

Cover Letters: A Guide for Undergraduate Students

This guide provides basic information regarding cover letter writing. It is designed to help you get started with writing your own cover letter. All students are strongly encouraged to have their cover letter reviewed by a Career Advancement counselor before submitting it to an employer. Career Advancement counselors are available to review and discuss cover letters in one-on-one appointments and walk-in hours. Call 773-702-7040 to make an appointment or find out about walk-ins.

What is a Cover Letter?

The cover letter is a marketing tool – often one of the first things that a recruiter sees about you. Its purpose is to advertise you well enough to secure an interview.

It represents you – your passion, energy, accomplishments, individuality and professionalism within the context of the job to which you are applying. If you are applying for a position to be a research assistant for a professor, you might emphasize course work, grades, class papers you've written, interest in the subject, and your ability to work independently and learn fast. If you are applying for a position as a tutor to grade school students, you might emphasize attributes that include previous experience working with children, examples of your creativity, love of learning, academic background and patience.

Are Cover Letters Important?

Do employers read cover letters? Most do. In fact, a survey of nearly 600 employment professionals, conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), suggests some 76% of employers may automatically eliminate an employment candidate from any further hiring consideration, based solely on the quality of his or her cover letter alone.

Further, 43% of survey respondents also reported they view the cover letter as equal to the resume in importance. Candidates can be eliminated because of their cover letters for reasons that include typos; letters that are too generic (for example, lines such as, "I am an excellent candidate and want to work at your fine company because of its outstanding reputation"); a lack of understanding about the position and poor grammar.

Before Writing Your Cover Letter, You Should

- Do your research on the industry, field, company/organization, and the job itself so you fully understand what the employer is seeking. Talk with a Career Advancement counselor to learn more about how to do this.
- Think like an employer—what qualities would you seek in an employee and how do your experiences reflect them? You can find hints: carefully read the job description, research the company/organization, go to company info sessions, and conduct informational interviews with individuals working in the field.
- Remember that you can include classes, class papers (just don't call them publications if they weren't published), hobbies, volunteer work and interests.
- Ask yourself the following questions:
 - What qualifications does the employer want? Read through a job description of interest and underline the attributes. These qualities are usually clear; in some positions or industries, however, the descriptions are vague. (This is where research and informational interviews come in handy.)
 - How does your experience relate to the job? What are at least two specific accomplishments you can cite?



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- What are three qualities or experiences you want the employer to know about you?
- Why do you want to work for this organization or person? What do you know about them? (Look for something deeper than their being an “excellent” company.) Is there something specific about their services, product, philosophy you can express?
- Watch the number of “I’s” that start sentences. There is no absolute acceptable number, but try to stay away from too many.
- There is more than one way to write a cover letter. Ask different people for their perspectives then develop your own style. Trust your own judgment.

To Craft a Successful Cover Letter, You Should

- Write your letter in a conversational/natural, albeit deferential, style. Stilted prose is not effective.
- Show enthusiasm for your work and the position.
- Establish your credentials early; give specific examples.
- Give them one or two compelling reasons to interview you.
- Run spell-check but check word-by-word after. Also, check your phone number, email address and street address carefully. Have as many people as possible read your cover letter for mistakes.
- Be careful. If you merge your letter, check that you changed everything and are not addressing the letter to a different organization than the one you mentioned in the body of the letter.
- Use the active tense; avoid “i-n-g” endings when possible.
- Avoid generalizations and trite expressions (e.g. “I am the ideal candidate”).

Online Protocol:

If someone asks you to email a cover letter and resume to apply for a position, you can do one of two things, both equally acceptable:

1. Write a brief e-mail, with the cover letter and resume attached.
2. Use your cover letter in the body of the e-mail, with the resume attached. Email format does not require you to include your mailing address, the date or the recipient’s mailing address; simply start with the salutation, for example, “Dear Ms. Smith.”

Be formal. It is not acceptable to use email/texting conventions that you would with friends (for example, lower case “I’s,” acronyms such as BTW, etc.); avoid contractions.

Be very clear in your subject line so the recipient knows that he or she will not be receiving spam.

Cover Letter Format

Your street address
City, state and zip code
Phone number
Email address

Date

Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof. first and last name of person
Position or title
Name of organization
Street address of organization
City, state and zip code

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof. last name of addressee:

First Paragraph:

- Give the person a reason to read on. Give an overview establishing your qualifications and cite the position.
- Do not start with "My name is..."
- What's important to mention? In general, experience in the field if you have it. Being a student at the University of Chicago is critical if you are applying for an internship, summer job or position in which the organization is specifically targeting students. This will include most positions, but there are times when you may want to de-emphasize your student status.
- If someone recommended that you write to a specific person, start with his or her name; for example, "Mark Smith recommended..."
- Mention the reason for writing to that firm if the reason is compelling.
- Do not say that you are the ideal candidate if you cannot prove it.

Second (and Occasionally Third) Paragraph:

- Elaborate on your qualifications in the context of the position—you can mention relevant jobs, courses, etc. Keep in mind the job description.
- Stress what skills and attributes you have to offer. Identify those parts of your experience (paid and unpaid) that will be of interest to the employer. This can be done in either one or two paragraphs.

Final Paragraph:

- What's the next step? Here's where you thank the person. "Thank you, in advance, for your consideration" and similar alternatives are fine.
- You can request an interview. There are many different ways (of varying levels of assertiveness) to handle this, but they will not make an appreciable difference as to the outcome.
- If appropriate, you can tell the reader you will follow up. If you will be visiting that city, indicate the dates you will be there.

Sincerely,
Your Name

Career Advancement Services and Resources

See a Career Advancement Counselor

All students are encouraged to see a Career Advancement counselor at some point in their university career. Counselors are able to offer assistance with job application materials, including resumes and cover letters. Staff is also able to help discuss broader plans like graduate or professional school. Students are encouraged to make an appointment and can either call 773-702-7040 or do so online.

Walk-In Appointments

Throughout the year, Career Advancement counselors make themselves available for short, walk-in appointments. The hours vary from quarter to quarter but the website is always up-to-date with current hours. Students looking for brief assistance are encouraged to use these appointments as a way to quickly move forward in their search.

Career Advancement Programs and Resources

Career Advancement offers programs throughout the year designed to educate students about career options in a variety of fields. Some of these programs are designed specifically for MA and PhD students so be sure to view the Career Advancement event calendar online. Be sure to browse our Career Resource Library as well as our website for additional resources.

Chicago Career Connection (CCC)

Accessible via the Career Advancement website, this online tool – specifically for University of Chicago students and alumni – lists full- and part-time jobs and internships, in Chicago, nationally, and even internationally. Jobs and internships listed are in business, government and nonprofits.

UChicago Careers In...

These series of University of Chicago programs helps undergraduate students learn about and prepare for careers in the arts, business, communications, education, health professions, journalism, law, non-profit/public service, science and technology, and social work. Some programs are selective and others are open to all students. To learn more about this great University of Chicago offering, visit the UChicago Careers In... section on the Career Advancement website.

Email Listhosts

Join the Consulting Career Advancement email list to get regular updates on career-related programs and job postings. You might also join the general business management listhost. Sign up via Chicago Career Connection (accessible via the Career Advancement website) and edit your profile to start receiving these emails.

Employer Information Sessions

Employers looking to hire students in consulting come to campus each year to host information sessions. This is a great way to learn about particular companies and network. View the Career Advancement event calendar online to learn more and see the schedule.

Researching Organizations

Know who the dominant players within the sector are as well as all the companies that are going to participate in on-campus recruiting. You can obtain first-hand accounts of the company's culture and philosophy by talking to University of Chicago alumni who are working at the firm (see networking and informational interviewing above). A good understanding of the work environment will go a long way in answering "fit" questions during the interview process and will help you differentiate the firms to enable you to pick those that best fit your personality.

Networking and Informational Interviewing

Whether you just want to learn more about a career in consulting or you're ready to apply for jobs, conducting informational interviews and networking with individuals already working in that field is a crucial part of the process. Career Advancement counselors can show you how to use the online alumni directory to identify University of Chicago alumni in this field; how to set up and prepare for an informational interview; and how to network effectively. Make an appointment by calling 773-702-7040.

Practice Your Interviewing

Practice Interviewers: Career Advancement has practice interviewers on staff to conduct mock behavioral and case interviews. To schedule a practice interview call 773-702-7040.

Career Advancement Super Interview Walk-In Days: Career Advancement holds "Super Interview Walk-In Days" for undergraduate and graduate students at the beginning of fall and winter quarters. Students interested in participating in a short, walk-in appointment style interview should attend. These days will be listed on the Career Advancement calendar online.

On-Campus Recruiting (OCR)

Every year employers come to campus to recruit University of Chicago students. In order to participate in OCR, you must be activated in Chicago Career Connection, which will allow you to view OCR-specific job postings. To become activated in CCC and to learn more about OCR, speak with a Career Advancement counselor.

Sample Cover Letter 1

This letter was used to apply for the Jeff Metcalf Internship for the New York Philharmonic Archives. It is an excellent letter and got an interview. There is one thing that would have made it stronger—mentioning music. Even though the description asked for an interest in music or history, they prefer both. Consider this alternate opening, “As a student at the University of Chicago with a passion for both classical music and history, I read your description with great excitement.” If the applicant doesn’t have that passion for music, don’t lie, but show that you are interested and have done some research.

February 8, 2000

Jeff Metcalf Fellowship Selection Committee
c/o University of Chicago
1212 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637

Dear Fellowship Selection Committee:

I am a first-year student at the University of Chicago writing to apply for the research assistant position at the New York Philharmonic Archives. I am interested in history, and am very keen on learning exactly what a specialized historian does on a day-to-day basis.

Through my editing experience with Diskord and the Wildcat, I have developed outstanding attention to detail and sensitivity to deadlines. While I was editor-in-chief of the Wildcat, no one on my staff of 32 ever missed a deadline. At Graham Crackers Comics, I had experience preserving and archiving comics from as early as the 1940s, and I had opportunities to read and carefully analyze primary documents in my history and humanities courses at the University. My experiences in document archiving and analysis and in working and managing others under pressure have given me many skills I believe would make me an asset to the Archives.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you further about this internship. Please feel free to contact me at _____ or _____ with questions or for clarification. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mildred Canoli
(letter used with permission)

Sample Cover Letter 2

January 6, 2009

5422 Frankford Avenue, Apt. 1
Chicago, IL 60637

Human Resources
Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania
3400 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am applying for the Clinical Research Associate position posted on the University of Chicago Career Center's jobs website. Currently, I am a fourth-year student majoring in Biological Sciences with a specialization in Immunobiology. I offer you excellent lab experience combined with a passion for research.

That experience includes research on campus and at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. For example, at the University of Chicago Hospitals, I investigated the cellular action of a mouse gene, Fv1, which gives mice resistance to the leukemia virus, MuLV. In addition, I have also carried out genotyping experiments involving DNA extraction and documented the results in an Excel spreadsheet. I have applied benchwork laboratory techniques, including polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and yeast hybrid systems. Through these projects, I have gained experience in research data consolidation and management skills. Throughout, I developed a reputation as someone who learns quickly and works tirelessly. *[If you don't have this level of experience, emphasize your relevant coursework and lab skills.]*

Academically, I have a 3.4 GPA and have been on the Dean's List each quarter while working 10-15 hours per week. My involvement in activities outside of the academic realm has strengthened my leadership and interpersonal skills. Most notably, as a teacher's aide in a local underserved elementary school, I explain science concepts to students, many of whom had been previously afraid of the subject. As a rugby player at the University of Chicago, I not only learned teamwork, I recruited many lab associates to join the scrum.

I have attached my resume for your further consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the position and my qualifications further. Please feel free to contact me at ____ with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bedilla Parfum

(This letter has been adapted.)

Sample Cover Letter 3

December 23, 2008

401 Grove Place
New York, NY 10012
____@uchicago.edu
212-333-0897

Mr. Schweppe Gray
Preston Henderson Marketing Consultants
2 Wall Street
New York, NY 10001

Dear Mr. Gray:

With a background in market research complemented by the rigors of a University of Chicago education, I am applying for the analyst position at Preston Henderson Marketing Consultants. Ever since I heard Carol Eckard speak during your on-campus recruiting presentation, I knew I wanted to work for you. She described your clients, the problems you solve, your culture and your commitment to your employees. Since that talk, my interest has become a passion and I have honed the skills you seek: writing, problem-solving, academic excellence, a team orientation and quantitative analysis.

I demonstrated these skills during my internship at Peopley Research where my assignment was to reduce the cost of the company's keyword advertising campaign in Google AdWords while increasing revenue-generating traffic to the website. After extensive modeling of how variables, such as keywords and day segmenting, affected cost per click and traffic quality, I successfully determined how to produce more revenue.

At Peopley, I exhibited leadership and my ability to work under pressure when my boss, the Vice President of Marketing, had emergency surgery and handed me the responsibility to lead the construction of a new search results page in a joint effort by the marketing and information technology teams. I had three days to explain the project to the teams and assign them tasks. By embracing this challenge, working long hours and even learning how to format code in order to alleviate the technology team's workload, we successfully launched the test pages on time.

I would greatly welcome the opportunity to discuss the analyst opportunity with the company and will phone you in two weeks to follow-up.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Emma Kim
(This letter has been adapted.)

Sample Cover Letter 4

January 18, 2008

5745 S. Brim Street, Apt. 12
Chicago, IL 60637

@uchicago.edu
773-221-3242

Ms. Rose Rubinstein
AIDS Terra Campaign USA
12 Farley Way, NW
Suite 1700
Washington, DC 20011

Dear Ms. Rose Rubinstein,

With a demonstrated commitment to eradicating AIDS, I am applying to the position of Marketing and Policy Analyst for the AIDS Terra Campaign, which I read about on your website. I am a graduating student at the University of Chicago majoring in public policy and have experience in research, web design, marketing, public relations, fundraising and writing. Equally important, I have been active on campus and in the community in raising awareness about AIDS/HIV.

My resume attests to my qualifications. As Director of Communications of the Student Global AIDS Campaign, I co-organized a conference entitled, "The Feminine Epidemic." I identified and secured speakers and publicized this successful event, which received coverage in local media. Further, I have coordinated letter writing campaigns and petitions for HIV/AIDS treatment access. For example, in little time, with a limited budget, I was able to mobilize over 125 students to write letters. As a peer health counselor, I have educated students about HIV and AIDS. By doing so, I learned techniques to get their attention and stop risky behavior.

My classes complement my hands-on experience. As a public policy major, I have taken courses that include micro- and macro-economics and *From Natural Law to Human Rights*, which have provided me with a framework to analyze policy and understand opposing points of view. I have a multicultural background and have translated materials in Spanish. Finally, I am a member of the student circus and my juggling skills have enlightened many meetings and presentations.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the position.

Sincerely,

David Aardvark