

# Guide to Writing an Effective Cover Letter

## THE PURPOSE OF YOUR COVER LETTER

You could write the best resume in the world and be highly qualified for a job, but if your cover letter is poorly written, generic, or misguided, you can pretty much throw your chances out the window. The cover letter is your first, and sometimes your only, opportunity to grab an employer's attention and let them know why your resume is worth reading. There are many different ways to write a cover letter, depending on the employer and the method of transmission. Here are some ways to make yours stand out.

## BEFORE YOU WRITE THE LETTER

- **Update your resume.** If you don't already have a resume, then write one -- the experiences and skills you list on your resume should be tailored to the particular position you're applying for, reflecting strengths that will be desirable to your potential employer.
- **Research the target organization or business so you can include information or facts relating to your desired job or industry.** This will not only help you in writing a relevant cover letter but it will also be useful if you get an interview. Some key items you should become familiar with:
  - What is the employer's mission?
  - What do they promote as setting themselves apart from competitors?
  - What kind of customer base does the employer cater to?
  - What kinds of people are in their target market?
  - What are the company or organization's values? Innovation? Service? Diversity?
  - What is the history of the employer? Who was the founder?
  - How has the business or organization evolved?
- **Analyze the job.** Read the job description *carefully*. Check for the noted and assumed needs and determine the most important skills, qualifications and experience the employer is looking for. Write them down, and put a check mark next to the ones you have.
- **Find the name of the manager in charge of the department you want to work in.** Use your network. Do you know someone who is in the company or industry? Can they help you? If not, call the HR department.

## WRITE EFFECTIVE CONTENT

- **Format the heading elements correctly.** Line spacing and address conventions mainly apply for a paper cover letter. For an online version that is not likely to be printed out, the date alone may be sufficient, or not even required.
  - Use the same formal letterhead you created and used for your resume. They should be identical.
  - Skip down 2-4 lines and enter the date.
  - Skip down 2-4 more lines and enter the Contact Person, then the name and address of the company. Write to a specific person, not "To whom it may concern", or "Dear Sir/Madam", whenever possible.

- **Write the body of your letter with three or four paragraphs.**
  - Paragraph One: Tell the employer **why** you're writing to them in two or three sentences. State the position you are applying for. Avoid the standard openings like "I wish to apply for the position of \_\_\_ advertised in \_\_\_". Design your opening to get the reader to sit up and pay attention to what you can do. It's unnecessary to specify how you became aware of the position unless it's through a mutual contact or recruiting program. If you're writing a letter of interest (also known as a prospecting or inquiry letter), in which you're asking about positions that might be available, specify why you are interested in working for the employer.
  - Paragraphs Two and Three: Outline your qualifications and match them to the requirements of the open job position. Show enthusiasm and a desire to help the company reach its goals. Show the employer what you can contribute to *their* bottom line, not what *you* want to get out of the deal. Use what you've researched about the employer's background and history. Try to make two or three solid points, backed up by specific examples. Relate some relevant details about the company so the employer knows you did some research ahead of time.
  - Last Paragraph: Include a positive statement or question that will cause the employer to want to take action. Make this closing paragraph between 2-4 sentences. Direct the employer to the enclosed resume, make your availability known for an interview, and if you want to be assertive, state when you will contact them to set up a meeting time to discuss the opportunity in further detail. Provide your own contact information (phone number, e-mail address) and welcome them to get in touch. It's very important to finish off by thanking the employer for their time and consideration.
- **Conclude with "Yours sincerely,"** Leave four blank lines to sign your name in ink.
- **Proofread!** This is essential. Some things to look out for are:
  - Be sure you have spelled everything correctly.
  - Own what you've accomplished, grammatically speaking (e.g. avoid "this experience gave me the opportunity to..." or worse, "these goals were met by me."). You don't want to sound like everything happened **to** you or was done by some other entity. Make yourself the active subject of every sentence (e.g. In this experience, I developed/reinforced/learned/etc."). But that doesn't mean every single sentence should start with "I..." so vary your syntax accordingly.
  - Break down any contractions (e.g. "I've" to "I have").
  - Avoid colloquial (informal) writing. You want to sound professional, objective, and educated.
  - Check the punctuation use carefully.
  - Keep the letter to one page -- the purpose of the cover letter is to get the hiring manager to read your resume! If the letter is spilling onto a second page, it's time to tighten your points and edit the fluff.
  - Your tone should be upbeat, professional and informative. The employer wants to know what you can do for them, so sell yourself and your skills in a positive way. Keep that in mind as you write and proofread each paragraph.