

Writing an Effective Cover Letter

Why is a cover letter required?

Employers use cover letters both **to determine your interest** in a position and **to assess your written communication skills**. Even those employers who do not read cover letters at first may eventually review them to compare applicants who seem similarly qualified.

How do I begin writing a cover letter?

1. Prepare to write

- The most effective cover letters are **tailored to the specific position** and **highlight the fit between the job requirements and what the applicant brings**. Therefore, to begin:
 - Re-read the job posting. Note the key attributes/skills the employer is seeking in a future employee. Two or three key attributes are ideal.
 - Assess yourself. Do you have those skills? If so, highlight them in your letter. If not, think about what attributes you do bring to the position that either are similar to what they seek or will help to address their needs. You should meet 75-80% of the qualifications in order to consider yourself qualified to apply for the position.
 - Research the company and, if applicable, specific department. Explore the company website. Read on the site, LinkedIn, or via a Google search about recent developments. This research will prepare you to express in a sentence or two why you want to work *specifically* for this particular company.
 - Search for the name of a contact to whom you can address the letter. Look on the website. If that does not yield results, call the general employer phone number. When the receptionist answers, politely explain that you'd to send a letter and resume and were hoping they could provide the name of someone to whom you could address the letter. If you still do not have a name, you will simply address it to "Hiring Manager."

2. Write a first draft

- Think of the letter as a **"mini essay"** with an introduction, body and conclusion. It should be no longer than 1 page. It should include the heading (your name and contact information) that is used on your resume for a coherent, professional appearance.
 - **The introduction should include:**
 - Reason why you are writing and where you learned of the position
 - The name of the specific position and company to which you are applying
 - A brief introduction about yourself
 - A final sentence (a "thesis statement" of sorts) highlighting the fit between you and the position, emphasizing the 2 or 3 things that you bring to the position that make you a great fit. This sentence will help to structure the remainder of the letter. THIS SENTENCE CAN HELP TO ORGANIZE THE ENTIRE LETTER.

- **The body (1-2 paragraphs) should include:**
 - Description of the 2-3 attributes you bring to the position (that you mention in the introduction)
 - Quantification or specific examples (while also being brief) to support your description
 - A link back to how those attributes you have make you good for the job
- **The conclusion should include:**
 - Re-statement of your enthusiasm regarding the opportunity
 - A statement of your desire to speak with the employer in person, along with an intent to follow-up
 - A thank you for their time and consideration

3. *Re-read, edit and finalize*

- Re-read the cover letter. Remove any unnecessary words and express your thoughts as concisely as possible. If you use the same verb or adjective repeatedly throughout the letter, consult the thesaurus for an alternative.
- Ask yourself: What is this telling the employer? Make sure it is what you want to say!
- Do NOT simply rely on spell-check. It can miss things! Moreover, double check that proper nouns (e.g., names of people, companies, etc) are spelled correctly.
- Finally, have at least two other people read it to be sure it makes sense, your message is clear, and there are no typos.

Overall guidelines to keep in mind

- Be brief. Use powerful words, concise sentences, and short paragraphs.
- Do NOT restate your resume. Rather, explain *how* your experiences meet the specific needs of the position.
- Focus on the particular employer's needs and what you can do for them, not what they can do for you.
- Keep it to one page.
- Match the type style and paper with your resume.
- Proofread for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Address the letter to a specific individual if possible.
- Keep a record of where you have applied, when you've sent each cover letter, and when you plan to follow up with a phone call.