

Writing A Cover Letter

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The Purpose of the Cover Letter

The purpose of a cover letter is to invite and then convince an employer to read your resume. Within the context of the cover letter you have the opportunity to expand on your resume, highlighting how you meet the qualifications of the job and what additional skills you can bring to the employer. A well-written cover letter may be the best tool you have to influence an employer who is swamped with resumes that you are an applicant worth considering.

Your resume is about **you**; it documents your education and experience, and highlights your accomplishments and proven skills. An effective cover letter focuses on **the employer**; it should elaborate on how your skills and qualifications will meet the employer's needs, and refers to your resume, which provides evidence to substantiate your claims. An effective letter will also communicate your enthusiasm for the job, knowledge of the company and entice the employer to read your resume.

Your cover letter should be an original document written specifically for each employer. An employer is not likely to be impressed by a letter that is not tailored to his/her particular company and employment needs or one that says little more than "I'm applying for a job, here's my resume, please call soon."

At this point you may be tempted to consider the task of writing a cover letter with the same dread and dismay you would have for yet another college research paper. Fortunately, learning how to write a powerful cover letter isn't nearly that difficult. Lots of information, guidelines, resources and samples are included to facilitate writing an effective cover letter. If this still feels overwhelming, read the last item on the last page A final word of advice – keeping it all in perspective before you continue. Then, you may even be able to drum up some **excitement** because a cover letter gives you another chance to market yourself to an employer . . . so they'll read your resume . . . invite you to interview . . . and offer you a job!

Writing Cover Letters

These are the basics:

- **An effective cover letter will provide four basic types of information:** why you are writing; why you are specifically interested in this employer; why the employer should be specifically interested in you; when and how you will follow up on your letter.
- **Identify the individual who should receive your letter.** Address your letter to a name, not a title or an office. If a company name is all the information you have, you will need to do a little investigating to obtain the name of the person receiving applications. Most people appreciate being addressed by name, and the extra initiative you took will make your letter stand out.
- **Use a friendly, conversational tone;** present yourself as a professional and pleasant person to work with. You may want to sound eager, enthusiastic, confident or determined, but never desperate or arrogant.

- **Be positive.** Stress your accomplishments and skills, your future value, e.g. *“I possess management skills as demonstrated in ...”* Don't be negative, vague or overly humble.
- **Address how your skills and qualifications will meet the needs of the employer.** Be specific; use examples that demonstrate your skills and quantify your experience and achievements. You need to draw from your experiences, those that *specifically* relate to the position you are applying for. Refer to your resume, but do not quote from it. Your cover letter should supplement and support your resume. Point out additional/transferable skills you will bring to the employer. What will set you apart from the other applicants who also meet the required qualifications?
- **Show a specific interest in and familiarity with that particular employer.** Tailor your letter to reflect an enthusiastic interest in and knowledge of the hiring company. One way to do this is to call the company's main number or human resources office and ask who is collecting or reviewing resumes for a particular job. If you know the department that is hiring (or the department that you would like to be working for), call the receptionist and ask for the name of the head of the department, or ask who does the hiring for a particular kind of position. Explain that you have correspondence that you need to direct to the appropriate person. Be sure to ask for the correct spelling of the individual's name.

Consider using the attached outline for putting together your cover letter.

Additional guidelines for cover letter format:

- Keep your letter to one page if at all possible.
- Use the block style format for business letters; double space between paragraphs, use flush left text in a 10-12 pt. type; repeat the font style of your resume.
- Use white paper, or a paper matched to your resume and envelope.
- Keep your paragraphs short. Vary sentence length. Consider, but use sparingly, **bold** or *italic* or use of one-sentence paragraphs for impact.
- Send an original document; mass-produced, generic letters are neither appropriate nor effective.
- Your letter should be **flawless**: no smudges, typos, grammatical or punctuation errors, no corrections made with black pen or whiteout, no last minute notes handwritten in.

Cover Letters For Unadvertised Positions:

Some additional guidelines for Referral Letters and Targeted Letters.

A referral letter is a cover letter with a distinct advantage. It grabs the attention of the reader by referring to someone they know and provides you with a certain sense of credibility. This type of letter is usually the result of successful networking.

- Mention the name of the person providing a referral in the first paragraph.
- A referral usually pertains to an unadvertised position, but would also be a distinct advantage in your application for an advertised position.
- This letter may also be based on a 'self-referral'. If you have spoken to an employer prior to sending a letter and resume, mention that conversation in your opening paragraph.

Targeted letters are a very pro-active approach to job search and a great way to “tap the hidden job market”. Targeted letters are sent to employers who interest you and may need your skills.

- Because you are choosing which employers you will send a letter to, you are also able to decide exactly who will receive your letter, that is, who has the power to make a hiring decision in the department you want to work in. If the organization is small, you may also want to send a copy of your letter and resume to the President or Executive Director (indicate on the bottom of your original letter that you are doing so – see format guide).
- Name the job title or type of work you are interested in. Demonstrate knowledge of the company and how you can benefit their organization. What kind of skills will you bring? Why are you especially interested in this organization?
- Let the employer know in your closing paragraph that you will be initiating follow-up contact. Specify how and when. Recommendations range from three to ten days as appropriate timing for a follow-up phone call. Be absolutely certain to follow-up as promised! When you call, be brief, positive and professional. You want to confirm receipt of your letter, re-affirm your interest in the position/employer, and ask for a meeting or interview to discuss your qualifications further.

Samples And Other Resources

For more information and sample cover letters, the Career Resource Library has several resources available for reference and loan, including:

- *National Business Employment Weekly COVER LETTERS*
- *Dynamic Cover Letters*
- *High Impact Resumes & Letters*
- *The Smart Woman's Guide to Resumes and Job Hunting*

You do not need an appointment to visit the career resource library, call 651-690-6510 for hours.

A Final Checklist: *A few reminders before you drop it in the mail*

___ **Check your letter format.**

Refer to our outline for format suggestions regarding style, margins, paper, etc. The stationary used for your cover letter, resume and envelope should match.

___ **Check for confident, professional writing style.**

Does your tone present you as a professional and pleasant person to work with? Have you avoided starting most of your sentences with "I" ? Do you use active verbs and phrases rather than passive? Check that none of your paragraphs are overwhelmingly long, and that you have varied your sentence lengths for interest. Eliminate qualifying expressions like "I feel that" or "I think that" which only weaken the statement that follows. Avoid opening your letter with the phrase "I am writing" which is obvious and understood. Consider visiting with a career counselor for feedback on your letter writing style and content.

___ **Check for effective content.**

Have you highlighted how your skills meet the required qualifications, used specific examples, referred to your resume, and addressed what else you can bring to the position? Does your letter explain your interest in this particular employer and position? Is your letter addressed to a particular person, and have you spelled their name correctly?

___ **Carefully proofread.**

Check for mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Check for typos. Now have someone else double check for you. Remember that you cannot rely on 'spell-check' to point out misspellings.

___ **Meet with a professional career counselor.**

Don't forget to use a walk-in or scheduled appointment to meet with one of the professional counselors in the Career Development office. You can ask questions and get feedback on the format, content and writing style of your letter. Call 651-690-6510 for information on counselor appointments and walk-ins.

___ **Don't forget your signature!**

___ **Mark your calendar to follow-up as promised.**

Make sure you can and will follow-up as you indicated in your closing paragraph. Leave yourself a reminder in your planner or calendar.

___ **Keep a copy as part of your job search records.**

Implement a good record keeping system to keep track of positions applied for, what actions you have taken, and what you need to do next. Include information you have regarding the position, your research on the employer, how you found out about the position (i.e. an ad, job fair, referral, etc.), a copy of your letter, notes on how you will follow-up, and room for notes on scheduled interviews, etc.

A final word of advice - keeping it all in perspective.

Gary Will, author, consultant and speaker writes,

"I've never seen a perfect resume or cover letter. I've never written one, and you probably won't either. But perfection isn't the goal. Strive for excellence – but remember that while you're sitting around tinkering with your letter, other people are out getting work with letters and resumes that are far weaker than you had to begin with."

This quote is taken from his article "Tips on Writing A Persuasive Cover Letter".
Read the rest of this great article on-line: www.garywill.com/worksearch/covlet1.htm