

WRITING PROFESSIONAL COVER LETTERS

What is a Cover Letter

A cover letter is an introduction letter most often accompanied by a resume for job searches, informational interviews and networking purposes. A cover letter conveys your interest in a particular position and/or company and highlights your qualifications, skills, accomplishments and abilities related to your career objective.

Just as the resume is a marketing tool to attract an initial interest, the cover letter serves the same purpose. A professional cover letter is essential because it is the employer's first glance and impression of you as a candidate. A cover letter allows you to introduce yourself and state your objective, personalize your resume and highlight information that addresses the needs and interest of the employer.

A Cover letter focuses on the needs of the employer, not just your own. What is the employer looking for and in what ways do I meet these qualifications. Highlights successes, contributions and accomplishments described in your resume but not an exact carbon copy of the resume. Demonstrates your knowledge of the organization, position and field.

A cover letter is a sample of you and your writing style. If your cover letter is written sloppy with misspellings and errors an employer will take this as the type of work you will do if hired.

Getting Started

Have you had assignments or papers that were exceptionally difficult to write because you only had a limited amount of space to convey a large amount of detailed information? The same thing can be said about a cover letter. For most people, the most difficult task in writing a cover letter is conveying their interest in the position and unique skills in only a relatively small amount of space. The number one error in cover letter writing is making the letter too long and too boring. What you want is a letter an employer can read fairly quickly and get excited to flip the page to read more in a resume.

Just as with a resume, the first step in writing a cover letter is self-assessment and research. The more you know about yourself, the position and the company, the more you can tailor and streamline your cover letter to match what the employer is seeking, thus, saving you valuable space.

Cover Letter Format

Heading:

A cover letter is a business letter, therefore, there are required elements to the heading as well as closing. For your heading, (1) include your name and complete address. Some people choose to add a phone number or e-mail address, which is fine, but optional. Next, (2) list the complete date (do not hyphenate such as 12/13/05). Following the date is, (3) the employer's name and address. List the employer's name, title (if known), department and/or organization (if known) and complete address of organization. The last component to the heading is a greeting. Try to always find a specific name to put in the greeting (Dear Ms. Smith/Dear Mr. Richards). Sometimes it is impossible to find a name, however, always try to personalize the greeting such as "Dear Selection Committee."

Never write “To Whom it May Concern” since this is too vague. Opening Paragraph: Who You Are and What You Want

Briefly Introduce Yourself: This can include your student status, college or university attended or attending, field of interest and/or expected degree.

State Why You Are Writing: Are you writing to submit a resume for a specific position? Are you writing for a company to consider your resume for future positions? Are you writing for an informational interview?

Reference Your Information: If writing to be considered for a specific position, you can state where you found that listing such as a web classified ad or job posting from a career services center. If the position was referenced by a specific source, i.e., professional colleague, professor, alumni, then reference the particular person. Why That Company: State why you are choosing that particular company or organization. Does the mission of the organization match your values? Does it consistently hire graduates with your major and background? Even if the initial interest came from a personal reference source, a good candidate will do some background research on the organization to show a “good fit” when submitting a cover letter and resume.

Middle Paragraph(s) - Summarization of Qualifications

This paragraph can be one large paragraph or broken into smaller paragraphs. The purpose of this section is to showcase highlights from your resume that would be of great interest to the organization and create the idea of a “good fit.”

This section is not a carbon copy of your resume. However, this section can expand on content from your resume. For example, don’t write down every single job listed on your resume, but focus on one or two listings that showcase your experience and knowledge of the field. Include specific details or examples that demonstrate your abilities. If the job posting identified several essential skills and qualifications, you can write how you meet them in this section. For example, if the job posting mentions a specific software program required, and you have experience in that software program, you can provide more detail about your experience and knowledge working with the software in your cover letter. You can also include “Why That Company” in this section rather than the first paragraph depending how the information flows.

Closing Paragraph - Next Step

Thank the employer for consideration and his or her time. Let the employer know what you would like to see as the next step. Typically, this is an interview. If you like, you can initiate the next step by letting the employer know when you will be in contact. For example, “I will be in the Denver area the week of March 14th and will give you a call that Monday to arrange an interview.” If you give a specific date and time you are obligated to that time. Not following up on a stated time shows a lack of professionalism. If you can’t guarantee that you will follow-up, then don’t write it in the cover letter. You can always end with, “If you have any additional questions please feel free to contact me at _____, and give a phone number and/or e-mail.

Closing First, (1) have a professional closing such as “Sincerely” or “Thank You.”

Then, (2) type out your full name leaving space between the closing and your typed name for a handwritten signature. Also, don’t forget to write, (3) “Enclosure” or “Enc” after your typed name. As a business document, anytime you are enclosing material, i.e., your resume, references, application, you need to add this piece at the end of the document.

Cover Letter Appearance Checklist

Page Length - Only one page.

Adequate Margins – Typically one inch, however, no smaller than 1/2 inch margins.

Font – Between 10 and 12 point for readability. Also use a traditional business font style such as Times, Times New Roman, Palatino, Arial and other book print fonts. It is best to keep the cover letter and resume font style the same.

Absolutely No Misspellings - Proofread for spelling, grammar and typographical errors and don't rely only on a computer spell check system.

Clear and Concise – Delete unnecessary words, sentences and irrelevant information.

Consistent - Review dates and numbers for accuracy on the cover letter but also against your resume. Also pay attention to paragraph transitions (think back to your writing classes).

Explain Specific Information – Departments, program names, acronyms or any type of information that only people familiar with the project or organization would understand.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I really need to send a cover letter with my resume?

YES! Every time you submit a resume, or any type of application materials, you should have a cover letter accompany it. A cover letter is another professional element to your application. Also, sending a cover letter is in your best interest since it provides another mechanism to convey your interest in a particular position and/or company, your qualifications, skills, accomplishments and abilities related to your career objective than just submitting a resume alone.

Do I have to address a cover letter to a specific person?

YES! A cover letter addressed to “Whom it May Concern” automatically has a carbon copy feel. It is your responsibility as a professional candidate to make an effort to find a personal contact. Even if you can't find a specific person after you have done some research, still try to have a more specific general contact such as “Dear Human Resource Manager,” “Dear Hiring Committee” or “Dear Search Committee.”

Do I address salary or visa issues in the cover letter?

NO! Just as with the resume, the cover letter is one of the first samples of you and your work. You want an employer to get an initial interest, and preferably, do an interview, before sensitive questions or information are brought up.

Is a cover letter the same as a personal statement or letter of intent?

NO! Sometimes student confuse a cover letter with a letter of intent or personal statement, however, these are two separate documents. Remember, a cover letter is an introduction to your application package, which can include a personal statement, letter of intent or any additional materials requested.

Are cover letters only used for job applications?

NO! Anytime you submit professional materials you should attach a cover letter. Examples include applications for scholarships, fellowships, admittance into degree seeking programs, just to name a few.