

COVER LETTER GUIDELINES

PURPOSE OF A COVER LETTER

“The art of good letter writing is more important than ever . . . The old interview adage that ‘you never have a second chance to make a good first impression’ is equally valid for the cover letter. For it is usually the cover letter . . . that first introduces you to a prospective employer. Your cover letter tells them who you are and why an employer should want to spend their valuable time meeting you in person. It enables you to express your personality and style—two important ingredients that are difficult to demonstrate in standard resume formats. It invites the reader to focus attention on your key qualifications in relation to the employer’s needs. In the end, it may well be your cover letter, rather than your accompanying resume, that is responsible for getting you invited to the job interview!”

—Krannich & Krannich, *Dynamite Cover Letters*

In essence, the cover letter provides you with an opportunity to:

- introduce yourself and state your objective
- personalize your resume
- highlight information that addresses the needs and interests of the employer

Bear in mind that the letters you write not only convey your interest and qualifications, but also give the employer an opportunity to observe your attentiveness to detail, spelling, grammar, and the overall quality of your written communication. **Flaws in your letters will often be interpreted as flaws in your qualifications.**

CHECKLIST FOR WRITING GOOD COVER LETTERS

A Good Letter Is:

- Focused on the needs of the employer, not just your own.
- Individually typed and addressed using business-letter format and a letter-quality printer.
- Aesthetically appealing with careful attention to spacing and format.
- Without errors or obvious corrections.
- Generally limited to one page, using paper identical to the paper used for your resume (letter-quality printer paper or high quality bond is fine for both).
- Addressed to a specific individual with name, title, organization, and address all correctly spelled. Use “Dear Human Resource Manager” only as a last resort. Ideally you should try to identify the actual hiring manager and address your letter to that individual.
- Well worded, concise, and controlled in the use of the pronoun “I.”
- One that highlights your skills and abilities, and goes beyond being a mere restatement of what’s already on your resume.
- Able to demonstrate your knowledge of the organization.
- Clear on your objective.
- Originally worded and not copied verbatim from the attached samples.

GUIDELINES FOR THE BASIC COVER LETTER

The best cover letters are short and to the point. Generally they contain three paragraphs, possibly four, as follows:

Opening Paragraph: *Who You Are and What You Want*

Briefly introduce yourself, your major and degree anticipated. If you are aware of a specific opening, refer to it. If you are not aware of a specific position, state your area of interest. This paragraph can also be used to refer to the individual who recommended that you contact the organization, or other factors that prompted you to write. If possible, convey why you are interested in the organization and anything you know about their product or service.

Middle Paragraph(s): *Why You Are a Good Candidate*

In one or two paragraphs, describe highlights from your background that would be of greatest interest to the organization. Focus on skills, activities, accomplishments, and past experience you can contribute to the organization and its work. If possible, demonstrate that you know something about the organization and the industry/field. Use action verbs that describe relevant skills/expertise you can contribute. Mention specific knowledge you may have, i.e., computer applications, foreign languages, lab techniques, writing/editing capabilities, etc. You are attempting to create a match or “notion of fit” between the employer’s hiring needs and your interests and experience.

Closing Paragraph: *Next Step You Will Take*

Close your letter with a statement that you would like to discuss employment opportunities or other information with the individual and that *you* will call to follow up on your letter (demonstrates your initiative and follow-through, as well as helping you maintain some control of your efforts). Other points that can be made in the last paragraph:

- Express your willingness to provide additional information.
- State a specific time that you will contact them by phone.
- Let them know if you are going to be visiting in their area on given dates.
- Thank the person receiving your letter for their time and interest.

COVER LETTERS ON-LINE

Increasingly job seekers are being asked to send their resumes and cover letters on-line. In terms of content, Patricia Wilson, Manager of University Recruiting at SUN Microsystems advises: “On-line cover letters should be about half the length of a regular cover letter. Be sure you mention how you found out about the position, what you are looking for, and what you have to offer. You might also mention a few key words the organization might want to hear. Most importantly, be succinct.” Most experts also recommend that you compose your cover letter off-line first before “importing” it into an outgoing email message that you will then send with your resume. You can do this by using your software’s “copy and paste” feature to enter the text into your email. Or you can “attach a file” to your email message. Patricia Wilson said most companies prefer that the resume and cover letter be embedded into the text of the email, rather than sent as an attachment. “While it won’t look as pretty,” she said, “it’s the information that is important, and it’s quicker for us to receive and forward.” Companies also use key word searches on these documents. For additional information on the technical aspects for “importing” and sending your resume and cover letter on the Internet, request *Hook Up, Get Hired* by J.L. Kennedy at your library or bookstore.

FINAL TIPS

- Have someone you trust, perhaps a friend with good writing skills, review your letter for spelling, syntax, grammar, etc.
- While a general cover letter can be used, best results come from individualizing each letter to fit the specific circumstances (position, organization, etc.).
- Devise a system to keep track of the follow-up steps you have taken, and the responses you have received. Most job seekers have found that binders or file folders for organizing the job search and its correspondence are essential.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *Cover Letters that Knock 'em Dead*, Yate.
- *Cover Letters That Will Get You the Job You Want*, Wynett.
- *Dynamite Cover Letters*, Krannich & Krannich.
- *Electronic Resume Revolution*, Kennedy & Morrow.
- *Finding a Job on the Internet*, Glossbrenner.
- *From College To Career*, Asher.
- *Hook Up, Get Hired*, Kennedy, 1995 (Chapter 7.)
- *Resumes That Mean Business*, Eyler.

Substantial portions of this material was developed and written by the staff of Stanford's Career Development Center.