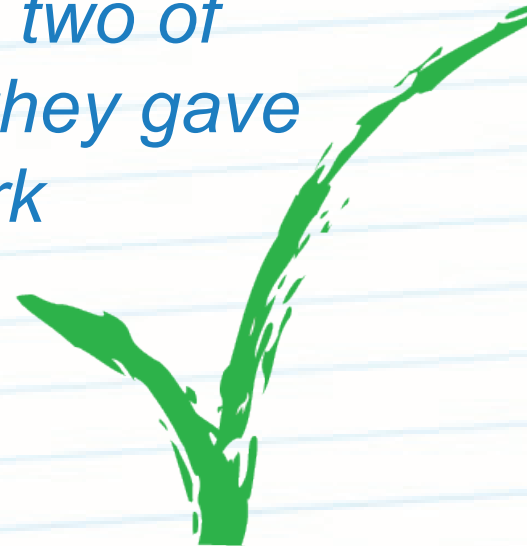
Joe Partner, head of your firm's Litigation Department, is a family friend and he suggested that I apply.





Personalize the letter.

John Doe, one of your summer students, 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

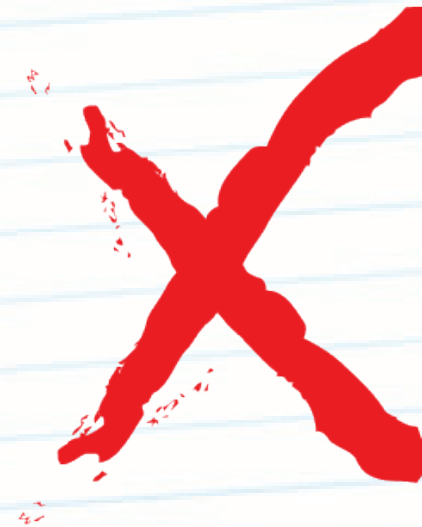
or sugary sentiment.

giving 110%

giving 110%

Avoid clichés

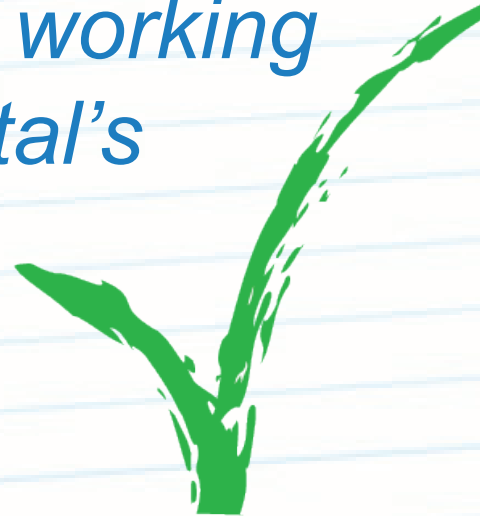
I volunteer my time because I believe it is important to give back to the community. Being a Big Brother to a young person has been the most memorable and rewarding experience of my life, and I hope that in some small way I have made a difference in my Little Brother's life.





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 a local rehabilitation hospital, working with young patients in the hospital's therapeutic pool.



A young boy with dark skin, wearing a green t-shirt, is sitting at a desk in a classroom. He has his right hand raised high in the air, looking towards the front of the room with a focused expression. In his left hand, he holds a pencil. On the desk in front of him are several colorful markers. In the background, other students are also raising their hands, and a teacher in a blue shirt is visible on the right side of the frame. The classroom has a corkboard with papers on the wall.

Questions?



Thank you.

Ari Blicher

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Associate Programs

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