Cover Letter Tips

Basics
A cover letter is a letter of introduction that you submit with your resume when applying for opportunities. The cover letter works in tandem with your resume; while your resume presents relevant data and facts about your skills and experience, a cover letter is a narrative, whose purpose is to highlight and expand upon your most relevant experiences that align with the requirements of the position. The cover letter is also a chance to share your knowledge of, and interest in, the employer and to move to the next step in the hiring process: a job interview.

A cover letter should be no longer than one page, and ideally 3 or 4 paragraphs. You should include an opening and closing paragraph in addition to the main content. The header should match your resume, and we recommend using business professional format, with the date and employer’s contact information at the top, under your header.

Letters should be tailored for each position (no generic letters or templates!) and be addressed to an individual. If no name is available, then address to the Hiring Manager, Search Committee, or Internship Coordinator (or something similar).

Keep in mind: there is no such thing as a good general cover letter. Each job or internship you apply for requires a demonstration of how your qualifications fit with the attributes a particular employer is seeking for a specific role. It’s an opportunity to connect the dots for the employer as to why you are a great fit for them.

Before You Begin
Research! Be sure you understand the employer, the position, and how your skills, education, and experience align with what they need. Carefully re-read the job description to identify the required qualifications and scour the company/organization website and LinkedIn pages to understand the culture. Search the Web for articles, reviews, or press releases related to the organization and its activities. Your cover letter should convey that you understand what the company is about and that you understand the position.

Identify the main qualifications the employer is seeking.

Consider how your courses, academic projects, internships and jobs, volunteer experience, and extracurricular activities relate to the responsibilities and qualifications for the job. Jot these down.

Choose 2 or 3 of the most relevant examples from your experiences that match the qualifications for the job.

Remember that the organization isn’t interested in how you want to grow or gain experience (at this stage), but rather, they want to know what you can do for them. Avoid statements like “this would be a great opportunity for me…”

Demonstrate to the employer that you’ve done your research by connecting the position to your skills and experience. For example: “It’s my understanding that you’re seeking candidates who possess strong writing and editing skills. My internship at a publishing house enabled me to develop those precise skills through…”

See the next page for the anatomy of a cover letter!
Anatomy of a Cover Letter

Date

Employer Name, position title
Company Name
Company address line 1
Company address line 2

Salutation: Dear _(first name last name)_________

Opening Paragraph: Identify the specific position you are applying for and how you heard about it. If this is for an internship, indicate what time period you are applying for. Convey enthusiasm for the employer and the position (this is where your research comes in, so show you know something about the company/organization). You are answering the question: "Why them?" Then, describe something about yourself that connects you to the position. Answer the question: Why you?" Enthusiasm goes a long way. You might also want to say for them to please find a copy of your resume attached.

Next 1 or 2 paragraphs: This is where you connect the dots between the opportunity and yourself, by sharing one or two examples of why you are an ideal candidate. Choose examples of work you have done in the past that are directly related to what the employer needs you to do in this role. Then be specific, using the STAR technique if helpful (describe a Situation you faced, a Task you were responsible for, the Action you took, and the Result of your action).

For example: As an Arts Administration Intern with the Community Project, I was assigned to review our membership outreach processes and make recommendations on how to increase our donor base. To accomplish this, I analyzed our past outreach methods and member lists and noticed that we were contacting the same donors repeatedly while adding very few new prospects annually. I recommended that the organization increase outreach by utilizing shared member databases from other, similar organization, and by researching on LinkedIn, to add 20% more potential members each cycle. This resulted in 45 new members in the first quarter, a 5% increase.

Closing paragraph: Close on a positive note and be brief. Thank the employer for their time and consideration, reiterate your enthusiasm for the position, and tell them you look forward to speaking with them soon to discuss how your skills and experience can help them attain their goals. Remember, the goal of the cover letter (and resume) is to earn an interview, not to express everything.

Sincerely,

Your name here