HOW TO COMPOSE AN EFFECTIVE COVER LETTER

A cover letter affords you the opportunity to present yourself as the perfect candidate for a particular job. Employers have needs, or they would not have openings. You have qualifications. A cover letter helps to bridge the two.

Highlight your most attractive features as a potential employee. A cover letter allows you to select one or two accomplishments or special skills that reflect your suitability for a desired position.

First, try to determine the appropriate person to whom you should address your cover letter. The more high-ranking your contact, the better. Try to contact the department head in the area which you are interested. Be sure to include your contact’s name and title on both your letter and envelope.

When should you send a cover letter? Every time you make contact with a prospective employer. Unless the advertisement says “send resume only,” be sure to include a cover letter.

WHY CREATE A COVER LETTER?

A well-prepared resume is sometimes not enough to convince an employer that you should be interviewed for a position. As important as your resume is, your cover letter can direct the reader’s attention to aspects of your education and experience that are the most relevant.

Cover letters demonstrate your knowledge of the organization you are targeting and explains any part of your work history that needs clarification. A cover letter also demonstrates that you can organize your thoughts and express yourself clearly and appropriately. In a sense, your cover letter reflects your communication skills and, to a certain degree, your personality.

WHAT MAKES UP A COVER LETTER?

Cover letters are usually one page documents consisting of a beginning, middle, and end. Typically, these three components can be conveyed in as little as three paragraphs.

The beginning is the introduction that expresses who you are and why you are writing. This paragraph should include any relevant contacts you have in the organization, and for which specific position you are applying.

The middle section can be one or two paragraphs, and is the sales pitch that describes what you have to offer. This section should also expand upon your interest in the position and how your qualifications fit with it.

The concluding paragraph is the closing in which you propose steps for further action. You should request an interview or meeting. Ask for the next step in the process, clearly and without apology or arrogance. View the samples in this handout for more specific guidelines on how to develop the right cover letter format for you.

CONTENT OF THE LETTER

Address the company/employer
A cover letter should be addressed to the specific company and individual who will process your application. You can usually find this information through research or by calling the company.

Address the position
The letter should name the position for which you are applying, indicate your knowledge of and interest in the company, and indicate your qualifications for the position. You want to answer questions such as:
• Why do you want to work with this specific organization?
• How do you fit in with this organization?
• What are your qualifications for this particular position?

Address your assets
Include:
• Positive information supporting hire
• Information detailing your strengths, accomplishments, interests and goals
• Examples of productivity and performance
• Benefits you can offer the employers

Omit:
• Information unrelated to position
• Negative talk about your prior employer
• Salary requirements or salary history.
• Personal information such as marital status, children, religious preference, etc.

LAYOUT OF THE COVER LETTER
• Write the letter in your own words so that it sounds like you, not like something out of a book
• Your writing style should be clear, objective, and persuasive rather than narrative
• Form paragraphs with a conversational though formal tone
• Check spelling and ensure there are no typing errors
• Use 8 1/2” by 11”, high quality paper that matches your resume
COVER LETTER FORMAT

Contact’s Name
Contact’s Title
Company Name
Company Address
City, State Zip Code

Mr. or Ms. Contact:

Your opening paragraph should arouse the reader’s interest. Indicate why you are writing the letter, the specific position or type of work for which you are applying, and how you learned of the opening. Give information to show your specific interest in this organization.

Your middle paragraphs should create desire. Give details of your background that show the reader why you are a strong candidate. Be as specific as possible about the kind of job you want. Mention why you are interested in the position, the organization, its products, or its services. Above all, indicate what you can do for the employer. If you are a recent graduate, explain how your academic background makes you a qualified candidate. If you have some practical work experience, point out your specific achievements or unique qualifications. Do not make the reader guess the point you are trying to make.

Refer the reader to your general qualifications, cited on your enclosed resume. Use as much space as you need to tell your story, but keep it brief and to the point.

In your closing paragraph, ask for action. Indicate a desire for a personal interview. You may suggest alternative dates and times or simply advise employers of your flexibility as to time and place. State your phone number in the letter and offer any assistance that would help achieve a speedy response, such as additional information. A positive request is harder to ignore than a vague hope.

Sincerely,

Sign your name here

Print Your Name

Your Street Address
City, State Zip Code
Your Phone Number
Your Email Address
Enclosure
Mr. John M. Curtis  
Recruiting Coordinator  
HAL Corporation  
55 Washington Avenue  
New York, New York 10081

Mr. Curtis:

I am pleased to enclose my resume in response to the computer programming position recently posted on Jobs4Cats. As a recent graduate from Texas State University, I am excited to begin my career in a position that will allow me to combine the talents I have developed through my academic courses and internship experiences.

My coursework as a computer science major has exposed me to an extensive set of programming experiences, including the use of C++, HTML, Java, and Perl. Through my academic projects, I applied my coding skills to create a web application, and further developed my ability to effectively problem solve under minimum supervision. In addition, I recently completed an internship with XYZ Technologies wherein I gained experience in producing essential code procedures for the organization's client database system. This internship yielded the opportunity to collaborate with various departments to create an effective and efficient product which maximized productivity by 25 percent.

Through my internship and academic projects, I have developed strong technical and interpersonal skills that would enable me to be a strong asset to your team. I am proficient with strong analytical skills and am eager to undertake challenging projects which continuously distinguish your company as a leading organization in this industry.

I am excited to learn more about this position and welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how my qualifications can best help HAL Corporation. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Joan Doe

Joan Doe  
1234 15th Street  
Troy, New York 12180  
(512) 271-0000  
Jwdoe23@yahoo.com
THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE WRITING YOUR COVER LETTER

- **What is the prospective employer seeking?**
  Think about the skills, knowledge, and experiences that would be an asset in the job you are targeting.

- **What are your objectives?**
  Are you applying for a specific position, trying to get an interview, or hoping to spend some time talking to someone who can discuss opportunities in general at that organization? Be specific.

- **What are the qualities that you bring to this employer or job?**
  Think of at least two specific accomplishments you can mention that credit the qualities you've identified.

- **Why do you want to work for this particular organization?**
  What do you know about the organization? What is it about their products or services, philosophy, mission, goals, and needs that relates to your interests, background and values?

USEFUL ACTION VERBS

**Management Skills**
- adapted
- delegated
- oversaw

**Communication Skills**
- addressed
- explained
- resolved

**Technical Skills**
- administered
- maintained
- utilized

**Teaching Skills**
- advised
- coordinated
- facilitated

**Financial Skills**
- allocated
- appraised
- reduced

**Creative Skills**
- created
- invented
- integrated

**Helping Skills**
- advocated
- resolved
- supported

**Organizational Skills**
- distributed
- implemented
- executed

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A SUCCESSFUL COVER LETTER

1. Tailor your cover letter as much as possible to target the reader and industry.
2. Focus more on what you have to offer the prospective employer than on what they can do for you.
3. Communicate focused career goals.
4. Avoid saying anything negative about your employment situation or about your life in general.
5. Get to the point quickly and clearly.
6. Back up claims with examples.
7. Keep the letter to one page unless told otherwise by the prospective employer.
8. Let other people read it and get their opinions before sending it.
9. Keep easily accessible copies of all letters you mail, fax, or e-mail.
11. Use terms and phrases that are meaningful to the employer.
12. Show concern, interest, and pride for your profession. Demonstrate energy and enthusiasm.
13. Avoid stuffiness, and maintain a balance between professionalism and friendliness.
14. Include information relevant to the job you are seeking.
15. Utilize Career Services by getting your cover letter critiqued, or by using the library resources.