

# Cover Letter Writing

HOW-TO GUIDE:

Career Development  
Center



# Frequently Asked Questions

## 1. What exactly is a cover letter and why do I need one?

- A cover letter is a **one-page** application document used to apply to a job, internship, etc. It is a well-written and research-based statement articulating your qualifications for the job and fit for the organization. Along with a well-written résumé, it's goal is to earn you an **interview**.

## 2. What is the difference between a résumé and cover letter?

- A résumé articulates the skills you have acquired from your experiences. Do not rewrite your résumé into your cover letter. The cover letter introduces you as a candidate and explains that you can do the job you are seeking. Your cover letter also serves a writing sample—demonstrating how well you articulate ideas and write persuasively and intelligently.

## 3. What's this about Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches?

- Think of the résumé and cover letter as a PB&J. Peanut Butter and Jelly are two very different ingredients but compliment each other on a sandwich. This is the relationship between the résumé and cover letter—they compliment each other but are different documents.

## 4. I've written a general cover letter, will that be good?

- There is no such thing as a “general” cover letter. Cover letters must be rewritten for each position you apply to. They are based upon research of the job, company, and industry. A general cover letter will quickly be tossed by an HR manager.

## 5. How do I structure a cover letter?

- Cover letters are business letters and should be structured as such. Pages 6-7 will give you examples of different ways to structure your letter and the important information to include.

## 6. Do I address the letter to “Dear Sir or Madame” or “To Whom It May Concern”?

- Neither! Whenever possible, address a cover letter to a person. Many job announcements will list the contact person so use that. Otherwise, utilize the power of the Web to look it up! Usually HR managers are listed somewhere on a company website. As a last resort, use “Dear Hiring Manager” or “Dear Director of Human Resources.”

## 7. How do I send a cover letter?

- Unless otherwise specified, always send a cover letter, along with the résumé as a PDF document. Place the cover letter on page one and the résumé on page two and send them as one attachment. In this way, you can avoid having your document changed or have its formatting messed up by different software.

## 8. I have completed a cover letter draft, what is the next step?

- Please submit a copy of the draft, along with the position description for the job you are applying to Michael Cronk, Assistant Director of Career Development: [mcronk@transy.edu](mailto:mcronk@transy.edu). Include days and times you are available for an appointment.

# Beginning the Cover Letter:

## Start With Research

**A successful cover letter begins with strong research. You need to understand the job, the company, and the industry. If the job description is vague, *and unless it states otherwise*, you can contact the company to learn more about the position. Visit our website to read about effective methods for conducting research.**

- In the box below, type the most important skills, qualifications, and duties required of the position.

- In the next box, list important information about the company that you learned from your research. This could be information regarding its mission, goals, products and services, or anything else that you think stands out.

- Save this information; you can refer to it as you draft your letter.

# Drafting a Cover Letter

While all cover letters need to be unique to the position you are seeking, the following pages outline the Four Sections that should appear in any well-written cover letter. Please read through each section and note how, collectively, they serve to present a complete, complex, and well-reasoned argument as to why you are a good candidate. Utilize the rubric on page 8 to “score” your résumé and to see detailed instructions on the “good, bad, and ugly” of cover letter writing.

## Section I: The Introduction

Any employer knows why you are writing to seek a position—you need a paycheck and benefits (or experience in the case of an internship). What an employer does not know, that you need to explain, is why they should invest in you.

The introduction to a cover letter should explain *what you are applying for and what you can offer to the employer*, rather than what you are seeking.

- **Example of a strong introduction—from a real student’s cover letter**

Dear Mr. Tillman:

When searching for summer employment in economics, the Department of Treasury holds a natural appeal. Upon review of the Treasury's functions, I believe I can contribute productively to the Treasury's work in applying practical research and economic tools to public economic issues. I share the Treasury's commitment to a high standard of work, and therefore will be an asset to the Treasury in the summer internship position.

- You can see from the Introduction above, that the student focused on what he could offer to the Treasury in a succinct and intelligent manner. The intro was brief, yet complex. It clearly shows that the writer read about the work of the Treasury and understood what was needed from an intern.
- It can also be useful to state, in the introduction, where you found a position posting that you are responding to. You can mention that you found it through Career Development, on the company’s website, or were referred to it by an employee or some other networking contact. Organizations like to know how applicants discover the job announcements.

## Section II: Why you are Qualified

The main body of the cover letter focuses on why you are qualified. The first thing an employer needs to know is if you can do the job. Using the job description, you can explain, *in general terms*, how you have the experience to do the job. **Do not rewrite the résumé**; refer to the résumé in the letter, and instead focus on how you can do the work.

As indicated on my résumé, I have ample education in economics, with a special emphasis on trade and finance concerns. Though only in my second year of university, I have already completed almost my entire economics coursework. This early completion of my required work stems from my determination to set and achieve goals for myself. In all things, I am a goal-setter and, for that reason, will function well in the Treasury.

Having spent a greater-than-usual amount of time abroad for a student of my year, I am deeply interested in international economics. My research foci include welfare effects of trade liberalization, tariff policy efficacy, and institutional effects on development. Given these fields of study, I am uniquely suited for work in the Office of International Affairs, where the conjunction of my academic interests and the Treasury's policy objectives will be particularly beneficial both myself and the Treasury.

I will be able to effectively communicate the Treasury's work due to the focus on professional writing in the liberal arts education of Transylvania University. I am an excellent communicator in writing or in person, and have significant experience in developing formal policy, professional communication, public discourse, and political writing. Given my positive, outgoing personality and strong communication skills, I am well-suited for an internship in Public Affairs, where such skills are essential.

- The example above shows how the writer focuses on what can be offered and why he would be effective in helping the Treasury during an internship.
- When given a long list of duties on a job announcement, focus on the most important ones and/or the “big picture” abilities.

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### Section III: The Fit

Being able to do a job well goes a long ways to helping you get said job. However, it is not enough. Can the employer imagine you working in the office? Do your potential co-workers see you as someone they can get along with and rely on to be an effective part of the team?

The third section of the cover letter demonstrates why you will be a good fit for the position and the organization:

My concern for international economics originates in service work in the Philippines in 2005, where I witnessed the difficulty of poverty relief. This early discovery of my interests has propelled me not only into international economics, but also into policy concerns. As shown in my résumé, I have developed clear communication skills by publishing political and economic columns in our campus newspaper. I have engaged in political work through multiple campaigns in my home community, as well as in the 2008 Iowa Caucus. This dual interest in policy and economics demonstrates my usefulness in the treasury specifically, where economic models must be translated into useful and communicable language for Congress, the Administration, and the public.

- In this letter, the writer shows how his interest in economics began and how this will help him work hard for the Treasury.
- Other ways to do this include recognizing certain “buzz words” on a company’s website or focusing attention on a particular project, program goal, etc. that the company has or is working on and how your personality, professional goals, or passions connect.

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### Section IV: The Closing

Finishing a cover letter involves more than just saying thank you. In fact, one of the most important elements of a cover letter is found in the closing. **Ask for an interview!** Getting an interview is the whole point of the application, so make sure request one!

As such, due to my qualifications as listed here and in my résumé, I hope you will consider my application for the summer internship position. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview, either by phone or through Skype. If it is necessary to reach me, my contact information is included in the header of my résumé. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
James Transy

- The closing above is professional and assertive. The writer solicits an interview and indicates how he can be contacted.
- Given the prevalence of emailed applications, leaving a space to sign your name is no longer as important.

# Examples of well written cover letters by Transy students

## Bodie O. Trustee

Permanent:  
1558 Oxford Drive  
Murray, KY 42071

botrustee13@transy.edu  
859-555-8193

Campus:  
300 N. Broadway  
Lexington, KY 40508

The writer utilizes his résumé “header” as stationary for the cover letter. This a professional look that includes all relevant contact information. The letter uses a business format throughout.

April 30, 2012

Mr. Chad Aull, Internship Coordinator  
The Kentucky Democratic Party  
PO Box 694, Frankfort, KY 40602

Dear Mr. Aull: — Letter is addressed to a specific person. A colon is used after the name.

Mentions a contact within the organization who he networked with.

Hello, my name is Bodie Trustee and I am currently a sophomore Political Science major and Spanish minor at Transylvania University. I am writing to inform you of my interest in participating in a possible internship opportunity with the Kentucky Democratic Party this summer. I became aware of this opportunity by personal research and through a link advertising the internship on Transylvania University’s website. I have also been in correspondence with a fellow student, Jane Pioneer, who has provided me with more in-depth information about the internship and the KDP in general based off of her past experience working with the party.

Business letters utilize block paragraphs, single spaced, with a space between each paragraph.

During my two years in undergraduate study, I have become more and more interested and intrigued by political issues, systems, goals, and campaigns. Because I am relatively new and do not have extensive experience in the political realm, I believe an internship opportunity with the KDP would be an excellent outlet to further my knowledge and experience of the behind-the-scenes logistics and mechanics that are essential to successfully achieving the goals and aspirations of a political organization. I am especially curious to see how the policies and personal beliefs of politicians and party officials are transferred to constituencies, and how party ambitions are realized and promulgated through the people, political systems, and legal structures.

At the same time, I believe that my personal attributes, curiosity, and assiduous mentality can most certainly contribute to furthering the objectives that are imperative to ensuring the success of the party. Along with my proficient writing and communication skills, my passion for learning and my desire to experience new challenges and situations are fundamental characteristics that would allow me to perform to the best of my abilities in an internship opportunity such as this. Finally, the personal evolution that I have undergone throughout my experiences in academics, campus involvement, service, and several others has exemplified an essence of personal evolution and individual growth that will be crucial for enhancing my work in an internship setting, and these can thus be utilized to serve others, the community, and the party as a whole.

Despite these personal qualities, I realize that I have much more to learn about Kentucky politics and the aspects of political organizations in general, and I believe that this internship opportunity is the perfect bridge toward the next step both in my own personal development and in providing a way for me to serve others in the community. I am excited at the prospect of being involved in something that is bigger than myself, and I consider it a must to learn more about the KDP and its ideology toward bettering the Commonwealth of Kentucky. It is this dedication, then, that invokes me to desire involvement in helping to guide the party toward success in the wake of the upcoming 2012 elections.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter, and I appreciate your consideration in the application process. Although this letter and resume are aimed to portray myself and my experiences to you in as detailed a manner as possible, I would love to speak with you more in person about any of these details.

The writer asks, in his own way, for an interview. This is essential!

Sincerely,  
Bodie Trustee

Jessica P. Pioneer  
 300 North Broadway  
 Lexington, KY 40508

March 19, 2012

The writer utilizes a more traditional business style format for the header. In both examples, the writer's address, the recipient's address, and the date are included.

Ms. Sandra Sims, Director of Public Relations and Marketing Communications  
 St. Elizabeth Healthcare  
 Covington, KY 41011

Dear Ms. Sims:

After living in the Greater Cincinnati region for several years now, I have come to understand first hand how St. Elizabeth Healthcare helps improve the lives of those in the community, through high quality and compassionate care. I am writing this letter because I would like the opportunity to be a part of a company such as yours as an intern in the public relations department. Currently, I am pursuing a degree in business and a focus in marketing at Transylvania University. My classes thus far and my past public relations experiences, make me qualified to provide a positive impact on your employees and those you serve by helping to continue and improve the highly valued relationship that St. Elizabeth has with those its serve.

The writer focuses on what she can offer to the hospital.

My writing skills are well honed and continue to improve as Transylvania University places a large emphasis on its students' writing skills. I am now in my second writing class, dedicated solely to improving students' critical thinking and writing skills. As philanthropy chair for my sorority, I have demonstrated my strong organizational skills through the planning and running of our annual Sincerely Yours Letter Campaign, one of our largest fundraising events. My creativity skills are also refined, as I have to use them consistently in the designing of my sorority's monthly philanthropy calendar and constructing new events, such as the water balloon fight we are hosting later this term. With my large involvement in numerous philanthropies, I have a great appreciation for St. Elizabeth's commitment to aid those in need. While a few "résumé experiences" are mentioned, they are focused on the job being applied for and the letter is not a rewrite of the résumé.

My parents are retired Naval officers and therefore during their military careers, I lived all over the country in places such as Maryland, California, as well as, overseas. This has allowed me to better connect with individuals from all over the world. As a result, I am able to relate to patients faster and in more depth. Furthermore, I have developed a deep respect for diversity due to all of my travels, which I believe will allow me to easily collaborate with others to produce the best possible outcome.

The experiences and different insights I would bring to St. Elizabeth can be immediately applied and valued by your employees and customers. I hope for the opportunity to further discuss my qualifications with you in an interview. I will follow up with you in one week. Should you need to reach, please call me at 859-555-6763 or e-mail me at [jppioneer15@transy.edu](mailto:jppioneer15@transy.edu). Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
 Jessica Pioneer

This writer is more overt about asking for an interview, but it is still done professionally.

## Cover Letter Rating Sheet

The rubric below can assist you in “scoring” your cover letter. Read through each category and the associated score to determine how strong your letter is. **You can type into this rubric** to assign yourself a score. Do not worry if it has all “5’s” before bringing it to Career Development. The important thing is to learn what goes into a high quality letter and work toward it!

Points	Poor					Excellent		Total Score	
	1	2	3	4	5	Score	Weight		
<b>FORMAT</b> (x2 weight)	-No addresses -Non-Business style paragraphs -Addressed "To Whom it May Concern or Dear Sir or Madame"	-Address of writer, but not recipient -Indented paragraphs -Not addressed to recipient	-Addresses appear -Business format -Not addressed to recipient	-Addresses appear -Business format -Addressed to a position, but not a person	-Addresses appear -Business format -Addressed to recipient		X		
<b>INTRODUCTION/ CLOSING</b> (x2 weight)	-Does not mention what is applied for or where position was found -Does not ask for interview -Does not thank reader	-Focused on what the writer wants -Does not mention where position was found -Does not ask for an interview	-Focused on what writer wants -Mentions referral or posting location -Does not ask for interview	-Writer offers to help organization -Mentions referral or other inside knowledge -Does not ask for an interview	-Writer offers to help organization -Mentions referral or other inside knowledge -Writer solicits an interview professionally		X		
<b>QUALIFICATIONS SECTION</b> (x3 weight)	-Limited or non-existent -Shows no capacity to do the job. -Shows no understanding of position.	-Simple rewrite of the résumé. -Shows no connection to the job.	-Rewrite of the résumé -Makes some connection to the job.	-Focuses on ability to do the job. -Includes a lot of résumé experiences.	-Connects to needs of job. -Shows capability -Mentions some examples, but directs reader to the résumé.		X		
<b>"FIT" SECTION</b> (x3 weight)	-No mention of company -"Generic" cover letter	-Shows rudimentary understanding of company -No mention of personal qualities that connect.	-Rudimentary understanding of company. -Some focus on personal qualities/connection	-Shows strong understanding of company -Makes good connections between person and company	-Well written connection between company and personal mission. -Shows how you belong there.		X		
<b>WRITING AND MECHANICS</b> (x 2 weight)	-Poorly Written -Littered with spelling/grammar errors	-Weak sentences -Poor paragraph structure -Errors in spelling/ grammar	-Better writing -Some awkward sentences, but good overall -Some errors	-No errors -Good writing -Good paragraphs	-No errors -Strong, intelligent, purposeful writing		X		
<b>RAW SCORE</b>								Out of	
<b>PERCENT SCORE</b>								/60=%	
<b>Type comments or questions to discuss here</b>									