

Writing An Effective Cover Letter Handout

What is a cover letter?

A cover letter, also called an application letter or letter of interest, is a letter you write in business letter format to an employer that you send along with your resume when applying for a job.

What's the purpose of it?

The purpose of both your resume and your cover letter is to get you an interview. More often than not, your cover letter will be read only after the employer has read your resume and liked what they saw. Therefore, your cover letter should supplement the information on your resume. It gives the employer a chance to get a better sense of who you are. It will also be used to assess your communication skills.

An effective letter should convince the employer of 2 things:

1. That you would be a good match with what they are looking for and will add value to their organization
2. That you have done your research and really feel like this job and this organization are the right fit for you

“It seems like I’m just repeating what’s on my resume. What’s the point?”

Here are the main differences between your resume and your cover letter:

- Your resume just lists qualifications. Your cover letter *explains* how those qualifications have prepared you to do the job you are applying for.
- Your cover letter directly discusses your interest in the job and the company and the research you have done; your resume does not.
- Your cover letter more clearly demonstrates your ability to communicate effectively (or inability to do so!)

Tips for Writing an Effective Cover Letter

TARGET each letter to the specific job and company. NEVER send out a generic cover letter- there is no point since it will not cover any of the above topics. Remember, this is not just a formality; **you are writing a letter to a person**. Think about if you had the opportunity to be face-to-face with the hiring manager, what would you say to explain why you want the job and why they should want you there?

Focus on what YOU can do for THEM, not what they can do for you. You want to say enough about why you are interested in the job to make them convinced that you really will fit and want to stay awhile, but your main focus should be on how you will benefit the company.

Address your letter to a person; only use “To Whom It May Concern” as a last resort. It may not be obvious who the hiring manager is, so do some research to find out. Call and ask, talk to current employees, look for a directory on their website, or use LinkedIn®. It does not have to be addressed to the first person to read it, but it should be someone logical, like the head of the department this particular position is under.

Use a standard font (Calibri, Tahoma or Arial). Especially if you are sending your letter electronically, this helps to ensure that your letter will open properly on the employer’s computer.

Keep it to 1 page, between 10 and 12 point font size. In most cases, especially for entry-level positions, employers will not want to read a letter that is longer than one page.

It must be error-free! Errors in your letter make the employer think you will be careless at work, and having one error can be the only reason they need to rule you out. Always proofread carefully, and then have another detail-oriented person check it for errors. It is often hard to proofread your own writing!

Drop names. If someone the employer knows (and likes) referred you to that company or suggested you apply for that job, say that in your letter.

Write professionally and intelligently, but do not overdo it! An employer will be able to tell if you are trying to write in a way that is very different than how you would ever speak, like if you use too many big words! (You also do not want to disappoint them when you get to the interview!) DO make sure your letter is well written and well thought-out, because the employer WILL use it as a sample of your writing ability!

Cover Letter Guidelines

Use this worksheet to help you build your cover letter for each job that you are applying for.

Header

1. Make sure you are using the same header that you used on your resume for your contact information.
2. Next is the information for the person of contact for the letter.
To whom are you sending the letter?
 - a. Name
 - b. Title
 - c. Company
 - d. Address

Opening Paragraph

1. What is the exact title of the job?
2. How did you discover the job was available? (*e.g., job board, internet, placement center, referral, career fair, recruiter, etc.*)
3. Why are you interested in this particular job and company? (*e.g., type of work, location, reputation, opportunities, etc.*)
4. What makes you qualified for this position? (*e.g., previous position, skills, education, certifications, etc.*)

Middle Paragraph

1. What do you have that matches those needs? (*experience, education, results, skills, approach, abilities*)
2. Give a specific example from a past experience that relates to the job.
3. Determine what areas are the highest priority to the company. (*e.g., mission statement, values, community driven activities, goals, etc.*)
4. Give statements that include key words from the job description. Use power or action verbs. Make sure to show impact and scope.

Closing Paragraph

1. Briefly summarize the contents of your letter in a sentence or two.
2. What do you want to happen after you send the resume? (*An interview, a phone call, an email, etc.*)
3. What is the person expecting you to send? (*e.g., resume, letter of interest, salary requirements, references, examples of your work*)
4. What next steps will you take after sending your resume? (*e.g., a call, email, a visit*)