



## **Cover Letter Guidelines**

A cover letter (sometimes called a letter of interest) is a one page, business-style letter that accompanies every resume you send to prospective employers. The purpose of a cover letter is to get the employer to read your resume; it serves as an introduction, telling the employer who you are and why you are sending a resume. If written well, your letter lets you highlight the special features of your education and experience that qualify you for the particular position or organization.

### **Overview of a good cover letter**

#### **1. A personal approach.**

As employers do not look favorably on cover letters which look "mass produced", it is important to personalize and customize your cover letter. Your letter should be addressed to a specific individual (whenever possible) and should demonstrate that you have taken the time to understand the organization's needs.

#### **2. A clear, concise presentation of interest, skills and intent.**

Your cover letter will have the most impact if it is targeted to match each particular organization or position being sought. The tone of the letter should emphasize ways you can fulfill the organization's needs. Be direct about your interest in the organization and what you can offer; say it clearly and concisely. As with your resume, be prepared to back up any information you include in the letter. If you make claims, support them with evidence.

#### **3. A glimpse of the author.**

Although this is a formal document, the style doesn't need to be stiff. Allow your personality to come through, and particularly seem interested and enthusiastic, both about what you have to offer them, and what they can offer you. A good cover letter will communicate interest, motivation, and self-confidence.

All employers want people with excellent communication skills. Your cover letter demonstrates your writing skills, so write thoughtfully. Pay particular attention to grammar, typing and spelling, and avoid trite language and the temptation to turn your cover letter into an extensive autobiography.

#### **4. A professional presentation.**

Your cover letters should follow a traditional business letter format (see "Suggested Format"). Also, use a good quality paper and a font which is easy to read.



## Know your audience and their needs

Develop your resume and cover letter as if you are presenting a solution to the employer-- you, the suitable candidate for their position. In order to make it easier for the employer to see that you are a fit for the position, your cover letter should answer these four questions for the reader:

- Why are you writing? *To express interest in learning more about the position and to submit your application for their consideration.*
- What do you offer as a candidate? *Make sure you restate the position description briefly before you state how you fit the position as it is quite possible that the individual who reads your materials may not have posted the position.*
- Why are you interested in the organization and/or position? *Employers value candidates who appear to be genuinely interested in their work and who appear to be interested in making a significant time commitment to the employer*
- How you plan to follow up? *This is perhaps the easiest part of the letter: "thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon. I will call (or e-mail) you the week of [insert date] to ensure that you have received my application materials."*

Your cover letter will send the desired message to employers if you:

- Take the time to write a thoughtful and focused letter that demonstrates that you are familiar with the nature of the employer's work
- Are concise, but say enough to capture the reader's interest
- Sell yourself by telling the employer how they can benefit from hiring you:
  - express your skills and accomplishments through descriptions of what you've done rather than superlative adjectives
  - give examples of experiences which support your claims
  - demonstrate knowledge of the organization

## Tell your experiences and accomplishments

Using your resume as a guide, think about your past work, project and research experiences. Consider what your responsibilities were, how you did the work, and how the results of your work were utilized. If you need help in brainstorming on this, you may find the following list of potential accomplishments to be helpful. Consider:

- How your accomplishments affected your student organization, summer job, etc.
- Dollars saved, new business generated, increased sales or profits
- Improved efficiency, time saved, better procedures
- Numerical and/or percentage measurements
- Any problems or challenges that you took the initiative in addressing
- A new program, procedure or plan you created or designed
- Any original reports, brochures or other publications you authored



- Any administrative or procedural recommendations you implemented, directly or indirectly
- Any major decisions or organizational changes you actively participated in
- Any award, certificate, or commendation you received
- A new process you implemented

Next, look at the position description again. Which of these accomplishments are in similar areas and/or demonstrate skills that you could potentially transfer to the position? If you can think of one or two to use as examples, write up brief descriptions in the "what I offer you as a candidate" section of your letter.

## **Formatting: Do's and Don'ts**

### **Do's**

- Use paper that matches your resume in quality and color, standard (8.5 x 11) bond. If you are mailing your materials in a business envelope, the envelope should also match.
- Address your letter to a specific individual. This information can be obtained by calling the employer's Human Resources office, asking for the receptionist/secretary in the department you wish to work, or researching company literature. If you cannot find a name, substitute: Dear Director of Human Resources or Dear Sir or Madam.
- Adhere to business letter format. See "Suggested Format" below.
- Demonstrate that you understand the employer and the industry. (See Thayer Career Services' "Resources for Conducting Employer Research" on their website)
- Use simple, direct language and correct grammar. Keep your letters professionally personal. Avoid an overly familiar or overly formal tone.
- Proofread! The cover letter must be flawless. Don't rely on spell-check, which won't catch grammatical errors or incorrect word usage. Have someone else proofread it if possible.
- Close the letter by courteously stating that you will follow it up with a phone call to discuss your qualifications and/or the possibility of an interview.
- Double space between paragraphs.

### **Don'ts**

- Don't try to say too much. Don't overcrowd the page. Make it easy for the reader to follow. Remember that the letter will probably get no more than one minute's attention.
- Don't address the envelope by hand. For both the letter and the envelope, use a computer or an electric typewriter. If using a computer, use a laser printer.
- Don't mass-produce your cover letter without individual names and addresses and specific references to the particular organization.
- Don't use your current employer's letterhead.
- Don't use periods after state abbreviations. Don't abbreviate months or streets.
- Don't use a first name in the employer's salutation unless it is a close, personal friend.



## Suggested format

Your Street Address (TIP: *Use accurate return address. Academic year = school address. Permanent address = where you reside when you're not at Dartmouth. Use the address at which you can be reached at present.*)

City, State Zip

Today's Date

Person's Name (TIP: *Always write to a specific person.*)

Title

Organization

Street Address

City, State, Zip Code (Or Country)

Dear Ms./Mr./Dr. Last Name: (TIP: *Always use formal salutation. Not "Dear Bill:"*)

### **The opening paragraph introduces you, and lets the employer know why you are writing.**

To capture the employer's interest, this paragraph should be well organized, concise, and specific:

- *State your reason for writing.* Example: "I am writing to express my interest in learning more about Brilliant Biomedical Devices International (BBCI), and to submit my resume for your consideration."  
Mention how you heard of the organization or of the position. Example: "Through the career services office at Dartmouth's Thayer School of Engineering, I learned of your need for an entry-level design engineer for your Implants division."
- *If applying for a specific job, refer to the position title.*
- *If sending out "blind letters" (i.e. you don't know if a position exists or if there are any openings), identify the type of position you'd like.*
- *State the proper name of the organization at least once.* Example: AOL = America Online
- *If you've already talked to the person to whom you are sending the letter, indicate this in your introduction.* Example: "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about the Instructional Design position at [company name]."
- *If you have a connection to the company or organization, let them know.* Example: "Your Conservation Director, Forest Sherwood, suggested that I contact you regarding potential openings in your environmental engineering subsidiary."



## **The middle paragraph(s) are your chance to shine.**

Summarize the aspects of your education, experience, and interests that are germane to the employer and convey your sincere interest in the position.

*Ask not what the potential employer can do for you, but what you can do for the employer.*

- *Expand on the information contained in your resume and highlight your qualifications by discussing them in terms of the contributions you can make.*
- *If you are applying for a specific position, refer specifically to the job description.* Example: "Based on the job description, it is my understanding that you are looking for a self-motivated employee with a demonstrated proficiency in html. I offer you these qualities and skills. In my job last summer, I?"
- *Explain why you are interested.* (You may want to start a new paragraph here.)
  - *Show that you know the organization.* Avoid adjectives and generic descriptions such as "I'd like to work in a challenging environment with opportunity for advancement." Make it obvious that you've researched the organization and are familiar with its services. If you have a good relationship with current employee(s), mention them. If certain aspects of the company impress you let them know!
  - *Explain how the position and/or company is a good fit with your career goals and interests.* This is especially important in applying for positions in a different geographic location or in fields unrelated to your studies at Thayer.

The closing paragraph should pave the way for the interview. You may express your interest in an interview (though do not state a specific time or day), provide additional materials, or suggest that you will follow-up with a phone call.

Sincerely, [Signature]

Your Name (typed)

## **Following up and keeping records**

Keep a copy of all your cover letters, and make notes outlining further correspondence between you and the employer. It can be both confusing and embarrassing to receive a reply from an organization and not be certain of what you sent them.

If you do not receive a response to your cover letter/resume within a reasonable amount of time (generally two weeks to one month), feel free to follow up by email, letter or telephone. A follow-up email or letter should:

- Inquire about the status of your application;
- Reiterate your interest in the position; and
- Offer to provide additional information that may aid in the evaluation of your qualifications.