

Writing Your Cover Letter

strategies for effectiveness

The purpose of the cover letter is to demonstrate your organizational and writing skills to future employers while distinguishing yourself from other applicants. A cover letter should always accompany each resume you send out, unless otherwise specified.

A cover letter is particularly important if an objective is not included on the resume. The future employer needs to be aware of why you are sending a resume, what position you are interested in, and what exactly qualifies you for the position.

Cover Letter Quick Tips

Target your message. Describe how your skills, expertise, and accomplishments can benefit the employer. Follow standard business protocol. Write clearly and concisely and check your letter for spelling and grammar. Use the same font and paper that you use for your resume. Cover letters should be no more than one page.

Be purposeful. Every cover letter is different, but effective cover letters often provide evidence of some of the following via specific examples: company knowledge, technical knowledge, enthusiasm, communication skills, leadership, teamwork, comfort with deadlines, responsibility, ability to learn quickly, maturity, and self-starting.

Do NOT mass produce. It is especially important to relate your skills and experience to a specific position in a specific organization. Use examples! Incorporate information that reflects your knowledge of the company and the specifics of the job description. Spotlight your accomplishments and measurable results. Consider that each potential employer is looking for different skills and qualities in each applicant and for each position, if applying to more than one position with the same employer.

Send your letter to a specific individual. Ideally, the letter should be addressed to the person who is likely to make employment decisions. It may take some resourcefulness on your part to identify this person, but the letter will be better received. For example, you may place a phone call to the company's HR department and ask who will be making the hiring decision. If a specific name cannot be found, never address the letter to "To Whom It May Concern." Instead use "Dear Hiring Manager" or similar.

available assistance

One-on-One Advising is available to discuss your cover letter with a professional career advisor during a 30-minute appointment. Schedule through Handshake @ Illinois.

Drop-in Advising is available at Media Career Services. Stop by to get help with your cover letter. Check the website for details.

Our Website has even more information to help with your cover letter.

Cover Letter Layout

1. The “Get Attention” Paragraph

This is where you capture the attention of the reader, and give the name of the position you are applying for (and perhaps indicate how you learned of the vacancy - did someone tell you about it? Who? Did you see an ad? Where?).

Most importantly, you should give an outline of the specific reasons you feel you are ideal for this job in this company. Do not wait until paragraph two to begin selling yourself: start doing it here. Rather than saying “My skills and experience make me qualified for this position,” specify which skills and which experience. Specifics are always more compelling than generalities.

2. The “Creating Desire” Paragraph(s)

Here you go into detail, depicting yourself as a serious candidate and one worth inviting for an interview. It is generally a good idea to give the hard details about yourself (specific skills, history of responsibility, success, etc.) above ‘softer’ details like personality traits, attitude, and values.

Think about ways you can reinforce an image of yourself that includes as many of the desired qualities as possible. Use specific examples!

- It is important that you not only tell the employer that you have a skill, but show them how this skill is reflected in your experiences. Don't just say you are 'detail oriented,' give the reader an example of something in your history that proves it; rather than claiming to be 'motivated,' make the reader believe this about you by drawing on real experience. Show, don't tell. Remember, you are trying to set yourself apart from the other applicants; anyone can claim to be 'hard-working,' but only a truly hard-working person can prove it.
- Do not simply regurgitate the contents of your resume. You should certainly refer to it, but do so with a goal of expanding on relevant areas. It is also acceptable (desirable, even) to refer to things that did not make it onto your resume, if they strengthen your case.
- Wherever possible, emphasize how you will benefit the company. If you write too much about how you will benefit from being hired ('I hope to learn a great deal about the industry'), then you will be calling attention to the gaps in your experience and knowledge.
- Do what you can to demonstrate that you are well-rounded. If every point you make about yourself is drawn from your educational background, the reader might think of you as narrowly focused; if possible, draw on experiences from a variety of settings.

Your Address
City, State Zip Code

Today's Date

Name of Addressee
Title
Organization Name
Address
City, State Zip Code

Dear Mr., Ms., Dr. Smith:

1. 

2. 

3. 

Sincerely,

Your signature

Your Name
Enclosure: resume

3. The “Call for Action” Paragraph

Normally just a few lines in length, this is where you express your strong interest in the position and your desire to discuss your application further in an interview. You might also consider giving a brief summary here of the key points in the letter above, but avoid simple repetition for its own sake.

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