

The Cover Letter

The importance of a strong, well-written cover letter cannot be overstated. A cover letter is used to introduce your resume to the hiring official, essentially explaining why you are applying for the position, and convincing the reader you're the ideal candidate. Without a cover letter, the hiring official is left to make their own assumptions regarding your qualifications and candidacy. Therefore, unless instructed otherwise, you should always send a cover letter along with your resume.

A cover letter should consist of 3 or 4 concise, marketing-oriented paragraphs that fit on one page. Each sentence should be powerful and convincing. Grammar and spelling are extremely important, as is your choice of words. Many readers skim the cover letter at first (just like the resume), so it should be visually pleasing and contain buzzwords that capture attention. Use full-block style and use an easy-to-read font. Be sure to date the letter.

1st Paragraph: Tell the reader what you are applying for, how you learned of the opening, and add a sentence about why you're a great candidate. If you were referred by someone, mention their name if appropriate. This paragraph should be short – 2 or 3 sentences.

2nd Paragraph: Start selling. Summarize the reasons why you are a great candidate. Highlight specific items on your resume and/or give concrete examples of your directly relevant experiences. If you're applying in response to an ad, address the specific qualifications they are seeking. Relevant items may include your educational background, work, internship and volunteer experiences, involvement and personal qualifications. Optionally, if this paragraph gets unwieldy, you can create an additional "selling" paragraph.

3rd Paragraph: This is your action paragraph. You are either telling the reader what action you are going to take, or inviting them to take action. Wrap up the letter and be very specific about what you would like to happen next. End on a warm and friendly note.

Optionally, your cover letter may include bullet points in the middle paragraphs to very quickly detail relevant qualifications. This makes it is easy for the reader to scan and can quickly address how you fit the sought after qualifications.

Cover Letter Tips

- Your letter should be structured in full-block style
- Put your full contact information at the top of the page
- Center your letter on the page and use the same font as your resume. Treat them as an application package.
- Do not repeat your resume verbatim. Give further details about items on your resume instead.
- Use powerful, action-oriented language. Get the reader excited about your candidacy.
- Create three full paragraphs. If your letter is too short, you may seem uninterested or unqualified.
- Give specific reasons why you want to work at this particular organization. The reader wants to know two things: that you can do the job, and that you are excited to work at the organization.
- Check all grammar and spelling thoroughly. Your writing must be perfect. Do not rely on spell-check.
- Create a "shell" cover letter and change it to fit each position for which you apply. Be sure to thoroughly tailor each letter. HR officials can tell quickly if your letter is "canned."

- When e-mailing, it's better to attach the letter in Word, rather than using the body of the e-mail as the cover letter. When printed, it looks better and is also easier for the reader to handle electronically
- Do not use fancy software packages. If they can't open it, they can't read it. Do not 'zip file' the letter.
- If mailing, don't forget to sign. If e-mailing, you don't need to sign. Just make sure the space between the closing and your signature isn't too large.
- In your final paragraph, be very careful when choosing your words: "I will contact you to set up an interview" is not acceptable as it's inappropriate for you to set up your own interview. "I will contact you next week to further discuss the position" is infinitely better.
- Be sure to back up your statements. If you say you will call in a week, do so.
- Do not use humor. Your sense of humor may be vastly different from the reader's.
- Keep your ego in check. You're marketing yourself, but you don't want to come across as boastful.
- Use direct, simple language. Big impressive words and overdone sentences may create a negative impression. **This is not an essay, it is a business letter.**
- Stay away from technical jargon and abbreviations.

Cover Letter Example

Your Name (alternatively, you may use your resume header for this section)

Your Full Address

E-mail (optional)

Date

Recruiter's Name (Correct Spelling) and Correct Full Title

Their Full Address

Salutation (Mr./Ms./Dr. Last Name):

Say exactly what you are applying for and how you learned of the opening. If you were referred by someone, mention their name here. Grab attention by detailing specifically why you would be a great candidate for the position and why you are specifically interested in this particular job and organization. A creative opening can work as well, but first consider your audience and the industry. Do this in 2-3 sentences, using the final sentence as a bridge to the next paragraph.

This is your **MARKETING PARAGRAPH** (and can be separated into two paragraphs if you have a lot to sell). Using your research into the organization and the job description/ad, detail *specific* examples of your skills and experiences that are relevant to the opening and organization. Discuss your education, academic projects, specific work experiences, and personal qualities that will make the reader sit up and take notice. A detailed example is always stronger than a general statement. Divide long paragraphs. Write from a “what’s in it for them” point of view and write how you speak. The reader is concerned how you can make a contribution to the organization. Do not bring up negative information or apologize for a lack of experience, etc. Make the reader believe that you believe in yourself. Be very positive—do not ‘think, hope or feel’ anything. Your grammar must be perfect. **Once you have completed the letter, read it out loud—a great way to catch mistakes.** Never go over one page.

Your final paragraph is the **ACTION PARAGRAPH**. You are either telling the reader the action you will take or trying to convince the reader to take action. It’s important that you **ask for an interview**. Do not tell the reader you will call to set up your interview. The subtleties of such phrasing can easily offend. If appropriate, refer to your resume for your contact info. If you are detailing how you will follow up, be realistic in your timing and method. If this is a “hidden” opening (not advertised), it is always your job to follow up.

Closing,

Your Name (if you e-mail, there is no need to sign)

Real-Life Cover Letter Example

Kyle Luth '08, won our cover letter contest last year. Here is a copy of Kyle's winning letter:

Kyle Luth
6414 25th Street NW
Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 555 – 1234 (c)
luthk@wabash.edu

January 12, 2007

Mandy Jacobsen
Graduate Coordinator
Department of Virology, Medizinische Hochschule
Johann-Neuberg-Str. 1
Hanover, Germany 55434

Dear Ms. Jacobsen:

The purpose of this letter is to express my interest in working in your lab this summer through the DAAD Rise program. This program offers an incredible opportunity to perform research, and it would be an invaluable component of my education and training as a scientist. I am a diligent novice scientist with a proven record of academic success. With my training and background, I hope to make a valuable contribute to the research carried out in your lab.

I am intrigued by your research pertaining to the Cytomegalovirus and its direct link to the medical field. Virology and the treatment of disease have always been topics of personal interest. As a Biology major and a Chemistry minor, I have had a great deal of science-based lab experience, and I have a very good understanding of the concepts and processes associated with both cell biology and molecular biology. In addition to my class-related lab experience, I have had one semester of independent study research in which I worked on a project designed in collaboration with my research mentor. I am currently in the planning and research stages of a second independent study which will provide me with an entire academic year of independent research experience prior to my summer internship.

I am passionate about research and I believe I could learn a great deal from my experience in the DAAD program. I will bring a strong work ethic, a good sense of humor, and a passion for learning to your lab. In addition, I have studied German for two years, so I am proficient enough in the language to interact with others, understand instructions, and adapt more easily to life in Hanover and in your lab. I believe that this summer internship could be mutually beneficial: I could help you conduct your research while gaining valuable biology lab research and intensive exposure to the German language and culture.

I would welcome the opportunity to schedule an interview at your convenience. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kyle Luth