

Writing a Cover Letter

Perhaps the only thing job-seekers dread more than writing a resume is writing the cover letter to go with it. True, a resume requires good, solid writing and attention to detail, but a cover letter is addressed to a particular person—whichever is in charge of hiring—and requires the job-seeker to answer the most important question on that person's mind: "Why is this applicant the best qualified candidate for the job?"

How well you write a cover letter may play a large part in how effective your resume will be. A good cover letter may get you an interview; a bad one may make your resume little more than an afterthought.

Cover Letter Content

The cover letter is the first piece of your work that a potential employer sees. It reflects your ability to communicate and get a job done. If it doesn't work, your resume will not be read and you may not get an interview or job offer. Make it count!

The cover letter is your chance to sell yourself to a potential employer as the best candidate for a specific position. As such, it's just as important as your resume. In fact, **you should never send out a resume without one.**

The most important thing to remember is that your cover letter serves a separate function from your resume and should *not* be used to repeat the details of your resume, such as work history, education, or personal objectives. The resume is about you, your experience, and your skills. **The cover letter is about what you can do for the employer.**

An effective cover letter should accomplish three things:

- **Introduce yourself and your reason for writing.**

The first paragraph needs to grab the hiring manager's attention. Say exactly why

you have sent your resume: you are interested in the company and you want to fill a need they have. Demonstrate your interest by indicating any connections between the employer and yourself. Show that you work in the same field, that you share a common professional interest, or that you have been following the company or industry in the news. If you were referred to the company by a mutual friend or associate, mention them; the hiring manager may feel more obligated to respond to your letter. (Don't profess to know more than you do, however. If you make inaccurate statements regarding the company or the industry, the hiring manager will see right through it.) When offering to fill the company's need, be specific as possible. Don't just mention the job description; describe what the company requires from that position.

- **Sell yourself.**

In the second part of the letter state (briefly) the skills you bring to the table that will specifically meet the employer's needs. There is no need to go into great detail; your resume should take care of that. Instead, use this section to highlight how you will use your talents and experience to benefit the company. Don't use it to indicate how you think you'll benefit from being employed—with a stack of resumes on the desk and positions to fill, the hiring manager isn't concerned with your personal fulfillment. Keep your use of the personal pronoun "I" to a minimum. Try to use it in this sense: "Here's how I can help you."

- **Make a plan.**

Close the letter by indicating what you would like to happen next. Don't leave the ball in the employer's court; take action! Tell the potential employer where you can be reached, either by phone or by e-mail, but don't wait for a call. Indicate that if you don't hear from them within a few days, you will follow-up with a phone call to make sure your resume and cover letter have reached the intended recipient, and to arrange a face-to-face interview. Be assertive but polite. (Some job seekers may want to use a paragraph to explain anything that's not apparent from the resume, such as large gaps in the employment history.)

Cover Letter Format

There is no one "official" format, but here are some basic rules to keep in mind when composing a cover letter:

- A five-line block on the top center of the page containing: your name; home street address; city, state, ZIP code; phone number; and your e-mail address.
- The date should be on your letter. (The date may be separated from the block by one line.)
- Another block, flush left, one space below the date and one space above the greeting. This block contains the addressee's full name, title, company name, and address, including city, state and ZIP code.
- Use a colon after the greeting, not a comma. The greeting should address a specific person in a formal manner. "Dear Ms. Harper:" is perfect; "Dear Jennifer:" is not.
- Use a personalized salutation (not, for example, "To Whom It May Concern"). **Make an effort to find out who will be receiving your letter. If necessary, telephone the company and ask.** If you do not find a specific name, address the letter to "Hiring Manager," "Human Resources Manager," or simply "Manager."
- Paragraphs should be separated by one blank line of space; indentation is not necessary.
- You may use bullets and bold print in the body of your cover letter to organize and highlight information, and make it easier to read. If you do decide to use them, do so conservatively.
- The closing should read "Sincerely," followed by your signature underneath, then your full name in print underneath that. Always leave enough room for your signature between the closing and your name when you print your cover letter. If typing your cover letter, you can make an electronic signature using Microsoft Paint or an online program.

Cover Letter Writing Tips

How you write your cover letter is as important as the message it delivers. Your letter is an example of how well you communicate, and no employer wants to hire people who can't do so effectively. With that in mind, here are some tips on making your cover letter look and sound professional.

- **Be natural.** Use simple, uncomplicated language and sentence structure. Don't try to sound like someone else, particularly if that means using unnaturally formal language, convoluted sentences and words you've never used before (perhaps misusing them in the process). You may mean to impress, but you'll often sound awkward. Be formal, but don't be a stiff. Say things in a simple, straightforward way, and don't rely on a thesaurus. As with your resume, use action words to create dynamic sentences.
- **Be specific and get to the point.** Your cover letter must be intriguing enough to get the reader to look at the resume, but should be only an introduction to the resume, not a repeat of it. Make sure you answer the question, "Why should I hire this person?"
- **Avoid using clichés,** like "I've taken the liberty of enclosing my resume," or "I'm a people person." It's difficult to sell yourself as unique if your letter reads like every other one in the pile.
- **Be positive.** Don't complain about your boss or describe your present or previous work experience as "boring." Nobody wants to hire somebody with an attitude. Above all, don't sound like you're begging for a job. A hiring manager may wonder why you're so desperate.
- **Be confident, but not arrogant.** Don't be negative or too humble. Tell them you're qualified for the job, but don't demand it. Explain why you find the company attractive (there must be some reason or you shouldn't be writing) and leave it at that.
- **Be polite and professional.** You may be a comedian with your friends, but a potential employer should be treated with respect.

- **Be efficient.** Don't waste space (and the reader's time) on unnecessary details. Respect the employer's time—make sure every sentence has something to do with explaining your interest in the company, illustrating how you'll fill the company's needs, and how you'll contact the company in the near future.
- **Type your letter,** but make sure that you change all customized statements accordingly if you are sending a similar letter to multiple companies; no company wants to read how much you'd like to work for their competitor. Carefully read each letter before you sign it.
- **Be available.** Remember to tell the employer how to reach you. Give a phone number, which will be reliably answered by either a person or a voicemail. If possible, include an e-mail address.
- **Do not leave the ball in the employer's court.** Indicate what reaction you expect from your letter and how you will follow up. For example, don't end with "I look forward to hearing from you soon."
- **Proofread.** Check carefully for grammar and spelling mistakes, then check again. Typos and grammatical errors say a lot about the kind of work you do. Don't depend entirely on the spell-check function of your computer. If you use "there" for "their," for example, spell-check won't notice. Keep a dictionary handy for proper word usage.
- **Sign it.** If you forget this, the employer may feel like you've sent a form letter.
- **Package it nicely.** If using a paper cover letter, print your resume and cover letter on the same paper stock; the uniformity will look professional. Use only printers that produce neat, readable text with no stray marks or smudges.
- **Keep one for yourself.** Make a copy of each letter sent, and keep it for future reference.

See the following pages for a sample cover letter format and an example of a cover letter.

Your Name
Street Address
City, State Zip Code
Phone Number
Email Address

Current Date

Individual's Name
Job Title
Name of Organization
Street Address
City, State Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms. _____ :

First Paragraph: State the reason for writing. Name the specific position or type of work for which you are applying. Mention how you learned of the opening.

Second Paragraph: Explain why you are interested in working for this employer and specify how you are PERFECT for this position. Do not only repeat the information on your resume. Include something special or unique about yourself that would "benefit" the employer. Remember, the reader will consider this an example of your writing skills.

Third Paragraph: Mention your resume is enclosed and indicate your desire to meet with the employer. You may want to suggest alternate dates and times, or simply advise them of your flexibility to the time and place. Include day and evening contact information. Include a statement or question that will encourage the reader to respond. Be sure to communicate your plan to follow up. You might state that you will be in the area on a certain date and would like to set up a meeting, or you will call on a certain date to set up a meeting. Never leave it up to the employer to get in touch with you. Finally, thank the employer for his/her time.

Sincerely,
(Your signature should be in blue or black ink)
Your typed name

John Brown
5400 North Irving Street
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55444
612-752-8100
jbrown@yahoo.com

May 25th, 2003

Sherrie LeCrone
Training Services Manager
1900 Chicago Avenue South 2nd Fl.
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404

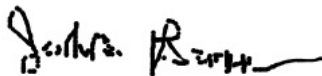
Dear Ms. LeCrone:

I'm responding to the ad in the Star Tribune regarding the Compute Technician Position that you have available. I am A+ Certified and just graduated from Avivo Institute. I feel that I would be an asset to your organization and would like an interview with you to discuss my skills and qualifications.

Enclosed is a copy of my resume. As you can see, I have worked as an Intern at 3M Corporation in Saint Paul, MN. Some of my experience as a PC Technician is in upgrading, installation and networking of PC's and peripherals. I also 10 plus years in Customer Services and I have a degree in Business Management.

Again, I would love the opportunity to interview with you. I may be reached at 612-752.8100 or by email at jbrown@yahoo.com.

Sincerely,



John Brown