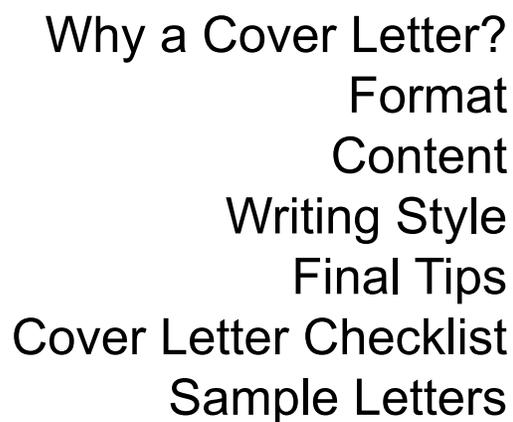


Cover Letters

A Guide to Writing
Effective Correspondence



- Why a Cover Letter?
- Format
- Content
- Writing Style
- Final Tips
- Cover Letter Checklist
- Sample Letters

Career Development Center



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WHY?

WHY should you write a cover letter?

Your cover letter serves as an introduction to you and your resume and explains why you are contacting the employer. Your resume should always be accompanied by a cover letter, and here are a few reasons why:

- To highlight certain aspects of your resume.
- To tailor your resume to a particular position or particular employer.
- To expand upon the resume.
- To add a bit of personality.
- To motivate the employer to read the attached resume and then invite you for an interview.

Writing a cover letter is your chance to make a connection with the hiring partner and address why you are interested in their company and specifically why you are a good fit for the position for which you are applying.

A cover letter can also say things that otherwise do not belong on the resume, such as explaining employment gaps or expressing a willingness to relocate. However, because some employers choose to read the resume before the cover letter, cover letters should be written to enhance the resume, not replace it.

KEEP READING FOR:

Format of a cover letter
How to organize content
Writing style
Tips to remember
Cover letter checklist for reviewing your work
Sample letters to get you started

Format Matters!...

You may have a ton of experience and good ideas to share, but if the information is not presented in an organized, easy to read format, your letter and resume may never be read!

Printed Cover Letters

Printed cover letters should be in business format, and the two most common styles are **full block** and **modified block**.

FULL BLOCK:

All paragraphs align on the left side of the page with no indentation.



MODIFIED BLOCK:

All paragraphs are aligned on the left except for your address, date, and your signature, which are right justified.



Though it may vary from the traditional styles above, it is also acceptable use the header style from your resume, i.e. your name and address block, at the top of your cover letter to further unify your application materials.

Format Matters

Email Cover Letters

With more and more applications being made online, cover letters are often sent in the form of an email. An email that functions as a cover letter should always adhere to standards of proper grammar, punctuation, and capitalization, as if it were a formal letter being mailed to an employer. It should include a salutation, one or two short paragraphs, and an appropriate closing. However, unlike with the printed cover letter, contact information can be included at the end in the signature block.

To attach or not to attach?

If you are sending your resume via email, you should refrain from attaching a separate cover letter document unless the job description specifically asks you to do so. Instead, keep the content concise, following the same concepts for writing a dynamic cover letter outlined here.

Subjects

The subject line of an email is the first chance you have to make a good impression, so never leave it blank. Instead, reference the job title (and position number, if applicable) you are applying for and your name. If instead of applying for a particular position you are requesting an information interview, you can state this information in the subject line as well.

Examples

- National Account Manager – John Q. Doe
- Public Relations Assistant – Molly Masscomm
- Supply Chain Manager – Ned Worker
- Employer, Inc. Informational Interview Request

* A Few Pointers

Try to keep your email one screen in length short enough so the recipient doesn't have to scroll.

Keep formatting simple, avoiding HTML.

Send a test email to yourself first to make sure the formatting displays correctly.

To:

Cc:

Bcc:

Subject:

 attach a file:

...But So Does Content

You have to grab the reader's attention with interesting content, and in order to do that, you first have to know what type of letter you should be writing. There are two common types of cover letters: a **letter of application** and a **letter of inquiry**.

Letter of Application

Letter of Application is used when there is a specific internship/job position advertised to the public. The position description will give you an idea of characteristics and skill sets the employer is seeking, so it is important that you read the description carefully. Highlight these points in the description, to ensure you know what the employer is seeking, and address the points in your letter.

Letter of Inquiry

Letter of Inquiry is used to express interest in an employer and inquire about the possibility of an internship or employment. Because there is no position description to help you identify the skill sets the employer may be seeking, it is helpful to read descriptions of similar posted positions. It is very important that you research the organization, including speaking with people within, so that you can state specifically why you are interested in the organization and what you can contribute.

Once you have determined the format you will use and the type of letter required, it is time to build content for your letter. Next is a general outline of what a good letter should contain, but remember that each letter you submit should be unique!

PIECES

- **Salutation**
- **Introduction Paragraph**
- **Body Paragraph(s)**
- **Closing Paragraph**

Next page elaborates on each of these.

...But so does content

Salutation:

It is important that you try to address your letter to the person who will be reading it. This information may be included in the job posting, but if not, you may call the organization and ask to whom you should direct your letter. If you are unable to obtain the name of the individual, then as a last resort, address your letter to Hiring Manager.

Body Paragraph(s):

Identify why you are interested in the position and your selling points, which is, the knowledge and skills you possess that make you ideal for the position.

Ask yourself:

- Does the writer show interest in the company/field?
- Does the letter explain how specific skills, experiences, or education relate to the company/position?
- Are skills linked to how they were developed and/or how they benefit the reader?
- Does the letter make the reader want to look at the person's resume?
- Does the letter flow smoothly?
- Do paragraphs contain groupings of similar information?

Intro. Paragraph:

State the purpose of your letter in a way that will immediately grab the reader's attention. Include the position for which you are applying and how you heard about it, whether through a posting or from a friend or mutual acquaintance. Ask yourself the following:

- Does the introduction paragraph indicate the specific position or field sought?
- Is the purpose for writing clear?
- Does the introduction paragraph persuade the reader to continue?

Closing Paragraph:

The closing paragraph should wrap up the letter by thanking the reader and stating when you will follow up. Have you:

- Referred reader to enclosed resume?
- Indicated your interest in an interview?
- Mentioned a follow-up plan, i.e. a phone call to set interview?
- Included a phone number in the event more information is needed?
- Thanked the reader for his/her time and consideration?

Writing Style

Though you may not be able to pinpoint why, most people recognize good writing—and conversely, bad writing—when they see it. Tone, word choice, and sentence structure as well as consideration for your audience play a big part in how your letter will be received, so always consider these in addition to overall content when writing your cover letter.

Below are two examples of how these elements can be used together to work to your advantage.

#1 ORIGINAL

I realize that my past work experience is not very conducive to this type of work. Due to my need to fund a large portion of my tuition I was forced into higher paying manual labor jobs. What it does show is that I have a hard working and goal oriented personality. Also in working manual jobs I had an opportunity to work and interact with a large variety of people, which helped my people skills tremendously. I am eager to start getting real life experience with information that I am learning in school.

#1 NEW AND IMPROVED!

I am proud of the fact that I have financed a significant part of my education through my summer jobs. This work has enhanced my appreciation for the education I am pursuing. While working construction, we were often met with tight deadlines. It was important that the team define our goals and prioritize what we needed to accomplish each day. Communication could be a challenge as team members were from different ethnicities. Through carefully listening to one another, we were able to meet deadlines and often finish ahead of schedule.

What's the difference? In the above example, the tone of the writer conveys a negative attitude that might prove difficult to work with if hired. It would be easy for a hiring manager to throw out his application before even looking at his resume.

The new paragraph highlights how the writer overcame obstacles in order to gain an education and also how those obstacles gave him the transferrable skills to excel in a variety of work environments.

Writing Style

On the other hand, you don't want to lose focus by speaking too strongly of your own virtues:

#2 ORIGINAL

As my resume shows, I have consistently performed exceptionally well in the classroom. I graduated with the highest academic rating in my high school's six-member district. Upon my entrance into MTSU, I was awarded two of the University's highly competitive scholarships. During my years of collegiate study, I have earned a cumulative grade point average of 3.1 while following a rigorous curriculum and developing my own program of study for my major. As an English major, I have achieved a grade point average of 3.6 and was awarded one of twelve places in the department's Honor program, which requires the development, writing, and oral defense of a thesis. This fall I was elected to the national Spanish honor society, Sigma Delta Pi. Balancing classes, assignments, several extracurricular activities, and a part-time job has required me to organize carefully and develop great time management skills.

#2 NEW AND IMPROVED!

As an English major in the honors program, I independently completed a 100 page thesis. As there was no set class time, I exercised strong self-discipline. I developed a system of prioritizing in order to balance my thesis work with other assignments and activities. By proactively managing my time, I was able to devote the necessary time needed to perform significant research for my thesis. Additionally, I learned to effectively analyze and synthesize complicated information to utilize in support of my thesis, which was positively received by my adviser. I am developing a formal presentation of my findings and will be defending my position within the month. The skills I developed through this experience will allow me to make immediate contributions to the strategic consulting team.

What's the difference? This student's letter demonstrates significant academic accomplishments and a high level of recognition for her achievements. However, in the original paragraph, the focus is entirely on the achievements and fails to note their broader application or how these past accomplishments will contribute to the company.

Again, the improved paragraph outlines the student's accomplishments but in a way that shows how the knowledge and skills gained in these school activities will transfer to the work environment.

It is highly recommended, in addition to proofreading the letter yourself for accuracy, that someone else proofread your letter for these more subtle nuances.

Tips

To summarize, there is not one way to write a cover letter, but there are certain expectations and guidelines for creating a strong one.

Direct your letter to an individual; **focus** your letter on a position; **highlight** how your accomplishments contribute to the company; and describe your plan to **follow-up**.

Below are a few final tips for ensuring your cover letter is well-received.

- Decide your purpose for writing and state it clearly. Place the most important items first, supported by facts.
- Be direct in what you say, be as brief as possible, and write clearly and simply, BUT keep the reader's attention by varying sentence structure and length.
- Write for the reader. Stress benefits for the reader.
- Do not repeat the entire resume, but DO refer the reader to the resume.
- Do NOT use a form letter for your cover letters. Each cover letter must be original and written for the job description and company.
- Always spell check and proofread your cover letter and have someone else proofread it as well.
- Set all of your page margins to 1 inch.
- Use a 10-12 point font size and make it the same font style as your resume.
- Use paper that matches your resume if you are hand delivering or mailing it.
- Do not go over one page.
- Keep your letter personal, warm, and professional.
- Use active voice and action verbs.
- Be positive in content, tone, word choice, and expectations.
- Be sure the first sentence summarizes the content of the paragraph. Many times recruiters skim the cover letter.
- Be sure to talk about your career goals, strengths, skills, and abilities and how all of these relate to the position for which you are applying.
- Make sure there is a match between the skills the job description highlights and the skills your cover letter highlights.
- Include specifics when talking about why you want to work for the company—do your research!
- Thank the reader for their time



For more information on cover letter writing, be sure to check the Career Development Center's online resources.

Cover Letter Checklist

Review the items of this list and make sure each is fulfilled before sending your cover letter.

YES**NO**

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The introduction paragraph indicated the specific position or field I am seeking. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The introduction paragraph motivates the reader to continue. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | My purpose for sending the letter to the reader is clear. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | If I read only the first sentence of each paragraph, I get the message of the letter. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I demonstrate interest in the organization/field. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I address specific skills, experiences, or education that the organization/field is seeking. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have demonstrated how the skills were developed and how they will benefit the reader. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | My cover letter flows smoothly. Similar skills are grouped in the same paragraph. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | My cover letter comes off as personal, warm, and professional. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have used active voice and action verbs. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | My sentences are easy to read with varied structure and length. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | My cover letter is in a business letter format. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | There are no spelling or grammatical errors in my cover letter. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have indicated my next step. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | My contact information is included (phone # and email address). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have thanked the reader. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have signed my cover letter. |

Sample Cover Letters

Letter Outline

While each cover letter that you submit should be unique and tailored to a specific job description, there is a basic formula that can be used to increase chances of your resume being reviewed. Below is an outline for creating a letter that is easy to follow and conveys the message that you are a candidate worth interviewing.

[Your] Mailing Address
City, State Zip
Date

[Hiring Manager's Name]
Title
Employer
Mailing Address

Dear [Hiring Manager's Name]:

First Paragraph. In your initial paragraph, state the reason for the letter, name the specific position or type of work for which you are applying, and indicate from which source (career center, news media, friend, professor, etc.) you learned of the opening.

Second Paragraph. Indicate how your educational philosophy correlates with the school system's mission and goals. If you are a recent graduate, explain how your academic background makes you a qualified candidate. Try not to repeat the same information the reader will find in the resume.

Third Paragraph. Refer the reader to the enclosed resume and application form which summarizes your qualifications and experiences.

Final Paragraph. In the closing paragraph, indicate your desire for a personal interview and your flexibility as to the time and place. State your phone number in the letter. Finally, close your letter with a statement or question which will encourage a response. For example, state that you will be in the city where the school system is located on a certain date and would like to set up an interview. Or, state that you will call on a certain date to set up an interview.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Type Name

Enclosure (This means your resume!)

Sample Cover Letters

Letter of Application

123 Middle Tennessee Way
Murfreesboro, TN 37132
March 15, 2005

Ms. Jane Doe
Recruiter
ABC, Inc.
4567 Raider Highway
Murfreesboro, TN 37130

Dear Ms. Doe:

I am writing to apply for the marketing representative position available in your Dallas office, which I learned of through the Career Center at Middle Tennessee State University. My educational background and work experience support my strong interest in a career with Big Company, Inc.

As you can see from my enclosed résumé, I am completing a degree in agribusiness with an emphasis in marketing. My coursework has included training in market analysis, business management, agricultural communications, and a variety of computer programs and applications. My first internship provided valuable exposure to marketing plan development for an agricultural equipment company. In my second internship with a large trade organization, I was responsible for coordinating a community involvement campaign and marketing an associated youth leadership workshop to potential participants. I also trained six other interns on the new database I created to manage the program's records.

My research has revealed that ABC, Inc. is a leader in the agricultural industry. I am especially interested in the strides ABC has taken in developing new products to address requirements of tomorrow's agricultural production demands. My background, skills and goals appear to match those outlined in your position announcement. I am genuinely interested in contributing to the further success of Big Company.

I would like the opportunity to visit with you to discuss the marketing representative position. I will call you late next week to see if a meeting time can be arranged. Please feel free to contact me at 615-123-4567 in the meantime. Thank you for considering me for this position.

Sincerely,

Ann Student
Enclosure

Sample Cover Letters

Letter of Inquiry

123 Middle Tennessee Way
Murfreesboro, TN 37132
March 15, 2005

Ms. Jane Doe
Human Resources Manager
ABC, Inc.
4567 Raider Highway
Murfreesboro, TN 37130

Dear Mr. Doe:

After visiting with several recruiters at the Middle Tennessee State University Fall Career Fair, I checked your company's website and am even more intrigued with some of the recent projects. I am writing to inquire about employment opportunities with ABC Inc.

I will graduate in May 20XX with a degree in Environmental Science. I became interested in environmental issues prior to entering MTSU, and planned my education based on this interest. My summer internship with a large environmental consulting firm convinced me to pursue a career in the environmental industry, as my interest has now become a passion.

My résumé is enclosed for your consideration. As you can see, several of my electives, such as Solar Building Design and Pollution Control Technology, specifically address the skills ABC is seeking in Management Training Program candidates. I am confident in my career direction and in my abilities to perform the tasks required by your organization.

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss my education and qualifications. I will call your office next week to see if a meeting time can be arranged at your convenience. If you need to contact me, my number is 615-123-4567. Thank you very much for considering my request. I look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Byron Environ
Enclosure